

Gedatsukai :  
One Life History and Its Significance for  
Interpreting Japanese New Religions

H. Byron EARHART

INTRODUCTION

*Purpose and method.* For about fifteen years, off and on, I have been collecting materials on the Japanese new religions with the intention of writing a general book on the subject. But the movements are so numerous, and the materials to be covered so extensive,<sup>1</sup> that it is difficult for one person to tell the whole story.<sup>1</sup>

A further difficulty is the problem of interpretation: whether and how to use the "social change" theories that have expounded at length on the human motives for form-

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Without the kind cooperation of the headquarters and members of Gedatsukai, this research would not have been possible.

This paper was first presented on 17 April 1980 at the University of Pittsburgh as part of a year-long colloquium sponsored by the Department of Religious Studies on the theme "Persistence and Change: Focus on Religion." Its title as of the time of its first presentation was "Traditional upbringing, Christian conversion, and joining Gedatsu-kai: One life history and its significance for interpreting Japanese new religions." The version presented here is slightly revised.

1. See my *The new religions of Japan: A bibliography of Western-language materials* (1970), a second edition of which is soon to be published by G. K. Hall and Co.

ing new religions—but without documenting this motivation concretely.

For my sabbatical research, therefore, I decided on a more direct approach to this subject and its interpretation by: (1) limiting the scope of my study to intensive examination of one new religion, and (2) utilizing the interview or “life-history” approach (along with historical and structural approaches) in order to approximate an “inside” view. The purpose of this article, even more limited, is to report and comment on the life-history of one member of this religion.<sup>2</sup>

*Background information.* The new religion selected, Gedatsukai, was chosen partly because it is historically related to the *shugendō* (organizations that practice magico-religious austerities pertaining to sacred mountains) that I had studied earlier.

To give a complete introduction to Gedatsukai is not possible here.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the fact that it was officially founded in 1929 by Okano Eizō (posthumously known as Gedatsu Kongō), all we need in order to proceed with the life-history is a reminder as to a few of its basic emphases: veneration of ancestors, especially with sweet tea memorial services at branch meetings and in individual homes; respect for traditional Shinto and Buddhist divinities, especially the tutelary divinity or *ujigami*; the ancestrally oriented *hō'on kansha* or “grateful repayment for blessings received” to society and to the universe; and, of particular importance

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2. In view of this limited purpose, footnotes will be kept to a minimum. More complete documentation will be reserved for the larger work now in preparation.

3. For Western-language materials on Gedatsukai, see items 407–413 in Earhart (1970). The forthcoming edition will contain about ten additional items.

The most complete account in English by a Gedatsukai representative is Kishida's *The character and doctrine of Gedatsu Kongo* (1969).

here, indirect communication with ancestors and spirits through a ritual called *gohō shugyō*.

#### LIFE HISTORY

The life history that follows is that of a 68-year-old man I shall call Mr. Nakajiba. My interview with Mr. Nakajiba took place in a Tokyo suburb on 23 October 1979 at the "I" branch of Gedatsukai.

The branch leader had just explained the purpose of the interview as one of learning about the members' "experience"—in Japanese, *taiken*, a term widely used to describe members' personal religious experiences, often related during regular meetings as testimonials. The interview followed immediately on the heels of the monthly meeting for *gohō shugyō*. (This ritual is considered quite important, and to participate in it a privilege. One speaks, therefore, not merely of "practicing" the ritual but also of "receiving" it.) The interview begins, then, with a question about *gohō shugyō*.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Mr. Nakajiba's first contact with Gedatsukai*

Q. Have you received the *gohō shugyō*?

A. My wife and children have, but I haven't very much. Being a Christian, I didn't enter into Gedatsukai practice much myself. But my wife was very active. In *gohō shugyō* she was frequently told that her ancestors had made mistakes, and that she should perform memorial services for them and apologize on their behalf.

Q. And did you receive *gohō shugyō* yourself?

A. Yes, three or four times. But it wasn't very clear to me—just a lot about ancestors and apologizing and memorial services. That was all.

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4. This interview has been edited to some extent to smoothe out false starts and reduce repetition, but in substance it is presented as it took place—except for the language.

- Q. When did you first receive *gohō shugyō*?
- A. Two or three years ago.
- Q. When did your wife first receive it?
- A. Ten years ago—maybe longer.
- Q. When you first received *gohō shugyō* two or three years ago, were you going through any particular trouble?
- A. What prompted me was illness in the family. My family members, relatives, and acquaintances told me to practice it with all my strength. I really was not that devout, but since another person started doing *gohō shugyō* for me, I felt that I had to do it too.
- Q. Who was this other person?
- A. A friend. At first I just couldn't put much trust in the *gohō shugyō*, but I was told to try it and see. That's why I did it at first. And things came up that I hadn't expected at all—for example, about my wife's mother's concern with money matters. Because this was inexcusable, I was told to apologize.<sup>5</sup> Through *gohō shugyō* I was taught things like this that I had no idea of beforehand.

This is a different matter, but another person received *gohō shugyō* for the sake of someone in my family who was sick—they were praying for the sick one. So when I was asked by the person who had done this for us, — — — — — it seemed only natural [to receive the *gohō shugyō* and, as advised,] to go to a shrine to apologize to my wife's mother.<sup>6</sup>

### *Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple*

Q. A shrine—your *ujigami*?

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5. What is implied here is that Mr. Nakajima should have given money to his financially troubled mother-in-law. Since he did not, he should now apologize.
6. The act of apologizing to a living person or to the spirit of a dead person is at the same time an act of repentance.

