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## The Experiences of Christians During the Underground Years and Thereafter

This paper examines the “underground” Christians of the Edo period, looking principally at the experiences of Christians in community. It is argued that these experiences reflect a tension between the complementary realms of secrecy on the one hand and privacy on the other, concluding that at the start of the Edo period, the Christians who took their faith and practice underground exhibited the characteristics of a proscribed religion practiced in secret. However, with the relaxation of enforcement of the state’s religious policies, and with the passage of two centuries and more, the underground Christians became something different, what came to be styled the *Kakure Kirishitan*, who subsequently in modern times acquired and finally retained to the very end the characteristics of a secret society.

KEYWORDS: underground Christians — *Kakure Kirishitan* — privacy — secrecy — secret society

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**I**N A 1993 article in this journal, I examined the lives of those who chose to defy the Tokugawa state's religious policies, risking death in order to preserve what they understood to be the Christian creed and practices of their ancestors (Nosco 1993). Under the best of circumstances, trying to reconstruct the spiritual experiences and ways of life of those who lived hundreds of years ago is a speculative exercise, but how much more so when those whom one is investigating chose to conceal these activities from the gaze of their contemporaries? Historians look for artifacts of various sorts to construct a representation of the past, and yet such artifacts are frustratingly few and far between when one studies underground communities. This is because possessing material evidence of one's faith would have been then, as now, risky business for anyone guilty of violating the state's religious policies, and we inevitably learn about the keepers of religious secrets only at the moment when their secrecy is breached.

In this paper I revisit the "underground" Christians of the Edo period, this time looking principally at the experiences of Christians in community. I argue that these experiences reflect a tension between the complementary realms of secrecy on the one hand and privacy on the other, and so we begin by examining some basic wisdom on the distinction and relationship between privacy and secrecy, as found in the literature of sociology. We then look for evidence of this wisdom in the actual experiences of Japanese Christians during the long underground phase, using our theoretical models to distinguish between a proscribed religion practiced in secret, and a secret society. That is to say, I shall argue that at the start of the Edo period, the Christians who took their faith and practice underground exhibited the characteristics of a proscribed religion practiced in secret. However, with the relaxation of enforcement of the state's religious policies, and with the passage of two centuries and more, the underground Christians became something different, what came to be styled the *Kakure Kirishitan*, who subsequently in modern times acquired and finally retained to the very end the characteristics of a secret society.

### *Life and Secrecy, Religion and Secrecy*

Looking at the "childhood ritual of hiding places, secret spots safe from grown-ups," Alida BRILL has asked, "Where does it begin, this seemingly instinctive but obviously culture bound need for secrecy—this demand that a portion of our lives be regarded as private" (1990, xii, xv). By asking this question, Brill calls our attention to the seemingly universal qualities of much secrecy and privacy, while at the same time in the example cited she appears to conflate the two.

For our purposes, the distinction between the two is paramount, and here again using Brill's language, we assume that, "Privacy is granted to an individual only when others agree to honor that privacy, be it by compliance with the law or by community custom... [Privacy] exists only when others let you have it... [and] is an accorded right" (BRILL 1990, xvii).

Secrecy, by contrast, will be for us a defensive strategy, and differs from privacy in that, "Privacy has a consensual basis in society, while secrecy does not. There is an agreed upon 'right to privacy' in many areas of contemporary life; however, there is no equivalent, consensual 'right to secrecy'" (WARREN and LASLETT 1980, 27). Put slightly differently, "Privacy is consensual; the behavior it protects is socially legitimated and seen as non-threatening to others. Secrecy is nonconsensual; the behaviors it protects are seen as illegitimate and as involving the interests of the excluded" (WARREN and LASLETT 1980, 32).

If one can find this distinction in childhood rituals, then the impulse toward secrecy must be to some degree universal. Indeed, Kees BOLLE (1987, 1) shares Brill's sense of the universal nature of secrecy when he writes that there can be no human existence without some measure of secrecy, but he brings this more into the realm of our interests when he maintains that there likewise is "no religion without secrecy." In other words, it is at the nexus and in this tension between the revealed and the concealed that one finds the experience of religion.

