Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 1986: 13/2-3

Conversion Stories and their Popularization in Japan's New Religions

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The study of conversion is one of the central tasks of religious studies. It has been taken up in all branches of religious studies, in psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and religious thought. However, surprisingly few efforts have been made to approach this question in terms of conversion stories, i.e., from the perspective of religious language. Modern Japanese conversion stories, with their appeal to the general public, are an everyday occurrence. They frequently take the form of testimonies about personal experience in the "new" religious movements. The topic of this present essay is the characteristics and functions of religious language as manifested in conversion stories, especially testimonies.[1]

The Scope of Conversion Stories

Conversion stories are stories told by persons about their subjective experience of acquiring and deepening religious faith, or stories based on such narrations but related by another party. Needless to say, conversion is a phenomenon that occurs within the hearts of individuals. Unless it is reported by those who have experienced it, there is no way we might know what it means. There are, of course, some indirect indications that aid our understanding, such as the observable changes in the behavior of the converted, witness by others, or utterances by the converted about matters not immediately related to their conversion. The content of a study of conversion depends greatly on whether or not such "reference data" can be obtained. One cannot deny, however, that the "primary data" are the statements and descriptions of the converts themselves, i.e., their conversion stories.

The term "conversion" is here used in a broad sense to indicate not only the once-and-for-all leap from unbelief to belief, but also the acquisition and growth of faith over a long period of time, passing through several stages. The classical studies of conversion, as represented by E. D. Starbuck and W. James, focused initially on cases which emphasized the experience of the acquisition of faith as a once-in-a-lifetime event. Religious persons stress the discontinuity between unbelief and belief. One might expect that when we look at conversion stories, those that relate once-in-a-lifetime conversions will easily catch the eye.

On the other hand, the acquisition and growth of faith may pass through several stages in accordance with specific religious traditions. The observer can most often detect several stages even in the case of a once-in-a-lifetime experience: the awakening of faith, its establishment, and the further strengthening of beliefs. As sociology and depth psychology have clarified, changes in religious beliefs go hand in hand with changes in social life as a whole and in one's relationships with other people. It is, moreover, a common fact that these changes proceed gradually over a long span of time. Whatever the converts themselves might relate about their experience, we must recognize the possibility that the process of change of religious beliefs probably requires a long time.

Let us then establish two poles, which we might call "sudden conversion" and "gradual conversion." Conversion stories are stories about phenomena occurring somewhere along a line between these two poles.

Persons who relate a conversion story do not necessarily do so self-consciously and they themselves may not always have a very clear notion of just what conversion is. Yet, those believers with a strong sense of self-awareness can be supposed to have at least some general idea about how they acquired their faith and how they deepened it. When asked, they can tell about these matters either at length or briefly. However, it remains difficult at times to determine the peripheral and essential elements of conversions in such stories.

If the story is told in a time sequence, where does the conversion story begin and where does it end? One must distinguish stories which deal with conversion as a singular event separated from the context of the convert's life, and stories which take that conversion event within the continuum of the convert's life. In the former the story constitutes a whole and is completed by the narration of the conversion event from its beginning to its end. The convert might add a brief description of his or her personal history, but this is simply an appendix and easily removed from the story. Such reports of conversion events are the shortest type of stories in the sense that they cover the smallest time span.

What about conversion stories that cover a long period of time? Since this type of story has been infrequently treated, I will deal with it in some detail by using as a concrete example the account Akazawa Bunji (Konkō Daijin, 1814-83), the founder of Konkōkyō, provided about his own faith in *Konkō Daijin's Memoirs* (see Murakami 1971).

Changes in Akazawa Bunji's faith were most prominent in the period between his thirty-seventh and forty-sixth year of age. The account of the events that occurred at that time covers one hundred pages in Japanese script, more than forty percent of the entire *Memoirs*. It is also their most lively part. Especially dramatic is the description of his encounter with the *kami* when he suffered a serious illness at the age of forty-two, an account which provides insight into Bunji's inner state and thus constitutes a most valuable source for the study of conversion. We may with reason see this period of his life as a conversion story reported in this central part of the *Memoirs*.