- A. Yes. I've been going to the shrine since ten or fifteen, maybe more, years ago. My wife's brother died, so at the first of every month she would go to the *ujigami*, or the memorial stone, or the parish temple. That was her custom. But, as I said, because I was a Christian I thought it just as well not to go to such places. That was what I felt then. Later I changed my mind.
- Q. Was that before or after your wife's joining Gedatsukai?
- A. After.
- Q. When was that?
- A. That would be fifteen or sixteen years ago. From about ten years ago, we went to the parish temple or memorial stone at the beginning of every month.
- Q. At that time had you entered Gedatsukai?
- A. No, I didn't have anything to pray for at that time. It was just that this was my *ujigami* and my ancestors, and I had been under the care of this *ujigami*, so going there was an expression of thanks. The memorial stones and the parish temple were the same: I had received their protection, and going to these places was a form of thanks.
- Q. Your family parish temple is what sect?
- A. Jōdo Shinshū. Higashi Honganji. And the family in which my mother was born was a temple family.

*Christian church*

- Q. Were you a Christian from your youth?
- A. I became a Christian at age 18. I was baptized at age 20.
- Q. What church?
- A. Nihon Kirisuto Kyōdan [United Church of Christ in Japan]. There aren't very many of these churches. They are very scholarly in their teaching. I had gone to Sapporo. Most of the people in this church were quite knowledgeable. There were many intellectuals. Hok-

kaido University is there, and there were many university students in the church.

Q. You were born in Hokkaido?

A. Yes. At that time, so that I could go to school, I was living with a family that happened to be Christian. Until that time I had been just an ordinary, traditional Japanese—though from youth up I didn't have any particular faith. But when I got up in the morning, my mother would say, "Go pay your respects before the [Shinto] household shrine and the Buddhist altar." If I didn't, I wouldn't get anything to eat. That was the way it was. My father and mother were both people of deep faith. Anyway, because this was the way it was, it seemed natural [to us]. It was a [family] custom for us to go to the household shrine and Buddhist altar, then to wash our hands [and eat breakfast].

But when I moved into this other house, there was no household shrine and no Buddhist altar, so I thought it a strange house. Two or three days later I mentioned something [about the absence of traditional altars] to the family, and they said it was because they were Christian. From a child's perspective it appeared as if there were no kami there at all. What a strange house, I thought.

I didn't know much about Christianity, and didn't understand why, with all the fine religions in Japan, they would accept a foreign religion. In their house they had a Bible, and they urged me to read it. I did so earnestly. The head of the family was an elder in this church, so every week missionaries and ministers would visit the house. I didn't really understand why, but there was some kind of rebellion within me.

I was reading the Bible diligently. If I asked them [the family members] or the minister about the Bible, they would say, "You haven't read the Bible [enough]."

It is good. Just read it." They wouldn't argue with me.

Really, when I was young, I didn't think that there was only one true kami. That's how I felt when I began reading the Bible. And I was encouraged to read it. There must have been some rebellion in me at that time.

Q. How old were you when you moved into that house?

A. Age 16.

Q. So you lived there until you were 20?

A. No, I moved to another house. That was a Christian house, too. But that house belonged to the Holiness tradition—Kiyome Church. The head of that house and I went to different churches.

I was 20 when I received baptism, so my parents couldn't object. When I was 24, I was on my own and opened a business. This was right next to my mother's house. At that time, every day for about half a year, my mother urged me to convert [from Christianity back to Buddhism]. She was born in a temple family, so naturally all of our ancestors were connected with Buddhist temples. She told me not to practice a foreign religion. "Return to Buddhism!" [she said.]

But by that time I was rather devout. At the time I converted to Christianity, it [the church] was in the country—of course it is now a city, but then it was a country church. We gathered together friends who shared the same ideas, and once a month we had a minister come. We had a number of people of the same mind gather, and we talked; even when the minister didn't come, we studied the Bible on our own. That's the kind of church it was.

I was in business, so I became an officer of that church. The minister asked me to be an elder and lead the Bible study. It was just as I was doing this in the church that my mother asked me to change my religion. I was reading the Bible, but didn't want to mention it, so I just

said "Yes, yes" to her so as not to get into an argument. But every day, every day she would come. I was devotedly reading the Bible, because I believed in it. After all, the kami I worshiped was not a small kami or Buddha, but a kami of the entire world, the entire universe. Also, I believed that was man's duty to do this, so I couldn't change my faith. When I told this to my mother, she was quite annoyed.

After some time had passed, one day I finally said, "Well, our thinking is different, but I don't want to disagree with you. If you dislike Christianity that much, then I'll give it up."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"But," I said, there is one condition. I will never enter another religion."

Then the expression on my mother's face changed again. At last she said that if I believed that strongly, I should keep my faith and she would practice Buddhism. She said that if giving up Christianity meant losing all faith, that would be bad. After that she didn't say anything.

Afterwards I had my own house, and since there was no church, we would meet in my house. Then after the war [World War II], I ran the Sunday School. I closed my business [on Sundays] to do this.

At the time I married, my wife was Buddhist. [Later] she was baptized and did practice Christianity for a while.