The historical experience of religion has been that membership has its privileges, and one of these is either direct or vicarious access to truth in its higher forms. In Japan for over a thousand years before the start of the Edo period, religious law and secular law competed with one another, and elites and would-be elites competed for privileged access to religious secrets, resting some portion of their visible secular authority on this concealed spiritual knowledge. As part of religion's stock-in-trade, esoteric transmissions operating according to rules of supply and demand preserved value for secret knowledge, a lesson learned by secular arts during the Edo period when a broad range of pursuits was commodified and popularized.

All religions to varying degrees find their propensity to disclose to be in some degree of conflict with their propensity to conceal, for again as BOLLE has written, "Religion in its specificity presents itself everywhere with an aspect of secrecy. Even then, however, it does present itself" (1987, xiii). Religions must of necessity disclose themselves, on the one hand to disseminate, and on the other hand to disciple their members. Though there are examples of religious organizations in Japan and elsewhere that have not sought to expand through conversion, all necessarily have to instruct their membership—their community—in the fundamental creedal principles that inform their individual and communal way of life. Nowhere is this more important than among those who practice forbidden ways, where the secret itself, as we shall see, touches all aspects of life. Curiously, if religion to some degree requires secrecy, it might be that the

inverse is also true, that is, that secrecy itself can become a form of spirituality for those who participate in it. Indeed, Norman MACKENZIE has written that, “It is not possible to grasp the nature of membership in a secret society unless we appreciate that, essentially, it is a form of religious experience” (1967, 18). I return to this point in the Conclusions.

In this respect, religious organizations and gatherings resemble a kind of spiritual voluntary association, and thus one aspect of a broader civil society.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the secrecy embraced within the otherwise above-ground religious organization is in fact a protected sphere, a form of liberty and thus something that properly partakes of privacy as much as secrecy. In communities with a robust public sphere enjoying an array of voluntary associations, both society and the state allow religions to draw a veil around portions of their activities, enabling the mysterious to coexist alongside the revealed. In its more antisocial forms, this fascination with secrecy in open societies can become the basis for secret and quasi secret societies.

We thus observe secrecy in multiple senses. One is the secrecy that maintains for religious institutions and religionists a preserve for the experience of a distinctive spirituality, a kind of religious trade secret, as it were. Even the most exoteric traditions will thus retain an element of the esoteric, if only because it always seems as if there are higher truths to be gleaned, subtler issues to be explored, and deeper experiences to be had. Yet another aspect of this is secrecy as a defensive strategy by which the religionist seeks to avert the wrath of the state for having embraced a forbidden creed or practice. Whatever the threat posed by the secret society or underground religion, to be part of it is to become an undesirable element in the eyes of those who define such matters, and to risk thereby suffering some degree of consequences. And somewhere between these two is the secret society with its quasi religious rituals and hierarchy.

The German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) a century ago described secrecy as one of humankind’s greatest achievements, and something decidedly not childish:

In comparison with the childish stage in which every conception is expressed at once, and every undertaking is accessible to the eyes of all, the secret produces an immense enlargement of life.... The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.” (WOLFF 1950, 330)

The creation of this second parallel world thus empowers the secret-keeper, but it does so in an equal-opportunity manner with potential for exploitation

1. The principal argument against doing so would be that in before-modern societies, one almost inevitably embraced the faith of one’s parents, thus calling into question the “voluntary” nature of the affiliation.

as much as liberation. Secrecy, according to Simmel, "enables the powerful to escape accountability for their exploitation and manipulation of the weak and enables the weak to escape coercion by the powerful and to oppose them" (TEFFT 1980, 67). This is what empowers, but at the same time it makes one vulnerable, since having another know one's secret gives that other a power over oneself that needs no explanation.

Simmel was the first to note how the dynamics of individual and group secrecy differ utterly.

