

The Birth of Americanized Buddhism: A Historical Study of Acculturation of Japanese Buddhism with Special Reference to Bishop Yemyo Imamura

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This dissertation considers the relationship between religion and nationalism in modern states through a case study of Japanese Buddhism and its transplantation to Hawaii in the early twentieth-century. In the process of modernization, religion has often contributed to the rise of nationalism in modern state. This assertion may appear nonsensical in light the well-known principle of the separation of church and state, which is usually understood to mean that no 'state religion' or theocracy is officially permitted. In spite of this principle, nonetheless, religion and nationalism have not been completely separated. In the case of modern Japan, the Meiji government established a new religio-political hierarchy that recognized the Emperor as the ultimate ruler of Japan. It was the myth of the goddess Amaterasu, a figure who was regarded as an ancestor of the Imperial family, which was used to legitimize the Emperor's absolute rule.

How did Japanese Buddhists react to this myth and to what extent did they recognize the legitimacy of the Emperor? Some Buddhist activists, especially from the Shin sect questioned the government about the central place of Shinto and its role as an "established Religion". Sometime priests called for "religious freedom" and eventually led the Shin sects to separate from the Daikyojin, which was the head Shinto institution that had been used control both Shinto and Buddhist priests. In spite of these actions, it must be remembered that these Buddhists did not on the legitimacy of the Emperor nor express concern over the rising nationalism. In fact, they encouraged their lay members to be loyal subjects of the Emperor. The mainstream Japanese Buddhist position, therefore, was characterized by subservience to political authority and general support for the government's nationalistic policies. The Kyodoshoku institution, which bound Buddhist priests to propagate Shinto doctrine was abandoned in 1884. From this point on Buddhist . priests were allowed to propagate Buddhist doctrines and this brought an end to their questioning of government policies.

About the same time that the Japanese government began its expansionist policy in Asia, many Japanese Buddhist sects started mission work in foreign countries by sending priests to work with Japanese immigrants abroad as well as to serve as chaplains for the Japanese military. In the case of Jodo Shinshu, missionaries (Kaikyoshi) were sent to such places as China, Korea, Taiwan, the Kurile Islands, Hawaii, and North America.

This dissertation focuses on the religious thought of Yemyo Imamura (1867-1932), a pioneer Shin priest and missionary to Hawaii, who developed an alternative Japanese Buddhist perspective in America. In 1899, several years after graduating from Keio University in Tokyo, Imamura was appointed as a missionary to Hawaii. In 1900, he became the Bishop (Kantoku later renamed Socho) of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, a position he held until his death in 1932. During this period he endeavored to transform the Jodo Shinshu tradition of Japanese Buddhism, to which most of the Japanese immigrants belonged, into an Americanized form of Buddhism. In analyzing the development of Imamura's thought in Hawaii, this dissertation will consider the following three points.

First, this study analyzes the process whereby Japanese Buddhism was transformed into an Americanized Buddhism. It shows how the nationalistic and hierarchical expression of Japanese Buddhism could become independent of political authority and be developed into an egalitarian and democratic religious institution. This study focuses on the thought of Imamura and his ideas about how Buddhism should be Americanized. It does not give much attention to the wider influence of Imamura on the Japanese-American community, on the lay members of Honpa Hongwanji in Hawaii, or on the host society, since previous studies have already considered these areas in some depth.

Second, this study considers the problematic relationship between religion and politics in Japan and the United States from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. This provides the larger context for understanding Imamura's thought. In Japan, of course, the issue of religion and nationalism revolves around the modern Emperor system. In the United States, in spite of the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state, it revolves around what Robert N. Bellah identified 'American Civil Religion.' Even though the Constitution prohibits the establishment of a state religion, Bellah points out that the Judeo-Christian tradition has been integral to American society and its political institutions. Although Bellah's article on 'Civil Religion' appeared in 1967, over three decades after Imamura's death, this dissertation finds that the idea of civil religion is particularly helpful for understanding nativistic attitudes of some Americans toward Buddhism as well as the pervasive notion in prewar Hawaii that only Christianity could be regarded as a truly 'American' religion.

Third, this study addresses the problem of how religion in modern states maintain an independent stance and avoid supporting nationalism. In order to deal with this problem in Japan, the author focuses on the writings of Yukichi Fukuzawa and Manshi Kiyozawa, two Japanese whose views on the social role of religion provided an important alternative to Shinshu orthodoxy. There is clear evidence that Imamura was deeply influenced by both of these individuals. The dissertation uncovers what Imamura inherited from Fukuzawa and Kiyozawa and shows how he developed their ideas in Hawaii. Through an analysis of Imamura's writing, this study shows how he opened the door religious freedom in America to the non-Judeo-Christian tradition of Buddhism.

