CHAPTER FOUR

THE BUDDHIST MISSION OF NORTH AMERICA 1898–1942:
RELIGION AND ITS SOCIAL FUNCTIONS IN AN
ETHNIC COMMUNITY

Arthur Nishimura

The role of religious organizations in the lives of immigrants groups is a topic that has a considerable body of scholarship. What the analysis shows is that these organizations have played a vital role for virtually all immigrants groups in the adjustment to the new society. In addition to the spiritual services, these organizations fulfill a host of social and economic functions. Immigrant groups in particular may be drawn to churches and other local religious associations because they not only represent something familiar of their country of origin but also provide a recognized social form within American society.

Put simply, religious organizations provide for both continuity and transition within immigrant communities. This motivation is also logical from the point of view of the religious organization. Although on its face, the expansion of activities to include social and economic programs may seem to detract from the basic religious motivations, the relationship is mutually dependent. As both the organization and the members are essentially “strangers in a strange land,” meeting these ostensibly non-religious needs helps to ensure the continued support of the ethnic membership for the organization. These services in turn help to maintain continuity and familiarity for the membership as they adjust to life in a new society.

For the Japanese Americans prior to World War II, one of the important religious organizations was the Buddhist Mission of North America (BMNA). Legally formalized in 1914, the BMNA's functional

---

1 Perhaps the two most notable classical studies in this body are Handlin (1951) and Herberg (1960); recent examples include Warner and Wittner (1988) and Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000).

2 The BMNA changed its name to the Buddhist Churches of America during World War II. The organization is still headquartered in San Francisco and currently
formation dates to 1898. That a Buddhist organization would play a vital role in this community is consistent with available statistics on the religious affiliation of its population. A 1930 survey estimated that 78 percent of all Japanese immigrants claimed Buddhist identity as compared to 18 percent claiming Christianity (Strong 1930: 352). In 1942, a survey of the population that entered the relocation camps found that 68 percent of all internees claimed to be Buddhists.

The BMNA was, like its membership, a transplanted group. It was officially an overseas branch of the Nishi Hongwanji (Western school) branch of Jodo Shinshu or True Pure Land sect from Kyoto (Andreasen 1998). The “Western” appellation does not refer to a significant geographical orientation as in the Western Hemisphere but rather a division of the sect between “Western” and “Eastern” schools—or, more exactly, western and eastern temple complexes in Kyoto. This division was ordered by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1602 to divide the potential power of the sect.3

Although other sects and schools of Buddhism made some inroads to the United States, this one sect and organization came to establish a significant presence in the Japanese American community. By the beginning of World War II, the BMNA had expanded from the one church in San Francisco to 46 across six states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. In terms of membership, it had grown from 30 members in 1898 to over 12,000 (Munekata 1974: 53).

The Religious Foundation

As part of a Buddhist sect from Japan, the BMNA had religious and organizational origins dating back to the 13th century. Jodo Shinshu was founded by a Zen Buddhist monk, Shinran Shonin, based on the teachings of his teacher, Honen Shonin. One of the key distinguishing features of Jodo Shinshu is that it was the first popular form of

3 The term “shogunate” refers to the type of governmental system in which a samurai warlord is granted the title of shogun, or “barbarian-conquering general,” ostensibly by the Emperor of Japan. With this title, the shogun has effective suzerainty over the country. The Tokugawa shogunate, named after the Tokugawa family, was in power from 1600 to 1868.