As long as the existence, the activities, and the possessions of an individual are secret, the general sociological significance of the secret is isolation, contrast, and egoistic individualization. The sociological significance of the secret is external, namely the relationship between the one who has the secret and another who does not. But, as soon as a whole group uses secrecy as its form of existence, the significance becomes internal: the secret determines the reciprocal relations among those who share it in common. (WOLFF 1950, 345)

In other words, being the sole possessor of a secret colors one's every interaction with others, and is fundamentally externally-oriented, since there is no social moment that does not contain the potential for catastrophic disclosure. But in the case of a secret shared within a group or community, the secret now to some extent enters into all interactions within that group or community, and is thus fundamentally internally-oriented.

Since the Bakuhan state used a mutual responsibility system, whereby households were grouped by fives or tens into units that shared legal responsibility for one another, Japanese Christians who took their faith underground sought each other out and, as much as possible, clustered in order to comprise groups ranging in size from full *gonin*- and *junin-gumi* units to entire villages and hamlets, as became apparent late in the underground phase. For example, in 1797 a large number of Christians fled to the Gotō Islands to escape persecution in Kurosaki (WHELAN 1992). Once resettled, these underground Christians formed entire "instant" communities which, like all village structures in Japan, were essentially self-governing. As Kataoka Yakichi has observed, "the underground organization of the Kirishitan became itself the social organization of towns and villages and developed a strongly closed society in order to sustain the faith and to remain unknown to outsiders" (KATAOKA, TAMAMURO, and OGURI 1974, 20). We examine the process of this transformation in the next section.

### *Tokugawa Religious Policy and Underground Christians*

Early modern religious policy in Japan began with the campaigns of Oda Nobunaga to subjugate the armies and security forces of major Buddhist temples,

and the efforts of Toyotomi Hideyoshi to assert the priority of secular authority (*ōbō* 王法) over religious, or in this case Buddhist law (*buppō* 仏法). This was the background behind Tokugawa Ieyasu's effort to control all religious institutions and their members, all religionists and their followers, by bringing them within the structure of the Bakuhan state, and thereby part of a broader "public peace" (BERRY 1986, 238).<sup>2</sup>

The effort, intended to be absolute, was only partly successful, as I have discussed elsewhere (see NOSCO 1996). Communities of believers in proscribed creeds and practitioners of forbidden acts arose throughout Japan with concentrations of Christians and heterodox nenbutsu groups in Kyushu and its offshore islands. Similarly proscribed heterodox daimoku groups from the Nichiren denomination thrived on the Bakufu's doorstep in the provinces near and surrounding Edo. Christians were thus only one among several religious groups posing a problem for the Bakuhan state.

In the case of the underground Christians, they had been generally well though unevenly prepared for the transition underground. Since ordained clergy were always scarce and too few for the mission, various accommodations had been embraced during the aboveground years, such as allowing native lay ministers (*kanbō* 看防 and *dōjuku* 同宿) to preach, to visit the infirm, to instruct young and old in the faith, to preside at funerals, and to baptize in urgent circumstances. Aboveground Christians prior to the intensified persecution were thus accustomed to gathering in each other's homes to hear a sermon or some other reading delivered by one of their own, to practice their prayers and engage in other penitential practices, or to celebrate holy days. This kind of non-ecclesiastic domicile-based spirituality became one of the hallmarks of underground Christian experience in Japan, much as it had been in Christianity's earliest days.

Still other accommodations were found, such as publishing works like the *Konchirisan no ryaku* こんちりさんのりやく to substitute for the sacrament of extreme unction and to address the problem of absolving an individual's mortal sins in the absence of a priest. Leagues of believers like the Jesuit Santa Mariya no Kumi or the Franciscan Obi no Kumi provided social and other forms of mutual support and fellowship for their parishioners, creating an organizational lay network that again proved helpful when time came for the transition to the underground. The Portuguese *companhia* (confraternities or sodalities) thus reemerge on Ikitsuki as the *konpania* or network of households which met monthly and provided the living expenses of the *sazukeyaku*, a kind of underground bishop. Elsewhere in this issue, João Paulo Oliveira e Costa describes the self-sufficiency of these confraternities, which were only minimally dependent

2. Berry lists "appropriation of the right...to superintend the church" among "the coercive and intrusive powers of early modern regimes [and] the instruments of unprecedented public peace."

on the mission or its subsidy, and which became the nuclei of the most successful underground communities, that is, those with the best internal discipline, as evidenced by their success at concealment, and those with the highest degree of fidelity in the transmission of doctrine and liturgy.

