

# Reiki History & Reiki Myth:

- another look at some elements  
of the 'new' History of Reiki

[Parts 1 & 2]

by

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**REIKI HISTORY AND REIKI MYTH:**  
**Another look at some elements of the 'new' History of Reiki...**  
[Parts 1 & 2]  
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**Part 1**

For long, the facts as we knew them in the West were that Usui-sensei had been a Christian (- and not just a Christian, but a Christian *Minister* - and that the Reiki healing system (while not having any *connection* with Christianity itself) had essentially come into being *as a result of* Usui-sensei's quest to discover how Jesus had performed his healing miracles

However, by the late 1980's / early 1990's, when Reiki was beginning to pick up momentum in its spread throughout the New Age community, the idea of Usui being Christian Minister wasn't all that fashionable.

In fact, for many New Agers, it was a rather *uncomfortable*, even slightly *embarrassing*, idea.

No doubt, for a lot of people, part of the reason they had begun to explore New Age ideas in the first place, was out of a need to find an alternative spirituality - to get away from what they saw as the 'dogmatic control' of a Christian upbringing - and so, to discover that the founder of the Reiki system had been a Christian Minister, well ...

Now as fate would have it, around this period, it would seem that several different individuals had (quite independently of each other) begun to attempt to verify certain elements of the History as it had been handed down to them.

Amongst other lines of enquiry, a few people decided to contact the two Universities mentioned in the History:  
Doshisha University, in Kyoto - where they had been told Usui-sensei had been both a Minister and, in some accounts, University President, and  
the University of Chicago - where Usui-sensei was said to have studied as part of his quest to discover how Jesus had performed his healing miracles.

One of the people who contacted the Universities was the Reiki master, William Rand.

In November 1990, he received a reply from the University of Chicago stating that:  
"...our records do not indicate that Mikao Usui ever attended the University of Chicago"

The following year Rand also contacted Doshisha University, and received a response (December 1991), stating that the name Mikao Usui " never appeared" on the lists of graduate students, nor on the list of faculty and clerical members. Also that "... he was never the president of Doshisha"

Of course this information must have come as quite a shock to many Reiki folk - and we can only imagine the various ways in which people sought to come to terms with these - as some saw it - serious errors in the account of the History of Reiki.

However, it seems that *some* folk - notably those who were not all that comfortable with the whole Christian element of the History in the first place, actually saw these discrepancies as, well, as a 'godsend'.

For these people, this was a great opportunity - a chance to edit things - revise things.

And so, revise they did.

All too swiftly, a "New Authorised" version of the History of Reiki began to take shape.

And in this new version, not only was Usui-sensei not *President* of Doshisha, nor a Minister at the University - now he was not even a Minister *at all*, in fact he was not even a *Christian* at all.

Usui-sensei was now a Buddhist<sup>[1]</sup> - always had been - and if anyone questioned why it had ever been claimed otherwise - well the parroted response was that Takata-sensei had, at best been confused, at worst, made the whole thing up.<sup>[2]</sup>

After all, Buddhism was far more acceptable to many New Agers than Christianity was, and of course, in the History, Usui-sensei was said to had studied in a Zen monastery, and eventually found the 'keys' which would lead to the manifestation of his system of Reiki Healing in Buddhist sutras<sup>[3]</sup>

And gradually, over time, in response to any who would dare to even *innocently* question this particular element of this new revisionist version of Reiki History by raising the topic of 'Usui the Christian' - there began to develop a series of 'stock' replies, including:

"Well, he *couldn't* have been a Christian, could he - he's buried in a Buddhist graveyard" <sup>[4]</sup>

and

"You see, it's *obvious* to anyone who knows even a little about Japanese history that Usui couldn't have been a born a Christian. Christianity had been outlawed for hundreds of years in Japan, and the ban wasn't lifted until Usui was about 8 years old, so there weren't any Japanese Christians when he was born."

and

"Of course we *know* Usui wasn't a Christian - both the 'Gakkai and one of his surviving students - a Buddhist nun called Mariko - have confirmed he was a Buddhist all his life..."

However, even now it is seldom ever pointed out that there is probably less evidence to confirm the existence of either this 'surviving student' or the modern-day Gakkai, than there is to confirm that Saddam Hussein ever had any 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' ...

Also, in the History of Reiki as recounted by Takata-sensei, there was no mention of Usui-sensei having been *born* a Christian - no mention of his early years at all... and for that matter, no mention of him having *died* a Christian either. (Takata did not say Usui was a Christian *all* his life. For example, there is no mention of him returning to his duties as a Christian Minister after receiving the 'Reiki Experience' on Kurama Yama)

And actually, as we will see, there *were* Christians in Japan at the time of Usui-sensei's birth - quite a *lot* of Christians....

