

“Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence”: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years

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This article examines the growing interest in Buddhism in the United States during the Cold War, analyzing discussions and debates around the authenticity of various Buddhist teachings and practices that emerged in an interracial Buddhist study group and its related publications. Japanese American Buddhists had developed a modified form of Jōdo Shinshū devotional practice as a strategy for building ethnic community and countering racialization as religious and racial Others. The authenticity of these practices was challenged by European and European American scholars and artists, especially the Beats, who drew upon Orientalist representations of Buddhism as ancient, exotic, and mysterious. In response, Japanese American Buddhists crafted their own definition of “tradition” by drawing from institutional and devotional developments dating back to fourteenth-century Japan as well as more recent Japanese American history. The article contextualizes these debates within the broader discussion of cultural pluralism and race relations during the Cold War.

In November 1957 *American Buddhist*, the flagship English-language publication for the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), representing tens of thousands of Japanese American Jōdo Shinshū (Pure Land) Buddhists in the United States, published an article by Robert Jackson, a high school teacher and student of Buddhism living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Jackson’s article, titled “Buddhism and the Beat Generation,” celebrated the actions of a young, postwar generation of Americans who could “hardly remember a

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thing before Hiroshima.” Jackson described the Beat generation as witnesses to “utopian dreams souring into a dismal swamp of jittering cities peppered by rains of Benzedrine and tranquilizers.” He proposed that, having rejected the “hollow life of production and consumption,” the Beats had “come to the realization, however unspoken, of the first of the Buddha’s four noble truths,” that all life is suffering. They had “become ‘beautified’ as well for it [was] this experience, not a profession of mere belief, that [set] one upon the path of the bodhisattva.” For Jackson, the Beat lifestyle and the approach of white Buddhists embodied the true spirit of Buddhism, even when compared to those Japanese Americans who had been raised Buddhist. Jackson exclaimed that “in the brooding, nervous wandering across the continent and over oceans these *hakujin* [white] Buddhists have built meditation into their lives”; although the Beats did not “care to be called Buddhist . . . they [knew] more about oneness, emptiness, wisdom and compassion than many whose Buddhism [was] a matter of no choice to them.”¹

Less than a year later, in another article in the *American Buddhist*, Taitetsu Unno, a Nisei (second-generation) Buddhist, critiqued the Beat Buddhist vision presented by Jackson. Instead, he offered a vision of Buddhism grounded in the teachings of the Buddha and the more ordinary workings of Buddhist lay communities. Unno argued that, while well-intentioned, the Beat Buddhists celebrated by Jackson were misguided in their spiritual pursuits and often failed to engage Buddhist teachings on anything more than a superficial level. He wrote: “The earnest seek to go beyond this world of transiency and impermanence and realize their roots in a stable reality that is the ground of life. But so often they seek it in the wrong places.” Quoting the *Dhammapada*, a text found within the *Pali* Canon, Unno observed that “Men driven by fear go to many a refuge, to mountains and to forests, to sacred trees, and shrines,” and added, “Today men go to resorts and psychiatrists, tranquillizers and drugs, effete philosophies and pseudo-religions. These are not solutions; the right path is clearly shown.” Again quoting the *Dhammapada*, he proposed that a person who took “refuge in the Buddha, Dharma [Buddhist teaching], and Sangha [community of practitioners]” and “who perceives in his

1. Robert P. Jackson, “Buddhism and the Beat Generation,” *American Buddhist*, 1: 8 (1957), 1. The author wishes to thank Hiroshi Kashiwagi for allowing him access to his personal collection of *American Buddhist*.

clear wisdom the Four Noble Truths” found “the safe refuge.” This was “the best refuge,” and, “after having gone to that refuge a man is delivered from all pain.”²

Debates about Buddhist teachings and practice in the United States by writers like Jackson and Unno attest to a previously unexamined history of cross-cultural exchanges between Japanese American “ethnic” and European American “convert” Buddhists during the mid-twentieth century.³ Both groups hoped that Buddhism would thrive in the United States and thus shared an interest in creating greater awareness of Buddhist religious practices and teachings. At the same time, ethnic and convert Buddhists often held contrary views, shaped by distinct priorities, as to what Buddhism in America should look like. Japanese Americans tended to espouse an ethno-national vision, grounded in community history and tradition, as part of a strategy for incorporating Buddhism and Japanese American Buddhists into the imagined community of the U.S. nation. Their vision of American Buddhism developed in the context of a long history of racial and religious discrimination. In contrast, many white convert Buddhists, dissatisfied with Cold War U.S. society and culture, viewed Buddhism as an alternative American religious practice—an exotic Orientalist religious practice defined as outside and often opposed to U.S. national culture. At odds with each other, proponents of each vision critiqued their counterparts in public presentations, study groups, and publications, asserting that their own version was more authentic. While couched in the language of Buddhist authenticity, supporting arguments for each vision centered on the conflicting prerogatives of constructing Buddhism and Buddhist identities in relation to U.S. national culture.⁴

2. Taitetsu Unno, “Some Insights into Life from the Dhammapada: A Collection of the Sayings of Buddha,” *American Buddhist*, 2: 8 (1958), 1, 6.

3. Scholarship on Buddhism in the United States has grappled with the problem of the categorization of Buddhists. See Charles S. Prebish, “Two Buddhisms Reconsidered,” *Buddhist Studies Review*, 10 (1993), 187–206. See also Rick Fields, “Divided Dharma: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism,” in Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, 1998), 196–206; Jan Nattier, “Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America,” in *ibid.*, 183–195; and Ryo Imamura, “Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies: An Asian American Perspective,” in *ibid.*, 228–237. For a discussion of race and the problem of categorization of Buddhists in the United States, see bell hooks, “Waking up to Racism,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, 4: 1 (1994), 42–45.

4. Recent works that analyze the impact of American Orientalist discourse upon U.S. culture include Jane Iwamura, “The Oriental Monk in American Popular Cul-

The history of Buddhism and Buddhists in America is a relatively new subfield that has emerged in the past twenty years. Most studies of Buddhist communities have focused on either convert Buddhists—mostly Europeans and European Americans who had grown up in a Judeo-Christian religious tradition but were drawn to Buddhist practices and teachings—or Asian Americans who were raised Buddhist. Taken together, these studies have provided important insights into the role that Buddhism played in shaping white convert and Asian American communities and identities.⁵ At

ture,” in Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley, 2000), 25–43; Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination* (Berkeley, 2003); and Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006). Studies that have addressed the impact of Orientalist discourse in shaping the racialization of Asian Americans include Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle, 1994); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, 1999); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, 1999); and Chiou-Ling Yeh, “In the Traditions of China and in the Freedom of America: The Making of San Francisco's Chinese New Year Festivals,” *American Quarterly*, 56 (2004), 395–420. Judith Snodgrass has specifically addressed the role of American Orientalism in shaping representations and understandings of Buddhism in U.S. culture. See Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003). For the idea of the nation as an imagined community, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991).

