Confronting Cultural Difference in the Establishment of a Global Zen Community

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As a commercial phenomenon, Zen is recognizable throughout the world as a lucrative brand name that communicates harmony, simplicity, and cosmopolitan elegance. In contrast, the Japanese Zen institution's attempts to develop Zen into a successful global religion have proven more problematic. Despite initial successes by Japanese clergy in establishing centers of Zen practice throughout Europe and the Americas, the past fifty years have seen the dream of a global Zen community descend into a legacy of controversy, scandals, and schisms over conflicting claims of authority.

Looking specifically at the internationalization efforts of the Japanese Sōtō Zen sect, this paper will discuss how essentialist assumptions of culture, religion, and race held by both Japanese and international practitioners continue to directly hinder Zen's development as a global religion. Complicating matters further are competing ideas of authenticity and legitimacy which have led to groups of dedicated but disenfranchised Zen practitioners becoming alienated from the Japanese Zen institution, all the while trying to maintain a sense of shared "lineage" with the same clergy and temples in Japan. As I will show, recent attempts to reconcile these groups and overcome cultural difference ultimately suggest that these ruptures hide a very different problem: an ideological divide over how participants conceive of the role of religion in their lives, and conflicting cultural expectations about the nature of religious practice itself.