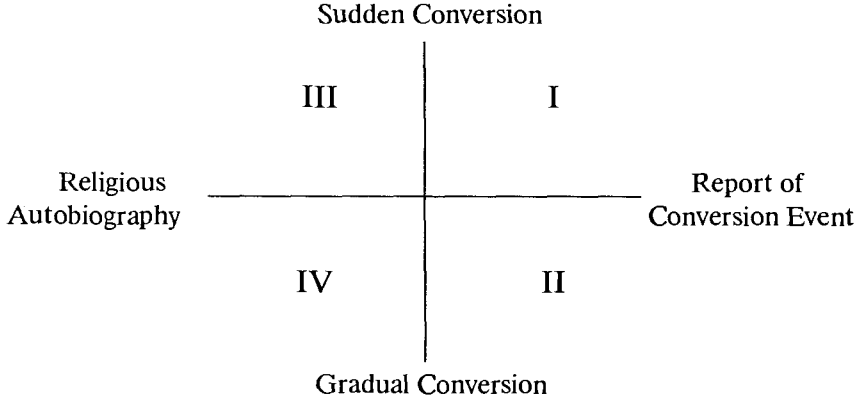
However, this is only a part of the whole story. The book opens as follows:

> Today, a message from Tenchi-kane-no-kami who told me: "Write down your place of birth and other things of the past of the living kami Konkō Daijin." I, Konkō Daijin, was born in the village of Urami in the same county where I live now, as the grandson of Kandori Sennosuke and the second son of my father Jūhei, on the festival day of the local deity Ōmiya-daimyōjin, before 6 P.M. My father, of the year of the fowl, was thirty-eight years of age and my mother, of the year of the rabbit, was thirty-two. It was the sixteenth day of the eighth month of the eleventh year of Bunka (1814), year of the dog. I was named Kandori Genshichi. My mother was Oshimo, daughter of Tokuhachi from Masuzaka village.

This text shows how, following the command of the *kami*, Bunji will reflect on his whole life and that the story starts from the moment of his birth. All the events of his life are recorded year by year until the end of his writing at age sixty-three. The account is not, however, a disorganized enumeration of facts. Bunji traces back his relationship with the *kami*. The intent of elucidating his present state of faith pervades the entire book. This seems to be why he mentioned that his birth occurred on the festival of the tutelary deity. Although there are only a few lines for the period between his twentieth and twenty-fifth years which were devoted to an enlargement of his house, they had a deep significance for his life of faith. *Konkō Daijin's Memoirs* is a religious autobiography in which Akazawa Bunji constantly looks back at his whole life "from the time of [his] birth until the present."

Although the central part of this autobiography is a series of conversion experiences, they cannot be separated from the wider context in which they occurred. In other words, we must consider the entire religious autobiography with both the conversion experiences and the context as one, single conversion story, so that these reflections on his faith "from birth until the present" really constitute what was identified above as the "extended" type of story.

Conversion stories have various time frameworks and their content ranges from reports on conversion events to "religious autobiographies." Differences in the time framework are related to differences in the understanding of conversion as either a sudden change in beliefs or as a more gradual process (see Graph 1). One who holds to the notion of conversion as a sudden, once-in-a-lifetime event would tend to talk about it in the form of a "report on the conversion event," a Type I Conversion Story. On the other hand, one who regards conversion as a gradually occurring event would take up the form of a "religious biography," Type IV. To round out the picture, in Type III one's whole religious life is told as the clarifying background for a sudden conversion event and in Type II the event is told as a synthesis illustrating a conversion that has been gradually building up over an extended time period. Conversion stories contain all of these four quadrants.



