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Volume 4, Issue 4, July–August 2020

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## Contents

### Articles

- 3     “We Can Lift This World While Quarantined”: Scientology and the 2020  
Pandemic  
*Rosita Šorytė*
- 25    The Response of Soka Gakkai to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Personhood,  
Interiority, and a Civil Society in Crisis Mode  
*Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen*
- 49    Deception, New Religious Movements, and Claims for Damages: The  
Case of *H.E. et al. v Seosan Church of Shincheonji et al.*  
*Massimo Introvigne*
- 69    Notes on a Survey Among Religious Studies Scholars  
*PierLuigi Zoccatelli*
- 89    “New New Religions” in North America: The Swaminarayan Family of  
Religions  
*J. Gordon Melton*

## **“We Can Lift This World While Quarantined”: Scientology and the 2020 Pandemic**

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**ABSTRACT:** New religious movements are rarely given credit for their humanitarian work. A case in point is the Church of Scientology during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Opponents used the epidemic as an opportunity to accuse Scientology of spreading conspiracy theories and not respecting anti-virus precautions. In fact, while interpreting the epidemic through L. Ron Hubbard’s theory of “dangerous environments,” Scientologists rapidly adopted state-of-the-art precautions and distributed millions of booklets teaching how to effectively protect hygiene and use masks, gloves, and disinfectants. Scientology’s Volunteer Ministers organized massive humanitarian activities, which were praised by majors and other authorities in several countries. By doing this, they were persuaded that they were not only helping fellow human beings, but moving decisively towards a better, “restored” planet.

**KEYWORDS:** Scientology, Church of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, Religions and COVID-19, Scientology and COVID-19, Scientology Volunteer Ministers.

### *New Religious Movements and Public Health: A “Paradigm of Suspicion”*

The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time for religious minorities. As it often happened in history, they were often scapegoated as irresponsible plague spreaders, from South Korea to India, and from France to Italy. It is certainly true that large religious gatherings during the first weeks of the pandemic may have contributed to spreading the virus. What, however, happened was that religious gatherings that occurred while they were not yet illegal were criticized more harshly than larger political and sport events, and minority religions were attacked while those representing the majority were largely left alone.

One example is France, where the evangelical megachurch Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (Christian Open Door) was accused for an international event that gathered more than 3,000 persons in Mulhouse from February 17 to 21, 2020. After the accusations, Porte Ouverte children were insulted in their schools and church members were beaten in the street. Porte Ouverte admitted the gathering might have contributed to spreading the virus, but claimed it had been “scapegoated,” and noted that before February 21, no restrictions existed in France for public events (Lindell 2020). On February 18, thousands had gathered in the same city of Mulhouse to welcome the visiting French President Emmanuel Macron. Images show that the President’s walkabout, a real “bain de foule,” happened without the use of face masks, distancing, or other precautions (Rousseau 2020).

A parallel phenomenon concerns the good, charitable work done by new religious movements during the pandemic. Either it went unreported, or was dismissed as covert proselytization. Indeed, most religions tried to help fighting COVID-19. The Catholic Church was particularly active in this field, including by opening its private hospitals to those in need, but so were others. New religious and spiritual movements were also part of this effort.

The opponents, and sometimes even scholars (e.g. Cawley 2019, 162–63), claim that charitable organizations operated by new religious movements are “fronts” for converting others under the false pretext of helping. This “paradigm of suspicion” may be criticized on two accounts.

First, it is in turn suspicious that critics do not raise these objections against the Catholic Church, the Church of England, or other mainline religious organizations. It is taken for granted that their activities on behalf of public health and the sick are promoted in good faith, out of a sincere desire for a better world, rather than for self-promotion or proselytization purposes. Only the activities of new religious movements are accused of dissimulating hidden motivations. And very often a vicious circle is created. If new religious movements only spend their time in missionary and religious activities, it is objected that this is typical of “cults,” while “real” religions help fellow human beings. If they engage in charitable, social, or health activities, it is argued that these are only “fronts” for proselytization.

Second, the theory that new religious and spiritual movements organize public health activities mostly for proselytization purposes is open to empirical

disconfirmation. The pandemic itself offered a good opportunity to witness this. By serving free meals (as the Mexican movement La Luz del Mundo did), or distributing face masks, disinfectants, and booklets of practical advice (as many did), new religious movements had a limited, quick interaction with the recipients, certainly not suitable to “convert” them. They also interacted with local authorities and chiefs of the police, bureaucrats whose profiles are normally far away from those of the religious seekers looking for a new religion.

Possibly, the humanitarian activities generate a larger awareness of the work of certain new religions, which may indirectly benefit their religious activities. This is, however, different from using the public health activities for proselytization purposes. Helping others is good public relations, but this is true for mainline as well as for new religions, and does not exclude sincerity. The “paradigm of suspicion” singling out and targeting the public health activities of new religious movements is both unfair and demonstrably false.

It depends on a general, negative image of the new religious movements. Data that do not conform to this image are discarded by most media. A “cult” is by definition “bad.” If it does something good, the inconsistency is resolved by either censoring the news, or interpreting it as hidden proselytization or PR.

For reasons that have been addressed by scholars (e.g. Schulte 2017; Westbrook 2018), and perhaps deserve further investigation, a large coalition of interests has been mobilized against the Church of Scientology, portraying it as the stereotypical “cult.” A significant part of this criticism has been supported, if not created, by interests disturbed by Scientology’s campaigns against psychiatry and the use of psychiatric drugs. The image these attacks have tried to create implies that Scientology is a movement hazardous to public health. When, during the pandemic, Scientology actually *promoted* public health through its initiatives, a problem was created for the opponents, and their reaction was predictably violent.

### *Anti-Cultists, Scientology, and the Pandemic*

Anti-cultists have used against Scientology the same line of attack employed against other new religious movements during the COVID-19 crisis. They claimed that Scientology promoted dangerous “conspiracy theories” about the

pandemic, and that Scientologists endangered public health by not respecting social distancing.

The first argument relies, almost exclusively, on an *Inspector General Network Bulletin* dated March 13, 2020, signed by Scientology leader David Miscavige, and largely publicized by Scientology critics (Miscavige 2020). These critics point out that the bulletin mentioned “the current hysteria,” commenting that “the only thing you can be *certain* of, is that it *is* hysteria,” and at one stage used the expression “planetary bullbait.”

Certainly, the bulletin is primarily an internal document for Scientologists, and includes some rhetoric hype when it affirms that “we have already been doing far more and taking greater preventive action than anybody else, anywhere on Earth—and by a long way.” However, the document should be read in its entirety. On the one hand, it denounces the possibility of chaos, “hysteria,” and provocations (“bullbait.”) Few would deny that these have been real possibilities, and in several countries more than possibilities, during the pandemic, the more so when hysteria has been directed at minorities, such as Muslims in India. On the other hand, the bulletin gives detailed advice and directions. This advice is *not* typical of those negationists and conspiracy theorists who denied the existence of the epidemic. It is both sound and consistent with the instructions given by many governments to their citizens.

In fact, it went even beyond such instructions, as Scientology cancelled all public events. The bulletin specified that,

even if no prohibitions were issued by others, standard LRH Sea Org protocol mandates against a mass gathering in times of illness and disease. *It is prohibited.*

After quoting L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986) as a leader who believed in the motto that “an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure,” the bulletin continued: “Well, how about a ton of *prevention* so as not to require an ounce of *cure*?” Besides cancelling Scientology’s large gatherings, the document detailed practical, common-sense directions:

1. First, real information for you and your immediate environment. Booklets containing this information have been provided for all staff and public—and in any quantity (free of charge) for dissemination to friends, family, and associates.

2. Second, preventing and/or killing whatever this virus is. We have researched and are utilizing the most effective products and applications for eradicating this virus and *any* virus, bacteria, or germ infestation.

This includes massive infusions of airborne ozone, as well as nebulized peroxide and Decon7. (If you haven’t seen these applications, that’s because the operation occurs in unoccupied spaces before you arrive.)

3. Third, medical checks and isolation. It has been longstanding LRH Sea Org policy that ill persons are isolated (segregated in separate quarters and not in contact with the general population). This *IS* how to prevent the spread of illness. Therefore, as a preventative measure, all staff and public have their temperature taken each day before services. This extends to the *requirement* that all staff and public report any feeling of illness *before* entering Org spaces.