Roman Catholicism had been brought to Japan in 1549\*, and for the next half century Christianity thrived - with ever-growing numbers of converts. Some estimates put the number of Christians in Japan by the end of the 16th century to be in the region of 300,000.

However, after the Tokugawa Shogunate seized political control at the very beginning of the 17th century, things began to change.

Partly because it came to be seen as a medium through which 'European Interests' could gain sway over the hearts and minds of the Japanese people, Christianity came to be viewed as a threat to the Shogun's power-base, and a period of ever-increasing levels of suppression ensued.

In time, this led to the Tokugawa government issuing an edict formally banning Japanese people from practicing the Christian faith; and orders were issued exiling foreign missionaries and also many prominent Japanese adherents of the religion.

Rather than leave the country, many of the (European) Roman Catholic priests went into hiding.

Large numbers of the faithful also openly refused to renounce their Christian beliefs.

So they were offered a simple choice - recant, or die. Many recanted.

Many were executed.

In time, seeking to further rid itself of Western influence (and the possible threat of the Europeans gaining too much power in the country) the Shogunate eventually decided to implement a policy of isolationism - expelling not just the *missionaries* but all Europeans, and ending all trade with European nations ( - with the exception of a small amount of strictly controlled trade with the Dutch)

Yet even after this, the Christian faith in Japan was by no means eradicated.

Historians believe that somewhere in the region of 150,000 Japanese Christians outwardly renounced their beliefs, yet continued to practice their faith, worshipping in secret.

And for more than two centuries, generations of these - as they were later named: *senpuku kirishitan* ("underground Christians") - often living in isolated, self-contained rural communities - would continue to worship in secret, knowing that if they were discovered, they would be executed.

And during this period, it is estimated that somewhere in the region of 40,000 were discovered and executed...

Over the centuries, these underground Christians had been without prayer books, Holy Scriptures or any of the identifying paraphernalia and formal rituals of the Church - all of which had, of necessity, been given up to lessen the chance of discovery.

Outwardly, the *senpuku kirishitan* had had to present an appearance of being adherents of Buddhism or Shinto (the distinguishing lines between these two faiths were often very blurred).

Theirs had become a religion of oral transmission, and down through the years, their faith had undergone varying degrees of transformation, absorbing as it had, various understandings and attitudes drawn from Buddhism, formal Shinto practice, and also from local folk beliefs.

In many ways, the religion of the *senpuku kirishitan* had evolved into what could best be described as a form of 'Folk Christianity'.

In 1853, a small fleet of US warships had arrived at Uraga harbour at the entrance of Edo Bay, demanding that Japan open its ports to full trade with the West.

As a result of centuries of self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world, Japan's military forces had not evolved technologically, and thus, realising its inability to effectively defend itself - should the US decide to be more 'forceful' in pursuing its demands - the Shogunate had little option but to agree; and by 1854 Japan had signed friendship treaties with not only the US, but also the UK, France, Russia and the Netherlands.

At the time of Usui-sensei's birth in 1865, Christianity was indeed still outlawed in Japan (at least, that is, for the Japanese *themselves*. The re-opening of the Japanese ports for foreign trade had led to an influx of Roman Catholic and other Christian missionaries - ostensibly to minister to the ever-growing number of Westerners living in the many newly-established foreign enclaves).

While banned from propagating Christianity amongst the Japanese people, it seems that the various missions were allowed to provide medical treatment, and carry out educational work.

Even *after* the fall of the Shogunate, and the establishment of the Meiji government (1868), it was still illegal for Japanese Citizens to practice Christianity. (About 3,000 Japanese Christians were arrested during the first two to three years of the Meiji era)

Yet things were about to change.

Under pressure (economic and otherwise) from the US and other western nations, the Meiji government was forced to 're-think' its religious policy, and eventually formally lifted the ban on Christianity in 1873.

While several of the *senpuku kirishitan* had already cautiously revealed their existence to greatly-surprised Roman Catholic missionaries *prior* to 1873, with the lifting of the ban they were now free to openly to receive fresh instruction and re-education in the catechism and the formal rites of the Roman Church (from which, over their 200+years of seclusion, their practice had to varying degrees strayed).

And while many *senpuku kirishitan* did indeed happily return to Catholicism, many of these previously 'underground' Christians chose not to - preferring to hold fast to beliefs and traditions (including ancestor-worship<sup>[5]</sup>) which had developed over perilous centuries of evading discovery by the authorities.

## Part 2

That Usui-sensei's family were *senpuku kirishitan* is of course not beyond the bounds of possibility<sup>[6]</sup>

However it is perhaps more likely that Usui-sensei, if he was a Christian, became one at a time some years after the ban on Christianity had been lifted - perhaps during his teens or early adulthood.

