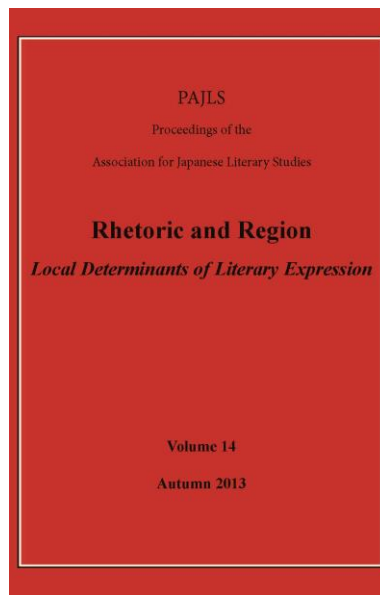


“Diaries of Conversion: God, Self, and the Dilemma  
of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature”

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**Diaries of Conversion: God, Self,  
and the Dilemma of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature**

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Several Meiji and Taishō writers were influenced by Christianity. The idea of an absolute God and an independent and free self often overlapped with these writers' search for answers to the meaning of human existence and the purpose of life. Many of them were baptized and embraced the Christian faith in their youth. However, as they strove to rationalize the internal conflicts surrounding the construction of the modern self, they became unable to address their predicaments within the framework of orthodox Christianity and later renounced their faith.

Scholars have generally downplayed the strictly theological inquiry that drove these young intellectuals, characterizing their religious experience as ephemeral and essentially marginal to the development of modern Japanese literature. This is not to say that the influence of Christianity has been totally overlooked or denied. The 1960s and 70s witnessed a burgeoning interest to investigate the impact of the Western religious tradition on early twentieth century narrative. The issue of faith and its relationship to literature and art came to the forefront of the literary discourse, spurring an important debate on the lasting influence of the Christian religion in the individual formation of many Meiji and Taishō writers.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Japanese Christian scholars monopolized much of that debate, questioning the religious orthodoxy of modern writers and the legitimacy of their recantation, Meiji Christianity came to be ultimately characterized by some as a short-lived phenomenon that seems "to have come and gone without leaving a trace."<sup>2</sup>

Drawing also from the conflictive relationship between sexuality and Christian morality that surfaced during the naturalist years, several critics have espoused the idea that modern Japanese literature likely originated not from the encounter with Christianity but rather from its rejection. It is certainly a fact that, while emphasizing individuality and equality, and inspiring the modern search for the self, the teachings of Christianity also stressed the duality of the spirit and the body and the sinful nature of sexual desire. The autobiographical writings of several modern authors attest to the reality of this equation. On March 23, 1898, for example, Masamune Hakuchō,

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on this debate, see, for example, the special issues of *Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kanshō* (June 1967) and *Bungaku* (June 1962, March 1979 and April 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Masamune Hakuchō, "Meiji bundan sōhyō," quoted in Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 81.

who had been baptized by Uemura Masahisa one year earlier, wrote in his diary “do not talk behind people’s backs. Do not lie even if you had to die for it. Do not look at women.”<sup>3</sup> Arishima Takeo, who converted in 1899 and was at first an avid reader of the apostle Paul’s epistles to the Romans, wrote at length over the course of his life about the conflict between faith and sexuality, and so did others like Kinoshita Naoe and Mushanokōji Saneatsu.<sup>4</sup> Most of these writers were under the influence of Christian leader Uchimura Kanzō and attended his lectures frequently, and it is widely thought that they eventually grew apart from him and the Church because of the issue of sexuality. Shiga Naoya once said that the path of morality and purity walked by Uchimura had become so narrow and tight that it was hardly impossible to tell whether there really was a path or not.<sup>5</sup> Nagayo Yoshirō also cited this issue as one of the main reasons why he stopped attending Uchimura’s meetings.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, despite the conflictive relationship with Christian morality, these writers’ religious discourse—their diaries and memoirs—provide evidence that the question of selfhood and its relationship to God and the universe remained at the center of their concerns, informing their narrative at every stage of their lives. Their personal pursuit unfolded along the spatial and time determinants that marked the spread of Christianity in Japan: the shared evangelical setting and artistic representation of faith, the intersection between politics and religion, and the presence of a common rhetoric of contrition throughout these texts are evidence of a unequivocally linked narrative space that was sustained by this major chronotope—the arrival of Christianity— and that was central to Meiji and Taishō literary developments. The coming of the Christian religion provided the spatial and temporal coordinates for the pursuit of a spiritualized dimension of life, critically shaping future deliberations on the construction of the modern self and its role in literature.

