Chapter 9

Persecutions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

The Kanazawa Persecution

In the early eighteenth century, many samurai under Maeda Tsunanori, governor of the Kaga, Noto and Etchu provinces, converted to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. They did so after attending sermons at Jozai-ji, a branch temple of the Fuji School in present-day Tokyo.

Upon their return to Kanazawa, the capital of Kaga, they propagated their new faith among retainers of the Maeda clan. This is believed to be the beginning of the spread of the Daishonin's teachings in Kanazawa. But because of the restrictions of the parish system, they could not openly convert to the Fuji School and had to conceal their faith from government officials and priests of other temples. Under the government-instituted parish system (see chapter 7 for more information) in Japan, citizens were legally bound for life to the temple of their parents and ancestors.

In 1726, Ryomyo, a priest of Jiun-ji, a Nichiren School temple, converted to the Fuji School while traveling to further his studies of the Daishonin's Buddhism. He then entered the school's Hosokusa Seminary. Ryomyo's conversion,

however, became an issue in local religious circles. There was no branch temple of the Fuji School in the Kaga areas governed by the Maeda family, so converts had no temple with which to register.

Furthermore, priests from the Minobu branch of the Nichiren School reported to the provincial authorities that the Fuji School was very similar to the Fuju-fuse branch, which had already been outlawed by the government. The Fuju-fuse School had a policy of not making or accepting contributions to or from those it regarded as heretics, which was highly offensive to the authorities. As a result, the Maeda clan issued an edict that outlawed the Fuji School as well, concerned that its apparent similarity to the outlawed Fuju-fuse School would cause confusion within local parishes (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, p. 278).

The Daishonin explains the inevitable persecution that those who propagate his Buddhism will face, stating: "If you propagate it, devils will arise without fail. If they did not, there would be no way of knowing that this is the correct teaching" (WND, 501). For the believers in Kanazawa, it came in the form of suppression by their local government.

In 1727, twenty-eighth high priest Nissho sent a request to the governor asking for a permit to build a temple in the area to support the growing number of believers. But Nissho's request was denied. In the petition, Nissho mentions that "those who took faith for the last few decades number several thousand" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, p. 293). In spite of the persecution befalling them, there were a substantial number of believers in the Kanazawa area.

Nissho could have appealed the governor's decision to the shogunate government, but decided against it. Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest, speculated as to why Nissho

did not file an appeal and persist in the efforts to construct a temple in the area. Nissho, he points out, probably was "concerned about bringing danger to his own temple" as well as "the possibility of believers in Kanazawa being subjected to more severe punishment" (ibid., vol. 9, p. 291).

While the head temple failed to extend any further support, believers in Kanazawa continued to practice and spread the Daishonin's Buddhism. Despite the ban issued by the authorities, believers did organize themselves. Historical records indicate that there were at least thirteen lay organizations of the Fuji School in the area. Those believers propagated the Daishonin's teaching and encouraged one another without any support from the priesthood. They also exerted themselves in Buddhist study. About four hundred books on Buddhism copied by the believers in Kanazawa still exist. In June 1749, when Taiseki-ji built its Five-Storied Pagoda, Kanazawa members donated a large sum of money —more than three hundred *ryo* (a monetary unit in thirteenth-century Japan)—to the priesthood, despite having been left to fend for themselves.

Toward the end of 1770, the ruling Maeda family again issued a ban on the religious practice of Taiseki-ji and the Fuji School. At that time, seven or eight leading believers, including Nishida Joemon and Takeuchi Hachiemon, were sentenced to various punishments. Most of them were low-ranking samurai serving the Maeda family and were eventually pardoned three years later.

But Joemon, who had exerted himself in propagation for thirty years and had helped form two lay organizations, died of an illness while serving his sentence. In March 1786, Hachiemon was again summoned by the provincial officials, who demanded that he renounce his faith. When he refused

to do so, he was imprisoned and died in prison on April 29 of the same year. Records show that several hundred fellow practitioners attended his funeral to honor a life dedicated to the spread of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

There were about twelve thousand people in Kanazawa and surrounding areas practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism. The office of religious affairs, which enforced the parish system, was clearly alarmed by the rapid growth of the Fuji School. In July 1786, seven leading believers, including Nakamura Kohei, were arrested and questioned by the provincial government. Nakamura Kohei, representing the believers, responded to government officials during the examination. He was pressured to reveal the names of those who practiced with the Fuji School but refused, stating: "Out of respect for the government system, I wish to remain silent [about the outlawed faith]. Since I do not know who practices the faith, it would be difficult to tell" (ibid., vol. 9, p. 305). He did explain how he had taken faith in the Daishonin's teachings and how he believed his faith helped him serve his lord.