Graph 1: Mutual Relationship Between the Notion of Conversion and Conversion Stories in Terms of "Length"

Conversion Stories as One Type of Religious Story

The characteristics of conversion stories are clarified by comparing them with other types of religious stories. A clue can be found by comparing mythological history (salvation history and mythology) with miracle stories and legends.

Mythological history can be represented as stories that tell the origin of the world or of the human race, or stories that explain the beginnings of a religious group. The main content of sacred writings usually embody such mythological history. These stories are deemed official accounts. They are believed to have an important meaning for the community life of the faithful and are given an authoritative status binding on all. By contrast, conversion stories are private in nature. Their material is individual experience and their purpose is to convey the "subjective reality" of those individuals. They elicit interest by personal sympathy.

Conversion stories can develop into mythological history, as in the case of the autobiographies of religious founders. For example, the *kami* possession of Nakayama Miki (1798-1887) which took place on the occasion of the leg pain of her eldest son is the climax of the biography of the foundress of Tenrikyō (see Shimazono 1977). During the twenty years or so that it took to build a group of believers, this event was of central concern only to Nakayama Miki herself and to the small number of her family members. It remained a private conversion story about how she came to speak the words revealed to her by the deity. As the group of believers became established and Miki's personality itself became an object of faith, the same event became gradually mythologized by Miki herself and by the believers around her. They began to regard the divine indwelling in her as the source for their religious group. This did not mean that the event completely lost its character as a conversion story. Its nature as such a story is seen in the felt difficulty of why Miki, supposedly deified, several times thereafter still considered suicide.

A conversion story is one in which the self of the converted person is deeply engraved and in which the telling of the story is to a great extent left to that person's freedom. Opportunities for such free expression of personal religious experiences were extremely limited in the pre-modern world. As will be treated later, it is only in modern times that this became a general, popular phenomenon.

It is striking that such popularization of conversion stories, originally expressing individual experience, often became standardized and uniform. Typical examples of this are testimonies or the stories of personal

experience, such as those told at the meetings of the New Religions or appear in their journals or newspapers. In these, many people repeat stories of conversion which closely resemble one another. To talk about one's own experience becomes a training ground for imitating and internalizing the original model.

The popular conversion story is of a different type, however, than the miracle story or legend. For example, the following story can hardly be called a conversion story.

> I am employed in the building industry, but after the oil shock work rapidly dwindled and I gradually sunk into poverty. Through an acquaintance I was introduced to the *sensei* ("teacher" or "leader") who advised me to pray for the repose of my aborted baby on the thirteenth anniversary of its death. I immediately started praying for spiritual purification (*jōrei-kigan*). Since then, my business, which had been quite sluggish, has recovered smoothly. At present the number of workers has also increased and profits are double those of the past. I am humbly grateful for what the *sensei* did for me (From a newspaper insert provided by a diviner in March 1981).

Here it is difficult to judge whether a conversion has occurred or not. This story does not try to relate a conversion but a miracle and a spiritual experience. In this sense the story corresponds to the legends collected by Yanagita Kunio in his *Tōno monogatari* ("Tales of Tōno"). In contrast, the following story of an experience in a New Religion is one that we can include among conversion stories.

> For a long time I could not sleep because of severe lumbar pains. My older sister worried about me and advised me to become a member of the Reiyūkai. At first I tried not to listen to her. But one night I saw in a dream an emaciated baby. Why did this happen? All of a sudden I realized. I had aborted two babies. Is it then right that I think only about the happiness of my living son and daughter who are in good health and fail to pray for the repose of those aborted children? While pondering this, one day a young Buddhist, beating a hand drum and chanting *namu myōhō-renge-kyō*, appeared at the entrance to my house. He asked me to let him in and take a short rest. He entered the house, looked at me, and said: "You were bad to two of your children, weren't you? And now you are suffering from lumbar pains. What a pity! I would like you to have a longer life." I felt as if a long nail was suddenly driven through my heart. The priest left without saying