Like all persons in Japan from the mid-seventeenth century, underground Christians had to register with local Buddhist temples, which functioned as an arm of the state, registering births, deaths, marriages, and so on. This meant that all underground Christians had to master the role of being nominally Buddhist as required, and secretly something forbidden. It is thus easy to imagine that defiance of the state's religious policy, which sought to control the inner as well as outward lives of individuals, contributed to the subjectivity and interiority that seem so much a part of the nascent individuality of early modern Japan, and that likewise benefited from it.

It was evident by the end of the seventeenth century that there were limits to the state's ability to enforce its draconian religious policies, with a corresponding reduction in its appetite to do so. One problematic factor was related to the jurisprudence of the age, which depended upon confession, and also sought to use informants. Christians became skilled at prevaricating when interrogated about their faith, and found other ways to address their clandestine spiritual dilemma, even devising liturgies intended to extinguish the defilement of having participated in non-Christian ceremonies, such as the mandatory Buddhist funerals. Here, in fact, the *Konchirisan no ryaku* became of particular importance for what was believed to be its efficacy in obtaining forgiveness of such sins as attending a Buddhist funeral or performing an *efumi* or other sacrilege during an inquisition.

Further, even generous bounties offered to informants proved insufficient to induce individuals to engage in the fundamentally anti-social act of disclosing the victimless crimes of their neighbors. This was so because underground Christians, both individually and collectively, had begun to master the best disguise of all, that is, the invisibility of the model subject and neighbor. Everywhere the evidence points to underground Christians being model cultivators, herders and other dwellers of the countryside. By being outwardly loyal taxpayers, there was little incentive for the authorities to take interest in what one suspects was well known or at least widely suspected about their private lives.

The principal evidence to support this suspicion is indirect but compelling: the sheer size of several "underground" Christian communities uncovered during the last decades of persecution. For example, in 1805 five thousand two hundred Christians were "discovered" in four villages near Amakusa; and in the 1860s Fr. De Rotz estimated that there were eight thousand Christians in Sotome, while Fr. Petitjean estimated that there were twenty thousand Christians in some forty to fifty communities near Nagasaki. The notion that underground communities of this size and in such numbers successfully concealed

their spiritual activities and escaped detection for centuries is simply not credible, leading me to conclude that a de facto sphere of privacy had opened during the Edo period in the realm of personal spirituality.

In other words, when the state was actively engaged in the forensic investigation and prosecution of those who defied its religious policies, secrecy was a necessary defensive strategy, and invisibility was the perfect disguise. However, once the state relaxed and essentially discontinued its prosecution of religious renegades, as it does in the case of Christians from the late-seventeenth to late-eighteenth century, one observes something akin to what Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett have termed private-life secrecy, or “secrecy about one’s personal life” (WARREN and LASLETT 1980, 29). The situation was always dynamic, since a single prosecution would immediately shift the balance in the direction of secrecy and away from privacy, but this very inconsistency in enforcement is suggestive of the emergence of new understandings of religion as an endeavor and its place in personal life.

#### *The Kakure Kirishitan*

In the early Meiji period when the formal persecution of the underground *nenbutsu* groups ended, a number of them chose to retain a measure of their “underground” character as quasi secret organizations, in part as an outgrowth of their legacy of hatred for the Honganji establishment, but perhaps also in part out of their having become accustomed and perhaps even enamored of the clandestine aspects of their religious praxis (KADOYA 1989, 17–18). Something similar can be observed among the Kakure Kirishitan, that is, those who chose not to join the aboveground church once it became legal for them to do so.