Nakamura Kohei was summoned several more times after that, but he refused to give up his faith. He went so far as to submit a letter of remonstration proclaiming that "the faith of the Taiseki-ji School is in accord with the time and conditions of the Latter Day of the Law" and that "if the true object of devotion is abandoned and thus the True Law becomes extinct, the [Maeda] family would not prosper" (*The Records of the Kanazawa Persecution*, p. 87). On September 26, 1786, Nakamura Kohei was imprisoned. Later, on December 23, he was pardoned and returned to work. This was the last recorded incident of the Kanazawa Persecution.

The propagation efforts of ordinary people brought about the Kanazawa Persecution. In its course, five believers

were imprisoned, with one of them dying in confinement; fourteen were placed under house arrest; and many were harshly interrogated. The priesthood at Taiseki-ji, on the other hand, submitted one petition to build a branch temple in the Kanazawa area and thereafter remained silent. Eventually the enthusiasm of Kanazawa believers died down, and by the time Taiseki-ji finally established a temple nearly one hundred years later in November 1879, only eighty households remained. Only 150 people attended the opening.

The Ina Persecution

In May 1784, believers in Ina, Shinano province, came under government persecution. Jokura Mozaemon was a farmer in Koide Village in Ina. Although his family had for generations belonged to Jorin-ji, a Zen temple, he eventually chose to practice at Jinmyo-ji, a Nichiren School temple. In 1763, when he was nineteen, he determined to visit one thousand temples related to Nichiren Buddhism. During this trip, Mozaemon encountered the correct teaching of the Daishonin at Taiseki-ji and converted to the Fuji School. Upon his return to Ina, he began to spread the Daishonin's teaching based on this school. It was a time of many natural disasters, and people were receptive to the Daishonin's teachings.

As more people began to practice, Mozaemon built a small hall on his estate for his fellow believers to gather and chant daimoku. Alarmed by the increasing number of Fuji School believers, three temples—Kokyu-ji and Jorin-ji of the Soto branch of the Zen School and Jinmyo-ji of another Nichiren school—lodged a complaint with the local government. In response, the office of religious affairs of the provincial government sent out some thirty men to arrest

three leading believers—Mozaemon, Saheiji and Tozaemon.

They were imprisoned on the suspicion of being Christians. Apparently the priests had complained to the provincial government that they were Christians—the practice of Christianity being illegal. For three days the authorities attempted to torture a confession out of Mozaemon. He was forced to kneel on sharp wooden planks, his head was submerged in water nearly to the point of drowning, and he was forced to drink an excessive amount of water. It is recorded that "No matter how severely he was tortured, he continued to chant daimoku as long as he could breathe" (*Essential Writings of the Fuji School*, vol. 9, p. 410). Since the government could not find any evidence that he practiced Christianity, Mozaemon escaped the death sentence. But he and his family had their house and fields confiscated and were exiled from the village. Some other believers were placed under house arrest. The priests of the three temples were also placed under house arrest for lodging a false complaint.

Twenty-three years later, Mozaemon was pardoned and returned to Ina. For the next one hundred-some years, the believers of Ina continued to gather to chant daimoku and study the Daishonin's writings. Unlike the Kanazawa Persecution of believers in the samurai class, the Ina Persecution was prompted by the propagation efforts of farmers and peasants. Meanwhile, the priesthood at Taiseki-ji remained silent throughout the affair.

The Owari Persecution

It was ordinary people who first propagated the Daishonin's teachings in Owari province (present-day Aichi Prefecture) as well—particularly in the area around Nagoya. Around 1822, toward the end of the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate, a lay

believer named Nagase Seijuro, from Meguro in Edo (present-day Tokyo), went to Owari province to spread the Daishonin's teaching even though there was no Fuji School temple there.

When he was young, Seijuro was a believer of the Minobu branch of the Nichiren School. Later he converted to Taiseki-ji. He often traveled from northeastern Honshu (Japan's main island) to the Owari area in central Honshu to spread the Daishonin's teaching. He also excelled in religious debate. Around 1830, he won a debate with an influential believer of the Minobu branch. (This debate is known as the Sunamura Debate.)

Takasaki Tayo, a woman who had been converted by Seijuro, led propagation efforts in the Owari area. She established a women's lay organization. Her son Takasaki Katsuji, who was a retainer of the ruling Tokugawa family of Owari province, also exerted himself in propagation and established a lay organization. With these efforts, the number of believers in the Owari area increased dramatically.

Seijuro also went to the Hokuzai area of Nagoya (present-day Komaki, Inuyama and Kasugai cities) to spread the Daishonin's teaching. In this area, Funabashi Gizaemon, Hiramatsu Masuemon, Kimata Ukyo and Iwata Rizo led the propagation campaign. They were all ordinary citizens—farmers and merchants—but they were well educated. Since they had been believers of a Nichiren School, they had some foundation in Buddhist study. Once they were awakened to the orthodox teachings of the Fuji School, they became a driving force behind propagation in their area.

They also challenged priests and lay believers of the various Nichiren schools, such as the Minobu branch, the Kenpon Hokke branch and the Eight Chapters branch, in religious debate and repeatedly defeated them. This caused

those various Nichiren schools to lodge complaints with the provincial government's office of religious affairs. Such complaints prompted the local government to persecute the believers in Owari four times over a fifty-year period.