> anything further, but when I talked about this occurrence with my husband big tears welled up in his eyes. I thought, "I don't want to die. For the sake of my husband and children, I cannot die young." I started appealing to all kinds of ascetic practitioners and faith healers, asking them how I could be saved. But to no avail! Finally I went to the house of my older sister who is a believer of Reiyūkai. She welcomed me warmly. In 1964 I myself became a member. A short time thereafter, one morning when I was praying for the souls of the deceased, the name of a house in the vicinity kept popping into my mind. I went to visit that house and a lady told me in a tearful voice that her husband had died several years before and that recently she had not even opened the doors of the Buddhist home altar to pray for him. She also became a member. When I awoke the next morning, I called out for joy. Incredibly, the lumbar pains I had suffered for four years were completely gone (See Reiyūkai 1976, p. 202).

The above story was written down from the oral account of the person involved, but one can detect in it the personal touch of the lady who told it. While telling about the miracle and spiritual experience, it also relates a conversion, viz., the growth of a religious self of the concerned individual. This religious self is formed in the daily activities of the religious group through dialogue and training. The typology of conversion story reflects that of the religious self as presented originally in systematic thinking on doctrine and practice. While they belong to an identifiable type, they do not lose their character as expressing individual personality.

The Milieu of the Formation of Conversion Stories

Conversion stories are based on "reality," but they also are limited by the various elements proper to the milieu in which they are recounted. Therefore, in interpreting such stories, one has to take into due consideration the nature of the milieu in which they have been formed and in which they are actually told.

In order to be told, conversion stories presuppose a religious self. In the establishing of this self, dialogue with a religious group plays an important role. Conversion stories take on their specific form through such dialogue. This does not mean that their form is unalterable. New forms do occur in accord with the personal and doctrinal interests and wishes of the listeners. In being retold, the interests of the narrator tend to be inserted in the story. Let us examine a typical case.

The following conversion story of a shamanistic practitioner (*gomiso*) has been partly excerpted and summarized by a psychiatrist who heard the story from the person in question, but used it for a treatise on what *kami* possession means.

> Case No. 18 - Male - 35 year old
> At the age of twenty the patient lost his job and suffered poverty. Finding it strange that his father, who was a diviner, was doing well in his profession, and wholeheartedly wishing to ascertain for himself the existence of *kami*, he started ascetic practices at Mount Iwaki. On the night of the eighth day, while sitting alone on a rock in prayer, he was attacked by a violent feeling of numbness and then induced into a state of drowsiness. All of a sudden the beautiful landscape of a spring field opened up before his eyes and on the far shore of a small river he saw the figure of a goddess stretching out her hand which held a beautiful jewel. Although he thought this a strange thing to see in the midst of the mountains, he submitted himself to this state of rapture. Soon he returned to reality "as if awakening from a dream," and he interpreted the event to mean that he himself had become a disciple of the *kami* who had showered him with immense grace and loved him as "the apple of her eye." Again he was submerged into a feeling of supreme bliss (see Sasaki 1981, p. 111).

In the case of charismatic religious figures such as a *gomiso*, the formation of a conversion story can be said to occur in a process of solitary introspection. When they become regular believers, they further build this up in dialogue with other believers. If someone with scholarly interests, like a psychiatrist, comes and asks direct questions, then the conversion story takes on a new form of expression. The scholar then develops this into a treatise appropriate to scholarly discussion.

The most important element in the limiting milieu is the nature of the relationship between the one who tells the story and those who listen to it. Based on this relationship we can distinguish three different ideal types of stories; (1) the introspective type, (2) the group type, and (3) the listener type.

