

Soka Gakkai in Italy: Success and Controversies

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ABSTRACT: Italy is the Western country with the highest percentage of Soka Gakkai members. This success needs to be explained. In its first part, the article discusses the history of Soka Gakkai in Italy, from the arrival of the first Japanese pioneers to the phenomenal expansion in the 21st century. It also mentions some internal problems, the relationship with the Italian authorities, and the opposition by disgruntled ex-members. In the second part, possible reasons for the success are examined through a comparison with another Japanese movement that managed to establish a presence in Italy (although a smaller one), Sūkyō Mahikari. Unlike Sūkyō Mahikari, Soka Gakkai proposed a humanistic form of religion presented as fully compatible with modern science, and succeeded in “de-Japanizing” its spiritual message, persuading Italian devotees that it was not “Japanese” but universal.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Italy, Buddhism in Italy, Japanese religious movements, Japanese religious movements in Italy.

Introduction

Soka Gakkai is the fastest-growing Buddhist movement in the world. The history and reasons of this growth have been investigated in Japan (McLaughlin 2019), as well as in the United Kingdom (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994; Dobbelaere 1995), Quebec (Metraux 1997), and the United States (Dator 1969; Hurst 1992; Snow 1993; Hammond and Machacek 1999; for early studies of Soka Gakkai, see also White 1970; Metraux 1988; Machacek and Wilson 2000; Seager 2006). Few, however, have discussed how important has been the growth of Soka Gakkai in Italy, a country where religious minorities are all comparatively small.

In Italy, Soka Gakkai as of September 2019 has 92,769 members, or 0,15% of the total population. It is the largest such percentage in the West for Soka Gakkai, which is also the largest non-Christian group among Italian citizens (figures and historical data derive from interviews with leaders and early members of Soka Gakkai in Italy conducted in 2018 and 2019; see also CESNUR 2019).

Members	Countries
Below 300	Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Finland, Norway, Greece, Iceland
300–600	Poland, Russia, Ireland, Sweden
600–2,000	Portugal, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, The Netherlands
2,000–8,000	Spain, Germany
8,000–20,000	United Kingdom
20,000–30,000	France
More than 30,000	Italy

Table 1. Soka Gakkai members in Europe.

I will try to explain why this rather phenomenal success occurred by first examining the history of Soka Gakkai in Italy, then analyzing it through the lenses of sociological theories of growth and mainstreaming of religions.

Soka Gakkai in Italy: A Short History

The origins of Soka Gakkai in Italy date back to the year 1961. Sadao Yamazaki, a Japanese member who lived in Rome, was appointed as “correspondent from Italy.” The “Italian Sector” was officially established in 1963, when Soka Gakkai President, Daisaku Ikeda, visited Italy for the second time.

Yamazaki and his wife were soon joined by Ms. Toshiko Nakajima, who was studying in Italy, and in 1965 by her brother, Mr. Tamotsu Nakajima. In 1966, Amalia “Dadina” Miglionico (1927–2002) was the first Italian to receive the Gohonzon, i.e. the sacred scroll to which devotional chanting is directed in Nichiren Buddhism as practiced by Soka Gakkai.



Figure 1. Ikeda in Rome in 1963. Sadao Yamazaki is on the left, with a camera.

In 1969, Mr. Mitsuhiro Kaneda and his wife, Kimiko, also moved to Italy. Subsequently, Mr. Tadayasu Kanzaki (1943–2008: Violi 2014) moved to Bergamo, thus completing the number of the early pioneers of Soka Gakkai in Italy.

In 1970, Kaneda became the leader of a newly established “Italian Chapter.” In 1975, two American jazz musicians who were members of Soka Gakkai, Karl Potter (1950–2013) and Marvin Smith, also came to Italy and started spreading their religion among their students. A third jazz musician followed, Lawrence Dinwiddie (1950–1999).

Slowly, the number of Italian members started growing. In November 1976, the first Italian national gathering was organized in Poppiano (Florence), with sixty Italian members in attendance.



Figure 2. The first Italian gathering, Poppiano 1976.

The first summer course was held in Bardonecchia (Turin) in August 1979. Dadina Miglionico and Matsuhiko Kaneda were among those lecturing.



Figure 3. Dadina Miglionico lecturing in Bardonecchia.