#### *Wife and wife's mother enter Gedatsukai*

Both my wife and her mother were devout, [especially since] fifteen or sixteen years ago when they got very interested in religion. They looked into various religions, such as Tenrikyō and Seichō no Ie, but with no effect. Then they found Gedatsukai and decided that this was

genuine religion.

I remained a Christian all that time. Finally my mother-in-law said, "There are all kinds of religions, but it would be too bad not to practice Gedatsukai. This Gedatsukai's teaching is the easiest to understand, and this is the genuine religion, a convincing religion." Well, that was twenty years—twenty years ago, this entering into Gedatsukai.

Q. Your wife?

A. My wife's mother. And right after that, my wife entered Gedatsukai. I kept it [my interest] to myself, but started asking about Gedatsukai. So it's fifteen or sixteen years since my family entered Gedatsukai. Longer than that—it must be twenty years. I was involved too, but kept it to myself.

#### *Son joins Gedatsukai*

Then my son—I have several sons—he wanted to go to Tokyo, so at age 23 my son left our house to go into business. I set him up, but my wife and I were [really] opposed to this, because he was still too young. But he insisted, so he did leave the family, and it didn't go well for him. He gave it up after a year. He was too far in debt and couldn't continue. His business ended in failure.

And then a letter came to us. "Really, father, I failed. As you said, father, I am really too young and ignorant of the world. I didn't study matters well enough, and I held a lot of mistaken ideas. Therefore I would like to take up spiritual training for two or three months. I know that you will probably be against this, father, but please let me take part in this spiritual training." So he went to the Gedatsukai headquarters.

Q. Headquarters? The Tokyo Practice Hall?

A. No, Tokyo—I mean the practice hall at the Sacred

Land<sup>7</sup> in Saitama Prefecture [just outside Tokyo]. Two or three months passed, and again a letter came. It said that the original agreement was for two or three months, but that he was a slow learner; he was sorry, but hoped he could continue with this spiritual training for a while. So about two years passed. That was the first case of one of my sons' entering Gedatsukai.

So I was the very last one. As I told you, I thought that Christianity was right. [It had a long history, but] this Gedatsukai wasn't very old. It started about the beginning of the Shōwa period [1926- ]. So I just couldn't bring myself to trust this religion. I stubbornly stuck to Christianity.

*Illness and the search for ancestors*

But as I said before, there was sickness in the family, and other people were trying to help us. When we wondered about the reason, my wife and relatives said that it was some offense against the ancestors or the kami. But I was sure that I hadn't offended them, so I didn't want to join Gedatsukai.

Then in 1964, mother—my wife's mother, [our family's] grandma—unexpectedly said to me, “Your ancestors are in Fukui City, so there ought to be a memorial stone [there]. Go and pay your respects at your ancestors' memorial stone.”

Well, I was a little resistant and said that since the main house of the family was still there and many elderly family members too, there was no need for me to pay a visit. My feeling was that it was enough to pay my respects at the memorial services for my mother, father,

7. The Sacred Land, or Goreichi, at Kitamoto, Saitama Prefecture, is the birthplace of the founder, Okano. He developed it into a sacred center for pilgrimage, religious practice, and ritual celebration.

and grandparents [in Hokkaido]. I felt that there was no need for other visits.

But she said, "You have abandoned your ancestors." It was 1964 when she said this.

The same year my wife, her mother, and I—the three of us—went to Sapporo because my son had sent us tickets for the Olympics [so we were on our way to Tokyo]. At that time mother—my wife's mother—said, "Why don't you go on to Fukui City and pay your respects at your ancestors' memorial stone? Go on to Fukui City." [Fukui City is located on the Japan Sea coast, almost due north of Kyoto.]

Well, at that time my mother and father were long dead, and relatives who would have known about these things had died too. I knew about Fukui City in a general way, and [in Hokkaido] we had an Association of People from Fukui Prefecture (Fukui Kenjinkai). My father had been an officer in the association. I visited all the officers of that association, but they couldn't tell me the address of my family in Fukui City. These people were rather old, and their memory was poor—but even the old women from Fukui Prefecture were saying that I should go back.

So when these old people told me to go, I just couldn't object and say I wouldn't. I just said that I wasn't sure yet, we didn't have any address at all, maybe my relatives were no longer there...

But my wife insisted, "There certainly *are* relatives there. If you go, you will see." She received *gohō shugyō* at that time, and that's what she was told: "If you go, you will see."

Q. During *gohō shugyō*?

A. Yes. She said that because we had been told "if you go, you will see," we should go. So I agreed. I still didn't understand, but anyway we went to Fukui City.

I really began to think that this *gohō shugyō* must be something miraculous. We went to Fukui City and began searching from district to district, since neither my wife nor I knew the city. But they had said it would be alright, because if we went, we would see.

We went to the City Office to search for the Nakajiba name, but it was a Sunday so there was nothing we could do. We got into a taxi—there was no other way to make inquiries around the city—and when the driver asked us where he should take us, I said, “It doesn’t make any difference. Straight ahead!” So off we went, completely in the dark [as to where we were going]. On the way we asked people if they knew of any Nakajibas, but no one did, so we just went farther. Finally we got out of the taxi.

The next time we asked, we were directed to the house of a Nakajiba family, [and of course we wanted] to see if they were relatives. This person was very kind, but said there were lots of Nakajibas in Fukui City and he didn’t know where my ancestors might be from. [So we thanked him and left.]