The development of the concept of *seimei* (universal life) seen in Kitamura Tōkoku’s thought was a first decisive moment in the unfolding of that quest.

### ***Seimei* and the Quest for a Spiritual Life**

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<sup>3</sup> See Masamune Hakuchō, “Hatachi no nikki” (1952); in *Masamune Hakuchō zenshū*, (Fukutake shoten, 1986), vol. 30, 179-80.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Arishima Takeo’s diary *Kansōroku*; in *Arishima Takeo zenshū* (Shinchōsha, 1930), vol. 10. See also Kinoshita Naoe, *Zange* (1906), in *Kindai nihon shisō taikai* (Chikuma shobō, 1965), vol. 10, 121-200; and Mushanokōji Saneatsu, “Kare no seinen jidai” (1923), in *Mushanokōji Saneatsu zenshū* (Shōgakukan, 1990), vol. 1, 226.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Nagayo Yoshirō, *Waga kokoro no henrei* (Chikuma shobō, 1963), 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Conversion to Christianity was facilitated by a fascination with the West and a number of major social and political developments. In 1873 the government began to ease its prohibitionist policies against the Christian religion. The missionary force more than doubled that year and over the following decade the number of churches and believers grew steadily. The so-called Sapporo, Yokohama, and Kumamoto bands were formed during the 1870s, and the year 1883 marked the “revival,” a renewed atmosphere of excitement among Christian believers that combined with the government effort to appease Western powers following the Iwakura mission, led to an exponential growth of the number of churches and mission schools in the country.<sup>7</sup> Several Meiji authors like Kitamura Tōkoku, Shimazaki Tōson, and Kunikida Doppo converted at the very peak of this popularity.

Tōkoku’s conversion took place in 1888, shortly before his marriage with Ishizaka Mina—herself a devout Christian—who likely played an important role in his decision to be baptized. In his famous essay “Kakujin shinkyūnai no hikyū” (The heart, a holy of holies) of 1892, Tōkoku acknowledged Protestantism, and Puritanism in particular, as “an important milestone to the process of acquisition of knowledge about man in that it had brought forth the ideal of freedom.”<sup>8</sup> He saw Christianity as a religion about life and stated that the greatest accomplishment of those who had spread the Christian religion in Japan was that they had planted the tree of life in people’s heart. In this essay, he also brought forth the idea of the existence of an outer *kokoro*, roughly identifiable with the realm of material life, and an inner *kokoro*, the domain of self-awareness, freedom, and the inner life. He warned of the difficulty of entering the inner *kokoro*, the only realm, in his view, where one could truly come into contact with Christ. For Tōkoku, “we become truly disciples of Christ only when our *kokoro* approaches him, only when our *kokoro* is plunged into the saving waters, or, in Paul’s words, when we are baptized by fire.”<sup>9</sup>

As Janet Walker explained, “the attainment of the inner *kokoro* is thus a mystical process whereby material man is transformed into spiritual man . . . once the inner *kokoro* is transformed the individual enters life (*seimei*).” Furthermore, “in order to be truly free, man must attain the inner *kokoro* . . . in order to attain the inner *kokoro* one must trust in life, i.e. Christ.”<sup>10</sup> This meant that Christ was not simply the only way that one could attain the inner *kokoro*, but it was also only

