

**Spring 2022 Lecture Series:
 Progressive and Radical Buddhist Experiments in Modern Japan
 James Mark Shields (Bucknell University)**

Lecture #3 (of 4): Taishō Buddhist(ic) Utopians (1920s)

W 3/23 at 7:00 PM Eastern, 6:00 PM Central, 4:00 PM Pacific (R 2/24 at 9:00 AM Japan Time)

One of the most significant outcomes of the Meiji Buddhist Enlightenment was the appearance of numerous lay Buddhist associations and publications. According to Yasutomi Shin'ya, these movements can be grouped under three broad categories: 1) Buddhism for the state; 2) Buddhism for society; and c) Buddhism of the self. The New Buddhist Fellowship, which flourished in the final decade of Meiji, amidst wars, rising nationalism, and growing unrest due to the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism, attempted to establish a “socially engaged” foundation for lay Buddhism, one that would touch all spheres of ordinary life. However, the moderate, liberal path of the New Buddhists did not survive the crackdowns following the High Treason Incident of 1911, and the stage was set for new and distinctive experiments, including a turn towards intentional communities — living utopias — several of which fused Buddhist with Christian, socialist and agrarian ideals.

From the period of the Russo-Japanese War, the social and religious writings of Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) had significant impact among young Japanese liberals and progressives. The late Meiji and Taishō periods witnessed the birth of several utopian communities that fused Buddhist and Tolstoyan principles, such as Itō Shōshin's (1876–1963) Muga-en, Mushanokōji Saneatsu's (1885–1976) Atarashikimura and Eto Tekirei's (1880–1944) Hyakushō Aidōjō. This paper discusses the work of these figures, with a focus on their respective visions of the future and utopia, in order to show both the disjunctures and the continuities in radical Buddhist political thought in these formative decades. I argue that despite their ostensibly “social” goals, the Tolstoyan-Buddhist intentional communities that flourished in the Taishō period were largely products of Yasutomi's third category (Buddhism for the self)—and that this made them vulnerable to co-optation by the first (Buddhism for the state) in the early Shōwa period.