Usui-sensei obviously had an enquiring mind, a great appetite for learning - and, it seems had embarked on a quest for new meaning in his life. We are told that he had studied widely, gaining amongst other things a good understanding of history, divination, incantation, various religions (including Buddhism, and Shinto), medicine, physiognomy and psychology, etc., and it is quite likely that his studies would have also included western Philosophy and Christianity - both of which had become very popular areas of study with the Japanese.

And if Usui-sensei had 'experimented' with Christianity (just as today many *Western* 'seekers' experiment with *Eastern* faiths and philosophies, including Hinduism, Sufism, Taoism, and various sects or denominations of Buddhism) well there were certainly a considerable number of different of Christian denominations to choose from...

As mentioned, with the reopening of Japan's ports to western trade, as well as the Roman Catholics, missionaries from numerous different denominations had also begun to establish a presence in the country

Amongst the different Protestant denominations eager to bring their own version of Christianity to the Japanese people were:  
Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Dutch Reformists.

By 1872, the first Japanese Protestant church, the Nihon Kirisuto, had been established.

The same year had also seen the establishment of a Japanese branch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

And over time, numerous Christian schools - some boys-only, some girls-only, some co-educational, sprang up.

There were also several Christian Academies and Seminaries of various denominations, and in time, several Christian Universities would also be created.

At its core, the Meiji Restoration was all about modernisation, westernisation, and industrialisation - about the Great Japanese nation, crippled by endless years of isolationist policy - seeking to catch up with the rest of the world.

Whereas, in the past, the Tokagawa government had sought to *rid* Japan of western influences, the Meiji government now sought to *embrace* the West and all it had to offer in terms of science, technology, philosophy, etc, etc

The Japanese government began hiring dozens of western advisors with expertise in areas of economics, politics, education, industry, etc. And, over time Japan, adopted the western calendar, western educational formats, a western-style political systems (including the adoption of a Constitution), and so on.

In fact, so strong was the drive towards westernisation that several influential people including Mori Arinori and Saionji Kimmochi<sup>[7]</sup> even advocated making English the new language of the modern Japanese nation.

Many Japanese citizens adopted western modes of dress, (including top hats and walking canes), and the Japanese appetite for all things western became almost insatiable.

Many wealthy Japanese families sent their children overseas to get a western education (something encouraged by the Meiji, and later, Taisho governments as part of Japans modernisation-process)

However, certainly in the first half of the Meiji era, the majority of educational establishments set up within Japan itself were funded and run by Christian Missionaries

With the Japanese hungry to acquire western learning, the various Christian missions took full advantage of the situation - any opportunity to propagate their faith.

Providing education was an ideal means of gaining converts.

During the Meiji and early Taisho eras, many Japanese converted to Christianity.

While it is important to point out that the majority were *genuinely* seeking a new moral, ethical, and philosophical 'code' more in keeping with the Meiji eras drive

towards modernisation and Internationalism, it must be stated that there were *also* those who viewed Christianity with a purely *pragmatic eye* - as simply means to an end - the *primary* reason for conversion being in order to procure a good comprehensive western-style education. After all, a good education meant good prospects.

And so, with Christian missionary establishments providing access to western educational formats, it was not that uncommon for families to convert to Christianity (even if only nominally so), in the hope that a western-style education would help their children secure positions in either the government or the military

The early years of the Meiji era had brought great upheaval to the structure of Japanese society - most notably to lives of the old nobility: the Samurai

In 1871 the Samurai had been banned from carrying swords. They had lost most of their power and privilege, and their old feudal way of life was being systematically swept away.

During the early part of the Meiji era, a great many people from old Samurai (i.e. Buddhist) families converted to Christianity.<sup>[8]</sup>

Again, it is important to be clear that while, for some, this was no doubt a purely pragmatic move, probably the majority of converts *were* genuinely drawn to Christianity seeking a new 'way' - searching for something to provide a new sense of meaning in their rapidly changing lives.

In fact, the first Japanese person to have been ordained as a Protestant minister had been of Samurai stock.

However, he had been drawn to the Christian faith in the years immediately *preceding* the Meiji restoration - at a time when the Samurai were still powerful - and Christianity was still banned ...

In the years immediately following the reopening of Japanese ports to foreign trade, it was still very difficult for Japanese citizens to get permission to leave the country, yet in 1864, a 21 year old samurai named *Nijijima Jou* (1843-1890) secretly found passage on a ship to the U.S. (via China) with the intent of studying Christianity and science

Settling in Massachusetts, he attended Amherst College and Andover Theological Seminary; eventually, in 1874, becoming ordained as a Protestant minister.

However, at the time, had you contacted either Amherst College or the Andover Seminary enquiring as to whether or not an individual named *Nijijima Jou* had attended their establishment, you may well have received an answer something along the lines of the one William Rand received from the University of Chicago, concerning Mikao Usui (see above)

i.e., that their records did not indicate that *Nijijima Jou* ever attended the establishment.