A significant growth started with a new visit of President Ikeda to Italy in 1981. The visit inspired the creation, in February 1982, of a monthly magazine, *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* (The New Renaissance). In 1984, the first Italian center was

opened in Florence. In April 1986, the cornerstone was laid for the national cultural center at the Villa di Bellagio, Florence, whose construction was completed in May 1987.

Year	Men	Women	Young Men	Young Women	TOTAL
2003	7,229	15,020	3,526	6,101	31,876
2004	7,740	16,355	3,778	6,655	34,528
2005	8,927	19,062	4,370	7,747	40,106
2006	9,768	21,256	4,494	8,251	43,769
2007	10,596	23,315	4,558	8,556	47,025
2008	11,906	26,028	4,057	7,950	49,941
2009	12,630	27,914	4,140	8,342	53,026
2010	13,403	29,984	4,273	8,594	56,254
2011	14,263	32,162	4,561	9,118	60,104
2012	15,830	35,769	4,235	8,789	64,623
2013	17,093	38,990	4,414	8,922	69,419
2014	18,130	42,166	4,510	8,850	73,656
2015	19,231	45,218	4,764	9,477	78,690
2016	20,733	49,501	4,514	8,809	83,557
2017	21,550	52,043	4,833	9,323	87,749
2018	22,220	54,163	5,065	9,805	91,253
2019 (Sep.)	22,584	55,220	5,084	9,881	92,769

Table 1. Members of Soka Gakkai in Italy (source: Zoccatelli 2015, updated 2019).

A phenomenal expansion followed from the 1990s on. Italian members were 13,000 in 1993, 21,000 in 2000, 40,000 in 2005, 56,000 in 2010, 78,000 in 2015, and more than 92,000 in 2019. Celebrities also joined, including football star Roberto Baggio, actress Sabina Guzzanti, and singer Carmen Consoli.

In 1981, the musical association Min-On, established by President Ikeda, brought a troupe from Milan's La Scala to Japan. In 1984, the Fuji Museum, also founded by Ikeda, exhibited in Japan more than 900 Greek-era archeological pieces from Sicily, in co-operation with Sicilian authorities. In 1989 and 1996, the Fuji Museum exhibited medieval and Renaissance treasures from Tuscany.

The co-operation with Tuscany's artistic institution went both ways, and in 1994, an exhibition of Japan's artistic heritage, *Il mondo dei Samurai* (The World of the Samurai), was organized at Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence (Beltramo Ceppi Zevi 1994).

From the mid-1990s, Soka Gakkai became well-known in Italy for its exhibitions about human rights and ecology, and its campaigns against the death penalty and the nuclear weapons. They were visited by hundreds of thousands of Italians of all faiths, and praised by politicians and leaders of several religions.

In 1992–93, sociologist Maria Immacolata Macioti conducted the first academic study of Soka Gakkai in Italy, which led to the publication in 1995 of a special issue of the scholarly journal *La Critica Sociologica* (Macioti 1994–95; Corrao 1994–95; Montemurro 1994–95; Semprini 1994–95a, 1994–95b; Rossi 1994–95; Spirito 1994–95; Ferrarotti 1994–95; Tedeschi 1994–95; Introvigne 1994–95). Macioti also published a book on Soka Gakkai in 1996 (Macioti 1996; see also Macioti 2001).

Other studies and dissertations followed (including Pastorelli 1998–99; Benzoni 1998–99; Mazzoli 2002–3; Falduzzi 2004; Poli 2005–6; Di Martino 2006–7; Barone 2007), and Belgian sociologist Karel Dobbelaere published in Italian in 1998 his book *La Soka Gakkai. Un movimento di laici diventa una religione* (Soka Gakkai: A Laypersons' Movement Becomes a Religion: Dobbelaere 1998). It is significant that such an important text on how Soka Gakkai was evolving was first published in Italy, before being published in English in 2001.

In 2002, Maria Immacolata Macioti blew the whistle on internal problems within Soka Gakkai, and widespread criticism about the management of Kaneda

and his main Italian co-worker, Giovanni Littera (Maciotti 2002). Although the political side of the controversy was over-emphasized by some Italian media and scholars (e.g. Cuocci 2002: see also the answer by Minganti 2002), Kaneda and Littera were accused of favoring conservative political positions and a puritanical approach to moral issues, while a majority of the Italian members could be defined as “liberal” (Scotti 2002; Arduini 2004–5).