<sup>7</sup> For information on the spread of Christianity in Meiji Japan, see Otis Cary, *A History of Christianity in Japan* (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo; Tuttle, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Kitamura Tōkoku, “Kakujin shinkyūnai no hikyū” (1892); quoted and translated in Janet Walker, *The Japanese Novel of the Meiji Period and the Ideal of Individualism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Mathy, “Kitamura Tōkoku: Essays on the Inner Life,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 19:1/2 (1964), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Janet Walker, *The Japanese Novel of the Meiji Period and the Ideal of Individualism*, 73.

in the inner *kokoro* that one could come close to Christ. In Tōkoku's thought, Christ and the dimension of the inner life were essentially one, and they could not be separated.

Tōkoku's thought gave impetus to the interiorization of individualism, and his idea of *seimei*, a highly charged concept that superseded even the cycle of life and death, would have critical ramifications for the development of modern literature.<sup>11</sup> *Seimei* critically linked the self to God and the universe, becoming the lasting expression of the interiority affirmed by Tōkoku in his writings, and ultimately informing much of mid-to late Meiji and Taishō literary discourse. This should not come as a surprise since the Meiji years were truly a time of deep spiritual quest. The rise of nationalism that preceded the two wars with China and Russia deepened the sense of anxiety and skepticism already present within the intellectual community, exacerbating the conflictive relationship between the individual and the State, and prompting the search for a solution to this quandary within the realm of religion and spirituality. Author and philosopher Tsunashima Ryōsen's account of his "beatific vision," which shook the souls of many young intellectuals, was the clear expression of an incipient religious sentiment and spiritual longing that was crucially linked—and not antithetical—to the exploration of interiority and the construction of the modern self. The publication of works like Kinoshita Naoe's *Zange* (Confession) and Nakazato Kaizan's *Waga zange* (My confession) put unequivocal emphasis on the act of confession as a means to overcome the impasse brought about by these internal conflicts, signaling a religious posture within the literary world that would become a major trait of Meiji and Taishō literary developments.

The critical intersection between religion and literature—naturalism, in particular—is also well known. Literary critic Shimamura Hōgetsu, who had already postulated the existence of an important link between the two domains in his 1906 piece "Torawaretaru bungei" (Literature in shackles), published two essays in 1909 in which he stated that confession was the only framework within which one could discuss a philosophy of life.<sup>12</sup> Others echoed this view, providing valuable evidence that the very last years of the Meiji period had witnessed the materialization of a trajectory in literature that held confession as a central element of its inquiry.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of Christian thought on Meiji Japanese literature cannot be underestimated. In the early 1890s, those who orbited around the journal *Bungakkai*—Hoshino Tenchi, Hirata

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<sup>11</sup> See Suzuki Sadami, *Seimeikan no kenkyū: jūshō suru kiki no naka de* (Sakuhinsha, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> See Shimamura Hōgetsu, "Jo ni kaete: jinseikanjō no shizenshugi o ronzu" (1909) and "Kaigi to kokuhaku" (1909); both in *Hōgetsu zenshū* (Nihon tosho sentaa, 1994), vol. 2, 167-74 and 183-94.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Sōma Gyofū, "Kokuhaku to kyakkanka" (1910); in Yoshida Seiichi and Wada Kingo eds., *Kindai bungaku hyōron taikei* (Kadokawa shoten, 1973), vol. 3, 341-43. See also Katakami Tengen, "Kokuhaku to hihyō to sōzō to" (1912); in Shimamura Hōgetsu et al., *Meiji bungaku zenshū* (Chikuma shobō, 1967), vol. 43, 279-82.