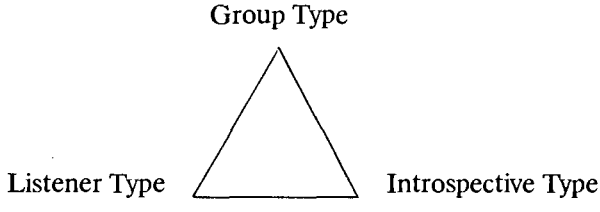
Conversion stories of the introspective type are written down by the narrator to ascertain his or her own faith. They are usually stories which the convert relates by looking back in solitary introspection to his or her own past without any intention to convey this experience to other persons. In this type, the initiative for the formation of the story comes totally from the narrator and such stories are therefore often overflowing with individuality.

The examples William James gives in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* belong almost without exception to this type. The above mentioned *Konkō Daijin's Memoirs* can also be classified under this type.

The group type occurs in cases in which the narrator and the listeners share a common faith and jointly compose the story of the conversion. Typical examples are the stories about religious experiences found in many of the New Religions. Prior to the self-reflection of the convert a request is made for an account of his or her conversion experience. The way to tell that story is then taught by the leaders and the older believers and the story is formed along the model of other similar stories. The initiative for its formation comes from the group to which both narrator and audience belong. As a result, these stories tend to be very similarly patterned.

In the listener type, the stories are related as heard from the convert by a listener, particularly someone with scholarly interest, not in order to share faith but to obtain needed information for oneself. A pure type is when a believer, who still has but shallow religious self-awareness and who has not yet composed his story, for the first time in response to the research questions of a listener (or questionnaire) composes a consistent account. Here there is a strong tendency for the stories to become eclectic, containing a mixture of images that the convert holds about his or her own faith and conversion and of the scholarly concepts of the listener about conversion.

Most conversion stories, however, are not pure types, but share in all three types. They are then to be located within a triangle (see Graph 2) with three ideal types as angles. For example, the case of the *gomiso* is originally formed as an introspective type of conversion story. But through the process of scholarly research and its transmutation into treatise form, it is gradually transformed into the listener type.



Graph 2: Ideal Types of Conversion Stories according to Milieu.

Conversion Stories as Fiction

Although varying in degree, the basic content of all the above mentioned types of stories depends on the testimony of the convert. From a research perspective, the question urges itself as to what extent the "story" actually reflects the "reality" of the conversion.

Sociology and depth psychology have made it clear that one should not accept the converts' stories at face value, but reconsider them critically in the light of other material. That material also comes for the most part from the converts, but goes beyond their explicit intentions. Information from other sources, persons, or writings are certainly significant. In the case of Akazawa Bunji, the reference material provided by the *Onoke monjo* ("Documents of the Ono Family"), which are records written by the village headman about life in the village where Bunji lived (see e.g., Seto 1974), open up new possibilities of interpreting the conversion process as related in *Konkō Daijin's Memoirs.*

By combining such materials with the conversion stories themselves, one often discovers unexpected insights, often including facts that may differ from the descriptions given by the converts themselves. By considering why such discrepancies occur, hidden meanings of the conversion story may come to light. Much progress in the study of religious biographies has been made by the discovery of such hidden meanings.

There are more fictional elements in autobiographies than in ordinary biographies. Conversion stories are particularly subject to such a possibility, for they are often written with a strong motivation to reassert and strengthen religious faith. One can easily understand that accounts of religious experiences benefit and strengthen the faith of practicing believers. A clear example of one's personal process from unbelief to belief further establishes one's self-identity as a believer. It is easy to imagine the rather extreme case of new believers, who do not yet have a firm awareness of whether they have faith or not, coming for the first time to firm faith precisely because they are given the opportunity to relate their experiences. In other words, it is possible that the very formation of the conversion story is an important aspect of the conversion process itself.

The fictional character of the conversion story appears more strongly in the selection of the actual elements selected for inclusion than in the fabrication of particular facts. Therefore, one must consider what has *not* been related in the story. Omitted facts may either have been excluded on purpose or unconsciously overlooked and forgotten. In either event, such omissions may have important relevance to the life of the convert. In

interviews the researcher not infrequently stumbles into matters which he/she needs to know, but which the convert does not like to discuss.

