



Duncan Ryūken Williams and Tomoe Moriya, eds., *Issei Buddhism in the Americas*

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THIS VOLUME joins a growing body of literature in English on Buddhism outside Asia, particularly in the United States, but is distinct in two ways. It covers topics beyond American Buddhism to include two essays, one on the Canadian and the other on the Brazilian experience. Secondly, it focuses on the pioneer or the

first generation (*issei*) Japanese Buddhists. Consequently, virtually all of the eight articles, by established authors on both sides of the Pacific, take up topics from the late 1800s to World War II. And they seek to do so, as noted by the editors, to avoid the simplistic framework of both a Japan-centered diaspora model and an America-centered assimilationist model in an effort to retell a part of American religious history from the perspective of those whose homeland is not Europe but Asia.

The volume is divided into four parts, the first of which is “Nation and Identity.” In the first essay, “Can I Put This Jizō Together with the Virgin Mary in the Altar? Creolizing Zen Buddhism in Brazil,” Cristina Rocha discusses Japanese Brazilians who participate in two religious customs of Buddhism and Catholicism. For example, a third-generation woman, Nicia Takeda, observes both a seventh-day mass for her deceased mother at a Catholic Church and a forty-ninth day service at a Zen temple. Nicias’ mother was a Catholic but had carried on the practice of taking care of the Buddhist altar at home. She is not an exception as many Catholic Japanese Brazilians continue to observe Buddhist practices as a way staying connected to familial and cultural roots. Rocha opts to use “creolization” rather than “syncretism” or “hybridity” for these practices of religious blending. The essay further discusses the phenomenon where a growing number of Japanese Brazilians (80 percent being Catholic) are turning to Buddhism for not only cultural connection but also for its enhanced prestige within Brazilian society.

Masako Iino’s essay, “Bukkyōkai and the Japanese Canadian Community in British Columbia,” provides a glimpse into the Japanese Buddhist experience in Canada. It focuses on the first thirty years of the twentieth century, with particular attention paid to two publications, *Otakebi* (A War Cry) and *Buddha*, published by the Young Buddhist Association. Like the Buddhists in the U.S., Canadian Buddhists struggled with discrimination and tensions with Japanese Christians, which forced them to rely on Bukkyōkai (Buddhist organizations) for their spiritual, cultural, and social needs. As Japan became more militarized through the 1930s, the Japanese Canadians felt greater pressure from not only the larger Canadian society but more importantly within themselves to realize their identity. They expressed their concerns in the above publications as they sought ways to be good Canadians equal to other races by cultivating their self-esteem through Buddhism at the Bukkyōkai.

The first essay in Part Two (Education and Law) is by Noriko Asato and is entitled “The Japanese Language School Controversy in Hawaii” utilizes newly-discovered Japanese sources to tell a more detailed story about the struggles of the Japanese language schools in Hawaii run by Buddhist temples during the first two decades of the twentieth century. These schools played a vital role in the missionary work of Buddhist priests. As they sought to expand their schools, the Buddhists were confronted by two foes, the dominant political groups and the Japanese Christians. When these groups blocked Buddhist efforts on the grounds that the schools were anti-American, Bishop Yenmyō Imamura of the Honganji Mission countered that the language schools were actually a means of Americanizing the Buddhist children.

Even though in 1927 the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Buddhist-run language schools, the controversy ensued until the schools were completely shut down due to the war.

Michihiro Ama's essay, "The Legal Dimensions of the Formation of Shin Buddhist Temples in Los Angeles" describes a controversy that erupted in the Jōdo Shinshū community in the Los Angeles area around 1917 between Rev. Junjo Izumida and the temple headquarters in Japan and their supporters in the U.S. The controversy and the subsequent suits represented tension and conflict between the American legal system regulating religious organizations and the traditional customs of Japanese Buddhist institutions. Izumida's victory in court not only convinced the religious authorities in Japan to concede the autonomy of its branch temples in the new country but initiated "... a new, modern development of Japanese Buddhism, such as the democratization of organizational management and the incorporation of a local body under the laws of a modern nation state."

The first essay in Part Three (Race and Print Culture) by Lori Pierce, "Buddhist Modernism in English-Language Buddhist Periodicals," discusses the role and nature of journals that were published in the period from the closing decades of the nineteenth century to the beginning of World War II. Pierce focuses on *The Light of Dharma*, which was published by the Jōdo Shinshū Mission from 1901 to 1907. Pierce sees this journal as having propagated what she calls "Buddhist modernism" that relied on the image and life of the Buddha, doctrinal unity through a common catechism, English as the vernacular, and emphasis on the textual authority of Orientalist scholarship. And this path was something that any reasonable person could follow, for it was without miracles and extraordinary powers. "Unlike salvation, enlightenment was a rational, achievable experience." Despite this effort, the growing discriminative policies against Asian immigrants forced them toward self-protection and isolation. As Pierce points out, the closing of *The Light of Dharma* in 1907, on the eve of the signing of the anti-Japanese Gentleman's Agreement (1908), is a coincidence but significant nonetheless.