Takuboku, Baba Kochō, Togawa Shukotsu and Shimazaki Tōson—were all deeply influenced by the religion. Tōkoku’s religious discourse, in particular, unfolded against a social and political context in turmoil in which the new faith was charged with the mission of reconciling the factions at war, saving the oppressed, restoring social justice, and sanctioning the superiority of the spiritual over the material world. In “Saigo no shōrisha wa dare zo” (Who will be the final victor) of 1892, for example, Tōkoku described the history of humanity as one of war and social injustice, upholding Jesus Christ as the only hope for a possible reconciliation: “what shall we call this reconciliation? It is that which Mohammed and Buddha preached and praised as truth, that which philosophers of East and West have never stopped trying to explain. We call this Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

It was clearly a discourse where religion and political ambition often overlapped. Tōkoku’s early letters to her then fiancée Mina are among the earliest evidence of this intriguing connection. In one of these letters, describing his adolescent years and his passion for politics, Tōkoku stated: “the following year, Meiji 17, I overcame for a time my faintheartedness and burned once again with the fire of ambition . . . Like another Christ, I would consecrate all my energies to politics.”<sup>15</sup> In an another letter he wrote to Mina, he decried the corruptions of society and stated that “unless the followers of Christ set limits to selfishness and determine the boundaries of greed, foul corruption will with awesome power destroy the world of Japan.”<sup>16</sup>

The intersection between spiritual pursuit and political aspiration became a topos in the narratives of conversion of Meiji and Taishō writers, reinforced by the concurrent increasing importance of the Meiji People’s Rights movement. Christianity found in fact important common ground with this movement, sharing with it the notion that all men are born free and equal. The emphasis placed on people’s rights and their aspirations, and the commitment to social issues and women emancipation similarly characterized the religion as a source of moral values that superseded power, hierarchy, gender, and that as such had the potential to change the dynamics of current social and political discourse.

In 1908, Shimazaki Tōson confirmed the existence of such trajectory in his personal development:

I was a very ambitious young man at the time I entered Meiji Gakuin. It was a time when it was trendy to talk about politics among young men, and so for me it was only natural to

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<sup>14</sup> See Francis Mathy, “Kitamura Tōkoku: Essays on the Inner Life,” 72.

<sup>15</sup> English translation in Francis Mathy, “Kitamura Tōkoku: The Early Years,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 18:1/4 (1963), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

want to become a politician.<sup>17</sup>

Around the same time, Kunikida Doppo similarly wrote about the spiritual revolution that followed his early interest in politics and economics, and other writers, like Iwano Hōmei, stated:

Neither the people at Church nor my friends were as devout as I had expected. That was when it occurred to me that Christianity did not have any real influence on ordinary people. I lost interest in becoming a missionary and instead developed the desire to become a politician.<sup>18</sup>

Mushanokōji Saneatsu also recalled his early passion for politics and his fondness, in particular, for the speeches and writings of Kinoshita Naoe—himself a Christian and a political activist.<sup>19</sup>

There was nonetheless another recurrent and more significant theme in these personal memoirs, namely the paradoxical realization of one's inability to fully believe the teachings of the faith. The initial excitement that came with the embracement of the new religion was almost inevitably followed by disenchantment, skepticism, and, in some cases, despair. The dilemma of faith lay at the center of most of these writers' concerns, becoming itself a trope for modern Japan's conflictive relationship with Christianity.

### **The Dilemma of Faith**

Shimazaki Tōson's *Sakura no mi ga juku suru toki* (When the cherries ripen), a partially fictionalized account of the writer's adolescent years through the eyes of his young alter-ego Sutekichi, is one of the most accurate portrayals of the predicament experienced by modern writers upon their encounter with the Christian religion. Although *Sakura* was actually written in the 1910s, when Tōson was already in his forties, it nonetheless epitomized the sense of helplessness and disillusionment shared by many young authors as they lived the dilemma of faith against the significant cultural changes of the Meiji years. *Sakura* described the romantic and joyful

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<sup>17</sup> Shimazaki Tōson, "Meiji gakuin no gakusō" (1908); in *Shimazaki Tōson zenshū* (Chikuma shobō, 1981), vol. 10, 56-58.