If one can ascertain what is untold, one can acquire a deeper understanding of the expressed content of the conversion experience. These "other matters" refer precisely to things the converts themselves do not want to talk about. There are clear limitations in ascertaining them. In many instances the interviewer is limited to hearing what the convert wants to say. In most cases this results in "shelving" the different interests between the researcher and the convert. If a researcher tries to touch upon matters the convert does not wish to speak about, this diversity of interests becomes apparent, possibly jeopardizing the very premises necessary for a fruitful interview.

Such may perhaps not be the case with research methods other than the direct interview. In using written conversion stories one might be able to research the private life of the convert to know things not included in the written material. Yet even here, if the researcher is to gain the respect of the convert and of those close to him, he must refrain from making public material that would debunk the conversion story.

Such limitations are part and parcel of research into conversion accounts, dependent as it is on what the convert wants to relate. Even if the interpreter can to some extent read the story in a different light, the main themes cannot but rely on the testimony of the converts themselves.

The Popularization of Conversion Stories

As mentioned above, in present-day Japanese society conversion stories are widely found in the daily activities of the New Religions. They are prime sources for insight into the characteristics of contemporary religious language. Of course, stories about religious experiences do exist in all religions everywhere. Such testimonies are expressed in the language of popular or mass religion. But the greater part of these are simple stories about miracles or the like. They seldom refer to the inner self of the narrator, focusing attention solely on specific events or manifestations of the sacred. By contrast, conversion story testimonies deal with an experience within the context of an individual person's life. They tell about a conviction of being saved and of personal change. Thus they characterize a single person's inner self and are naturally limited in number. It was the exception that such things were related in a society in which the rural population constituted the majority. When we study the biographies of famous religious persons from the past, we find only meager data about their conversion and faith-formation. This certainly does not make our task any easier. Even in

the case of those who preached often and wrote much on religious themes, only a few have made their religious experiences public. In a word, it was not generally accepted that talking about one's personal inner feelings could be a form of expressing a sublime religious truth.

This remains the case for believers in general. It is not that they have no experience of conversion or no interest in what moves the heart of others. Rather, since religious communities in the past reflected the same background and similar life-histories, without waiting for verbal expression, people could naturally understand each other's feelings. Moreover, ordinary believers were regarded not as suppliers of a religious message, but recipients.[2]

In the Catholic Church confession has been an important element in the life of faith. The words of confession lay bare the inner feelings of the individual and, just as in the testimonies about religious experiences in the New Religions, they have a cathartic function (see Turner 1975 and Shimada 1980). Perhaps one can see in confession a type of religious experience story that can be termed a "liability or sin story." However, confession is made in an enclosed space from one person to another under the total guidance of the confessor and does not promote by itself the establishment of individuality in the confessant. There has traditionally been little possibility for the confessants to locate their experience within the context of their whole life or to construct a story relating to fundamental changes in their hearts.

With the advent of modern times awareness of individuality and self has increasingly strengthened and ideas of the value of personal experience have gained importance. Concurrently, the number of persons who relate and write down their conversion stories has grown. In Japan this idea of grounding one's search for truth in one's own experience of conversion and of telling each other about that conversion can be found as early as Ishida Baigan (1685-1744) and his monthly *tsukinami* meetings. In both the West and in Japan the golden age of confessional literature (the I-novels) clearly reflects the centrality of seeking ultimate truth in individual experience. In the case of Japan, an aversion for abstract thinking and a pragmatic tradition of adopting a plurality of ideas have, it would seem, spurred on this proliferation of stories about experiences and conversions.

The testimonies in the New Religions are one result of this trend to diffuse and popularize such conversion stories. The very act of expressing one's individual feelings in a personal way and of presenting one's religious self to the general public became increasingly popular. However, this was not done in terms of personal freedom in conflict with religious group activities, but instead was performed within these activities. In other words,

the conversion stories came about as a common religious language of the masses.