And the reason for this?



In the US, *Nijima Jou*, had adopted the name Joseph Hardy Neesima. (*Jou* became Joe became Joseph, *Nijima* became Neesima, and as to the middle name, Hardy, this was the surname of the people who sponsored his stay in the US)

And in taking a westernised name, *Nijima Jou* / Joseph Hardy Neesima could perhaps be seen to have set a precedent.

For, over the years it became a not too uncommon practice amongst Japanese students travelling to western countries to adopt western names (or at very least, westernised versions of their original Japanese names)<sup>[9]</sup>

[Which begs the question: Could it be that when Usui-sensei went to the US<sup>[10]</sup> he had *also* adopted this practice?<sup>[11]</sup> ]

For some, like Neesima, the westernised name was a baptismal one<sup>[12]</sup> - an outward sign of the individual's Christian faith<sup>[13]</sup> , for others, taking a western name was simply part of their immersion in western culture, part of their desire to 'fit in'.

On returning home, *some* kept their western names (a statement of their westernisation/modernisation), *some* did not.

*Nijima Jou*, on returning to Japan in 1874, retained the westernised name Joseph Hardy Neesima.

In 1875, he opened his own *Eigakko* (Academy) in Kyoto.

Initially having only eight students, Neesima's academy steadily grew into an important centre for education, and by 1920, had evolved into a full-blown, private *Daigaku* (University) - yet it still bore its original name: Doshisha.

**[Part 3 of "Reiki History & Reiki Myth" will be included in a future version of this e-book]**

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## NOTES

[1] Though, as to which specific denomination of Buddhist -well even now in 2008 there is still no clear consensus on this.

[2] Perhaps it was also during this period that the poorly thought-out notion that Takata-sensei had manufactured the Christian connection to make Reiki more approachable to westerners first manifested itself?

[3] It is perhaps interesting to note how some elements of the History were kept intact, while others were ditched.

[4] Of course the same reasoning could possibly also be used to argue that Usui-sensei wasn't a Tendai Buddhist (as has been claimed) - afterall, he is buried in a Jodo Shin Buddhist cemetery...

[5] Most importantly, those ancestors who had been martyred for their Faith.

[6] Though I feel it is important to point out that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that they were.

[7] Both Mori Arinori (1847-1889) and Saionji Kimmochi (1849-1940) served as Japanese Minister of Education. Mori Arinori was appointed to the position in 1885, Saionji Kimmochi in 1894.

[8] It has been suggested that Usui-sensei was of Samurai ancestry (Chiba clan)

[9] Even today, some Japanese people working abroad choose to adopt English names (though nowadays, usually only first names), in an effort to fit in. Commonly the adopted name will have the same initial sound as their Japanese names; for example, Tomita might simply be shortened to Tom or become Thomas, Kenichi might become Ken or Kenneth. Yoshio - Josh or Joshua  
- and theoretically, Mikao might become Mike or Michael...

[10] We know from the inscription on the Memorial stone at Usui-sensei's grave that he went to the US.

[11] Note the careful phrasing of the reply received by William Rand - "...our records do not indicate that Mikao Usui ever attended the University of Chicago" - as opposed to a clear "Mikao Usui definitely did not attend the University of Chicago" or similar phrasing.

[12] Even the senpuku kirishitan - the 'underground Christians' - had taken ( -albeit secretly -) western baptismal names

[13] In much the same way that many westerners, on becoming a (for example, Tendai) Buddhist, may not simply receive a Japanese Buddhist name in addition to their birth-name, but as a sign of their new-found faith, choose to actually replace their birth-name their newly acquired Buddhist one

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Addendum 2009:

\*When I say that Roman Catholicism came to Japan in 1549, I am speaking about the *official introduction* of Roman Catholicism to Japan. It is known that European Christians had *visited* Japan prior to this date. [In 1543, two Portuguese merchants had arrived in Japan on board a Chinese vessel, however they did not go there with the intention of converting Japanese citizens to their faith.]

There is of course also a *possibility* that quite some time prior to this, Japan may have had contact with *Chinese* Christians, belonging to the so-called 'Nestorian' Church (Nestorian Christianity had come to China somewhere around the early 7th century), however that's another story...

The first Roman Catholic Missionaries to reach Japan were Jesuits. Led by Francis Xavier, they had travelled from the Portuguese colony of Malacca. Arriving at the port of Kagoshima, at the south-western tip of the island of Kyūshū, Xavier chose to come ashore on the day of the Roman Catholic Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (a day which also had additional significance for the Jesuits).

And interestingly, a day which would later have considerable significance for Reiki practitioners. The date was August the 15<sup>th</sup>

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