5. For major studies centered on European American Buddhist converts, see Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington, Ind., 1992). Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), examines European and European American Buddhists as cultural brokers through the life of Henry Steel Olcott and the development of Theosophy. Major studies centered on Asian American Buddhists include Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution* (Westport, Conn., 1977); David K. Yoo, “Enlightened Identities: Buddhism and Japanese Americans of California, 1924–1941,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 27 (1996), 281–301; Irene Lin, “Journey to the Far West: Chinese Buddhism in America,” in David K. Yoo, ed., *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans* (Honolulu, 1999), 134–168; and Sharon A. Suh, *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean American Temple* (Seattle, 2004). Studies by Rick Fields and Richard Hughes Seager present an overview of the history of Buddhism in America that includes a discussion of both white convert Buddhists and Asian American Buddhists. See Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston, 1992), and Richard Hughes Seager, *Buddhism in America* (New York, 1999). Two recent studies have taken a comparative approach to the study of Buddhists in the United States and have sought to develop categories that transcend the division between ethnic and convert Buddhists. See Wendy Cadge, *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America* (Chicago, 2005); Lori Pierce, “Constructing American Buddhists: Discourses of Race and Religion in Territorial Hawai‘i” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawai‘i, 2001).

the same time, the focus of these studies on either one group or the other has, perhaps unintentionally, implied a divide between ethnic and convert Buddhist histories in the United States. Two commonly assumed and interrelated interpretations of Buddhism's acculturation in the United States flow from the division of ethnic and convert Buddhist histories. First, studies of convert Buddhism have often been framed around a narrative of the transmission of Buddhism from Asian texts, monks, and teachers to convert practitioners in the United States. Second, separate studies reinforce the notion that Asian American religious practice operated in an ethnic vacuum. This approach supports the portrayal of Asian Americans as a "model minority"—passive, silent, insular, and largely disengaged from Cold War politics.⁶

This article analyzes previously unexamined Japanese American Buddhist temple records of ethnic and convert Buddhists, as well as memoirs, correspondence, fiction, and oral interviews. The findings demonstrate that during the 1950s and 1960s the boundaries dividing Japanese American and white convert Buddhists were more fluid than has been assumed and that ideas about the form and content of Buddhism in America were open to discussion and debate. The cross-cultural exchanges between ethnic and convert Buddhists underlie a comparative framework for assessing the role that religion played in shaping race and racial formations in the United States. A comparative framework complicates the narrative of Buddhism's acculturation to America. It de-centers Asia as the sole source of transmission of Buddhist teachings and practice; it also modifies the image of convert practitioners as the sole recipients of that transmission. Finally, this framework challenges representations of Japanese Americans as insular and disengaged from the broader American society.

The first section of this work examines the historical context in which Japanese American Buddhist practice and communities developed during the early Cold War years. The second section analyzes representations and interpretations of Buddhism by a growing number of convert Buddhists living in the San Fran-

6. For a more recent example of the casting of Japanese American Buddhists as insular, see Alfred Bloom, "Shin Buddhism in America: A Social Perspective," in Prebish and Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 31–48. For a historical analysis of the construction of Asian Americans as a "model minority" during the Cold War, see Lee, *Orientalists*, 145–179, and Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 223–263.

cisco Bay Area who envisioned Buddhist teaching and practice as an alternative path toward meaning, peace, and spirituality in an increasingly materialistic and unstable Cold War world. The third section assesses discussions and debates that emerged among Buddhists in the Bay Area beginning in the 1950s. Here I argue that, rather than clarifying a true or authentic Buddhism, these discussions and debates reflected and reinforced Cold War constructions of Japanese Americanness and whiteness. I conclude by briefly considering the predominance of the convert alternative vision of Buddhism and the way that this vision helped to reinforce the imagination of America as a Christian nation.

Envisioning Japanese Pure Land Buddhism as an American ethnic religion

Jōdo Shinshū Japanese American Buddhist practice developed in immigrant laboring communities in Hawai'i and the continental United States beginning in the late nineteenth century. Buddhism played several important roles in these immigrant communities. Buddhist laypersons formed study groups, in part to meet their emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual needs as immigrants. The desire to create meaning and a community of support was particularly strong given the difficult working conditions and sense of isolation created by long distances and separation from families and communities in Japan.⁷ The experience of racial discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization further shaped this longing for a sense of community. Chastised as racially Other partly because they were not Christians, the immigrants' Buddhism became an additional source of ethnic solidarity.⁸

7. John Bodnar examined immigrant attempts to construct a world of meaning within the context of a transplanted culture. See John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985).

8. Some of the early historical studies of Japanese Americans include Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley, 1977); Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885–1924* (New York, 1988); and Gary Y. Okihiro, *Cane Fires: The Anti-Japanese Movement in Hawaii, 1865–1945* (Philadelphia, 1991). The few works that include discussions of religion in shaping racial discrimination and formation include Brian Masaru Hayashi, *For the Sake of Our Japanese Brethren: Assimilation, Nationalism, and Protestantism Among the Japanese* (Stanford, Calif., 1995), and David K. Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture among Japanese Americans of California, 1924–1949* (Urbana, Ill., 2000).

A majority of Japanese immigrants were Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists, a Japanese development of Pure Land Buddhism based on the teachings and practice of its thirteenth-century founder, Shinran.⁹ In contrast to monastic traditions and developments, Shin Buddhism adopted an approach centered on the perspective of ordinary laypersons. Jōdo Shinshū stressed devotional recitation of the Nembutsu, a reference to the phrase “Namu Amida Butsu” (Name of Amida Buddha), as a central form of practice. By the nineteenth century the Nembutsu was interpreted as a gesture of gratitude to the Amida Buddha for entry into the Western Paradise, or Pure Land, where all could reach nirvana.¹⁰ In contrast to most other Buddhist traditions and denominations, Shin Buddhism went further in blurring the lines between priests and laity. Following the example of Shinran, Buddhist priests married, raised children, and resided in lay communities. The emphasis on the laity and devotional practice drew vast numbers of adherents from the peasant population, making Shin Buddhism one of the most powerful sects in Japan by the sixteenth century and the predominant Buddhist practice among Japanese migrant communities overseas.¹¹

In 1898 Japanese immigrants in San Francisco organized a Bukkyo Seinenkai—Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA)—to meet the social and spiritual needs of the growing Buddhist community. Participants planned and attended weekly religious discussions and *sutra* (transcribed teachings of the Buddha) study

9. Louise H. Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii: Its Impact on a Yankee Community* (Honolulu, 1971), 79. A conservative estimate by the War Relocation Authority concluded that in 1940, 55,000 Japanese American residents—or slightly more than half of those living on the West Coast of the United States—had some affiliation with a Buddhist temple or church. See Robert F. Spencer, “Social Structure of a Contemporary Japanese-American Church,” *Social Forces*, 26 (1948), 281. Pure Land Buddhism first developed in India and later China. Mark Blum has provided an overview of the Pure Land tradition in Japan. See Mark L. Blum, *The Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism: A Study and Translation of Gyōnen’s Jōdo Hōmon Genrushō* (New York, 2002). For a discussion of the history of Jōdo Shinshū, see James C. Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989).

10. Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany, N.Y., 1997), 10. James Dobbins has traced the historical development of the Nembutsu. See Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū*, 11–20.

11. *Ibid.*, 54. In most other Japanese Buddhist denominations, including Zen, priests were banned from marriage until an 1872 law created under the Meiji Restoration. See Richard M. Jaffe, *Neither Monk Nor Layman: Clerical Marriage in Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 4.

classes. To support this organization, the Homba Hongwanji (the institutional headquarters for Jōdo Shinshū in Japan) sent two missionaries to San Francisco and officially designated the center as a branch office. The branch office was officially recognized as the head institution for Buddhism in North America one year later.¹²

Japanese immigrant Buddhist communities had endured a long history of racial hostility and discrimination. This hostility was rooted in economic competition and xenophobia, fortified by the portrayal by nativist exclusionists and Protestant ministers of Japanese people as a “yellow peril,” a threat to an implicitly white, Christian nation.¹³ While sharing this nativist exclusionist view, some Protestant missionaries endorsed Japanese assimilation, contingent upon their conversion to Christianity. The Christian program for assimilation would later influence sociologists and institutions in the 1920s, such as Robert Park and the Chicago School of Sociology.¹⁴

Faced with this two-fronted opposition from nativists and assimilationists, Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists in the United States blended external aspects of Buddhist spaces, symbols, and practices with Anglo-Protestant Christian markers and U.S. national social customs, thus crafting a bicultural vision of Buddhism as an American ethnic religion.¹⁵ Drawing on the language of Ameri-

12. Buddhist Church of San Francisco, *Buddhist Church of San Francisco, 80 Year History, 1898–1978* (San Francisco, 1978), 16–17.