In 2002, the crisis was solved by appointing Tamotsu Nakajima as the new general director for Italy. Kaneda and Littera remained in the movement, but without the same leading roles they had before. Most of the members supported the reform, but some manifested their dissent on the Internet, and a small minority joined the tiny but vocal Italian anti-cult movement, which added Soka Gakkai to its lists of “cults.”

Much more important, for the Italian Soka Gakkai, was the Intesa with the Italian government, signed by then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi on June 27, 2015 and confirmed unanimously by the Italian Parliament on June 14, 2016. The Italian Constitution reserves the name “concordat” to the agreement with the Holy See and the Catholic Church, but the “intese” are in fact concordats as well, making the signatories partners of the state.

A visible sign of the mainstreaming of Soka Gakkai was the opening, on October 27, 2014, of the Milan Kaikan, the Ikeda Milan Cultural Center for Peace, which became the largest Buddhist center in Europe. Symbolically, the mainstreaming process had been completed.

Analysis: Why the Success?

I have analyzed elsewhere (Introvigne 2016) the mistake several religious movements made about Italy. They believed that, as a Catholic country, Italy was an unfavorable ground for the missionary activities of other religions. In the 19th century, several new religions (including the Mormons and the Bible Students, later to be called Jehovah’s Witnesses) concentrated their missionary activities in the valleys of Piedmont where the majority of the population was Protestant (Waldensian). Only in the 20th century, they discovered that it was much easier to convert Italian Catholics than Italian Protestants.

Because of the Catholic Church's opposition to the political unification of Italy, decades of anti-Catholic propaganda, and the perception of the Church as an obstacle to the modernization of Italy—all feelings also fueled after World War II by the narrative proposed by the Italian Communist Party, the largest such party in the West—, there was a pool of potential converts to religions other than Catholicism in the country.

Among the educated classes, many in the 19th and early 20th centuries were progressive and pro-unification and, consequently, against the Catholic Church. Both atheism and liberal Protestantism appeared in Italy at that time but met with moderate success only. More important among the elites was the cultural role of Freemasonry and the Theosophical Society. Some Freemasons were atheists, but others, and all Theosophists, were interested in alternative forms of religion, including those coming from the East.

Buddhism and Eastern religions in general, had potential in Italy, particularly among the educated elites (disproportionately represented in Soka Gakkai according to Macioti's 1990s studies: Macioti 1994–95, 166).

This comment raises, however, another question. Several other Eastern groups sent missionaries to Italy. None was as successful as Soka Gakkai. If we do not consider Asian immigrants, the total membership of several hundred Buddhist communities present in Italy barely matches the numbers of Soka Gakkai alone. What distinguishes Soka Gakkai from other Eastern and Buddhist groups?

A good starting point may be a comparison with Sûkyô Mahikari, a non-Buddhist Japanese new religious movement that opened its first center in Italy in 1974. I studied the Italian branch of Sûkyô Mahikari in the late 1990s, and published a book on the movement in 1999 (Introvigne 1999).

Sûkyô Mahikari has been comparatively successful in Italy (6,500 initiations and some 1,500 active members today), but much less than Soka Gakkai. Both movements were founded in Japan, yet their degree of Japan-ness was somewhat different. This is also true for different Japanese Buddhist movements active in Italy, whose adaptation to the West (or lack thereof) may be very much different from Soka Gakkai's (Zoccatelli 2001–2).

Sûkyô Mahikari and Soka Gakkai do have elements in common. Both are joined by many seeking “practical benefits,” i.e. a solution to physical and psychological health problems through ritual (chanting in Soka Gakkai and

“receiving the light” in Sûkyô Mahikari). In both cases, surveys have noted that seeking practical benefits is a Stage I. While some stop at this stage, others become interested in the spiritual teachings, and enter Stage II, where they effectively join the movement (Maciotti 1994–95, 166–67; Dobbelaere 1998).