Religious Truth in Testimonies

Not all testimonies in the New Religions are conversion stories. Quite a few deal simply with miracles or with a reconfirmation of faith. Here the focus is upon those popularized stories which do treat one's own inner experience and which deal exclusively with conversion.

What then are the characteristics of such popularized conversion stories as a language for expressing religious truth? How are they different from traditional religious language? The remainder of this essay addresses these questions in four points from the perspective of the religious language used by people and for people (See also Takagi 1958, pp. 194-201; Takagi 1959, pp. 142-48; Saki 1960, pp. 196-203).

1: Uniqueness in Time

Stories about conversion experiences are unique in time, limited to one particular occasion in the sense that they seldom linger on in common memories. They stress unique, dramatic inner changes of particular individuals that do not occur every day. Except in small, tightly knit groups, most testimonies are not meant to be permanent records. Most frequently they are slowly forgotten after having "stirred up" faith when recounted. It seldom happens that they are preserved as common memories or further discussed on subsequent occasions.

The topic of these testimonies tends to be seen as new and relevant, much as in newspaper articles or T.V. news programs. In large or middle-size groups it is not considered proper to talk too much about long past experiences, however important such might have been. The narrator has to show concretely how a sacred power has appeared *now*, how one individual person has been enlightened *now* and *now* stirred into action. Testimony seems to be restricted by the present time in this double sense.

Doctrinal talks and sermons often contain similar references to the concrete present as an aid to memory. Thus they might also be thought to be restricted to the present. But at basis they express some truth proposition and their concrete and present-tense examples surround this core of unchanging truth. By contrast, the concrete references in testimonies are the prime reality without any necessary appeal to unchangeable truth.

This is the salient difference between popularized conversion stories and religious autobiographies. Conversion stories in the form of testimonies

seldom develop into extensive religious autobiographies. The inner, personal religious understanding of a believer is in a continuous process of development. Such a slow and gradual growth, however, is rarely mentioned in testimonies. The focus is on the occurrence of a new, dramatic event, from which one may only occasionally look back and interpret the past.

2: Practicality

Stories of conversion experiences are practical in the sense that they express teachings as being in touch with the concrete life of the people and in the sense that they can directly aid in the practice of faith and religious self-understanding. This is one reason why they are so popular. They concretely address the problems people face daily and bring to speech hitherto unspoken feelings from the depth of one's heart. The reality of sacred power is shown as bringing salvation from the depths of suffering. Short passwords of the specific faith are provided as a means for finding one's way. In such words and phrases a concise guide is expressed for "rebuilding the heart," i.e., for changing one's heart and life.

The use of examples to illustrate doctrine is of course not restricted to testimonies. The language used in the *toritsugi* "mediation" in Konkōkyō with their face-to-face dialogue between the religious leader and the believer emphasizes concrete descriptions of felt problems. Many doctrinal sermons with their ready examples have a practicality closely resembling that of testimonies. Indeed, when they treat important events in the life of the preacher, they take on the character of conversion stories. Nevertheless, the aim in these cases is always to present teaching, and the concrete examples remain peripheral. The salient feature of testimonies is that one can enter into, participate, and "live out" their exampled world.

3: Activity

The language of conversion stories is active in the sense that their main protagonists articulate their own problems and present themselves before others as overcoming these problems. The method of these stories is not passively to accept the words of a teaching, simply to convey them to others, or silently to put them into practice. The one engaged in practice is the one who gives the sermon wherein he or she presents a personal faith to others. Here the distinction between teacher and disciple, between giver and recipient, is bracketed and people from all levels participate in dialogue on an equal basis (at least in principle). All are qualified to participate simply as believers and all present their personal, individual experiences before the others.