<sup>18</sup> See Kunikida Doppo, "Ware wa ika ni shite shōsetsuka to narishi ka" (1907); in *Kunikida Doppo zenshū* (Gakushū kenkyūsha, 1966), vol. 1, 495-99. See also Iwano Hōmei, "Boku no jūdai no me ni eijita shojinbutsu" (1910); quoted and translated in Yōichi Nagashima, *Objective Description of the Self: The Literary Theory of Iwano Hōmei* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1997), 23-24.

<sup>19</sup> Mushanokōji Saneatsu, "Jibun no aruita michi" (1956); in *Mushanokōji Saneatsu zenshū*, vol. 15, 537-94.

atmosphere that surrounded the young Sutekichi's life at the time he attended Meiji Gakuin. The Sunday service, the prayers, the beautiful church with its high ceilings, large windows and Cross-shaped altar were all new symbols that now mediated his perception of reality. These symbols spoke not only of a new God but also of an exotic new world where young men and women mingled together to discuss and enjoy literature. It was a dream-like existence that filled Sutekichi's heart with a sense of freedom and excitement.

Doppo experienced similar sentiments of elation when he first came into contact with Christianity. In an essay that appeared in 1906, he described the surreal atmosphere that characterized his first visit to a church on a winter night: the soft lighting, the beautiful young ladies that were gathered in prayer, the white walls, the sound of the organ, the sermon, and the silence that followed it, it was an experience that left him almost in a trance.<sup>20</sup> Others also spoke in these terms: both Kinoshita Naoe and Nagayo Yoshirō, for example, characterized their first encounter with the Christian faith and the Bible as a life-changing moment.<sup>21</sup>

Sutekichi's enthusiasm peaked at the end of his third-year summer term when he attended a number of lectures hosted by the Christian Youth Association. The opportunity to learn first-hand from famous scholars, orators, and pastors, and the free interaction between young men and women that preceded or followed a service or a prayer filled him with happiness. Yet, despite these feelings of joy and anticipation, one day, after witnessing a baptism, Sutekichi suddenly thought of the futility of his own conversion, experiencing a sense of emptiness that spoke of the shallowness of his beliefs.

Compared to the assertiveness and self-assuredness displayed by Tōkoku in his essays on the inner life, Tōson's religious tone was much more subdued. Sutekichi's doubts about God were real and in this sense his struggle epitomized the common predicament that affected many young intellectuals of his generation. Jesus Christ, for example, who had played such a central role in Tōkoku's writings, was only a marginal figure in Sutekichi's religious consciousness:

The God that was at the bottom of Sutekichi's heart was not the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit Trinity that had been preached to him by many pastors. The notion of God as the creator of all things was merely a preconceived notion that came from his learning, but the object of his faith was not Christ and his person. In Sutekichi's imagination, God was

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<sup>20</sup> Kunikida Doppo, "Ano jibun" (1906); in *Gendai nhon bungaku zenshū* (Chikuma shobō, 1956), vol. 57, 208-11.

<sup>21</sup> Nagayo Yoshirō, *Waga kokoro no henreki*, 77; Kinoshita Naoe, *Zange*, 171.



not the 33-year old Christ that died on the Cross, but rather someone older, perhaps an old man in his fifties. Sutekichi imagined him as one of the stern figures of the Old Testament.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus Christ was not the object of Sutekichi's faith. The inability to believe ironically became the rhetorical climax of these narratives of conversion, inspiring in turn a discourse of contrition—a desire to be truthful to the self—that was strongly reminiscent of a Christian examination of conscience. In *Sakura*, Sutekichi seriously reflected upon the nature of his Christian experience and the future of his faith:

Are you a Christian? Had he been asked this question now, Sutekichi could not have answered that he was the same person who had been baptized by Reverend Asami. He no longer was the type of believer that every Sunday felt the need to go to Church to listen to the sermon and sing hymns (in praise of God). He had even quit praying before meals. If anyone were to ask him now “don't you believe in God?” he would answer that in his own immature way, he was a person that was searching for God . . .<sup>23</sup>