4. Finally, masks and gloves are available for all public when they are out and about (gas station, supermarket, etc.) and wish to insulate themselves.

The second argument used against Scientologists is that they did not respect social distancing, thus endangering the population. At times, this criticism simply confirm that some media are incapable of reporting objectively about Scientology. In Florence, Italy, it seems that on March 25, 2020, eight Scientologists gathered in the local church. Depending on what activities they were performing, the gathering might or might not have been against the city’s regulations for the pandemic: indeed, the Scientologists might have had legitimate reasons to meet (R.C. 2020). However, the subtitle of a local newspaper mentioned that “the police raided a clandestine summit of Scientologists” (*Firenze Today* 2020), with a language more often used for the mafia than for peaceful meetings of law-abiding citizens.

In Clearwater, where Scientology has its Flag base, a recently elected city councilor particularly hostile to the church, Mark Bunker, spread accusations by anti-cultists that Scientologists were not respecting health rules in their premises, and instigated an unannounced police inspection. As reported by local media, the initiative backfired spectacularly.

On Tuesday [March 31], Police Chief Dan Slaughter showed up to Scientology’s Fort Harrison Hotel unannounced to inspect the buildings and ensure Scientology was complying with measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Over a 30-minute tour of the church’s Fort Harrison Hotel and its Flag Building, Slaughter said he observed multiple locations with surgical masks, gloves and sanitizer; no groups congregating in common areas; a closed hotel pool; and employees standing six feet apart while waiting in line in dining areas.



Slaughter also said he observed buses on Monday and Tuesday occupied with less than 15 people.

“My goal was to get this resolved, whether it was a problem or not,” Slaughter said. “I think they are doing a pretty darn good job in this particular scenario based on what I saw” (McManus 2020).

### *Scientology Volunteer Ministers and the Epidemic*

Scientology’s immediate reaction to the epidemic was to implement a policy of sanitization and control in its own premises throughout the world, and to switch meetings from in-person to online. In Los Angeles, it reported that, due to the early implementation of preventive measures, no member of the large Scientology staff in the city was infected (Pierce 2020). Soon, however, Scientology started devising ways to help the communities where its Volunteer Ministers were present. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard describes the Volunteer Ministers as “the best-known charity of the Church because of its ministers with their bright yellow jackets highly visible in disaster zones” (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 87). She has also commented on anti-cult criticism that.

with their yellow jackets the Scientologist rescue teams made sure to be far more visible on photos or on television than other teams and to use their presence as a proselytizing tool. Scientologists will say the bright color is to signal to victims or other helpers where they are for extra support. Indeed, all disaster relief volunteers do wear specific colors or logos in order to be located easily by victims or by the other members of their groups or by coordinators, since each team is specialized in one form of relief. In any case, the issue betrays the age-old ambiguity of humanitarian aid, inextricably altruistic and *pro domo* (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 88).

Obviously, humanitarian aid always benefits the image of those providing it. When it is from Scientology, however, we hear a criticism not normally directed at Catholic or other organizations that operate very much in the same way. Rigal-Cellard concludes that,

The volunteer ministers of the Church of Scientology are then just another cog in the never ending conflicts around the real motivations of humanitarian aid that, like any other social activity, will be viewed in diametrically divergent ways according to one’s relation to the group (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 89).

The 2020 pandemic itself witnessed again this debate, with respect not only to NGOs or religions, but also to governments. When China, Russia, or the United

States, while all affected themselves by the epidemic, competed in offering masks, field hospitals, and other aid to several countries, a debate was generated whether theirs was a genuine humanitarian enterprise or a form of “mask diplomacy,” or “soft power” in disguise.

Scientology volunteers operated even before, but the program was organized in its present form after Scientologists offered their help in New York after 9/11. Volunteer Ministers were a recognizable presence, *inter alia*, after the Haiti earthquake of 2010 and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico in 2017.

How international and effective was the Volunteer Ministers network was demonstrated during the 2020 pandemic. Not all activities were reported by local media, but throughout the world Scientologists mobilized to help in several different ways. In Nashville, Tennessee, a Volunteer Minister turned her home into a “tiny cloth mask factory,” and donated them to the Salvation Army emergency workers and to others ill-equipped “first responders” (Brinker 2020). In Atlanta, Georgia, a visiting Volunteer Minister from Kazakhstan launched the idea that Scientologists should prepare tables where neighbors can pick up for free masks, disinfectant, gloves, and Scientology’s booklets on prevention (Webb 2020).

In Seattle, Scientology reported that it had prepared and distributed at Mary’s Place, a shelter for street children, masks inspired by Dr. Seuss and other popular characters (Pearce 2020). Both in Los Angeles and Clearwater, where Scientology has its main U.S. bases, Volunteer Ministers helped with blood drives, in Florida by operating “blood buses” to reach donors at a time of severe shortage of blood in the hospitals due to the virus crisis (Skjelset 2020; Wieland 2020).

In Madrid, the Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad, whose leader is Scientology executive Iván Arjona Pelado, and the Volunteer Ministers, reported that they had distributed massive quantities of disinfectant to hospitals, the police, nursing homes, and churches, and co-operated with local businesses in distributing masks (Fundación para la Mejora de la Vida, la Cultura y la Sociedad 2020).



**Figure 1.** A Volunteer Minister in Madrid shows the disinfectant gel to be donated to the local police.

In several cities, Volunteer Ministers disinfected public facilities. For example, in Rand West City, in the South African province of Gauteng, Volunteer Ministers disinfected the Public Safety Department in Randfontein and Westonaria (the two municipalities whose merger resulted in Rand West City), the Rand West City Civic Centre, the Old Westonaria Municipal Offices, the Randgate Clinic, the Westonaria Shelter for the Homeless, and the Westonaria Library (*Randfontein Herald* 2020a). In the Gauteng province, Scientology mobilized 233 Volunteer Ministers, split in 18 teams (Bosch 2020).

In the Johannesburg area, Volunteer Ministers decontaminated several fire stations (*Sandton Chronicle* 2020), and the city of Johannesburg entered into an agreement with them to systematically disinfect all local taxis (*The Citizen* 2020). Also in South Africa, Korekile Home for Cerebral Palsied Children, in Simunye, was disinfected by Scientology Volunteer Ministers, who donated gloves to the children (*Randfontein Herald* 2020b). In Mogale City, the disinfection involved parts of the City Hall, the local library, the Munsieville Centre for the Aged and Disabled, Munsieville Stadium, and ThuroLefa Secondary School (*Krugersdorp News* 2020). In fact, Scientology volunteers became so popular in South Africa that criminals falsely claiming to be Volunteer Ministers showed up at private homes' door pretending to be there to sanitize them (Deklerk 2020).

The Volunteer Ministers Facebook page includes hundred of other examples, from the U.K. to Hungary, Italy, the Bahamas, and beyond. It is true that news of the Volunteer Ministers activities was often spread by Scientologists themselves,

including as contributors to the popular U.S. Web site of neighbor news *Patch*. But they were also reported by mainline media in several countries.

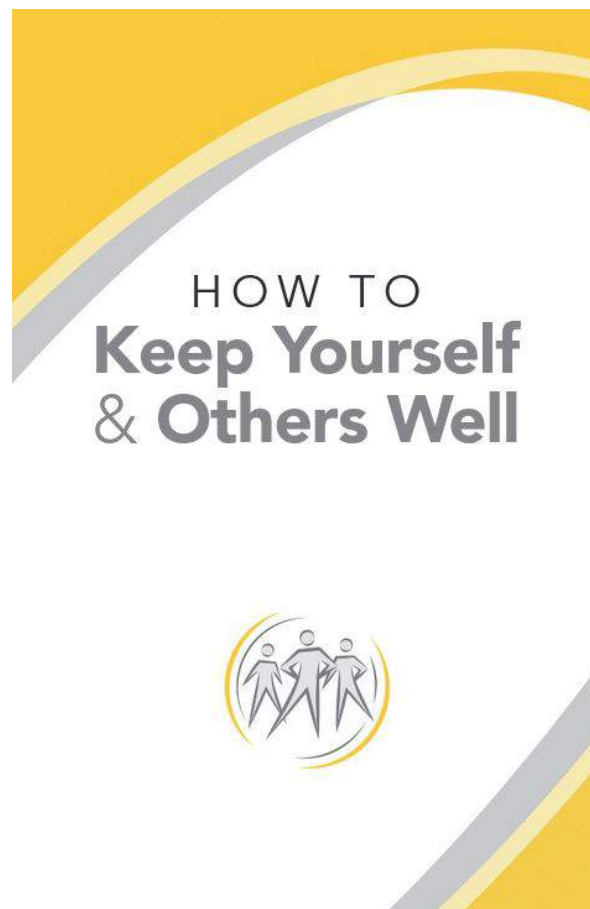
Opponents dismissed the Volunteer Ministers activities as PR or hidden proselytization, and mentioned isolated incidents such as one where a Scientology pamphlet on prevention was included in 86 meal bags donated to children in public schools in Clearwater, violating provisions against the distribution of religious materials there (Reeves and McManus 2020). Scientology called the incident a mistake, and local media noted that the pamphlets included state-of-the-art advise on hand-washing and social distancing, and “the only mention of the church is on the back cover, which reads ‘Courtesy of Church of Scientology International’” (Reeves and Mc Manus 2020).