13. The racialization of Japanese American Buddhists as “Others” depended in part on their demarcation as non-Christians outside the fold of civilization. As Tomás Almaguer has shown, the process of racialization in California had antecedents in the racialization of Native American Indians. See Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994). For a discussion of Buddhism in late nineteenth-century U.S. popular, academic, and missionary discourse, see Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*. Snodgrass has discussed the staging of Buddhism at the World’s Parliament of Religions held in conjunction with the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. See, in particular, the introduction, and chapters 1 and 4.

14. Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii*, 72–74; Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*, 39–40; Noriko Asato, *Teaching Mikadoism: The Attack on Japanese Language Schools in Hawaii, California, and Washington, 1919–1927* (Honolulu, 2005), 31–34. For a discussion of the influence on sociologists of missionary arguments for conversion, see Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York, 2001), 25, 65.

15. For a discussion of biculturalism as a strategy for negotiating identity, see Lon Kurashige, “The Problem of Biculturalism: Japanese American Identity and Festival before World War II,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (2000), 1632–1654, and Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934–1990* (Berkeley, 2002).

canization and of cultural and religious pluralism, they modified many external aspects of terminology, architectural design of temples, and practice.¹⁶ By the 1910s public religious ceremonies that had been organized around a lunar calendar in Japan were held on Sundays to conform to Christian American religious and work practices. Adults attended weekly Sunday services, while children attended “Sunday schools.” Meanwhile, temple exteriors reflected the style of European American architecture. Styles ranged from the modest and plainly decorated buildings of smaller congregations to the elaborate, three-story brick building with a Roman façade that was built in 1914 to house the Bukkyo Seinenkai and the Hongwanji Shutcho-jo in San Francisco.¹⁷ The inner sanctuaries of the temples were similarly modified, with the *butsudan* (altar) placed at the front of the *hondo* (main hall) displaying an image of the Amida Buddha. Laypersons would remove their shoes and leave them by the door, but, rather than sitting on floor mats, they now sat on temple pews and listened to Buddhist *gathas* (religious songs) performed by choirs and accompanied by the pipe organ.¹⁸

Buddhist descriptive terminology was modified in response to anti-Buddhist sentiment, as well as to meet the needs of a growing bilingual, bicultural Nisei population. Buddhist priests were addressed as “reverends,” and many temples were renamed “churches.” In 1914 Hongwanji Shutcho-jo, the San Francisco branch office for Jōdo Shinshū, was renamed the Buddhist Mission of North America. During the 1920s Buddhist *gathas* were written in English and modeled after Christian hymns. Songs such as “Onward Buddhist Soldiers” and “Joy to the World, the Buddha Has Come” were regularly sung at English-language services. Significantly, however, Buddhist *sutras* and commentaries were not translated into English and continued to be presented in Japanese.¹⁹ Meanwhile, popular Issei (first-generation) immigrant social orga-

16. For a discussion of the increasing prominence of ideas of culture and cultural pluralism in the first two decades of the twentieth century, see Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York, 1991).

17. Buddhist Church of San Francisco, *Buddhist Church of San Francisco*, 19.

18. Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*, 44.

19. Hunter, *Buddhism in Hawaii*, 131; Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*, 44; Carl Becker, “Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in Christian America,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 10 (1990), 145.

nizations that might have been typical of Meiji-era Japan—such as Kendo clubs, which studied the art of Japanese fencing—gave way to Nisei baseball and basketball leagues beginning in the 1920s; Boy Scout troops were organized in the 1930s.²⁰ These modifications were not merely external symbols designed to allay discrimination. They also reflected an acculturated and transformed understanding of the *sangha* (community of Buddhist practitioners) and of the internal governance of Buddhist institutions. Historian David K. Yoo has shown that, when laypersons incorporated the Sacramento Buddhist Church in Sacramento, California, in 1901, they vested power in a board of trustees comprised of elected lay members, significantly reducing the power of the priest and the hierarchical form of institutional governance. This pattern of incorporation and governance by elected lay leadership came to characterize Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist temples and churches generally.²¹

During World War II Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist priests and lay leaders created additional, unprecedented modifications of the terminology, iconography, and internal governance of their organizations. Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Buddhist priests and lay leaders were targeted for surveillance and arrest by various branches of the U.S. government. Japanese Buddhists were misrepresented in national newspaper coverage and in U.S. popular culture as ultranationalist terrorists and part of a hidden "fifth column" waiting to strike at the United States.²² This demonization of Buddhism reinforced stereotypes of those of Japanese ancestry as part of an "enemy race." In response, Japanese American leaders of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist communities in the continental United States formulated and implemented a program for the official transfer of leadership from Issei to Nisei. They did so to deflect charges of disloyalty in an attempt to retain institutional property by holding it in the names of Nisei who were U.S. citizens by birthright, unlike their Issei parents who had been systematically ex-

20. Buddhist Church of San Francisco, *Buddhist Church of San Francisco*, 106–107, 119–123.

21. Yoo, "Enlightened Identities," 288; Spencer, "Social Structure of a Contemporary Japanese-American Church," 282.

22. Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York, 1993), 45.

cluded from citizenship.²³ Hoping to curb further stigmatization as non-Christians, Buddhist leaders also approved a change in the name of the institutional headquarters from North American Buddhist Mission to Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), thus dropping the institution's missionary connotation and reconstituting it as another national religious tradition. To underscore American national identification further, the newly formed BCA set up an official English-language policy and created a loyalty oath for its membership.²⁴ Despite these emergency measures, Buddhist community members were among the 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry who were forcibly removed and imprisoned in internment camps for the duration of the war.²⁵

In the two decades after the end of World War II, Japanese American Buddhists sought to counter the demonized representations of Buddhism by appealing to racial and religious tolerance and by renewing efforts to present Buddhism as an American ethnic religion.²⁶ In a 1946 pamphlet, Rev. T. Terakawa, a promi-

23. California Young Buddhist League Leaders, "Minutes of the Emergency Meeting," San Francisco, Jan. 4, 1942, pp. 1–2, box 2, Buddhist Churches of America Collection, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles (hereafter Buddhist Churches of America Collection). For a discussion of the legal status of Issei and Nisei, see Angelo N. Ancheta, *Race, Rights, and the Asian American Experience* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998), 23. Japanese American Buddhist leaders were responding in part to suggestions by representatives of the U.S. federal government that they might be able to retain property in the name of second-generation Nisei who were deemed "pro-American." For more, see Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 78–79; Lon Kurashige has provided an insightful reconsideration of historiographical interpretations of interethnic generational conflict in relation to wartime ethnic organizational politics and protest. See Lon Kurashige, "Resistance, Collaboration, and Manzanar Protest," *Pacific Historical Review*, 70 (2001), 387–417.

24. Kashima, *Buddhism in America*, 59; Donald Tuck, *Buddhist Churches of America* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1987), 284.

25. For a discussion of Buddhism in U.S.-sponsored "internment camps," see Kashima, *Buddhism in America*, and Duncan Ryuken Williams, "Camp Dharma: Japanese-American Buddhist Identity and the Internment Experience of World War II," in Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley, 2002), 191–200.