In her essay "'Americanization' and 'Tradition' in Issei and Nisei Buddhist Publications," Tomoe Moriya examines the writings of some of the prominent Issei pioneers from the perspective of Americanization but with a focus on the doctrinal dimensions rather than on the social structures as seen in many other studies. Contrary to the view that immigrant Buddhists were isolated and confined to their ethnic community, Moriya points out, for example, that 97 percent of the subscribers of *Light of Dharma* published by the Jōdo Shinshū organization were non-Asians, and it included writings by influential Euro-American Buddhists. Issei Buddhist priests such as Kakuryō Nishijima and Kōyū Uchida wrote articles to dispel misunderstandings about Buddhism by stressing its universal and democratic qualities. Moriya finds the following common attitudes among the Issei Buddhist intellectuals: 1. nonsectarianism, 2. relative evaluation of ethnic culture, 3. internationalization, 4. interests in Buddhist ethics and social justice, and 5. a tendency toward Americanization.

The first essay in Part Four is “The United States-Japanese War and Tenrikyō Ministers in America” by Akihiro Yamakura. It chronicles the treatment of those affiliated with Tenrikyō, particularly its North American head, Bishop Hashimoto, before, during and after World War II. The essay discusses the reasons for their harsh treatment by the U.S. authorities and Bishop Hashimoto’s response to how he was treated. Yamakura concludes that the fate of Bishop Hashimoto, the Tenrikyō church, and Japanese in the U.S. were the result of “xenophobia in the United States as well as intense Japanese nationalism triggered by the aggressive and militaristic policy of the Japanese Empire.” Yamakura also observes it was unwise for the bishop and some Isseis to have openly expressed their loyalty to the emperor. At the same time, he is critical of the U.S. government’s failure to guarantee their first amendment rights, which contributed to such harsh treatment.

Finally, in her essay “The Role of Buddhist Culture in International Acculturation,” Keiko Wells examines Buddhist songs written in Kona, Hawaii, from the 1930s to the 1950s. In her view, three factors enabled Buddhist singing to be vibrant during this place and time: Japanese Buddhists being the majority in Kona, the leadership of Rev. Shuun Matsuura in fostering literary and musical expression, and the tragic events of the war in which many families lost their sons fighting for the American army. Haru Matsuda was a lyricist who wrote hundreds of verses, some of which dealt with the agony of losing a son in Italy. Several years after his bloodstained uniform and his ashes arrived home, she wrote the words to a song:

Six years have already passed; finally you have come back to us loving parents
 who have waited and waited for your return to your homeland, Hawaii.
 You have come back guided by the compassionate hands of America.
 You have come back silently. You have come back silently.
 Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu.

Here, we see three elements that constitute this as an *American Buddhist* song: homeland (Hawaii), country (America), and religion (sacred name, “Namu Amida Butsu”). And this tradition of expressing their spirituality through songs continues today in English to American tunes.

If there is any shortcoming to this volume, I question the inclusion of Tenrikyō, which is normally not considered Buddhist and in North America was regarded as “Shinto” particularly during the war. Further, two essays (Rocha and Asato) deal more with Niseis or Sanseis than with the Isseis. On the other hand, from my personal preference I enjoyed these two essays for their focus on “ordinary” Buddhists, whereas the remaining essays (with the exception of Wells’) highlighted the “elite” Buddhists addressing the literary, organizational, and political activities of priests and intellectuals.

These two points, however, pale in comparison to the enormous contribution that this volume makes in helping to clarify and reevaluate our previous understanding of the early years of Buddhism, particularly in North America. For exam-

ple, the efforts made by Issei Buddhists go against the popular image of Japanese Buddhism as being insular and sectarian. However, the early Issei period was actually marked by transnational, nonsectarian, and progressive efforts to reach out to the larger society to share the teachings which they believed to be democratic and universal. And even after social and political struggles and the dark clouds of war intensified from the 1910s to 1945, the Issei Buddhists battled external discrimination and internal division but were determined to establish Buddhism in their new land. They thus succeeded in keeping the torch of Buddhism burning during these four decades, even while the initial Euro-American interest in Buddhism waned, until the present dramatic growth reignited in the 1960s.

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