Critics also questioned the effectiveness of the Volunteer Ministers’ sanitization activities, ignoring that they used the same technologies adopted by several governments, and that the Ministers were praised by majors and other authorities (*Krugersdorp News* 2020; *Randfontein Herald* 2020b).



**Figure 2.** Mayor Francis Makgatho of Mogale City, South Africa, with a Volunteer Minister yellow jacket, among the Volunteer Ministers who disinfected the local library.

Indeed, the three *Stay Well* pamphlets (Church of Scientology International 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) are a key part of the strategy deployed by Volunteer Ministers to help against the virus. More than five million copies of them were distributed throughout the world (Reeves and McManus 2020). They are easy to read, illustrated, and intended to teach even to the barely literate the basic precautions to be adopted against the virus. Scientology is never mentioned, except as publisher of the pamphlets, although on the back cover a link to the dedicated page of Scientology's Web site created for offering advice during the pandemic is also offered. While it is difficult to estimate how many were led to the Web site by the pamphlets, there is no reason to doubt that they offered sound and easily understandable advice to their readers. The pamphlets also embraced a strategy based on masks, gloves, social distancing, disinfectants, and the suggestion that hands should be washed frequently, in accordance with the recommendations of most governments, and far away from the conspiracy theories of those denying that the epidemic was real.



**Figure 3.** Cover of one of Scientology's brochures.

### *Dangerous Environments: Learning Resilience*

In times of epidemics, religions normally do not limit themselves to offer advice on prevention and hygiene. They may do so very effectively, as in the case of Scientology’s booklets, but this activity remains ancillary to what secular institutions are also expected to provide. Religions should also offer psychological and spiritual guidance.

Modernity tried to exclude religion from the sphere of health, which should be controlled exclusively by medical doctors and psychiatrists. As Meredith McGuire noted,

Biomedicine claimed control over the health and curing physical bodies; a separate science claimed the health and well-being of minds; and religion was relegated to the sphere of the purely spiritual (McGuire 1993, 146–47).

Modernity, thus, “exclude[d] social, psychological, spiritual, and behavioral dimension of illness” (McGuire 1993, 147). Wouter Hanegraaff noted how this vision of health, typical of “Western medicine,” was always rejected by “traditional cultures.” In times of crisis, as many perceived that Western medicine and psychiatry failed to deliver, traditional non-Western forms of healing gained a new popularity, and the “biomedical” model treating the body, and reifying the mind, apart from a broader concept of “a person’s perceptions and experiences,” was increasingly challenged (Hanegraaff 1996, 42–3).

Scientology teaches that the basic essence of humans is an immortal spiritual being known as thetan. Today, thetans have forgotten their spiritual identity and believe they *are* human bodies, while they merely *inhabit* subsequent human bodies, one reincarnation after the other. Scientology reminds thetans of their divine origin, making them realize that they are cause rather than effect of the universe.

The Web page created by Scientology for the COVID-19 emergency proposes three courses corresponding to the three *Stay Well* pamphlets. It also offers a fourth three-hour course, “Solutions for a Dangerous Environment,” based on a booklet Scientology published in 1994, with a second edition in 2001, putting together statements by L. Ron Hubbard from *The Scientology Handbook* (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001).

Hubbard's texts were not written in anticipation of a pandemic. Indeed, they mention "robberies, rapes, riots, murders, fires, earthquakes, floods and famines"—but not epidemics (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 2). Yet, it is in these texts that we find the basic principles Scientology proposes to us to cope with the pandemic.

Hubbard criticizes there the common Western notion that, while the environment is dangerous, it does not appear dangerous enough to non-Westerners, and the colonialist assumption that those in developing countries have a backward economy because they are not "challenged" enough by the environment. While the Western white man always had to work hard to survive, Africans or indigenous South Americans, according to this stereotype, were accustomed to simply pick up fruits and eat them. Although the latter condition may seem better, it was in fact worse, as it prevented economic development and progress.

Hubbard traces these theories to British economic historian Arnold Toynbee (1852–1883), noting that he rarely left London and probably never met in his life one of the "backward" natives he was writing about. Had he traveled more, Hubbard argues, Toynbee would have discovered that, in what we now call the Third World, natives experienced daily a terrible "challenge by the environment," no matter how many fruits they were able to pick without growing them. Indeed, they had a much higher chance of succumbing to wild animals, poisonous snakes, incurable diseases, or malnutrition than Toynbee had in his London armchair:

What did Toynbee know of it? He spent all his time in the back end of a library, reading books written by men who had spent all of *their* days in libraries! That is no way to learn about life (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 4).

On the other hand, Hubbard (who was probably aware that Toynbee overworked himself and died of exhaustion at age 30) did not deny that humans are "challenged by the environment" in the rich West too. He gives the example of a painter from Terre Haute, Indiana, who was "challenged by the environment" enough in his native city, where he was systematically bullied and beaten by classmates, that he moved to New York, even if he correctly anticipated that in the competitive art market there, being without connections, he will end up starving (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 5).



Hubbard’s point, here, goes beyond the critique of a colonialist prejudice against non-white populations. He wants to lead his readers to the conclusion that the “challenge by the environment” is largely a state of mind. Hubbard does not deny that the environment may be “dangerous enough” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 3), and that “there *are* real areas of danger in the environment” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 10). He does not teach that dangers are merely imaginary, which is important to understand the spirit in which Scientology proposes the booklet to those worried by the pandemic.

However, Scientology tries to see humans, as thetans, as causes and not only as effects of the environment. To some extent, we create the environment, and

An individual’s health level, sanity level, activity level and ambition level are all monitored by his concept of the dangerousness of the environment. [...] [In the environment] there are also areas being made to *seem* more dangerous than they really are (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 10).

According to Hubbard, our perception of the “dangerous environment” may make it more dangerous. Fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The higher the percentage of the population that is afraid, the more threatening the environment becomes. The process, however, is not totally spontaneous. There are “merchants of chaos,” including journalists, politicians, and those serving the interest of certain pharmaceutical companies, who have a vested interest in making us perceive the environment as even more dangerous than it is.

There are those who could be called “merchants of chaos.” These are people who want an environment to look very, very disturbing. These are people who gain some sort of advantage, they feel, if the environment is made to look more threatening. An obvious example can be seen in newspapers. There are no good news stories. Newspapermen shove the environment in people’s faces and say, “Look! It’s dangerous. Look! It’s overwhelming. Look! It’s threatening.” They not only report the most threatening bits of news, but also sensationalize it, making it worse than it is. What more do you want as a proof of their intention? This is the merchant of chaos. He is paid to the degree that he can make the environment threatening. To yearn for good news is foolhardy in a society where the merchants of chaos reign. The chaos merchant has lots of troops among people with vested interests (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 6).

While the merchants of chaos are powerful, they are not invincible. “It is only the things which aren’t handled which are chaotic” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 9). The way of handling the environment is Scientology:



To the degree Scientology progresses in an area, the environment becomes calmer and calmer. Not less adventurous, but calmer. In other words, the potential hostile, unreachable, untouchable threat in the environment reduces. Somebody who knows more about himself, others and life, and who gets a better grip on situations, has less trouble in his environment. Even though it may only be reduced slightly, it is reduced (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 7).

Hubbard then proposes seven steps to “confront” the environment, which Scientology now believes are also relevant to confront the pandemic crisis (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 11–5).