26. Scholars of Japanese American history have focused attention on the period before 1924 and during World War II. Two studies that examine the postwar period include Tetsuden Kashima, "Japanese American Internees Return, 1945–1955: Readjustment and Social Amnesia," *Phylon*, 41 (1980), 107–115, and Charlotte Brooks, "In the Twilight Zone Between Black and White: Japanese American Resettlement and Community in Chicago, 1942–1945," *Journal of American History*, 86 (2000), 1655–1687.

nent Nisei priest and leader, portrayed Buddhism as a model for democracy and made the case for its inclusion within the broader American community while calling on America to live up to its ideals. He made the case by arguing that Buddhism more than lived up to the principles of democracy and religious tolerance:

Democracy is an ideal for all Americans. . . . [yet] we have to admit this ideal is yet hardly more than a splendid idealism. . . . [T]he Buddha knew no distinction of caste, color, or race. The only nobility He acknowledged was the nobility of a well-lived life. He also recognized an equal right to spiritual freedom for everyone, instead of insisting upon blind belief in dogmas.²⁷

Terakawa's plea for democracy in practice was part of a broader movement among racialized groups who sought to hold the nation accountable to the rhetoric of civil rights and the image of American democracy promoted by the U.S. government in the early years of the Cold War.²⁸

In support of the American ethnic vision of Buddhism, Japanese American Buddhists staged public festivals, participated in memorial services, and engaged in civil rights campaigns to recognize Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States. Lay leaders worked to build networks with civil rights organizations, including the Japanese American Citizens League and the San Francisco Council for Civic Unity, which had emerged out of the collaboration of a liberal coalition of Bay Area reformers during World War II.²⁹ By the late 1940s these various efforts by Japanese American Buddhists resulted in an increased visibility of Japanese American ethnic Buddhism in the United States, including coverage in national

27. Reverend T. Terakawa, "Buddhism and Democracy," *Bliss of Nirvana*, 2: 2 (1946), 7, box 4, Buddhist Churches of America Collection.

28. As several historians have recently demonstrated, the federal government during the Cold War promoted the image of the United States as a multiracial, multicultural democracy, as the United States, the Soviet Union, and, later, the People's Republic of China sought allies and adherents among nations emerging from European colonialism. See Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color-line: American Race Relations in a Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

29. Misao Nakamura, "Bussei listen to civic leader," *Rafu Shimpo*, Aug. 28, 1948, p. 1. For a discussion of the San Francisco Council for Civic Unity and the liberal coalition from which it emerged, see William Issel, "Liberalism and Urban Policy in San Francisco from the 1930s to the 1960s," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 22 (1991), especially 433–441.

newspapers, on local television programs in major cities like New York and San Francisco, and widely read publications such as *Life* magazine.³⁰

From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, an American ethnic vision of Buddhism emerged among Jōdo Shinshū Japanese American communities in the United States. This vision was shaped by the needs of local communities in response to nativist and assimilationist forces that defined Buddhism as outside the fold of U.S. national culture. With the onset of the Cold War and a coinciding growth of interest in Buddhism beyond the Japanese American community, this American ethnic vision of Buddhism gained greater visibility and attention, leading to discussions and debates about Buddhism in America.

Orientalism and convert Buddhism as an “alternative” religious practice

Buddhism had stirred interest and anxiety in the United States during the late nineteenth century, a period characterized by unprecedented economic and social growth, upheaval at home, and U.S. imperial aspirations around the globe, including across the Pacific to Asia.³¹ While sometimes conflated with Hinduism, Buddhism drew the attention of a small but growing literary and professional class that responded to tensions in bourgeois society between authority and individual autonomy.³² Buddhism also raised concerns from Christian missionaries and ministers who viewed it as a useful model for comparison, a potential competitor to Protestantism, and a threat to a Christian nation.³³ While difficult to chart, based on the numbers of English-language publications and coverage in national newspapers, the number of European American Buddhist converts remained small even as gen-

30. A major celebration by the Buddhist Churches of America garnered coverage in *Life* magazine. See “Buddhist Jubilee: San Francisco Japanese have 50th anniversary,” *Life*, Sept. 20, 1948, pp. 76–78.

31. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*; Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*, 46–47.

32. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of United States Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1994).

33. For a discussion of Buddhism as both a source of anxiety and as a useful point of comparison with Christianity, see Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*, chapter 4, and Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, 26–27.

eral interest in Buddhism grew. For example, British writer Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879), a book on the life and teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, was estimated to have sold over 500,000 copies in the United States. Buddhism also garnered national press coverage at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, part of the World's Columbian Exposition.³⁴

The interest in Buddhism in America persisted during the early twentieth century largely among individuals who had contacts with Asian scholars, priests, and monks.³⁵ Awareness of Buddhism—Japanese Buddhism in particular—among the general public grew dramatically in the two decades after World War II and was driven by several circumstances. First, during the U.S. occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952, a growing number of Americans traveled, worked, and lived in Japan as part of the occupying forces. The U.S. presence produced new opportunities for those interested in learning about Japanese culture.³⁶ During the same period, popular films, magazines, novels, and plays sought to develop an interest and a sense of connection between Americans and Asia.³⁷ Meanwhile, the unprecedented attention given to Japan specifically and Asia generally, driven by the American experience in World War II, grew steadily during the Cold War, leading to the growth of Asian studies as one component of area studies in the American academy.³⁸ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's return to the United States after World War II resulted directly from this development. Suzuki, who would play an important role in popularizing Zen Buddhism, was invited by the Rockefeller Foundation to lec-

34. *Ibid.*, 26–29; Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington, Ind., 1995); Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*.

35. See Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, chapter 10.

36. See John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York, 1999), 206–207.

37. For a discussion of middlebrow cultural production on Asia, see Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, and Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally*.

38. For a discussion of the development of Asian studies as a component of area studies during the Cold War years, see Bruce Cummings, "Boundary Displacement: Area Studies and International Studies During and After the Cold War," in Christopher Simpson, ed., *Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences During the Cold War* (New York, 1998), and Vicente L. Rafael, "The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States," *Social Text*, 41 (Winter 1994), 91–111. The first Buddhist studies program in the United States was established in 1962 at the University of Wisconsin. "Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin," *American Buddhist*, 5 (Jan. 1961), 3; see also Douglas Dunsmore Daye, "Memorial Tribute to Richard Hugh Robinson, 1926–1970," *Philosophy East and West*, 22 (1972), 291.

ture at various American universities beginning in 1950; he held the position of visiting professor at Columbia University from 1952 to 1958.³⁹

A critical mass of convert Buddhists converged in the Bay Area during the 1950s. Their interest in Buddhism and their proximity to Japanese American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist communities, together with Japanese American interest in promoting Buddhism among the general American public, resulted in increased interaction between convert and ethnic Buddhists. Convert Buddhists were a diverse group that included academics, students, teachers, ex-soldiers, printers, editors, artists, poets, and writers. Through informal conversations, correspondence, and published writings, convert Buddhists constructed a modified vision of Buddhism as an alternative to American religious traditions and Cold War society and culture.⁴⁰

Alan Watts was one of the most visible convert Buddhists in the San Francisco Bay Area. A British expatriate living in the United States and self-taught author of numerous popular books on psychology, comparative religion, and Asian religion and culture, he had a particular interest in supporting the growth of Zen Buddhism in the United States. Watts first arrived in San Francisco in 1951 after being invited by Frederic Spiegelberg, a professor of Oriental Studies at Stanford University, to serve as an instructor (and later the director) of the newly formed American Academy of Asian Studies (AAAS).⁴¹ In 1953 Watts gained greater visibility in the Bay Area when he began hosting a weekly radio show with topics on Asian philosophy and religion, including numerous discussions on Zen. He also began hosting a regular program on the San Francisco public television station KQED.⁴²

39. Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 1870–1966," *History of Religions*, 6 (1967), 265–269.

40. Studies focused on white convert Buddhism in the Bay Area during the 1950s have been scattered and sparse, focusing primarily on individuals including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. Interactions between converts and Japanese Americans have generally been reduced to a brief mention of the Berkeley Buddhist Study Group. See, for example, Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*; Carole Tomkinson, ed., *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York, 1995), 25–26.

41. Alan W. Watts, *In My Own Way: An Autobiography, 1915–1965* (New York, 1972), 236.

42. Peter Tamony, "Beat Generation: Beat, Beatniks," *Western Folklore*, 28 (1969), 276. Three of Alan Watts's radio programs have been transcribed in Alan Watts, *Zen and the Beat Way* (Boston, 1997).