We didn’t know what to do and just walked around quite a while. Finally we decided that anything would be better than this, so we had someone direct us to an old, a very old, Buddhist temple. We wandered into that temple and asked [at the office] if there was a Nakajiba memorial stone there. They said they didn’t know about any ancient memorial stone for the Nakajiba family, but we checked the temple death register all the way back. The family name was not in it, but there was [a name with] the character [read] JŪ or *shige*—and there was such a name in my main family. (I am a second son.) In the [Hokkaido] family I was born in, there is a memorial tablet for a person who died at the beginning of the Meiji period [1868-1912].

[The name on it is] the posthumous Buddhist name. I had copied this Buddhist name and brought it with me. What I noticed was this same character, *shige*.

The priest wasn't there, but we talked to his wife and tried to find out if the Nakajiba family was in the death register. All I had written down was the Buddhist name, and the Meiji year, month, and day [of death]. Looking at the temple record, [I found the same name, but] there was one month's difference. The priest's wife said, though, that the old calendar and the new differed by a month. So I figured that this *shige* might be one of my relatives.

Q. Was that a Jōdo Shinshū temple?

A. Yes. I didn't know for sure [that this person was a relative], but said that if they didn't mind, I would take some of the soil from around that memorial stone back to my family's memorial stone in Sapporo.

We were just about to leave, when the son of the Nakajiba family we had talked to earlier—a big lumber dealer—came rushing in. He said that his father had returned home [later] and told him that the Nakajibas who had gone to Hokkaido were from his family, and that he belonged to the main family. The father has died since, but there is no doubt that we are of the same family. Later I learned that this family holds an official position in the temple we visited.

[About that time] the temple priest came in, too, and since we had traveled all the way from Hokkaido to locate our ancestors, they ordered in food and gave us a nice meal. [They urged us to stay longer and visit the memorial stone,] but we had already made arrangements to stay in Kyoto, so we had to go on.

### *Taking care of the family*

That was the first time [we went to Fukui City]. The

next time was when we learned through *gohō shugyō*—that is, my wife was told—that no one was taking care of the memorial stone.

Q. When was this *gohō shugyō* received?

A. Well...

Q. The first was in 1964?

A. Yes, 1964. It was after that... I'm not really sure.

Q. The next year?

A. Yes, [about] the next year—quite a while after the first. [Anyway] we had a main family there [in Fukui City], and they had a very nice Buddhist altar. That first time we didn't go to the memorial stone because it got late [and we had to go to Kyoto]. I had thought that the memorial stone would be taken care of since the main family had such a fine Buddhist altar, but in *gohō shūgyō* we were told that the memorial stone was not being taken care of. I thought this was peculiar.

Then about three years ago we suddenly received a phone call from the house we had visited in Fukui City. They said that they had found the memorial stone of our family, and they asked us to come. This was just before the time of Buddhist memorial services for ancestors [in the late summer].

My father hadn't said too much about his ancestors. There had been a second marriage in the family four generations ago, and the family was split. This may be a shameful thing to talk about, but that's the way it was.

But the present Nakajiba family in Fukui City, the main family, put up a very nice memorial stone. There are many Nakajiba memorial stones, but they are all different. My family's memorial stone would probably be something like a *muenbotoke* stone [the stone of a dead person or persons without descendants or whose descendants do not observe the regular rituals].

Then came this phone call from the house in Fukui City—not the head of the house, he had died, but the son of the former head, or rather his wife. She said that they had remembered this visit of a relative from Hokkaido some eight years ago—he must be a fine person to come all that way to look for his ancestors—and that [they had learned that] there was a family taking care of the memorial stone, but it was not a Nakajiba family. This family had been looking after ancestors for a hundred years or so, but they were about to give it up. In that case the memorial stone would become a *muenbotoke* [stone].

Well, we went to Fukui City, [and it turned out to be] the same main family as ours. The name written in the death register was not the [posthumous] Buddhist name; it was the family name. The family name and the [Buddhist] name on the memorial stone did not agree, but I thought they were [probably] the same. We discussed it with the temple priest, and [he too thought that] this seemed to be our family stone. He said that we had better take care of it.

I thought [it would be good] to have a new memorial stone put up [in Hokkaido] and have the spirits transferred there. Then the former memorial stone could be treated as a *muenbotoke*. But when winter comes to Fukui, there are times when you just can't move memorial stones [to the special *muenbotoke* site]. And also I would have services in Hokkaido. In the end I told him that I would assume responsibility for it, and then I returned home.

About a year later we wanted to go to that memorial stone in Fukui City [and see to our responsibilities]. We talked about it, but what with business and all, we couldn't work it out. We wanted to go at the time of the Buddhist memorial services for ancestors, but

couldn't. So we decided that even if we couldn't go then, we would go later.

At that time my wife received *gohō shugyō* again. She was told, "Go to Fukui City!"

Q. From Sapporo?

A. No, by this time we had moved to Tokyo. But why were we supposed to go to Fukui City? [The answer was the same as before.] "If you go, you will see." I couldn't understand this at all.

Well, we couldn't go the year before last or last year either, so we went this year. But the old memorial stone that we had thought was being taken care of by the temple actually was not being looked after. Then we understood. The memorial stone was *not* being treated as a *muenbotoke* [stone]. This was when we first understood what the matter was.

[But before going any further,] we wanted to check with the main family [in Hokkaido] to see whether this memorial stone was really one for our ancestors, because if you make mistakes with memorial stones, people say that bad things will happen.