1. “Find something that isn’t being a threat.” Obviously, not all features of the environment are threatening. While we are led to focus on the threats, we should instead focus on the non-threatening elements.

2. “Don’t read the newspaper” for two weeks. Hubbard believes you will be surprised of how, without continuing exposure to bad news, you will feel better.

3. “Take a walk” and look at what you see while walking. You will find a lot of beautiful and non-threatening aspects of the universe. (Taking a walk may be difficult during a quarantine, and Scientology’s course do not suggest that you violate the rules. However, even a short walk or perhaps a mental walk would do).

4. “Find something that isn’t hostile to you,” a person or a feature of the environment, and concentrate on this. It is unlikely you live in an environment where everything, and everybody, is hostile.

5. “Handle your loss.” If you have lost a loved one, a relationship, or something you deeply cherished, everything in the environment will remind you of your loss. However, this connection, between elements of the environment and what you lost, is in your mind, not in the reality. Slowly, by looking closely at each single element of the environment, “one gets a *differentiation* where an *identification* existed before. And where differentiation exists, intelligence and judgment can return” (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 13).

6. “Arrange your life,” i.e. move from a causal, chaotic life to a systematic plan.

7. “Knock off things that upset you.” Some of the upsetting features of the environment cannot easily be “knocked off,” an obvious example being the COVID-19 virus. However, Scientology recommends making a list of “things that upset you,” from the global to the trivial. You will probably discover that at least some of the trivial disturbances may indeed be “knocked off.”

According to Scientology,

A person is either the effect of his environment or is able to have an effect upon his environment. The nineteenth-century psychologist preached that man had to “adjust to his environment.” [...] The truth is that man is as successful as he adjusts the environment to him (L. Ron Hubbard Library 2001, 20).

*“We’ll Show This World It Can Be Restored”: The Aesthetic of the Quarantine*

The individual who reacts to the environment, either succumbing as effect or rising above it as cause, is described by Scientology as a thetan who looks at the images stored in the mind. The mind, however, has three parts. The analytical mind stores images, and use them to take decisions aimed at survival. The reactive mind records images of pain and unpleasantness, which are reactivated when similar circumstances occur. The somatic mind translates at the physical level the inputs of either the analytical or the reactive mind. The more the thetan believes, mistakenly, that he (the thetan is always referred by Scientology with the male pronoun, although women are thetans too) is effect rather than cause, the more the reactive mind takes over, causing most of the problems affecting humans.

Hubbard also taught that there are higher levels above the analytical mind, the first being the aesthetic mind. The latter may positively influence the whole process leading the thetan to understanding himself as cause rather than effect. This is the basis of Hubbard’s rarely studied, yet important in his system, theory of art as communication (Hubbard 1991; see Introvigne 2020). For art to be effective, it should be able to communicate to its audience. Technique is important, but only if it allows the artist to communicate effectively.

Scientology promotes Hubbard’s ideas about the arts, and systematically cultivates the artists through its Celebrity Centers. Hundreds of visual artists, singers, visual artists, and other performers are Scientologists. The proportion of artists in Scientology is higher than in most other religions (Introvigne 2020).

During the 2020 pandemic, Scientology was thus able to mobilize its artists for collective performances aimed at raising the spirits in the middle of the global crisis. For those familiar with Hubbard’s ideas on the arts, this was not merely entertainment, or a PR exercise showing again to the world just how many brilliant artists happen to be Scientologists. In fact, in Hubbard’s system, communicating through art and allowing as large an audience as possible to have

meaningful aesthetic experiences during the quarantine may literally change the world and, in a moment of global desperation, prepare its “restoration” to a more desirable condition.

On May 21, Scientology TV proposed a “Stay Well Concert” by Scientology musicians, described in the network’s Web site as “a monumental event” (Scientology Network 2020). The concert was indeed impressive, lining up Scientologists who are celebrity musicians from several different countries, from Mexico to South Africa, and from Canada to Chile, and of course Americans such as jazz legends Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke. While they performed their signature songs rather than something especially created for the occasion, the concert succeeded in showing that Scientology is now a firmly established presence in the world of music. The concert concluded with a song that had indeed been created as an answer to the pandemic crisis, “Spread a Smile, Stay Well,” collectively presented by all the cast. In the end, host Erika Christensen, a well-known American TV and movie actress, shortly directed the audience to Scientology’s Web page offering the “Stay Well” booklets.



**Figure 4.** A segment of the “Stay Well” Concert, May 21, 2020, featuring vocalist-guitarist Greg Camp, formerly of the Smash Mouth rock band.

Earlier during the pandemic, Scientology Web sites had started offering the video of “Spread a Smile, Stay Well” where Scientology musicians, including

again Corea and Clarke, virtually came together and sang and played jointly, each from his or her home. When I last accessed the video on May 23, 2020, YouTube indicated that it had exceeded 10 million views (“Spread a Smile, Stay Well” 2020).



**Figure 5.** Chick Corea in the “Spread a Smile, Stay Well” video.

The lyrics were, in themselves, significant:

Let’s talk about something that ain’t dangerous.

How about this?

So things may be a little strange for us

But listen to this

Yeah, we could start a new direction

Affecting the future ahead

Spreading smiles for miles

A new kinda trend

Wanna new style?

How about this?

Let’s talk about something that’s courageous

How about this?

Let's talk about something that's outrageous  
Put this at the top of your list  
If you're stuck and gonna sit at home  
Live it up, live it up, live it up with me  
You're not alone  
We can lift this world while quarantined  
From your phone  
Pick it up, pick it up, just pick it up  
Take this shot with me  
Spread a smile, not something else  
'Cause this world is really needing your help  
Spread a smile and nothing more  
And we'll show this world it can be restored  
You want a smile?  
How about this? ("Spread a Smile, Stay Well" 2020).

At first sight, it may appear just as a sugary text, whose main aim is to allow a group of well-known performers to demonstrate their technical prowess. In fact, the text spells out Scientology's ambitions during the pandemic and beyond. Its first commandment is to "spread a smile, not something else" (i.e., not contagion and the virus), but the context is "starting a new direction," "affecting the future ahead," and even "lifting the world" and "showing this world it can be restored."

"Smiles," as evidence that the crisis has been handled and thus ceased to be chaotic, become powerful tools to create a new world, one not dominated by fear but created by the collective effervescence of thetans progressively moving, including through beauty and art, from wrongly perceiving themselves as effect to the truth that they are cause. Scientologists sincerely believe they are equipped with the only technology in the world capable of achieving this goal.

## *Conclusion*

Eileen Barker notes that "one does not often see reports of the charitable work in which many of the NRMs [new religious movements] engage," even if it is

sometimes “outstanding” (Barker 2020, 538). That this happens, is evidence of the phenomenon social scientists call “gatekeeping” (Shoemaker and Vos 2009; Barzilai-Nahon 2008, 2009). For different reasons, the media filters out news that do not correspond to certain agendas or established stereotypes. “Cults” are by definition malignant, and gatekeeping works to exclude information that would contradict this prejudice.

Some specialized media are devoted exclusively to perpetuate the stereotypes about the “cults,” and to attack those, including scholars, who dare to report positive information about these movements. Confronted with the fact that, during the 2020 pandemic, Scientology and its Volunteer Ministers performed significant and positive charitable deeds and helped the population in a moment of deep crisis, anti-cult media reacted by raising doubts about the Scientologists’ motivations, and even ridiculing them with their usual violent language—which, in this case, was also distasteful and offensive towards the victims of the pandemic and those who tried to help them (for a particularly egregious example, see Keller 2020). The verbal violence was also intended to serve notice that, should some media or others lower the gate and allow positive information about Scientology to be published, they will also be attacked.

Although able to influence some mainline media, anti-cultists have not been able to stop Scientology’s progress and activities, at least in democratic countries (Rigal-Cellard 2019, 107). Annoying as they may be, in the eyes of the Scientologists they are merely a distraction in what they see as a cosmic battle to rescue the planet. As for the outside observers, the fact that Scientology’s good work, as in the case of the pandemic, goes unreported is both a confirmation of how persistent prejudices are against certain religious minorities, and something that should slowly be changed by studying how “ordinary Scientologists,” rather than cultivating controversies, try daily to make our planet a more hospitable environment (Westbrook 2018), persuaded that L. Ron Hubbard equipped them with the tools capable, as the song says, of “restoring this world.”

