

THE ENIGMA OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION IN MODERN JAPAN:
THE CASE OF TWO BUDDHIST PRIESTS

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“You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism.” At the beginning of his letter to the Galatians, Paul establishes his authority through an account of his conversion: “I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.” Here, instead of recounting the experience of blinding light and the voice of Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–31) that makes his one of the powerful conversion stories in Christian history, as he had before a crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22:1–21), Paul describes an exchange of one religion for another. The rhetoric of conversion, both as darkness-to-light and as zealous exchange, recurs in the historiography of Japan, in the break with a traditional past and entry into modernity and in the ways indigenization is configured as inevitable and natural. The accounts of Paul’s conversion in his letters and in Acts point to enduring questions: the conversion narrative and the change it describes, the assertion of a new or transformed religious identity, and the calling to missionary or evangelistic work. Closer attention to the process of conversion and the ways the experience is retold requires looking at how religious change occurs. It is a reminder that conversion (from A to B) is one way of talking about religions alongside competition (A vs. B), negation (B, not A), syncretism (A melded with B), fulfillment (A subsumed into B) and an interest in comparison and dialogue (A and B) and that it is also an experience bound in context and recounted in the language available, and, as such, is of historical interest. Just as Paul’s narrative sometimes exhibits different understandings of conversion, Japanese converts describe religious change in a variety of ways, for instance as negation, fulfillment, or comparison.

This essay has its origins in a 1918 photo found in the course of larger project trying to answer the question of the significance of Christianity in a nation where church membership has never surpassed one percent of the population but where, as missionaries explained to themselves, success might be measured in terms of “penetration” more than in terms of individual converts.¹ (Indeed, a 1929 issue of the *Japanese Christian Quarterly* took as its theme “Penetration and Conversion.”)² The striking photo shows five young men with the caption “Our ex-priests. The opposition of Buddhist priests is because we are converting them!” which

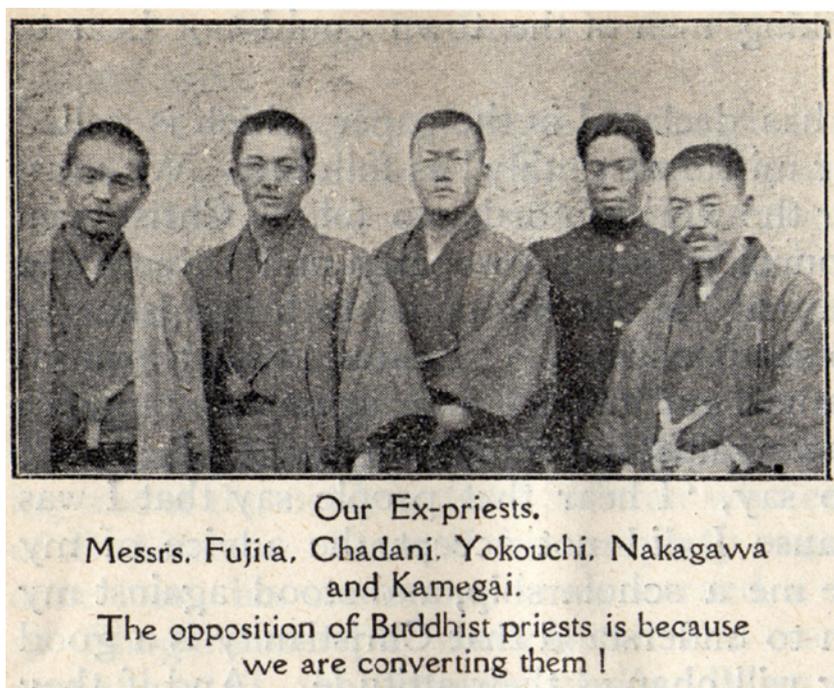


Figure 1. “Our Ex-priests.” From E. V. Yoshida, “Progress of the Buddhist Opposition,” *Omi Mustard Seed* 11, no. 9 (Feb., 1918), p. 257.
Courtesy of the Day Missions Library, Yale Divinity School.

¹ Gregory Vanderbilt, “The Kingdom of God Is Like a Mustard Seed: Evangelizing Modernity between the United States and Japan, 1905–1948” (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 2005).

² “Penetration and Conversion” was the theme of the October 1929 issue of the missionary periodical *Japan Christian Quarterly*.