[We went back to Hokkaido and checked, but the main family too] wondered what the circumstances were. Finally I said that we [all] ought to go to Fukui City, so the main family said they would go with us to the memorial stone. This time my elder sister and her son—my nephew—all of us went to Fukui City.

Finally we got the memorial stone taken care of. This was [my wife's and my] third trip, and little by little we came to understand the situation of our ancestors.

So this is the really important thing that we learned [through *gohō shugyō*]*—*something we hadn't anticipated at all: the fact that the memorial stone had not been taken care of, had not been offered memorial services.

*Ritual services and the link of karma*

Q. You requested memorial services at that Jōdo Shinshū temple?

A. Yes, three times.

Q. You've had memorial services performed in Gedatsukai, too?

A. Yes. We still do.

Q. In Gedatsukai you have memorial services for individuals?

A. Yes.

Q. That is a miraculous tale, isn't it.

A. Yes, it really is miraculous. [My experience] may be a small thing, but after all, it is not a lie. And there really is such a thing as the link of karma. Of course I was studying Christianity all the while, so I wasn't paying visits to shrines and temples, or performing [acts of] repentance and thanksgiving. That's the way it was, but Gedatsukai got me to studying [too], and practicing grateful repayment. Thanks and repentance was really not thoroughgoing in Christianity.

Because I was a devout Christian, I was self-confident. I thought that I didn't need a household shrine because Christianity was a religion of faith. Even with regard to the memorial stone and my business—I had a watch and jewelry business—I thought I could take care of things myself. I did pay my respects to the kami and ancestors, but from the viewpoint of the kami, I was a bad person. From the viewpoint of the average person, of course, I was a virtuous person. I seemed to be prosperous and serving the kami.

But when I came to study it—for example, the link of karma—I really did not have a feeling of gratitude for this link of karma, for my money, and so on. But after all, the ancestors—well, we are in the same blood line, of the same blood, and...

Q. Karma link?

- A. Yes, we have a karma link, and Gedatsukai teaches us to be thankful for this. And if we do something wrong, we are supposed to apologize to the ancestors.

Well, I had known about these things in a general sort of way, but to realize that they are actually so! As the branch leader said [in a talk we all heard earlier that day], there may or may not be repentance in Christianity, but if you're not [sincerely] repentant yourself, it is nothing. Gedatsukai taught me this.

Even if you think you are doing the right thing, it's not always the case [that you are]. The same [act of] repentance—you may not even notice it yourself if you are just [mechanically] saying and doing things—is nothing. Whether you go ahead and do it or not, you think things are alright. But recently I have come to see that this is not the case; I have come to examine myself more closely.

*Mr. Nakajiba joins Gedatsukai*

- Q. You mentioned repentance—have you visited the Sacred Land?
- A. Yes, we go there often.
- Q. At the Sacred Land, do you practice repentance and *ohyakudo* [a form of repentance that involves walking back and forth between two stone pillars a hundred times]?
- A. Yes, *ohyakudo* too.
- Q. Was that from two or three years ago?
- A. No—well, it wasn't too many times, but I did it while still in Hokkaido.
- Q. When was it that you moved to Tokyo?
- A. It's been ten years now.
- Q. And the time you joined...
- A. Gedatsukai?
- Q. Yes. That was in Sapporo as far as your wife is concerned?

- A. Yes, in her case it was in Sapporo.
- Q. And it was after the move to Tokyo that you yourself entered Gedatsukai?
- A. Yes, I really—Gedatsu... Well, my wife was attending, and I attended too for a while, but I was in Christianity—still a member of a church. I'm [still] a member of the church. So [at first] I couldn't agree to entering Gedatsukai. I thought that if I were to join here, the proper thing would be for me to cut my Christian ties and then enter Gedatsukai. That was my idea, but I decided to consult [others] about it.

[It is true, though, that] thanks to my study of Christianity when young, I was able to lead an honest life. And then there was my family's finances, and my family itself—since I had received Christianity's protection in these matters...

- Q. This was the United Church of Christ in Japan?
- A. Yes. In August—no, September, the first of last month—I went to Hokkaido, and it became a big problem. I had received the help of the church, and I was thankful, so why should I have to cut my ties with Christianity? Anyway, I went to Sapporo and consulted with [the minister of] the church there.

But the minister had changed since my association with Gedatsukai. Before, I had told the former pastor that I was looking into Gedatsukai and that we had had this message in *gohō shugyō*, and he had said just to wait. But now I believed in the *gohō shugyō*. So this [new] minister said, "If you have gone this far, you may as well go ahead and practice Gedatsukai."

Did you know that Reverend Kashima, a leader of Gedatsukai, is Christian?

- Q. Really?
- A. Yes, [anyway] he was formerly a Christian. I have met him many times, and he told me, "Nakajiba, it's alright

for you to be a Christian.”

He said that I had surely been blessed as a Christian. Well, I don't really understand the blessing of Christianity.

Q. That blessing of Christianity—what would that be?

A. Well, I don't know exactly, but as he said, “You surely were blessed.” My wife and children told me that Christianity was probably good for me. “Even if you enter Gedatsukai, that won't change,” they said. If you practice Christianity, there is no such thing as not being blessed. There is no Christian who has not been blessed.

So I decided that it was alright to go ahead [and enter Gedatsukai]. And even now, receiving *gohō shugyō*, [I am sure that] *gohō shugyō* is not false.