Watts acquired a broad background in Buddhist history and teachings through book study, supplemented by conversations with fellow convert Buddhists. He developed a vision for Buddhism that was defined against a Western Christian world view. As a teenager, he had read an essay on the topic of nirvana, which, he recalled, “gave me such a convincingly different view of the universe from the one I had inherited that I turned my back on all I had been taught to believe as authority.” For Watts, the Christian God “was a bombastic bore, and not at all the sort of fellow you would want to entertain for dinner, because you would be sitting on the edge of your chair listening to his subtle attempts to undermine your existence and to probe the inauthentic nature of your life.”⁴³

Drawing on a tradition of Orientalist scholarship, Watts emphasized the importance of tracing Buddhist teaching and practice to Buddhism’s founder and its ancient sages. As a result, he dismissed many of the “modern” developments in Buddhism as distortions of the original teachings.⁴⁴ In Watts’s rendition, Zen was to be praised precisely because it was antithetical to the institutionalized sense of hierarchy that he had experienced in his Christian upbringing and that he attributed to organized religion. In a revised version of his 1935 *The Spirit of Zen*, Watts proposed that Zen had “no doctrinal teaching, no study of scriptures, no formal program of spiritual development.” In a 1959 Pacifica radio broadcast, he contended that the function of Buddhism, unlike other religions, was not to devise conventions and rules in order to create and reinforce communities.⁴⁵

Watts maintained this idiosyncratic vision of Buddhism even in the face of challenges presented by actual study under a Zen master. In 1938 he had the opportunity to study with Sokei-An Sasaki, a Zen scholar and monk who had settled in New York City, but Watts gave up practice in a matter of weeks after getting into a heated argument with Sokei-An over the interpretation of a *koan*.⁴⁶ Rather than accepting Sokei-An’s response, Watts quit and resolved

43. Watts, *In My Own Way*, 66, 74–75.

44. See, for example, Alan Watts, *The Spirit of Zen: A Way of Life, Work, and Art in the Far East* (New York, 1958), 25–30.

45. *Ibid.*, 17; quoted in Alan Watts, *Zen and the Beat Way*, 8.

46. Presented to a practitioner by a Zen master, *koans* were seemingly irresolvable riddles designed to jar recipients from conventional frames of reference and understanding, thus developing mindfulness.

to “study Zen” by secretly monitoring Sokei-An’s daily personal behavior patterns.⁴⁷

Interest among convert Buddhists in the Bay Area was also generated by artists, writers, and poets associated with the Beat generation.⁴⁸ Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac journeyed to the Bay Area in the fall of 1954. Within weeks, they had been introduced to a number of West Coast poets who shared an interest in Buddhism, including Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. Like Watts, the Beats developed an interest and view of Buddhism as a spiritual alternative to Cold War institutions, organizations, and domestic prescriptions for security.⁴⁹ During the early Cold War years, they, like other Americans, were haunted by the unparalleled destruction of World War II and the increasing prospect of nuclear war. While many Americans turned to consumerism, the nuclear family, and the home as a sanctuary, the Beats retained a deep ambivalence to the dominant ideology of domestic containment.⁵⁰

Defining themselves against domesticity and consumerism, the Beats drew upon racialized figures at the margins of white, heterosexual, middle-class America for inspiration: the junkie, the street hustler, the jazz musician, and the migrant laborer. Scholars have noted that the embodiment and performance of blackness and, in particular, black primitivism played a central role in bol-

47. Watts, *In My Own Way*, 142–143; Monica Furlong, *Genuine Fake: A Biography of Alan Watts* (London, 1986), 69–70.

48. In clarifying the definition of the “Beat Generation,” a variety of scholarly and popular works have distinguished among artistic movements, lifestyles, and the media-invented term “Beatniks.” Scholarship has also sought to differentiate or demonstrate overlap among contributors to the “San Francisco Renaissance” and the “Beat scene.” See, for example, Tamony, “Beat Generation: Beat, Beatniks”; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York, 1983); Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters* (New York, 1995), 3–5, 192–193; Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge, U.K., 1991), 60–61. In this article, I focus on key writers and poets of the Beat generation who were interested in Buddhism, including Ginsberg, Kerouac, Snyder, and Whalen, as well as a broader circle of Bay Area poets, artists, students, and Buddhist practitioners who either interacted with this circle or were directly influenced by them.

49. Stephen Prothero, “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 84 (1991), 205–222, especially 216.

50. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1999). Stephen J. Whitfield has discussed the appeal of religious revival in an atomic age. See Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1996).

stering Beat narrative claims to liberation and freedom.⁵¹ Yet, they have not considered the central role that an exoticized Orientalist vision of Buddhism also played in the construction of the Beats' alternative vision. Like Watts, the Beats extracted Buddhism from its long history and transformed it into a timeless essence that harked back to the solitary, monastic practice of ancient sages.

A Beat vision of Buddhism as an alternative to American society and religion was encapsulated in Kerouac's figure of the dharma bum, which appeared in his 1958 novel of the same name. Loosely based on interactions among Kerouac and his friends on the West Coast, *Dharma Bums* followed the adventures of self-styled "Zen lunatics." Kerouac crafted the Japhy Ryder character, based on his friend Gary Snyder, as the quintessential dharma bum. Ryder's Oriental authenticity, and hence his authority, derived from his knowledge of Asian language and culture. Equally essential was Ryder's ability to embody and perform as an Oriental. Kerouac described Ryder as wearing "a little goatee, strangely Oriental-looking with his somewhat slanted eyes." Kerouac later noted that "his face was a mask of woeful bone, but his eyes twinkled like the eyes of old giggling sages of China." Ryder's "shack" in Berkeley evoked "his belief in the simple monastic life" with straw mats, his rucksack, "Japanese wooden pata shoes," and crates filled with books, "some of them in Oriental languages, all the great sutras, comments on sutras, the complete works of D. T. Suzuki and a fine quadruple-volume edition of Japanese haikus," as well as "an immense collection of valuable general poetry." In effect, Kerouac sought to transform Ryder into the ancient Tang Dynasty poet monk, Han Shan.⁵²

Kerouac's portrayal of Buddhism as an "alternative" religious

51. Jon Panish, "Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*: A Study of Romantic Primitivism," *MELUS*, 19 (Autumn 1994), 107–123; Jonathan Paul Eburne, "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 43 (1997), 53–92. Preston Whaley, Jr., has argued that Kerouac and other Beat writers were able to "disable the grinding pinions of primitivism through [their] own vernacular take on oriental mysticism." Surprisingly, he does not critique the role of Orientalist discourse in his argument about the disabling of the problematic racist aspects of primitivism. See Preston Whaley, Jr., *Blows Like a Horn: Beat Writing, Jazz, Style, and Markets in the Transformation of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 27–32.

52. Jack Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* (New York, 1958), 10–12, 16–17. The Tang Dynasty lasted from 618 through 907 A.D.

practice offered the dharma bums and convert Buddhists a critical perspective from which to view Cold War America: through the racial lens of the Oriental Other. In *Dharma Bums*, Ryder has a vision of a world filled with such people:

a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway . . . all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray . . . Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.⁵³

Kerouac's vision of Buddhism and its future in America were framed around the elevation of "rucksack wanderers," Beat oriental monk figures who rejected Cold War materialism and likened cycles of production and consumption to *samsara* (the Buddhist view of the endless cycle of birth and death from which nirvana was an escape). These "Zen Lunatics" wrote poems in a spontaneous, mystical process reminiscent of the presentation of a *Zen koan*. Their poems and their visions alerted all sentient beings to new levels of mindfulness.⁵⁴

Convert Buddhists like Watts and Kerouac crafted a vision of Buddhism's taking root in America by depicting Buddhism as an alternative to the Cold War domestic ideology and the social institutions and organizations that undergirded it. Their vision defined practice and Buddhist identity through the racialized figure of the Oriental as an "alternative" to U.S. society and culture. Proximity to Japanese American Buddhist communities in the Bay Area offered opportunities for dialogue—but also debate—over the vision and representation of Buddhism in the United States.