This does not mean that all testimonies are indiscriminately accepted. They are in fact subjected to the critique and appraisal of the community. The leaders naturally take the initiative for these critiques and appraisals, but the overall group of believers is given a chance to express opinions and the comments of the leaders take into account the reactions of the community. In the presentation of the stories, the extent to which the narrator has understood doctrine becomes apparent. Stories which move the heart, whether coming from the leaders or from ordinary believers, are heard by the audience on an equal basis. Because most of the audience will become narrators themselves once in a while, they are being trained in their daily faith activity in telling about their own experiences and in critically regarding such stories. In a word, the audience can participate as "authors" and "critics" in constructing the story itself.

4: Solidarity

Conversion stories establish a strong sense of solidarity among people who seldom come into contact in their ordinary lives. They are oriented to and evoke this solidarity by assimilating people into common values.

All the participants share in the story "time" and participate in the feelings expressed in the telling of the story. Furthermore, feelings of solidarity and fellowship arise from the "naked" face-to-face encounters of the participants. A sense of oneness with the narrator is brought about by the sympathy elicited in the hearers. The listeners can and do feel that they should share in others' stories, for the religious attainments described therein relate directly to their own concerns. This sharing in a common endeavor engenders solidarity, whether expressed by hand clapping or other signs of approval. Without compulsion all are drawn into the group values and unconsciously learn group forms of expression, further solidifying their fellowship (see Shimada 1983, esp. pp. 47-50, for such a process as occurring in meetings of the Yamagishikai). Needless to say, such fellowship is more permanent than the contrived togetherness of T.V. group programs or rock concerts. It draws the participants into group activities and their accompanying lifestyle.

When stories are told in large gatherings, the entire audience often becomes totally engrossed. For example, in salvation stories about how grave troubles suddenly turn into great happiness, or in stories about repentance in which the narrator repeatedly apologizes with a heartfelt sorrow, both narrator and audience easily share in a deep sense of unity. Stories of salvation instantly take away the fear of evil powers which threaten one's fate or make one lonely. Repentance stories instantly remove the walls of enmity and guilt that separate one from the others. Such

feelings of unity resemble those elicited among the spectators of the Christian passion plays. In the case of testimonies it is not so much the power of traditional symbols or artistic refinement which evoke those emotions. It is rather the fact that those who underwent the experience are themselves recounting it and the fact that the content of such stories reflects common experiences. In traditional religious language, assimilation into the sustaining and unifying values of the group is accomplished through the stereotyped language of myth and doctrine, ritual and practice, or through the acquisition of specific religious conduct. This is an extended process and involves many gradations. By contrast, in conversion stories a quiet and deep assimilation occurs through the demonstration and sharing of subjective experience in everyday language.

It goes without saying that the above description does not exhaust all the characteristics of popularized conversion experience stories. I would like to leave further systematic investigation of them, together with an attempt to trace the development of testimonies in Christianity, for a later occasion.

Notes

1. The present article is based on two previously written essays. See Shimazono and Inoue 1985, and Shimazono 1986a. Also Shimazono 1984 and 1986b deal with related problems. Since I do not treat the concrete types and contents of testimonies in the New Religions in the present article, the reader is referred to these essays.
2. There may have been an opportunity for talking about conversion in the cult groups (*kō*) of the Pure Land Shin sects, but probably this was not a regular custom. According to Morioka Kiyomi, who made a comparative study of the *o-za* in the Pure Land Shin sect in Noto Peninsula and the *hōza* in Risshō Kōsei Kai, personal sufferings and troubles are not thematized in the dialogues of faith of the *o-za*, and even if the "self-awareness of being wicked" is stressed, this remains limited to the conceptual level. Morioka explains: "If what and who is evil would be concretely pointed out in front of neighbors and conclusions made about someone's ugliness and dreadfulness of heart, one could no longer feel at ease in that place. One might come to hate such people who expose evil and criticize their hypocrisy. The social organization of the village believers who sustain the *o-za* would face dissolution. Therefore, the stimulation of the awareness of being wicked does not exceed the level of conceptual general theory" (Morioka 1975, p. 190).

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