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## **The Response of Soka Gakkai to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Personhood, Interiority, and a Civil Society in Crisis Mode**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a discussion based on research into what Buddhist practice looks like in Soka Gakkai (SG) in times of crisis and growing uncertainty, and explores how Soka Gakkai members and organizations responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as a globally attuned civil society network. The paper is based on reviews of organizational responses, the examination of Soka Gakkai news materials published in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, including regular articles published in the *Seikyo Shimbun*, as well as members' experiences, observations, and informal conversations, particularly with youth members in Japan and overseas, from around mid-February to mid-June 2020. From this preliminary research, two underlying themes emerged: 1) the SG felt the need to respond practically and with urgency as a global civil society network; and 2) the SG felt the need to tackle fear as an equally significant issue, to facilitate the most appropriate response to the crisis from the perspective of Nichiren Buddhism as practiced in Soka Gakkai. This article is an exploration into the actual mode of hope and future-making in times of crisis in Soka Gakkai, as an organization, and as displayed in practical social situations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai and COVID-19, Religion and COVID-19, Buddhism and COVID-19, Religion and COVID-19 in Japan.

### *Introduction*

The dominant mode in the world today may present a global sense of tragedy, which has resulted both in people turning to strengthening solidarity, new community life, and appreciation for the importance of good governance, or in contrast, in a sense of greater fragmentation, and populist approaches that steer towards self-protection and the exclusion of others. Like the notion of “epoch,” COVID-19 may come to frame and channel current social phenomena to help us

make sense of “fluid presents and uncertain futures” (Knight and Stewart 2016, 5), in meaningful ways. Still, the significance of the trope of hope taken on by grassroots initiatives may also reflect high aspirations for a better future, and the way hope shapes up under specific conditions as indicated in this paper.

At a time of rising uncertainty and social and economic needs, what might the idea of almsgiving mean for a Buddhist organization such as the Soka Gakkai? Offering to others is one of the six *pāramitās*, or six kinds of practices required of bodhisattvas. The “Devadatta” (twelfth) chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* describes Shakyamuni in a past existence as the ruler of a kingdom who, in order to fulfil the six *pāramitās*, diligently distributed alms, never stinting in heart, no matter how precious were the goods he gave away. He did not begrudge, the sutra says, even his own life. Among the various kinds of almsgiving, two may be best known as the offering of goods and the offering of the dharma: the former refers to food, clothes, and other material items, while the latter refers to sharing the Buddha’s teachings. There is also a concept of three kinds of almsgiving, which in addition to the two mentioned includes the offering of fearlessness. The offering of fearlessness is meant to inspire courage and remove fear.

The global crisis arising from COVID-19 and related responses has shown how intricately connected is the need to combat fear. We have seen various social and political responses, ranging from acts of solidarity to increased social tension, discrimination, and outbreaks of conflict, which intersect with the nature of governance and the state of economic, social, and healthcare systems. Soka Gakkai members, as all members of their respective societies, are entangled in the crisis as individuals, and as civic groups who live amidst the wider threat the pandemic poses. Soka Gakkai President Minoru Harada captured this mood for Soka Gakkai members when he stressed: “This is an unprecedented time in history where feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and loneliness can either exacerbate divisiveness or bring a deeper sense of community.” He then continued to praise the actions of SGI members by saying, “It is deeply inspiring to see how people are showing resilience, compassion and solidarity in this most difficult period” (Harada 2020b).

By April, this sense of resilience and solidarity was visible in the Soka Gakkai communities, now gone online. The paper explores how the Soka Gakkai came to work increasingly as a global network of human connectivity, which first sought to replace fear and anxiety by providing hope through a clear message of resilience

within and solidarity without, and as a movement that aimed to bring people together amidst the many forces that were pulling them apart. Secondly, this paper discusses how the Soka Gakkai stepped up to be a local and global forum for disseminating correct information about the coronavirus, amidst the widespread misinformation on social media.

*Buddhism Is About “Human Behavior” That Inspires Others and Brings Hope*

How did the Soka Gakkai organization and members respond to the challenging, difficult, and unexpected circumstances that the pandemic brought? The response to COVID-19 of Soka Gakkai members in Japan, as of their counterparts in Soka Gakkai International (SGI), appeared rather different to what was summed up by the Shingon priest, Reverend Asahikawa, in a recent article investigating Japanese religious organizations’ responses to the coronavirus in Japan. Asahikawa explained that,

the Japanese people believe in a theory of destiny (*unmeiron*). Even if they don’t use the word “destiny” openly, they are part of a culture of accepting everything that happens to them (McLaughlin 2020, 3).

Although words such as destiny or karma can be heard, the overall sentiment of what that means in Soka Gakkai is different in significant ways. Rather than accepting “destiny,” actively changing “karma” is more characteristic of Nichiren Buddhism in Soka Gakkai. That is, changing one’s habitual tendencies to think and act in certain ways that are seen to create a person’s “destiny.” Particularly, this means changing the tendencies by which a person acts based on sentiments of fear, lack of self-confidence, or disrespect towards oneself and others. Such internal change is achieved through *daimoku*, or the chanting of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* that was advocated by Nichiren (1222–1282), coupled with Buddhist study, and by actively trying to contribute to others, ultimately “removing” fear and replacing it with the courage by which members testify to internal changes that they perceive as reflected in actual life experiences and circumstances.

Sometimes, members talk about the difficulty of maintaining the intensity and focus of practice, and that it is often some sort of personal crisis that spurs individuals into practicing or continuing to strive to do their “human revolution,” or change negative tendencies. The response to the pandemic could be seen as a collective sense of crisis, which spurred on a collective urgency in practice. Soka

Gakkai members could be observed to address the situation with a renewed focus on their daily Buddhist chanting of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, and a new resolve to find ways to encourage people around them. This response may not be surprising, since a key social dynamic in Soka Gakkai is to try to find ways to encourage others to believe in their inherent “Buddhahood” or “dharma” nature. This is promoted as the way to not only overcome problems and suffering, but see these as opportunities, which can lead to new creativity and positive change. When viewed in this way, challenges become springboards for personal growth and for spurring social action. This life-affirming philosophy and practice seemed to propel members to confront the pandemic with the ever-present principle of “changing poison into medicine.” Harada restated in his message on April 10 that this principle,

teaches that even the darkest and most desperate of times can contain the seeds of new learning and possibility, [and] will help strengthen humanity’s indomitable network of global citizens (Harada 2020b).

Most people have had to adapt to a new sociality of everyday life over the past few months, from late February to June, and have felt the immediacy of the interdependence of daily life on many levels. One key issue in Soka Gakkai has been to make people deepen their understanding of how their actions can have immediate consequences for others’ welfare. The measures to deal with the pandemic presented the paradox that the situation simultaneously required distancing oneself from those on whom one in fact depended. For example, many climate activists from across the world, including many Soka Gakkai members, also hoped for long-established mindsets to have jumped on to the Petri dish of possibilities that would help in the long overdue response to the climate crisis. Soka Gakkai is one of those civil societies that also has continued to stress support for the Sustainable Development Goals through this pandemic, and SG in Japan committed itself to 100% renewable energy use by 2050 in April this year, to support the institutions working on this. There is a general awareness in SG that the pandemic is intricately related to the destruction of natural habitats, as many environmentalists stated (see e.g. Lambertini, Maruma Mrema and Neira 2020; Carrington 2020).

At the same time, the pandemic is likely to cause one of the deepest recessions since World War II, which may result in national protectionism, disruption to supply chains, and growing distrust towards others and other nations. As a long-

time committed supporter of the UN-led global governance system, Soka Gakkai's outlook is highly supportive of an internationalist approach to strengthening international governance, and sees the need to raise a sense of international solidarity to address global issues, and was also part of the faith-based organizations (FBOs) that organized a panel with the UNHCR during the crisis. Typically, we see members' views as a civil society position generally informed by the content in the yearly peace proposals to the United Nations made by the SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, such as this year's "Towards Our Shared Future: Constructing and Era of Human Solidarity" (Ikeda 2020a). Also, on April 21, Nobuyuki Asai, of the SGI office of Peace and Global Issues, and Elisa Gassotti, of the SGI Office for UN Affairs, participated in an online meeting about the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the fight against COVID-19. The event was hosted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR), together with representatives from 11 FBOs, to raise awareness of the infection risk for refugee populations. Asai also introduced initiatives launched by SGI organizations around the world to fight against COVID-19 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020n).