In 1825 and 1826, local officials raided believers' homes in the Hokuzai area of Nagoya and confiscated the Gohonzon. In those raids, believers were beaten and kicked. Funabashi Gizaemon was the main target of the raids.

In the fall of 1837, after an initial series of raids, believers became cautious and hid their Gohonzon behind statues of the Buddha in their altars. But Hiramatsu Masuemon had his Buddhist altar examined by local officials and was immediately arrested. He was taken to the office of religious affairs and interrogated for an extended period. Iwata Rizo and Kimata Ukyo experienced similar treatment. These incidents took place repeatedly until the spring of the following year.

For eight years, from 1847 to 1854, persecutions intensified. Each year Fuji School believers suffered some form of harassment from the provincial government. In February 1848, Kimata Ukyo completely refuted Chijo-in, a Myoraku-ji priest, in a religious debate. Incensed, Chijo-in demanded that Kimata Ukyo and his son Sakyo submit a letter of apology. The priest also attempted to have Ukyo's job at a local Shinto shrine taken away.

On August 25 of the same year, Kimata Ukyo was summoned to Hon'en-ji by someone claiming to act on the authority of the office of religious affairs and was detained there. On August 29, Kimata, along with Iwata Rizo and Zen'noemon, was transported to the office of religious affairs, escorted by eighty-some Minobu priests and lay believers. There they were flogged, beaten and tortured by local officials.

On September 9, Zen'noemon was released and returned

to his village, sick and beaten almost to death. The government regarded Ukyo and Rizo as ringleaders and detained them for further interrogation. Meanwhile, Hiramatsu Masuemon petitioned a steward of the ruling family. The steward was moved by the plight of these believers and issued a warning to the office of religious affairs. As a result, on September 27, Ukyo was released, and on October 4, Rizo returned to his village. Both had to be carried home in a litter. On October 22 and 23, Masuemon was summoned and questioned by local officials.

Masuemon, Rizo and Ukyo then had a religious debate with high-ranking priests of the officially sanctioned temples of the various Nichiren schools. These schools worked closely with the office of religious affairs. The debate was held in three sessions—October 25, November 2 and November 10—under the supervision of the office of religious affairs.

Through this debate the provincial government sought to convert the leading believers of the Fuji School to other Nichiren schools in the area. However, the lay believers led by Rizo refuted the priests' arguments and pointed out their errors one by one. In many instances, the priests were unable to respond. Furthermore, to the embarrassment of the debating priests, some priests in the audience acknowledged the points argued by Rizo and others.

Their arguments compelled the priests to accept the two transfer documents that validate Nikko Shonin as the legitimate successor of the Daishonin and confirmed the slanderous nature of actions by Hakiri Sanenaga, the steward of Minobu, which prompted Nikko Shonin to leave the area. Through the debate, known as the Owari Debate, the lay believers of the Fuji School affirmed the orthodoxy of the Daishonin's Buddhism.

Regarding the Owari Debate, Nichiko Hori writes: "The debate ended in triumph for the lay believers of the Fuji School and in miserable defeat for the officially sanctioned temples. The fact that the positions of priests as teachers and lay believers as students were completely reversed brought public honor to the three [lay believers] and indelible disgrace to the seven temples. Furthermore, [at the debate] government officials heard that the faith of the Fuji School is not erroneous but is the orthodox and correct teaching among all Nichiren schools" (*History of the Owari Persecution*, p. 85).

After the Owari Debate, Rizo and Kimata Sakyo, the son of Ukyo, led propagation efforts. In 1854, Sakyo refuted the priests of Gyokuzen-ji concerning the relative merits of the theoretical teaching (or first half) of the Lotus Sutra and its essential teaching (or latter half). After Sakyo's victory, more people took faith in the Fuji School throughout the Owari area.

As propagation progressed, another persecution occurred in 1858 in the Komeno area of Owari province. On November 8, about thirty villagers were arrested. Three of them were severely tortured. The local government continued to harass Fuji School believers in Owari province until 1876, when the new Meiji government issued an edict ensuring religious freedom.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ordinary people of Kanazawa, Ina and Owari awakened to the Daishonin's Buddhism and enthusiastically spread their faith. Threatened by the rapid increase in the number of believers, influential priests of other schools instigated persecution by local officials. Despite this, many believers courageously continued their faith.

On the other hand, the priesthood at Taiseki-ji, fearful of

persecution and concerned about self-preservation, remained silent and kept its distance from the laity. While approximately a hundred believers were subjected to persecution for their efforts to spread the Daishonin's Buddhism during the Edo period (1603–1867), only two priests in the remote Sendai area were persecuted for propagation. In view of the above events under the parish system instituted in this period, it is evident that the priesthood at Taiseki-ji had grown more concerned about its own survival than the spread of the Daishonin's teaching.