53. *Ibid.*, 77–78.

54. Jane Iwamura has assessed the transformation of the Oriental monk, interpreting its post-World War II manifestation as a sign of both increased "tolerance and respect" and the further growth of an Orientalist "system of representation" that "reveals the interests and concerns of the Occidental subjectivity from which it emerges." See Iwamura, "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture," 23–43.

Cross-cultural encounters and the making of American Buddhism

Cross-cultural dialogue between ethnic and convert Buddhists was encouraged by priests, lay leaders, and students from the Japanese American Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) as part of an attempt to develop interest and support among the general public. During the 1950s discussion and debate between ethnic and convert Buddhists over competing visions of Buddhism emerged in three major arenas: public conferences, Buddhist study groups, and Buddhist publications. In 1952 the BCA held a three-day Buddhist seminar, the first of its kind in the Bay Area. The seminar included lectures and panel discussions presented by Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist priests, faculty from the American Academy of Asian Studies (AAAS), including Watts, and students and faculty from Stanford University, the University of California, Berkeley, and other surrounding colleges. The seminar drew 250 people, among them fifty local and international participants from outside the ethnic community, including Thubten Norbu, brother of the Dalai Lama, and Dilowa Hutuktu, the spiritual leader of Mongolia.⁵⁵ As a result of the conference, Watts and other scholars and students from the AAAS became regular participants in BCA study groups, contributors to BCA publications, and guest speakers for Japanese American Young Buddhist conferences.⁵⁶

Initially, the dialogue between ethnic and convert Buddhists was welcomed and viewed as an improvement in race relations and cross-religious dialogue. Hitoshi Tsufura, co-organizer of the 1952 seminar, felt that it would open a dialogue among Buddhists and across religious traditions. He described the seminar as “herald-

55. Hitoshi Tsufura, “Buddhist Seminar,” *Berkeley Bussei* (1953), 28, 36, box 3, Buddhist Churches of America Collection; Jane Michiko Imamura, *Kaikyo: Opening the Dharma: Memoirs of a Buddhist Priest's Wife in America* (Honolulu, 1998), 33–34, 48–49.

56. Jane Imamura has provided a list of BCA study group presenters in 1955 that included a number of American Academy of Asian Studies (AAAS) students and instructors, as well as graduate students and professors from surrounding Bay Area universities. See Imamura, *Kaikyo*, 40. Two notable examples of AAAS participation in BCA Young Buddhist Conferences include G. P. Malalasekera, “Transcript of Memorial Service Sermon,” 11th Annual Western Young Buddhist League Conference in *Tri-Ratna: Buddha, Buddhism, Buddhist*, 7 (1953), 1–7, Buddhist Study Center Archives, Honolulu (hereafter Buddhist Study Center), and Alan Watts, “A Program for Buddhism in America,” *Berkeley Bussei* (1952), 21, Buddhist Churches of America Collection.

ing a new phase of Buddhism in the United States” that would not “yield to traditions and orthodoxy.” Another observer noted the feeling of “oneness in this search for mature thinking. All barriers of sect, race, and even the name of religion were overcome in this search.” The author noted that “the atmosphere that prevailed in those three days was of reverence and deep stimulation that was never felt before at any young Buddhist gatherings.”⁵⁷

Buddhist study groups provided another arena for the discussion and exchange of views. The most significant of these was the BCA study group in Berkeley. First formed in 1948 by the BCA’s Bishop Shigefuji to prepare Nisei Buddhists for roles as future priests and lay leaders, the study group, under the direction of Rev. Kanmo Imamura and his wife, Jane Imamura, became an important forum for discussions between ethnic and convert Buddhists. In addition to participation by BCA priests and laypersons, the study group included Bay Area scholars, students, and convert Buddhists from a variety of backgrounds. In the fall of 1955 Beat poets and writers, including Ginsberg, Whalen, and Kerouac, began to participate in the group after Snyder, who had joined months earlier, brought them to meetings.⁵⁸

Like Buddhist conferences, the BCA study group was praised by participants as a step forward in race relations and religious dialogue by both ethnic and convert Buddhists. Graduate student Vanita Meyer from the University of California Berkeley, characterized the BCA study group as a “happy conglomeration of people of different religions, races, ages and experiences.” Another Berkeley student, Isao Fujimoto, a Nisei who had been raised as a Zen Buddhist, appreciated the “camaraderie” that grew among “all these people interested in Buddhism.” Snyder recalled that “he had not expected so familial and relaxed an atmosphere. . . . the room was a mix of folks, students, children, older people . . . but what touched [him] most was this taste of family Buddhism, and

57. Hitoshi Tsufura, “Buddhist Seminar,” *Berkeley Bussei* (1953), 28, Buddhist Churches of America Collection; A. B., “Notes on the Buddhist Seminar,” *Tri-Ratna: Buddha, Buddhism, Buddhist*, 7 (Sept.–Oct. 1953), 15, Buddhist Study Center.

58. “Buddhist Study Group,” *Berkeley Bussei* (1950), 7, box 3, Buddhist Churches of America Collection; Tsufura, “Buddhist Seminar,” 28; Gary Snyder, “Introduction,” in Imamura, *Kaikyo*, iii; interview with Gary Snyder by the author, Feb. 7, 2002, Nevada City, Calif., in author’s possession; Alfred Bloom, “The Unfolding of the Lotus: A Survey of Recent Developments in Shin Buddhism in the West,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 10 (1990), 158.

the ease of a traditional culture grounded in the Dharma.” Jane Imamura described the study group meetings, with their “erudite seekers often engaged in friendly bantering but mostly serious discussion,” as “exceptional happenings with everyone in common search for the meaning of life.”⁵⁹

An exchange of ideas also began to appear in Japanese American Buddhist-sponsored publications throughout the 1950s. *Berkeley Bussei*, *Tri-Ratna: Buddha, Buddhism, Buddhist*, and *American Buddhist* (which served as the official English-language publication of the BCA) led the shift toward a broader comparative examination of Buddhism that included contributions and perspectives from a variety of participants, including BCA priests and laypersons and Japanese American, Asian, European, and European American scholars, students, and laypersons.⁶⁰ Beginning in the 1950s, BCA publications were the first to publish the poetry of Kerouac, Snyder, and Whalen. In addition to publishing Kerouac’s first poems, the *Bussei* also reprinted Kerouac’s account of his meeting with Suzuki.⁶¹

Interactions at meetings and with publications carried individuals into social exchanges, participation in the Japanese American Buddhist community, and sometimes long-standing friendships. The study group provided Watts with an opportunity to become acquainted with Snyder and the Beat scene.⁶² Meanwhile, conversations and BCA publications continued to nurture ties among an informal *sangha* of friends and acquaintances. Alex Wayman, a

59. Vanita Meyer, “New Experience: Notes on the Buddhist Seminar,” *Tri-Ratna: Buddha, Buddhism, Buddhist*, 6 (Sept.–Oct., 1953), 15, Buddhist Study Center; Isao Fujimoto, interview by the author, Oct. 16, 2002, Davis, Calif., in author’s possession; Snyder, “Introduction,” in Imamura, *Kaikyo*, iii; Imamura, *Kaikyo*, 39.

60. For example, the 1955 *Berkeley Bussei* was primarily produced by and included contributions from BCA Study Group members, including Lily Fujioka, Kimi Hisatsune, Jane Imamura, Reverend Kanmo Imamura, Robert Jackson, Hiroshi Kashiwagi, Vanita Meyer, Snyder, Tokwan Tada, Tsufura, Taitetsu Unno, Watts, and Alex Wayman. *Berkeley Bussei* (1955), box 3, Buddhist Churches of America Collection. Kashiwagi reflected on the goals of the *American Buddhist* in 1964 after having served as editor for the previous seven years. See Kashiwagi, “Progress Report,” *American Buddhist*, 8 (Jan. 1964), 2.