Doppo, who had been baptized by Uemura Masahisa in 1891, similarly questioned the depth of his own faith. In “Waga kako” (My past) of 1896, regretting a past of dreams, sin and failure, he wrote in distress:

When I left Waseda University, I was already a Christian. But have I behaved like a true Christian? Have I professed my faith . . . has my life been a true Christian life? . . . Have I read the Bible? . . . What kind of a Christian am I? Without Christ, without the Bible, without prayer, I am only weak, arrogant, lazy . . . I am no Christian believer.<sup>24</sup>

This distress was further deepened by serious doubts about the value and usefulness of one's faith. Hakuchō wrote on July 29, 1898: “I have been reading the Gospel of John everyday, but I just read it mechanically and get nothing from it. I still do not understand the meaning of life and the universe.”<sup>25</sup> A few months after his declaration of faith in 1899, Arishima Takeo recorded in his diary: “it has been more than one month since I swore to give myself to you. I do not know

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<sup>22</sup> *Sakura no mi ga juku suru toki* (1913); in *Nihon bungaku zenshū* (Kawade shobō, 1967), vol. 10, 215.

<sup>23</sup> *Sakura no mi ga juku suru toki*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> “Waga kako” (1896); in *Kunikida Doppo zenshū*, vol. 9, 342-47.

<sup>25</sup> “Hatachi no nikki,” 184.

if what I have done is enough, but I believe I did all I could. Yet, there is still a distance between myself and God.”<sup>26</sup> Doppo himself began his “Waga kako” stating that “several years have passed since I have received the truth and life of Christianity . . . spiritually and mentally, I have not benefited at all from it,” and Kinoshita Naoe, who became a Christian in 1894, wrote at the beginning of his *Zange*: “I have proclaimed the word of God and called for the improvement of society, but who am I really?”<sup>27</sup>

For many of these writers, conversion to Christianity was an earnest attempt to live a life of moral rectitude. Their ultimate decision to distance themselves from the Church was not necessarily driven by a superficial understanding of the Christian faith, but was rather the outcome of a complex process of self-introspection that was intrinsically tied to the Meiji pursuit of a spiritualized dimension of life. In fact, these writers not only continued to draw from the idea of a universal life and its sacredness—a Christian inspired concept—but they also relied on Christianity as a framework of reference for the construction of their own selves. They continued to hold the question of God and their relationship to the divine as a primary concern of their human existence. Their conversion was therefore not a merely private affair, but rather the manifestation of a modern common desire to answer quintessential questions on the existence of God and the place of man in the universe. Their embracement of Christianity ultimately promoted the creation of a shared religious space, a spiritual continuum where negotiations between the realms of faith and literary expression took place, coalescing into a single form of coherent discourse on faith and life. This discourse sat squarely within the literary deliberations of the Meiji and Taishō periods and ought therefore be carefully analyzed as an integral component of the developments of those years. After all, as one scholar recently pointed out, “Mushakōji’s early contact with Christianity is crucial to his intellectual development and without it the Shirakaba concept of selfhood would be inconceivable.”<sup>28</sup> Nor would it be possible to conceive or discuss the artistic evolution of Kitamura Tōkoku, Shimazaki Tōson, Kunikida Doppo, Masamune Hakuchō, Arishima Takeo and others without considering the role of the Christian faith in their lives.

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<sup>26</sup> *Arishima Takeo zenshū* (Shinchōsha, 1930), vol. 10, 135. On Arishima’s conversion to Christianity, see Leith Morton, *Divided Self: A Biography of Arishima Takeo* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 23-46.

<sup>27</sup> Kunikida Doppo, “Waga kako,” 342; Kinoshita Naoe, *Zange*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> Maya Mortimer, *Meeting the Sensei: The Role of the Master in Shirakaba Writers* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 90.

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