*Spirit communications*

Q. How many times have you received *gohō shugyō*?

A. Three.

Q. During those *gohō shugyō*, did you receive any special messages?

A. Just small things. Nothing special. My wife's mother—her trouble with money, and the time my brother died [and I was told to perform] memorial services.

Q. Memorial services for your brother?

A. Yes, we still hold them.

[Then there was the message about] Batō Kannon, too. It wasn't all that clear, but “Batō Kannon has also been of help to you”—this came out in *gohō shugyō*. [Batō Kannon is a popular Buddhist deity featuring a horse's head; it is identified in Sanskrit as Hayagrīva.]

Both my wife and I denied this, but when we went to Hokkaido—my father had already died, but [when alive], even though poor, he would pay visits to shrines; he and my elder brother too—I wondered why my father had visited his *ujigami* so frequently. There was

another small shrine he also visited, and when I asked, sure enough, it was a shrine for Batō Kannon.

Another time when our son was sick, my wife received *gohō shugyō*. [She was told that the sickness] was related to Batō Kannon, and that we should go to Batō Kannon and give thanks. So we paid visits [to Batō Kannon] for that purpose for about twenty days. Even these days—what day of the month is it?—we often pay a visit to express gratitude when we can.

So, you see, we thought that we had no connection with Batō Kannon, but my father had prayed to Batō Kannon. It may seem a small thing, but we received this message in *gohō shugyō*, and when we checked, it turned out to be right.

Q. What about the rest of your family? Your daughters?

A. Well, that's a family matter. Some family members do, and some don't. My daughter, now, goes to the Sapporo practice hall. My oldest son, second son, and oldest daughter—my fourth child—they were all telling me to go to Gedatsukai. They did so because of their own experience. They had undergone *gohō shugyō* and received much help. There was only one of my children who didn't urge me to practice [Gedatsukai].

Q. Well, that is an interesting story.

A. At first, of course, I was opposed to this. Later, for a long while, I just thought I would keep this [faith] to myself.

### *Gedatsukai and Christianity*

But as I said—this overlaps with what I said earlier—Gedatsukai teaches the same thing [as Christianity], but it teaches us in a fashion *much* more easily understood. At first I disliked this kind of “faith in answer to prayers,” but after all, it teaches us clearly things we [otherwise] don't understand.

I was practicing Christianity, and maybe it was because I didn't have [enough] faith, but I didn't experience such things in Christianity.

- Q. Is there "faith in answer to prayers" in Christianity too, sometimes?
- A. Well, anything, after all—it is the same in Christianity. Things occur because you have faith. This is the same in Christianity.

For example, my children were in a car accident, but weren't injured. Surely this was "faith in answer to prayers." You find this in Christianity too.

But Gedatsukai teaches *concretely, concretely*. Since my children were safe in the accident, they gave thanks for this protection. Gedatsukai teaches us *concretely* about this protection.

*Amulets and altars*

- Q. Do you have a Gedatsukai traffic safety amulet in your family?

- A. Yes, my son has, I think. I don't drive myself.

And a "body protector"—we all keep a "body protector" next to our skin.

- Q. Any other amulets?

- A. In addition [there is a household shrine] in our home for the *ujigami*—not a formal altar, but one of the kind found in any ordinary house. For example, Gedatsukai's Tenjin Chigi—what in Christianity they call the kami of heaven and earth.

And then we have a Buddhist altar. It was only after we moved to Tokyo that we first got a Buddhist altar. Our children bought it for us.

- Q. Your children?

- A. Yes. I had been a Christian and felt I didn't need one. But then I built a new house in Tokyo and had to think about a Buddhist altar. They wanted one very much,

so I thought I would buy one—and then they said they had already bought one, so I couldn't object. At any rate, they brought it home and said, "Father, father, you are a Christian, so don't worry—you can even put a cross in it!" (Laughter)

But we don't have any memorial tablets for [particular] ancestors of our family. The altar is just for the generations of ancestors [in general].

Q. There are no memorial tablets at all?

A. No, no one in my family has died. All the memorial tablets are with the main family.

*The family is reunited with the ancestors*

A. And at your home you perform the sweet tea memorial service?

A. Yes, every day. As I said before, it is best for the entire family to worship the same way. In Christianity, too, I thought the same way. My wife felt this way, too.

In Christian worship services that's how it is, along with prayers before sleeping. After all, if you take the view that there is something holy, kami exists, so we should pray to the kami. I haven't really given up Christianity.

Q. This goes back to your earlier reference to your family, but you were born in Hokkaido, and much earlier your family had come from Fukui City?

A. Yes, four generations earlier—about a hundred years ago. But now there aren't many people who know about those things—about ancestors and the like. And I felt sorry for the ancestors.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In many ways Mr. Nakajiba's life history is a good example of the social and religious processes crucial to the formation and dynamics of Japanese new religions. In fact one could

comment at length on the nature of the new religions on the basis of this one life-history. It contains much more information than can be treated in a brief discussion. But substantiation of such a far-reaching claim must await treatment in broader context. For the moment it is best to focus on what can be learned directly from this one member's experience.

Because space is limited, I would first like to give a quick, overall analysis of Mr. Nakajiba's life-history, dividing it into three periods. I then propose to use this analysis to interpret the significance of Mr. Nakajiba's life story for understanding the Japanese new religions.