61. See, for example, 1953, 1957, and 1958 editions of the *Berkeley Bussei*. The 1960 edition of the *Berkeley Bussei* includes a reprint of Jack Kerouac’s recounting of his meeting with D. T. Suzuki; *Berkeley Bussei* (1953–1960), box 3, Buddhist Churches of America Collection; Hiroshi Kashiwagi, “1957 *Berkeley Bussei* exceeds previous editions,” *American Buddhist*, 1 (Aug. 1, 1957), 4.

62. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 215.

graduate student and future pioneering scholar in the field of Tibetan studies, became acquainted with Snyder through BCA activities. Wayman later asked Snyder to review poetry that he planned to submit to the *Berkeley Bussei* in 1956. Cal Steinmetz first learned about the BCA while living in Casper, Wyoming, when a friend in Houston, Texas, sent him a copy of *American Buddhist*. Steinmetz reflected on “how easily [he] identified with the spirit, the aspirations [and] the unfolding actions of the BCA.” He read, saved, and reread articles, and, after moving to Boulder, Colorado, he began attending meetings with the Tri-State Buddhist Church, a branch of the BCA.⁶³

After Snyder left for Japan to study under a Zen *roshi* (venerable teacher), study group members continued to update him on local happenings. Jane Imamura wrote to Snyder about Will Peterson, an artist loosely associated with the Beat scene and a study group participant, about Peterson’s plans to move to Japan shortly after he finished editing the 1957 *Berkeley Bussei*. While spring was usually a season of “regeneration,” she noted that there was “so much regeneration here all the time that I hardly feel it.” She also mentioned that Robert Jackson was lecturing on Buddhism at local universities and teaching BCA high school Sunday school courses, noting that “his energy shows no sign of exhausting which is a wonderful thing for us.” In another letter to Snyder, Kerouac reported on his participation in a study group meeting and the dinner that followed: “Last Sunday Claude [Dalenberg] spoke at the Buddhist [study group] meeting here and I met Mrs. Imamura again and that fine fellow [Hitoshi] Tsufura and they took us to dinner of eel at Fuji inn, which I guess Phil [Whalen] told you.” Jane and Kanmo Imamura’s interactions with convert participants such as Snyder led to friendships that spanned the next four decades.⁶⁴

Despite a shared interest in generating broader public awareness of Buddhism in the United States, debates, criticisms, and countercharges surfaced during the late 1950s in public discus-

63. Wayman to Snyder, Oct. 26, 1956, folder 3, box 197, Series II, Gary Snyder Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Davis (hereafter Snyder Papers); Cal Steinmetz, “‘Hearts and Minds will Expand’: A Letter from Oregon,” *American Buddhist*, 4 (Oct. 1960), 2.

64. Jane Imamura to Snyder, Feb. 20, 1957, folder 46, box 85, Series II, Snyder Papers; Kerouac to Snyder, May 24, 1957, folder 38, box 94, in *ibid.*; see introductions by Jane Imamura and Snyder in Imamura, *Kaikyo*.

sions, study group meetings, and in print. These debates ostensibly centered on the issue of the authenticity of various forms of Buddhist practice and teachings. In fact, the debates reflected mounting tensions that erupted as the American ethnic and alternative Orientalist envisionings of Buddhism converged. At the source of these tensions were contrary definitions of Buddhism in relation to U.S. national culture. Criticism of the ethnic Buddhist vision by convert Buddhists emerged partly in response to the structure and form of Jōdo Shinshū practice and teaching, which were deemed too similar to Western religion. Buddhism as practiced and understood by Japanese American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists retained both differences and doctrinal similarities to Christian Protestantism that many convert Buddhists found undesirable. One of the major differences between Jōdo Shinshū doctrine and other Buddhist sects such as Zen was the former's emphasis on *tariki* rather than *jiriki*. Jōdo Shinshū founder Shinran had emphasized *tariki*, or an acknowledgment of the "Other Power" of the Amida Buddha's compassion as the only necessary precondition to attaining enlightenment. This stood in stark contrast to Zen Buddhist tradition, which emphasized *jiriki*, or "Self-Power," generated through persistent and rigorous practice of zazen sitting meditation, something that many convert Buddhists found appealing. The emphasis in *tariki*, expressed through "faith" or gratitude to the Amida Buddha through the practice of devotional recitation, was often criticized for its similarity to the Christian concepts of faith and redemption by the Christian God.⁶⁵

In addition to doctrinal similarities to Western religion, the Japanese American emphasis on weekly temple services, which had developed as central social and religious gathering points for Japanese Americans, drew criticism and comment from convert Buddhists because the practice resembled that of Christian churches. While acknowledging that racial and religious discrimination in the past might have led to use of the term "church," Calvin Steinmetz appealed to the BCA to change the term back to "temple," noting that he had learned from Buddhists in other countries—

65. Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida*, 8–10. See, for example, Robert Jackson, "Zen and Shin," *American Buddhist*, 2 (June 15, 1958), 5. Despite his continued preference for Zen and Beat-styled Buddhism, Jackson began to develop a more comprehensive understanding of faith by contrasting Shin Buddhism and Christianity. See Robert P. Jackson, "Buddhism and Christianity," *American Buddhist*, 5 (Aug. 1961), 2.

including (presumably) convert Buddhists in England—that they were “uniformly horrified at the idea of Buddhist ‘churches.’” Steinmetz explained that “Buddhism is interesting to some of the best minds in the West because it is different enough from westernized religions that the contrast is striking.” He concluded by advocating for the adoption of “Buddhist terms,” by which he meant Japanese and Sanskrit words.⁶⁶

What many convert Buddhists found most unsettling were the same external modifications that shaped the presentation of an American ethnic Buddhism. Convert Buddhists criticized what they described as the “Protestantized” modifications in Japanese American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist practices, such as Buddhist “temple worship.” In a keynote address titled “Program for Buddhism in America,” presented to the Japanese American Western Young Buddhist League, Watts contrasted “American-Japanese” Buddhist group organizations in the United States with “purely American” groups, by which he meant convert Buddhist groups. “The former,” he stated, “are organized as temples and churches, which pattern themselves more and more after the Protestant Christian Churches of the West. The latter are organized as ‘ashrams,’ that is to say, as informal schools for the study and practice of Buddhist teachings.” “Historically,” Watts continued, “ashrams existed in Buddhism long before temples. Buddhism began as an ashram—a group of disciples studying under Gautama the Buddha. Temple life came later, as a way of paying respect or giving thanks to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for their compassion in pointing out the way of deliverance from illusion.”⁶⁷

If appeals to a historically based authenticity were not enough to persuade Japanese Americans to reconsider their forms of practice, Watts tapped into a source of anxiety for most Nisei by claiming that similarities in practice to Christianity threatened the future of Buddhism in the United States. Watts asserted:

Temple-Buddhism is a very wonderful development—so long as it does not supplant or overshadow ashram-Buddhism. But this is just what is happening in Buddhism, particularly in the American groups of Japanese origin, and it is to be feared that if this course continues, these groups will

66. Calvin C. Steinmetz, “What’s in a Name: The Question of Temple or Church,” *American Buddhist*, 6 (June 1962), 2, 4.

67. Alan Watts, “A Program for Buddhism in America,” *Berkeley Bussei* (1952), 21.

die out, and fail to make their important contribution to Western life. . . . It is very understandable that Americans of Japanese origin want to adapt themselves to American life, and to fit in with the social patterns which they find in this country. But this copying of Christian church-organization is most unfortunate.⁶⁸