At the same time, the practical question as to what will make people care for strangers in times of crisis, particularly when their own livelihoods may be threatened, is an increasingly central dilemma. The old question that was posed by Adam Smith (1723–1790), the Scottish moral philosopher who saw moral sentiment and the everyday activity of exchange, for which he is better known, as two fundamental human conditions that would come to bind the world in myriad ways, both to keep it fed and to maintain our sense of humanity, offers a way to begin exploring this question. Like his friend David Hume (1711–1776), Smith believed that it was sympathy that moved people to care about others. Moral behavior of course does not stop at sympathy, which can be a fickle friend too. However, if sympathy arises out of a willingness to let oneself feel the situation of another, COVID-19 has brought many people across communities into action to help others, including people in the Soka Gakkai communities. Smith argued that, out of sympathy for one's fellow human beings, the conventions emerge that guide our morality. Sympathy as the starting point of what it means to be human can also be found to resonate in Nichiren's writings. In "The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind Established in the Fifth-Five-Hundred-year Period after the Thus-come One's Passing," Nichiren states: "Even a heartless villain loves his

wife and children. He too has a portion of the bodhisattva world within him” (*WND* 1999, 358).

Like many people in this pandemic, who amidst immediate challenges of stay-home or lockdown measures also found a new sense of purpose in altruistic actions, such a response from SG members quickly became apparent as the seriousness of COVID-19 escalated. While advice on handwashing, mask-wearing, and social distancing had come early on February 1 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020a), by February 20, as the coronavirus was beginning to spread in Japan, and legislating on a state of emergency bill was being discussed, Harada’s message from February 20 (Harada 2020a) was used to remind everyone that, although they may be encountering an unprecedented situation, Nichiren had written that when “great evil occurs, great good follows” (*WND* 1999, 1119).

This is a well-known passage to most SGI members, but as Harada emphasized, this is not to be confused with the idea of an already decided destiny. Rather than waiting till great good follows, what would ensure the “great good” was courageous actions. Harada was presenting Nichiren as having wanted people to resolve to take a new step forward, with the perspective that difficulties are an opportunity to grow regardless of the situation. He quoted from *The New Human Revolution*, written by the long-term Buddhist leader and SGI President Daisaku Ikeda,

If you continue to move powerfully toward the future with brilliant hope no matter what happens, that itself will be your victory. That is the proof of your faith (Ikeda 2008, 204–05).

Similar messages, which were aimed to inspire people to vigorously practice (chanting to raise their life-state, or consciousness), to study Nichiren’s teachings, and to have the spirit of “turning poison into medicine” continued to characterize the world of Soka Gakkai in crisis mode.

For example, a week later, on April 17, the English translation of Ikeda’s monthly editorial was released, and read by the majority of active Soka Gakkai members, now facing lockdown in many places:

Now, as the world confronts the coronavirus pandemic and other serious global challenges, our members everywhere are striving in the spirit of the Daishonin’s treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land.” They are praying earnestly together, uniting across borders, to bring ‘order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land’ (*WND* 1999, 24), and change poison into medicine, while

making sincere and wholehearted contributions to their respective societies. The powerful sound of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* permeates the entire universe. We now have built a network of ordinary people, Bodhisattvas of the Earth, that is undaunted by any of the ‘three calamities and seven disasters’ described in the Daishonin’s writings. Let us continue, limitlessly into the future, to forge ties of respect and trust among people far and wide, based on our conviction that “All people have the Buddha nature” (*WND* 1999, 756) (Ikeda 2020c).

This was both stating an ideal, a hope, and expectation, but was also based on past knowledge of how members would likely respond. As indicated below, members struggled in various ways to cope with the challenges they faced, but also simultaneously wanted to be inspirations to others by trying to respond with courage and compassion. Much has been written about the production of specific formation of hope as a response to a rising sense of uncertainty with an emphasis on specific social, cultural, and political settings (Appadurai 2013). This article perhaps is one empirical example of such “hope production,” hope as an engagement with the future, and as a mode for internal and external transformation, a highly sought after value-orientation in Soka Gakkai, whose members could also in this pandemic be found seeking to try to transform mindsets to states of hope, as a step towards social transformation.

Soka Gakkai organizations could be seen to respond to the pandemic according to their size and situation in each country. For example, in the USA, they donated masks to hospitals facing shortages of medical supplies, and in Italy, they donated funds toward fighting COVID-19. In Japan, before the state of emergency was declared on April 7, the youth division members launched a Stay Home project on Twitter, to encourage young people to stay home, as well as to seek out and share correct information. During the months of March, April, and May, Soka Gakkai members’ spontaneous responses could be witnessed across the social media, from India and Europe, to the United States. This gave the impression of a surge in human connectivity, and a new sense of energy and vitality, as new songs, and messages, and worldwide *daimoku* campaigns emerged. Through the new technology available, Soka Gakkai members shared messages of hope, for example by showing how they remained optimistic and were taking on the organizational ethos that “obstacles and difficulties are great opportunities to become stronger” (Ikeda 2018, 19). These messages, which make up a common language in SG, were now felt to be increasingly significant. The visibility of a human network, whose sensibility rested on providing hope and



strengthening solidarity, emerged with social media posts encouraging SG members nationally based on their fellow members' responses cross-nationally, and as an international movement to create hope and solidarity amidst a pandemic.

Different campaigns led by young people emerged from each country. One such example is the “123 Be the Light” campaign in Europe begun on March 2, which had been inspired by an article about the response to the 2003 SARS outbreak by members in Hong Kong and Taiwan featured in the *Seikyo Shimbun* (2020b). This campaign was then taken up by the Soka Gakkai European Youth Committee (personal communication with Robert Harrap, SGI-UK general director). This, amongst other things, reminded people of the *Lotus Sutra*' message of “casting off the transient and revealing the true,” which refers to the concept that individuals have a deeper self that transcends one's immediate sense of personhood of the here and now, and connects with others on a more profound level. This is an identification with the law of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* or dharma, the principles by which Nichiren, for Soka Gakkai members, is seen to have experienced life based on a vow to cut through his own internal negativity, i.e. fundamental darkness in Buddhist terms, and to enable others to do the same, as expounded in the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Lotus Sutra*. The determination or desire for all people to attain the way is seen as the path to Buddhahood. Confronting fundamental negativity refers to confronting what is seen as the deepest illusion that disconnects from the world and from others. The ultimate reality is seen to be one of interdependence, and connection with others.

Ideally, this means that others' welfare is equally important as our own. Vowing to “be the light” means striving to feel this deeper sense of purpose and connection with others, which is reflected in the concept of *myoho*. Nichiren wrote in a letter sent to one of his disciples in 1255 that,

the ultimate reality ...is the Mystic Law (*myoho*). It is called the Mystic Law because it reveals the principle of the mutually inclusive relationship of a single moment of life and all phenomena (*WND* 1999, 3).

This frequently read letter in Soka Gakkai postulates the essential oneness of the ultimate reality and the manifest world that is characterized by each individual. Practically, the meaning of “123 Be the Light” referred to everyday chanting for one hour, studying Nichiren Buddhism for twenty minutes, and talking to three people to encourage them. Through such practical daily effort, each person could

become that “light” in her environment, a person who tries to connect with others at a deeper level of consciousness, by reaching out to people and showing empathy for another’s situation, while demonstrating how to deal with the fear felt, and the frustrations the restrictions imposed were generating, in a creative and positive manner. Such campaigns are not new, in fact they are rather typical as the mainstay of growth in Soka Gakkai. Similar campaigns could be observed in SGI-Canada, SGI-USA, and other branches. However, a renewed sense of purpose and significance brought about by the immediacy of the pandemic was visible.

Technology and social media became the practical tools by which to deliver messages of hope, with Zoom meetings in many places soon becoming normal. Those who in the past might have been apprehensive about the use of teleconferencing, or other digital media communication tools, witnessed a smooth transition to digital conferencing as a way to hold meetings. While many felt this could not substitute face-to-face meetings, it seemed to have worked well in many countries. In fact, an increase in member participation in meetings could be observed in European countries, the US, and other places where digital communication was easily implemented, and where the members tend to be younger and more digitally savvy. Other places, like Japan, saw fewer official meetings conducted via digital conferencing such as Zoom, largely due to the concern that the higher number of older members would not have the same access. Yet, many smaller, informal group meetings in local areas did take place.