There seem to be three major periods in his life:

- (1) a *traditional* period, from birth to age 16 or 18, when he participated in rather traditional practices in his family home;
- (2) a *non-traditional* period, from age 16 or 18 through middle age, characterized by his rejection of traditional religion in favor of the foreign religion of Christianity; and
- (3) a *neotraditional* period, from middle age to the present, during which he returned to explicitly traditional religious conceptions, but as expressed through transformed religious rites within the framework of the voluntary association of a new religion.

*Traditional period.* The first period of Mr. Nakajiba's life is the most clearly distinguished, being set apart by the time he lived in his family of birth. During this time, Mr. Nakajiba sees himself as growing up in a traditional home and religious setting. In his own words, he was "just an ordinary, traditional Japanese..."

We can confirm the traditional character of his upbringing by the existence of both a household shrine and a Buddhist altar in the home, and by his attestation of regular

daily devotions before them. To his statement of being “just an ordinary, traditional Japanese” Mr. Nakajiba adds the qualification that “from youth up I didn’t have any particular faith.” By this he means that he was not devoted to any particular cult. We can see from his later actions, however, that during his early life he did absorb traditional notions customary in Japan. Within the total experience of individuals and families there was an implicit world view that found concrete expression in such daily practices as honoring the local *ujigami* at the household shrine and revering the family ancestors at the household Buddhist altar.

As any student of Japanese religion and folk customs knows, this unwritten world view was spelled out in such patterns as the calendrical cycle of annual rituals and the human cycle of rites of passage. It included unstated principles that everyone “knew” by virtue of the socialization process, such as that of the unbroken tie between family ancestors and descendants.

There is no space to elaborate on this traditional world view here.<sup>8</sup> The point is that during the first period of Mr. Nakajiba’s life, he assimilated this traditional world view—even though he was not aware of it then, and may not be fully aware of it today. For all these reasons, the first period is labeled “traditional.”

*Non-traditional period.* The second period of Mr. Nakajiba’s life begins with the time he left his family of birth and traditional religious setting to live with another family in order to go to high school. This second period can be seen as beginning either at age 16, when he left home, or at age 18, when he gave up the traditional world view and

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8. For one interpretation of the traditional world view, see my *Japanese religion: Unity and diversity* (1974), esp. pp. 5-8.

turned to Christianity. The precise pinpointing of the opening of this period is less important, however, than the process of moving from a traditional to a non-traditional world view.

Generally speaking, Japanese family structure and traditional values in the past century have often become complicated due to the rapid changes of industrialization, urbanization, and social mobility. In Mr. Nakajiba's case, the break with the traditional social and religious pattern is first indicated by the move from his family of birth to a home that happened to be Christian. It is worth nothing that the basic motive for this move, quickly passed over in the life history, is education—and, indirectly, economic mobility. In other words, changing educational and economic patterns played an important role in the disruption of traditional social and religious patterns.

But educational and economic reasons alone are insufficient to explain Mr. Nakajiba's changed religious affiliation. Many other alternatives were open to him, such as leaving the Christian home for a more traditional home, or reacting against Christian overtures and becoming archconservative in his social and religious outlook.

One point that stands out in Mr. Nakajiba's reminiscence (a factor often overlooked by Western interpreters of the new religions) is that here he exercised a personal choice. He was clearly impressed by Christianity's notion of kami (God) and consciously decided to follow this faith. In his words, "After all, the kami I worshiped was not a small kami or Buddha, but a kami of the entire world, the entire universe." The motivation for Mr. Nakajiba's change of mind is complicated, to say the least, and cannot be reduced to a single causative factor such as social change or anomie.

Also important is the nature of this change of mind—and action—during the non-traditional period. In deciding to worship *only* the Christian kami, Mr. Nakajiba decided *not* to continue the variety of practices associated with the

traditional world view. As he told his mother when she wanted him to convert to Buddhism, it was either Christianity or no faith at all. Even when he married, he had no household shrine or Buddhist altar in his home. It appears that he did "go along" with some formalities such as veneration of the spirits of his parents, but his heart was not in these practices.

Mr. Nakajiba's initial solution to the problem of the disruption of traditional values was to accept a non-traditional alternative—Christianity. Of course this is an exceptional step; it should not necessarily be regarded as typical of the new religions generally. It is to be noted, however, that first-generation members of new religions often seem to have experienced a break with traditional religion, and to have tried various alternatives—including indifference to religion. In Mr. Nakajiba's case we know that in spite of his public renunciation of traditional religion, he subconsciously harbored an appreciation of traditional religious values. But in terms of his formal decision and actions, this second period of his life can best be characterized as "non-traditional."

It is difficult to give a terminal date for this period because in middle age Mr. Nakajiba became increasingly uneasy about his abandonment of traditional religion. He became interested in Gedatsukai—but clung to Christianity. Not until he was in his sixties did he formally enter Gedatsukai.

*Neotraditional period.* The third period, covering Mr. Nakajiba's late middle age (when he was about 60) and on to the present, is marked by the readoption of traditional conceptions, but in a transformed pattern. Though not quite aware of it himself, Mr. Nakajiba seems to have grown increasingly restless and dissatisfied with Christianity and more inclined toward traditional notions. But he was also

strongly opposed to new religions and to prayers seeking immediate, tangible results. He did not experience a sudden change of mind and eagerly join Gedatsukai as a result. He was drawn into it gradually, especially by his wife, mother-in-law, and a friend.