In addition to expressing disapproval of temple Buddhism, convert Buddhists also expressed displeasure with many of the modifications that had been made in Japanese American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist practices: Buddhist priests who were addressed as reverends or ministers; Sunday school programs; Buddhist choirs; Young Buddhist Associations with basketball and baseball leagues that resembled YMCA and YWCA programs; and Buddhist Boy Scout troops. In a letter to *American Buddhist*, Rev. Jack Austin, editor of *The Western Buddhist*, stated that he “had no objection to any social activities and [was] in favor of Buddhist Youth organizations having all the sporting events possible, so long as this does not prevent the study of the Dharma, which is the main thing. But many of the [Japanese] American Buddhist magazines which reach us make one wonder if Buddhism is not the main thing but only an adjunct to baseball!”⁶⁹

As the Beat vision of Buddhism began to influence discussions among convert Buddhists, it was used as a point of contrast with Japanese American Buddhists, who were characterized as apathetic and conformist. Jackson, who penned the 1958 “Buddhism and the Beat Generation” article, declared, “We are not looking for a popularized, watered-down version of Buddhism that will appeal to the lowest common denominator.” Buddhist education needed to appeal to “individuals who will emerge from the apathetic run of people.” Jackson concluded, “A Buddhist disciple is often unconventional, he does not ask for parables or stories to be minutely explained to him. He ‘gets it,’ ‘digs’ the teaching and often comes up with some startling ideas of his own.”⁷⁰

Challenges by supporters of an alternative Orientalist vision of Buddhism were met with heated responses and counter challenges by those supporting the ethnic American vision. David

68. *Ibid.*

69. Rev. Jack Austin, “Letters from Readers,” *American Buddhist*, 1 (Oct. 1, 1957), 4.

70. Robert P. Jackson, “On Buddhist Education,” in *ibid.*, 2 (July 15, 1958), 1.

Iwamoto, a former Nisei Young Buddhist Association (YBA) member who had recently been ordained as a Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist priest, addressed Watts's comments on Japanese American temple Buddhism with a pointed rebuttal. Iwamoto rejected Watts's characterization of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism as equivalent to or very similar to Christianity and also disagreed that Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists needed to adjust their practice to an ashram format to remain significant. Invoking the long history and tradition of Shin Buddhism, Iwamoto called Watts's comments "a virtual insult not only to the Shin Sect order of America but to all who find the crystallization of Buddhism in Shinran Shonin's teaching." He added, "If [Watts] is the Buddhist scholar he claims to be, he must know that Shakyamuni Buddha made difficult truths intelligible to minds of various capacities and that this diversity of provisions in Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching has been responsible for the establishment of various Buddhist sects." He concluded, "No one doubts today that the Shin Sect is an established Buddhist sect. People out of number have found joy in following the doctrine of the Shin Sect as the way to Enlightenment as propounded by Shakyamuni Buddha."⁷¹

Others affirmed the temple tradition, arguing that it had been important in sustaining an everyday sense of both collective and individual identity for Japanese Americans. BCA study group member John Doami reasoned that Buddhism was more "a way of life" than a "religion in the popular sense." In response to the question, "Is there really a need for temples and churches?" Doami stated, "I believe there is. To propagate a way of life that one believes in, the best way I know of is through word of mouth [in] a congregation." Doami then explained how the pursuit of individual understanding and community social interaction complemented one another. "Since Buddhism is an individual matter, a way of life seeking understanding of the self in order to achieve greater happiness in this world, intermingling would be an ideal, leading to a greater insight of one's thoughts and actions through observation of others."⁷²

Still others denounced *American Buddhist* articles on Beat Bud-

71. David Iwamoto, "The Shin Sect Doctrine in America," *Tri-Ratna: Buddha, Buddhism, Buddhist*, 6 (Sept.–Oct. 1952), 7–8, Buddhist Study Center.

72. John Doami, "The Social Utility of the Church," *American Buddhist*, 2 (Oct. 1958), 6.

dhist mysticism, viewing them as a heretical straying from traditional Jōdo Shinshū teachings. In one column, Jackson felt compelled to respond to sharply worded criticism from an unnamed but “respected source” on the recent “trend of American Buddhism.” Jackson noted that *American Buddhist* would continue to “remain open to the wider tradition of Buddhism.” Nevertheless, Jackson assured readers that “by no means is there a policy in the (BCA) or its publications of ‘moving away from the Jodo-Shin-shu of their fathers in favor of a nebulous concoction composed of one part Zen, one part anti-Christianity (!) and one part metaphysical gymnastics’ as the letter received put it. Nor is it true that faith in Amida would pass ‘as soon as the last Issei is buried.’”⁷³

Critiques of Japanese American Buddhist practices cut to the core of Japanese American assumptions about their own ethno-religious practices, traditions, and identity. In defending an American ethnic vision of Buddhism, Japanese American Buddhists invoked a particular vision of Buddhism that affirmed the acculturated practices and traditions developed in America over the previous sixty years. Whether supporting temple modifications, turning to their knowledge of Jōdo Shinshū teachings and general Buddhist *sutras*, or labeling articles heretical, Japanese American Buddhists clarified and crafted a renewed understanding of the content and form of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist practice. At the same time, by asserting an ethnic American vision of Buddhism, Japanese American Buddhists problematized Orientalist constructions of an idealized, ancient, exotic form of Buddhism that reinforced its difference and distance from U.S. national culture.

Conclusion

The visions of Buddhism that converged during the 1950s—as an ethnic American religion and as an Oriental alternative to Cold War America—were shaped by the overlapping and diverging interests of ethnic and convert Buddhists. Seeking the inclusion of Japanese Americans and Buddhism within the U.S. national imaginary, proponents of the ethnic American vision argued for the resonance of Buddhism with democratic principles and called upon America to live up to its promise of religious freedom for all. At the

73. Robert P. Jackson, “The Relationship of Shin Shu and General Buddhism,” in *ibid.*, 1 (Sept. 1957), 1, 5.

same time, they modified external aspects of practice in an effort to counter accusations of difference and invited the participation of the general public in Buddhist seminars, study groups, and publications. Convert Buddhists like Watts, Kerouac, Jackson, and others crafted a vision of Buddhism as an Oriental alternative, located outside the fold of U.S. national culture. The ethnic and convert visions of Buddhism clashed in discussions and debates centered on the authenticity of Buddhist practice and teaching. Advocates of both visions offered prescriptive advice as to the appropriate form that Buddhism should take in America. Rather than leading to clarification of the variety of Buddhist teachings and traditions, participants sought to affirm either the ethnic constructions of Japanese American Buddhist tradition or the Zen-inspired convert form that mythologized a timeless ancient form of meditation and monasticism at the expense of Buddhism's longer history.

Buddhism's greater visibility and appeal during the Cold War years proved to be a double-edged sword for Japanese American Buddhists. Although a departure from the negative wartime associations of Japanese Buddhism, the new curiosity, interest, and attraction to Buddhism continued to be rooted, at least in part, in its delineation as exotic and distant from U.S. culture. This distance in turn naturalized associations of U.S. national identity with Western Christian society and culture. While potentially producing greater appreciation of Japanese American Buddhist religious practices and traditions, the interest in Buddhism among non-ethnics also served to conflate Buddhism and Buddhists with Asia. Thus, ironically, "American Buddhism" would come to be equated with the practices of white convert Buddhists, even as the modified practices of Japanese American Buddhists remained marginal and largely ignored beyond Japanese American communities. Japanese Americans made some inroads in promoting an American ethnic vision of Buddhism during the late 1940s and early 1950s, but, from the late 1950s on, the alternative vision shaped by Watts, the Beats, and a host of convert Buddhists dominated popular discourse. Only in the 1980s, when discussions of race relations prompted by Asian American Buddhists appeared in scholarly journals and convert Buddhist lay publications, did the presence and concerns of Asian American Buddhists surface again.

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