In the UK, leaders told of the ease by which some members now participated in online meetings, who in the past had struggled to attend meetings in person because of either responsibilities that conflicted with meeting times or the long-distance travel to meeting places. For example, a typical local chapter study, which in the past may have been attended by around 30 people, now had around 50 or even 60 members participating via Zoom. Undoubtedly, the immediacy of the situation, and the crisis or challenges that people faced, had intensified their Buddhist practice, and raised an interest in the teachings of Nichiren, while their ability to participate was being facilitated by the practical use of modern technologies.

As other community and civic groups have witnessed during this pandemic, a focus on empathetic action and connecting with others could be observed. As indicated, for Soka Gakkai members this “connection” began with a daily practice

of chanting to connect with themselves on a deeper level. As a particular layer of civil society whose objective is *kosen-rufu*, literally “to declare and spread widely,” or the propagation of Nichiren Buddhist philosophy, the movement is based on a personal practice of having faith in one’s own “buddha” nature, with a socially engaged practice based on the belief that others equally possess such inherent dignity and wisdom. The quotes above point to a Buddhist view of personhood as something intertwined with how one views other people’s lives, and work on manifesting “the dignified attributes that they inherently possess” (WND 1999, 832). Since members have learned to see difficulties as opportunities for change, Soka Gakkai’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought a renewed sense of purpose and mission to “display inherent dignity,” and bring what they regard as a humanistic social practice to others.

Yet, Soka Gakkai’s success so far as a global civil society has rested on emphasizing local, grassroots activities based on face-to-face exchange. The very social fabric, the face-to-face interaction that made much of the organization so far, was brought to a halt. As indicated, newly found ways to recreate local and global sentiments of social engagement and provide a sense of empowerment became visible, while this also required a more organized commitment to new practical issues, such as ensuring accurate information was communicated, as discussed in the next section.

### *Beyond Sympathy: Information and Education as Keys to Combatting Fear and Discrimination*

As indicated in the last section, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be closely intertwined with human interiority, which has ranged from sympathy to antipathy, shaping how people imagine, see, and react to the world. Central to the pandemic are also questions about the freedoms envisioned by Smith to “truck, barter, and exchange,” which came to underpin people’s livelihoods in our modern capitalist world. Lack of freedom soon manifested both as new forms of cooperation, as well as protests against lockdowns (Wilson 2020). Society was never the equilibrium and state of order Smith had seen coming, something the coronavirus has highlighted all too well as the social and economic fault lines of inequity are revealed, as is clearer than ever in places such as India (Vasavi 2020). Sympathy alone will never be enough as a sufficient

affective tool, even if it involves the more egalitarian feelings of empathy. Bringing about equity and humane societies require good governance, leadership, and cooperative action on many levels of civil society, all of which will be significant for what kind of “moral consciousness” will come to predominate in a post-COVID-19 world.

Soka Gakkai is an organization that exists at the level of civil society, and particularly in communities across Japan. It is an organization with a vast grassroots reach that has extended into support for a political party (Fisker-Nielsen 2012), which has been part of coalition government for most of the past two decades. Soka Gakkai is growing in many localities across Asia, Europe, and North and South America, with around 2 million members, and is rapidly increasing in such areas as India and Italy. Note that precise membership figures are somewhat difficult to obtain, as some fluctuation in participation exist. Numbers in Japan are counted in households which makes it also difficult to discern accurate numbers of individual members.

Apart from its doctrinal study and focus on the practice of chanting, face-to-face meetings have been the mainstay of the organization, creating its extensive local community networks. The sudden new “common sense” caused by the pandemic made social gatherings effectively anti-social, and face-to-face interactions came to suggest moral carelessness about transmitting a potentially life-threatening infection. It seemed obvious that the organization needed to respond in a coherent way.

Undoubtedly, if mistakes had been made, this would have rapidly generated negative publicity. However, more significantly, it could have had far-reaching impact on people’s lives. As an organization with around 7-8 million households in Japan, the leadership of Soka Gakkai understood the way members reacted to the pandemic was significant not only for themselves but also for the wider society. As previously indicated, a collective response from SG was taken early on, directed by President Harada. As an organization that thrives on face-to-face grassroots relations, its activities could potentially become a major point of spreading the virus if preventative measures were not taken in a comprehensive manner. As one of the first countries to experience the coronavirus outside of China, in Japan meetings were stopped from February 20. At the time, stopping meetings that makes up a large part of members’ social network outside work

seemed over-precautious, and for young single people such as students this was particularly challenging.

The youth division took various measures, as will be discussed below. Soon, media reports emerged in Japan about the impact on mental health occurring across Japanese society. Yet, it was deemed necessary to give priority to prevent the spread of the virus. Anxiety and fear were increasing in the wake of rumors and misinformation being circulated on social media, and SG felt the need to begin a comprehensive awareness raising campaign about COVID-19. Furthermore, as the pandemic began to take effect in late February and early March, it was reported that young people in various countries were not taking the situation seriously enough. Soka Gakkai consists of several million young people and the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the Soka Gakkai's daily newspaper, began a series of different projects, often in cooperation with youth leaders. The aim was to provide accurate information, based on expert opinions and the latest scientific understanding of the virus.

The *Seikyo Shimbun*, with around 5.5 million subscribers, started two new series of articles under the headings, “Understanding the Coronavirus Properly” (正しく知ろうコロナ) and “Living in Time of Crisis” (危機の時代を生きる). The first set of articles began on April 6 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020e), the day before the Japanese government declared a state of emergency, and was aimed at providing updated information about COVID-19. The articles delivered concise information with practical illustrations and charts in short pieces. The other series, begun three days later, was based on longer interviews, in which relevant academic experts shared insights into the current situation, aiming to provide professional views on the situation as the pandemic was developing both nationally and globally. Preliminary observations revealed that these serialized articles played a critical role in providing up-to-date and scientific information from relevant experts. The aim was to give readers a sense of assurance by factual and expert-based information, considering rising fear and anxiety.

News reports on rising situations of discrimination, prejudice, and disparagement of people on the front line of the crisis, including healthcare workers or supermarket staff, also began appearing. An Agence France-Presse (AFP 2020) report on April 15 stated that misinformation regarding COVID-19 was spreading, and that the WHO had coined the term “infodemic” (information + pandemic) to call attention to the problem of misinformation (WHO 2020). On

several occasions, Japan's Prime Minister also spoke out against the rise in discrimination and the unacceptable stigmatizing of frontline workers who were trying to support and save people, but still stigmatization was widespread (*Mainichi Shimbun* 2020b). Other articles appeared on the topic such as in the *Mainichi Shimbun* on May 7, in an article titled, "Corona-shock, Prejudice, Accusations and Slander—Continuing the Battle Against 'Infection-Discrimination'" (my translation: *Mainichi Shimbun* 2020a).

The *Seikyo Shimbun* aimed to combat this spread of misinformation and rise in prejudice by featuring interviews with a number of prominent academics such as Professor Emeritus Takesato Watanabe from Doshisha University, who discussed the seriousness of "infodemic," stressing the importance of media literacy (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020m). Other interviews such as one titled "Lack of Information and Work: Foreign Residents Facing Difficulties," which was published on April 29 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020o), aimed to help readers think about those suffering from COVID-19-related issues, and how to respond to misinformation.

In the first issue of the series "Living in Time of Crisis" (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020f), an international perspective was brought to bear on the situation from Dame Claire Bertschinger, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She pointed out to readers the seriousness of the situation overseas, and how people were reacting to the situation by showing support for healthcare workers. As a public figure and Soka Gakkai member with a long experience as a nurse working in conflict zones, Bertschinger's life story is well-known in the Soka Gakkai community. She serves as one of the many role models for young people, who can be found to often desire jobs directly seen as contributing to welfare. In 2019, she was the guest of honor at Soka University's graduation ceremony, and gave the keynote speech on her experience working in Africa in refugee camps. Some long-term academic staff commented at the time that this had been one of the most inspiring graduation speeches they had heard over the past twenty years. It certainly, resonated with the mindset of social contribution through which students, and Soka Gakkai members in general, learn to see the significance of their work.