Both Sûkyô Mahikari (Tebecis 1982) and Soka Gakkai (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 221–22) affirm that their religion is perfectly compatible with modern science, and both have scientists among their members. However, in Sûkyô Mahikari this remains a theoretical statement. Followers are requested to embrace an esoteric worldview derived from Japanese folk religion and implying, for example, that many forms of illness are caused by the influence of the spirits of deceased animals—particularly, foxes and badgers (Davis 1980). Remarkably, and contrary to the prediction of Winston Davis, who studied the movement in Japan in 1980 and declared it impossible to export in the West, Western followers come to firmly believe in these theories (Cornille 1991, 1992; Bernard-Mirtil 1998; Introvigne 1999). On the contrary, Soka Gakkai not only takes great care in explaining how all its core beliefs are compatible with mainstream Western science, but largely succeeds in this endeavor (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 222).

The main difference, however, is cultural. Both Sûkyô Mahikari and Soka Gakkai insist that their teachings are universal rather than Japanese. However, Western members of Sûkyô Mahikari are asked to believe that humans were created in Japan, both Moses and Jesus studied in Japan (and Jesus, having escaped the crucifixion, also came back, died, and was buried there), and Japan has a central eschatological and apocalyptic role in the millenarian future of humanity (Introvigne 1999).

On the contrary, the message of Soka Gakkai has been progressively “de-Japanized.” Of course, it keeps references to Japan. But, compared to Sûkyô Mahikari and other groups, they are but limited and Italian members perceive themselves as devotees of Buddhism, a universal religion, rather than as followers of a “Japanese” movement.

In 1991, Soka Gakkai terminated its relationship with the monastic order Nichiren Shoshu, led by Nikken Shonin (1922–2019: see for a discussion McLaughlin 2019).

This event in fact made possible the “de-Japanization” in Italy and other countries. Certain typical Japanese traits and strictness mostly derived from the monks. Once the lay leadership of Soka Gakkai broke free of the original monastic cage, the possibility of mainstreaming reforms opened, which greatly benefited the Western branches.

What happened to Soka Gakkai in Italy was also the consequence of events in Japan. However, some developments related to the peculiar Italian situation. Sociological theory teaches that, in its beginnings, a religious group has a high level of strictness. Doctrinal and practical rigidity is needed to minimize the number of free riders, and clearly define boundaries with respect to pre-existing religious traditions and society at large (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1992, 1994; Iannaccone, Olson and Stark 1995; Stark and Finke 2000).

As the group evolves, strictness, originally a resource, becomes a burden and limits the growth. Some religious groups keep the original strictness and cease to grow or lose members. Others progressively lower the level of strictness, and move from the margins to the center of the religious scene through a process of “mainstreaming” (Barker 2009). The Mormons, at least in the United States, are a good example of this process. They went from being regarded as a marginal Intermountain West “cult” to seeing an active member (and former bishop) of their church, Mitt Romney, becoming a credible candidate for the U.S. Presidency.

In the case of the Mormons, sociologist Armand Mauss noted that mainstreaming can be perceived by some members as too quick and generate reactions. In this case, a “retrenchment” may happen—or conservative schisms (Mauss 1994). An example of the latter are the “traditionalist” schisms in the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council.

These categories are helpful to interpret the story of Soka Gakkai in Italy. The conservative Kaneda-Littera administration, well beyond petty questions of personality issues and Italian politics, may be seen as an attempt at retrenchment after a process of mainstreaming had developed quickly in the Italian branch. While this process allowed for a spectacular growth, it also generated uneasiness among some of the earlier members.

Retrenchment, in turn, is normally provisional. Mainstreaming, once set in motion, is difficult to stop. In 2002, the change in the Italian leadership and the

reforms set mainstreaming back on track. The growth continued, and remarkable results were achieved such as the Intesa and the building of the large Milan *kaikan*.

Conclusion

The opponents of the 2002 reform never had the strength to organize a “traditionalist” schism, and the Nichiren Shoshu monks only gathered a handful of followers in Italy. However, some of the anti-reformist members joined forces with others who had left Soka Gakkai for different reasons and the Italian tiny anti-cult movement. As a result, alleged “victims” of Soka Gakkai started to be promoted, together with other “victims of the cults,” by media that often ignored both the history of Soka Gakkai and the reasons of internal dissent (see for examples of such literature Del Vecchio and Pitrelli 2011; Piccinni and Gazzanni 2018).

Although annoying for the members, who are insulted by their opponents through the social media and should occasionally face hostile press reports and TV shows, anti-cult criticism of Soka Gakkai in Italy has been so far largely irrelevant. It has not affected the generally good relations of the Italian Soka Gakkai with political authorities and the academia, and the growth of the movement continues unabated.

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