The central ideas of the dissertation can be briefly outlined as follows. In Japan, as explained above, the modern state was structured according to the religio-political hierarchy of the Emperor system. Under this system, Japanese Buddhists sought to follow their Buddhist beliefs, but were nevertheless inclined to support the growing nationalism as Japanese citizens. Representatives of the Shin sects officially disseminated the ideology Shinzoku nitai which defined the relationship between the sacred and the profane or the combination of religious belief with worldly morality. This ideology was used to legitimize their submission to the Emperor.

Since the Shin sect was a religious institution, it could not be entirely subsumed under the government. Therefore, it is not surprising that another movement within Shin sect would emerge and challenge the dominant Shinzoku nitai ideology. As concrete examples of this movement, this study considers the writings of Yukichi Fukuzawa and Manshi Kiyozawa, and shows how they criticized the Shinshu orthodoxy and tendency of contemporary Buddhists to passively submit to political authority. Both searched for an alternative way to democratize religious institutions and exercise socially relevant compassion.

This movement obviously formed an important part of Imamura's discourse in Hawaii. Although Imamura initially supported Japanese nationalism at the turn of the century, he gradually abandoned it and began to emphasize the necessity Americanization. It is clear that he did not simply switch his loyalty from the Emperor to the United States because he criticized nativistic movements in contemporary America at the same time. This study shows how Imamura's views came to differ from the policies of the Mother Temple in Japan

and how his religious faith enabled him to stand apart from both Japanese and American forms of nationalism.

The fact that Imamura was geographically and culturally separated from Japan allowed him to start a new approach to Buddhist mission. His mission work initially focused on Japanese laborers on sugar plantations, most of whom wished to return to Japan after accumulating sufficient wealth and educate their children as loyal subjects of Imperial Japan. In time, however, most of these laborers decided to remain in Hawaii and their children became American citizens as a result of the annexation of Hawaii to the United States. In light of these changes, Imamura recognized that the Honpa Hongwanji Mission would have to radically change its approach to mission.

The Hongwanji Mission and the Japanese language schools it sponsored adopted a new educational policy that aimed at assisting the Japanese children in American public schools to become good citizens. Imamura seriously studied American history and culture and was particularly impressed by American pragmatism. At the same time, he guided the Hawaii Hongwanji Mission in its democratization and in the establishment of the English Department. Imamura also made plans to establish a school to educate and train American-born Buddhists as missionaries, rather than recruiting Japanese Kaikyoshi dispatched from the Mother Temple in Kyoto. In 1929, the English Department was transformed into a non-sectarian institution called the International Buddhist Institute that published the Hawaiian Buddhist Annual, which contained essays by Buddhists from around the world.

In spite of these efforts, most people in the host society doubted that the Buddhist institution and its Japanese language schools had seriously been Americanized. Tensions with the host society reached their peak in the second decade of the 20th century, culminating in the nationalistic "100 percent Americanization" movement. During the Americanization drive, Buddhism was depicted as "pagan," "heathen," and as an "anti-American" religion. The Japanese people were regarded as subjects of Imperial Japan who had no understanding of American ideals or democracy. The Americanization movement became especially powerful when the United States entered World War I and was responsible for cultivating a harsh nativism that criticized immigrants for not being fully Americanized.

This study draws particular attention to the fact that this conflict was largely the result of the collision of a non-Judeo-Christian religion with the 'civil religion' that dominated American society. The author suggests that when a religion is closely related to nationalism, it tends to evolve into a form of religious nativism. Imamura argued, however, that 'the essence of Americanism' was its pluralistic character and recognition of the equality among different religious and cultural values. In other words, conformity to one particular nation was not necessary. Imamura concluded that equal opportunity and religious freedom should also be guaranteed for Buddhists in America. Imamura's notion of pluralism was clearly influenced by the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, which became an important factor contributing to the birth of Americanized Buddhism. The adoption of pragmatism alone, however, was not enough to Americanize transplanted forms of Japanese Buddhism. In order to truly Americanize Buddhism, it was necessary to reinterpret Buddhism according to American culture.

In one sense, the Americanization of Buddhism can be seen in the transformation of Imamura's religious thought. He slowly moved away from the nationalistic Shinzoku nitai ideology and gradually adopted the socially relevant compassion mentioned above. He eventually questioned the legitimacy of the understanding of democracy propagated by the Americanizers, which was shaped by racial and religious prejudice against Japanese Buddhists. During World War I, when America was fighting for the sake of 'liberty and democracy,' Imamura also articulated a powerful anti-war message based on a passage from a Buddhist sutra.

In sum, the most important characteristic of Imamura's Americanized Buddhism was his socially engaged compassion, which was to be equally enjoyed by every person, regardless of race or nationality. Those ideologies that contradicted this compassion, such as nationalism, prejudice, and war, needed to be criticized and challenged. The perspective that Imamura developed in Hawaii one hundred years ago reveals an important alternative path for modern Buddhism, one which his contemporaries in Japan failed to fully understand or appreciate.

NOTE: Prof. Moriya Tomoe's study, "*Yemyo Imamura: A Pioneer American Buddhist*," is available from the [Honpa Hongwanji Bookstore](#).