In youth Mr. Nakajiba had been impressed by the universality of the Christian notion of kami or God, but in middle age he became impressed with Gedatsukai's ability to speak directly to human problems. If we rephrase this in "psychological" terms, Gedatsukai was able to discover or diagnose unconscious or semiconscious feelings of guilt through the *gohō shugyō* ritual, and to resolve this guilt through individual and corporate ritual action. Of course an abrupt psychological explanation such as the foregoing does violence to the gradual, dramatic unfolding of Mr. Nakajiba's own religious awareness. At first he thought that the *gohō shugyō* was false, a lie. But through his own experience, he gradually became convinced of its authenticity. No one, however, was more surprised than he at his growing trust in *gohō shugyō*. This attitude comes out clearly when he says, "Things came up that I hadn't expected at all—for example, about my wife's mother's concern with money matters.... Through *gohō shugyō* I was taught things like this that I had no idea of beforehand."

The subtlety of the *gohō shugyō* ritual is seen in that it can uncover the unconscious guilt of a third party. In this case both mother and daughter helped uncover the latent ancestral concerns of the son-in-law/husband.

The *gohō shugyō* process is much too complicated to be exhausted by this thumbnail sketch. It is enough to remark here that it served as a means for Mr. Nakajiba's rediscovery of traditional religious notions.

The content of these reaccepted (or newly awakened) traditional religious notions can only be touched on. Perhaps most important is Mr. Nakajiba's reestablishment of

ties with his family's ancestors in Fukui City. This was the test that clinched his inclination to join Gedatsukai. Also, he renewed his faith and practice in tutelary divinities. His home now has both a household shrine and a Buddhist altar. He himself resorted to *gohō shugyō* to discover the spiritual cause of an illness in the family. And generally Gedatsukai provides protection for him and his family both by means of "body protectors" and traffic safety amulets, and also by means of general counselling.

This third period has been called "neotraditional" because it is a renewal of traditional notions. But like any "neo-" movement, it transforms what it renews. Gedatsukai's pattern of ancestral rites, for example, is a remarkable modification of traditional practices. A person's tie with family ancestors is one of the most vital social and religious bonds in the Japanese tradition. Traditional practice focused on the patriarchal family system and the hereditary relationship between a family and its parish temple. But in Gedatsukai a family venerates both the husband's and the wife's ancestors (as well as other spirits of the dead). And while preserving the older parish temple and household Buddhist altar system, Gedatsukai has both supplemented it (by recommending a Buddhist altar for each house, not just for the main family) and superseded it (by making Gedatsukai, a voluntary association, the primary means of venerating ancestors).

Several other aspects of this neotraditional transformation may be noted quickly. Mr. Nakajiba has renewed his spiritual affinity to the tutelary divinity (*ujigami*), but in a remarkably new sense. In traditional Japanese religion, the *ujigami* is a geographically limited, local tutelary deity. But the Gedatsukai *ujigami*, known by the ancient name Tenjin Chigi, is interpreted by Mr. Nakajiba as "what in Christianity they call the kami of heaven and earth."<sup>9</sup> Tenjin Chigi is a universal deity figure, and this is a character-

istic important to more than one new religion of Japan. This kind of kami represents, moreover, a continuity with his youthful attraction to a universal deity.

There is a double irony in Mr. Nakajiba's neotraditionalism—a kind of double inversion. On the one hand, because he accepted a foreign religion while young, he *rejected* traditional Japanese practices. On the other hand, though he once more accepts traditional religious notions in middle age, he does *not reject* the foreign religion of Christianity. One might expect him to do so, but in his insistence on retaining his affiliation with Christianity even as he formally enters Gedatsukai, he is being “very Japanese.”<sup>10</sup>

I want to close this all-too-brief interpretation of Mr. Nakajiba's life-history on this note of double irony or double inversion, for it shows that if the experience of a single person is this complicated, how much more complicated to try to discuss an entire new religion, or the vast subject of the new religions as a whole.

#### CONCLUSION

This is just one example from the material I have gathered on Gedatsukai and am now formulating as a monograph. In this brief glimpse of Gedatsukai through the life-history of one member, I hope to have demonstrated at least two major points. The first is the fruitfulness of the life-history

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9. In order to obviate the possible misunderstanding that this Tenjin Chigi concept is due to Christian influence, it is worth mentioning that Buddhist influence, particularly the concept of Dainichi Nyorai (the so-called Sun Buddha), is much more important. Furthermore, this comparison of Tenjin Chigi with the Christian “kami” may be idiosyncratic with Mr. Nakajiba.
  10. David W. Plath, on the basis of his wider familiarity with life histories, provided the following comment on the first draft of this paper: Mr. Nakajiba's story is a good example of a general life-course set of phases (not at all peculiar to Japan) with rather passive acceptance of tradition in the early years, then the rebel phase of rejection as a young adult, and in later adulthood a kind of rediscovery of tradition.

approach for the study of contemporary religious movements. This approach enables us to obtain vicariously an "inside" view of the new religions without undue speculative theorizing. The second is the general validity of the thesis that the new religions contain ancient, persistent themes of Japanese religion, but transform their content as practiced in the context of voluntary associations.<sup>11</sup>

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11. For more theoretical comments on Gedatsukai and the development of Japanese new religions generally, see my "Toward a theory of the formation of the Japanese new religions: A case study of Gedatsu-kai," *History of religions* (forthcoming).