The persecution of Christians actually resumed in the early years of the new Meiji period 1869–1873, but thereafter the disapproval of European and North American governments brought about the end of formal prohibition, and individual Christians were faced with the decision of whether to accept the invitation to rejoin the aboveground church. Those who chose not to do so came to be styled *hanare* Kirishitan, or “separated Christians” by Catholics and Kakure Kirishitan generally, though in their own parlance they preferred to style themselves *kotchi* or here, in contrast to Catholics who are *atchi* or there.

Georg Simmel has noted that perhaps the most typical characteristic of the secret society is its “high valuation of usages, formulas, and rites, and their peculiar preponderance over the purposive contents of the group.... Sometimes, in fact the contents are less anxiously guarded than the secret of the ritual” (WOLFF 1950, 358). Indeed, the limited material evidence suggests that for many if not most underground Christian communities during the Edo period, formulas, rituals, incantations, the calendar for calculating holy days, and so on became items of such central importance that they overshadowed doctrinal matters in



everyday spirituality. This became even more so the case once the secrecy was no longer necessary, that is, when Christianity became an elective though still secretive creed, and one now increasingly akin to a secret society.

Kataoka Yakichi identifies a number of reasons why underground Christians chose not to join the orthodox church. One was that they failed to see in the French missionaries the authentic spiritual heirs of those who had ministered to their forebears. Indeed, many nineteenth-century missionaries, and especially the French Catholics, were perceived to have a condescending attitude toward Japanese generally and in particular to the formerly underground groups whose heterodox ways were anathema. A second was the extraordinary power the leaders of underground Christian communities had over their flocks. In order to succeed as an underground community for over two centuries, exceptional internal discipline had to be maintained, and this required strong authoritarian leadership. These leaders were often loath to relinquish their former charges to new and still unfamiliar spiritual hands. And, a third factor was the strong internal bonds forged within such communities by centuries of fear of disclosure. As Simmel observed, in group secrecy the dynamics are such that the secret colors all internal interactions, making for exceptional social and psychological isolation from a truly "outside" world. Whatever their reasons, however, there were no sizable conversions of Kakure Kirishitan to the orthodox church after October 1939, when some one hundred and four souls made the leap, and by their own testimony many post-Pacific War Kakure Kirishitan acknowledge that they are not even sure why their ancestors first took the faith underground (KATAOKA et al. 1974, 111–14). Well into the twentieth century, Kakure Kirishitan continued to embrace the Butsudan and *kamidana* altars, amulets, and other physical trappings of aboveground authorized spirituality which their persecuted ancestors had earlier infused with proscribed meaning and significance (KATAOKA et al. 1974, 22–24). What once was part of the disguise of invisibility thus becomes transformed in the absence of persecution into a kind of fetish.

Simmel also observed that "through such formalism, as well as through the hierarchical organization itself, the secret society makes itself into a kind of counter-image of the official world, to which it places itself in contrast" (WOLFF 1950, 360). In fact Miyazaki Kentarō's reports on the last remnants of Kakure Kirishitan communities on Ikitsuki paint a picture of a liminal, rapidly dying realm straddling the worlds of shamanism and animism on the one side with all their liberating spiritual freedom, and contemporary Japanese society on the other with all its strictures and hierarchy.

### *Conclusions*

James Ketelaar has written on precisely this point when looking at Meiji heretics and martyrs who,

dwelt within a certain exteriority...and by virtue of their suffering...come to inhabit a position marked by fear and awe. Persecution, though pervasive in human history, is seldom in and of itself capable of totally extinguishing the other. It is precisely the privileged exteriority available to the persecuted other that provides a strategy crucial to the survival of the persecuted. The heretic martyr is not merely a “law breaker” but, in becoming a martyr, is transformed into a paradigm of the possibility of transcending the operation of certain definitions of “law.” ... The heretic-as-martyr figuration suggests a contestable relativization of certain claims to hegemonic authority in so far as it provides alternative possibilities of action derived from alternative modes of acceptability. (KETELAAR 1990, ix)

Like their counterparts among the *fujufuse* Nichiren Buddhists and underground renegade nenbutsu practitioners, the underground Christians metaphorically shook their fists at a society characterized by an organic all-inclusiveness. Whether thought of in terms of *mibunsei* 身分制 or some other organizing principle, the Edo state imagined a society that works well when each individual has a specific place within that society and attends punctiliously to her/his responsibilities, neither exceeding nor falling short.

To be sure, this was a society that also had its designated liminal zones, such as the licensed pleasure quarters, where, like on a cruise ship, society’s rules seemed for the moment suspended. But even so, there was no room in the idealized Bakuhau state for underground Christians or any other law breakers and defiers of state authority. As heretics and occasionally martyrs they personified the limits of the possible within the early modern polity.

In most ways the experience of Japan’s underground Christians was consistent with what Simmel’s theories predict (WOLFF 1950, 361–73). They inhabited a world apart, a parallel bifurcated realm which operated at one level on the surface and another deep beneath. It was a secluded world, even in urban settings but most commonly in rural environs, and it seems to have lacked the signs of recognition—the handshake, or gesture, or other visual marker—so characteristic of members of dispersed secret societies. This is because, as scattered as they were, there appears to have been minimal contact between underground communities of Christians, who in this aspect differed from their *fujufuse* Daimoku counterparts.

Japan’s underground Christians also showed little evidence of degrees of initiation, no doubt because unlike secret societies such as the Freemasons, they only replenished their numbers through reproduction, and possessed no visible recruitment strategies. Rather like the society of which they were a kind of distorted reflection, underground Christian communities represented intersecting combinations of horizontal and vertical orientations. The organic nature of their community, like that of its reflection, made one either a member or not a

member but never a partial member. By contrast, the vertical nature of both was inescapable. Edo society embraced finely honed distinctions among individuals, leaving little to guess work regarding status. So did underground Christian communities, which combined elaborate hierarchies with deliberately overlapping areas of responsibility, this latter representing an important difference with their aboveground brethren.

Above all, early modern underground Christians defied the state. At times when the persecution intensified, their resistance, like that of Ketelaar's martyrs and heretics, disclosed an alternative community "law," or contestable relativization of the state's claim to hegemonic authority. They were in that sense dangerous elements. At other times, however, when the level of persecution diminished, the underground Christians occupied a space that now had all the earmarks of privacy: it was an interior space with a social dimension, and represented a form of tolerance, something accorded as a practical accommodation but never asserted as a right. At that point it began to resemble something more akin to Alida Brill's childhood hiding place, a secret spot safe from grown-ups. But when the formal institutionalized persecution ceased after the 1870s and the underground Christians became Kakure Kirishitan, they now looked much more like a secret society, a transformation eased by the structural similarity between an underground religious movement, and the inherent religiosity of a typical secret society (see MACKENZIE 1967). Inclusiveness and exclusiveness became organizing principles, with high levels of group egoism, and altogether different relationships prevailed in interactions with local and federal authorities.

Finally, we need to remind ourselves of the intensely subjective nature of faith generally. In this paper I have generalized broadly about the faith-based and ritual-based experiences of others, who lived centuries ago and tried their best to conceal their activities. Those familiar with religious communities in the here-and-now will recognize that the nature of faith, both individual and collective, is always elusive and dynamic, varying widely not just from individual to individual within the same community, but also within the same individual from one moment to the next. To describe the faith- and ritual-based experiences of members of present-day religious communities is itself a sufficiently challenging task, but to do so examining individuals whom one will never meet is surely a bit brazen. These reservations notwithstanding, I hope that the observations in this paper will help at least partially to illuminate aspects of the experiences of some remarkably interesting folk, whose very presence demonstrates that the conventional portrait of a seamlessly organic and supremely effective authoritarian Tokugawa society is in need of some reconsideration.

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