Based on preliminary observations in Japan, and from around 50 casual conversations with young Soka Gakkai members and Soka University students who are frequent readers of the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the overwhelming majority

talked about their concern with discrimination facing healthcare workers, and the rise in child abuse and domestic violence that was being reported on as an outcome of the stay-home measures. Many also seemed aware of the wider potentially positive changes, such as an increased focus on climate action, and the potentially changing mindsets towards creating a better life-work balance, a lack of which has been an ongoing social problem in Japan. How information was communicated about the pandemic soon became critical.

Other interviews featured the story of Dr. Moriya Tsuji, currently working on researching a possible vaccine for COVID-19 at Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Centre (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020j), as well as an interview with Professor Jeremy Shiffman, from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, on “Infection Control and Medical Support for Developing Countries” (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020p). Such articles directed readers to think about those who are involved with combating the pandemic. Articles of the series “Living in Time of Crisis” also covered broader topics such as “Seeking-help Under the Stay-home Requests,” as increasing reports were indicating a rise in domestic violence and child abuse in the face of the stay-home request (see for example *Asahi Shimbun* 2020), which as mentioned, were issues that concerned many young members. Articles included practical information, such as contact numbers for help groups. As the *Seikyo Shimbun* continued to publish such types of articles almost every other day, including May 16, after the Japanese government had lifted the state of emergency in 39 prefectures on May 14, that began raising awareness about “new lifestyles” and the “new normal.” Many members during this time said they appreciated the paper for providing useful information they could easily share.

This issue of mis- or disinformation was also specifically taken up by various youth division initiatives. For example, the Soka Gakkai Youth Division in Japan initiated teleconferences to learn correct information about COVID-19 from medical experts, held seven times as of June 18. Youth Division representatives and medical experts discussed various themes and topics based on the latest situation of COVID-19. For example, the first teleconference highlighted simple measures to take to prevent further spread of COVID-19. Changing the attitude and behavior of young people was regarded as a key step at this time, getting youth to see the importance of careful hand washing, avoiding nonessential outings, and ensuring they gained correct information (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020c). On another occasion, they pointed out preventative measures against the possible

collapse of medical services in Japan, highlighting the importance of responsible actions by individuals, such as avoiding nonessential outings (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020d).

These teleconferences led by youth leaders correspond to relevant issues as they arose in relation to the pandemic. In the context of school closures, which occurred across Japan at the beginning of March, discussions focused on ways to protect the physical and mental health of children and parents (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020g), and students, especially with regard to those living alone (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020i).

As the Japanese government lifted the state of emergency for 39 prefectures in mid-May, their discussion shifted to what people should keep in mind after the state of emergency was lifted (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020q), emphasizing the importance of people focusing on what they could do to create a lifestyle to fit each individual's situation rather than on what could not be done (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020o). As the state of emergency was lifted for all the prefectures at the end of May, discussions highlighted the importance of strengthening human bonds to serve as the foundation for creating a society that can deal with infectious diseases without resorting to prejudice and discriminatory attitudes (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020s).

These discussions were always used as opportunities to express appreciation toward medical workers on the frontline, who were facing many difficulties exacerbated by the rise in prejudice and discrimination. The youth leaders were emphasizing the importance of combatting such negative forces and tendencies by gaining correct knowledge and using one's imagination to understand their situation (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020c, 2020d, 2020g, 2020i, 2020l, 2020r, 2020s). To combat such stigmatization of health workers, the nurses group division and doctors' division confronted such attitudes with statements such as,

As Buddhists, members of the Soka Gakkai's doctors' division and nurses group, along with other medical caregivers, are steadfastly fighting their fight as they offer profound prayers for the safety and security of all people. They do so in accordance with this spirit expressed in Nichiren's writings, "If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?" (*WND* 1999, 24) (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020b).

While initiating such teleconferences, the Soka Youth Physicians Conference and Soka Gakkai Youth Peace Conference launched a Japanese language Twitter



account @savelifePJ, encouraging youth in major urban areas such as the greater Tokyo area to stay at home (Soka Gakkai 2020). The information from the teleconferences was regularly shared through their Twitter account. Since then, the name of their StayHome project on Twitter changed to the SaveLife project, after the lifting of the state of emergency in Japan (Soka Gakkai 2020). On June 3, SG youth representatives also held their first online gathering with eight international youth organizations, such as the All-China Youth Federation from China, and other organizations from Afghanistan, Argentina, India, Ghana, Czech Republic, and Russia. This project is a part of their project titled Soka Global Action 2030, which began before the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was launched to build solidarity among youths internationally who had responded to the current crisis through introducing disaster relief activities, and other activities that contributed to protecting the life of others, sharing what they had learned.

There were also many new musical initiatives that aimed to raise hope towards the future. Many could be found to arise spontaneously in the Soka Gakkai social media-scape, and some were e organized by the youth members, including the *Utatsuku* (song-making) project, which unfolded with many different individuals performing a different version of the same song titled “Step Forward,” an upbeat song that aimed to inspire hope (Soka Gakkai Youth Division 2020).

### *“Change Poison into Medicine” Through Earnest Prayer*

As indicated, the *Seikyo Shimibun* played a key role in providing accurate information, as well as Buddhist study and guidance. Members and leaders read and used the information with key articles by Ikeda and Harada, translated into English and other languages. Regular guidance from Harada such as reaching out to others through making simple phone calls or writing letters, which he himself was seen to do personally, took on new meaning as people were unable to meet. Everyone was keenly aware of the rising levels of anxiety across Japan, and Harada would encourage leaders to take the initiative to give hope to friends and exercise wisdom based on prayers, quoting Ikeda on March 1 (Ikeda 2020b):

Even if you can’t meet with them in person, a single phone call can help them break through something that may be holding them back. Sometimes even writing an encouraging note can be all it takes to change a person’s life. Often allowing a person to

speaking freely of their dissatisfaction and unhappiness resolves their problems and, in many cases, they feel much better just because they've been heard. The act of listening is in itself the Buddhist practice of compassion, a form of relieving suffering as taught in the Buddha's commitment to "relieving suffering and imparting joy" (Ikeda 2020b, 1).

Masayo Kumakura, a 52-year-old woman living in Saitama City, north of Tokyo and working in a supermarket shared her experience in the *Seikyo Shimbun* on May 20 (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020r). Quoting an essay that had encouraged her to persevere titled "Our Brilliant Human Revolution" (Ikeda 2020d), she recalled President Ikeda's words which had stated, "as well as everyone carrying out their noble mission in different areas of society. I am praying earnestly for everyone's health and safety." She then told of her recent experience under COVID-19,

I am working as a cashier at a supermarket. Under Japan's state of emergency, I keep feeling worried and nervous while working, but I earnestly chanted *daimoku* (*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*) to be able to work without any accident each morning. A few days ago, several customers came to talk to me and told me, "We wish you all the best in your work. Thank you always [for what you are doing]." This was unexpected, and I felt happy. Nichiren Daishonin writes, "It is to voice what one truly has in the mind. Thus, one's thoughts are expressed in one's voice" (*WND* 1999, 86). Facing difficulties at this moment, I resolved to polish my heart by strengthening my faith [in Buddhahood] and to talk to people using really kind words. Even though it is not possible to meet my fellow members, I am currently trying to send encouragements to three friends per day through phone calls (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020r).

Hironobu Shigeyama, a man aged 57, from Minoh City, in Osaka, related his struggle to not worry about his children who live abroad in America.

My daughter and son, 25 and 22 years old respectively, are doing their best while fighting against the COVID-19 in California in the U.S. My daughter is working as a schoolteacher at a local elementary school. Under the curfew, she is working hard to do her best in online classes. As a member of the young women division's, she encourages others together with other fellow members through sending SNS messages. My son, a university student, is doing his best in online classes under the lockdown. Since his club activities for track and field got suspended, he was feeling disheartened for a while. Thanks to the daily encouragements by local Soka Gakkai members, he finally returned to his usual self and resolved to fulfil his own mission. We are holding an "online family discussion meeting" connecting Japan and the U.S. once a week, where we are openly sharing our struggles and strengthening our resolve to overcome this hardship. I am chanting *daimoku* together with fellow Soka Gakkai members from all over the world. This has made me realize more than ever the progress of worldwide *kosen-rufu*. I am sure we will find deeper meaning in this catastrophe, while I am chanting earnestly for the

quickest possible end to the pandemic together with all the members of my family (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020k).

In Nerima City, Tokyo, Yuuki Hanajima is a vice area leader and his wife, Yuri, is a vice group leader. Together they managed a music class called “Ohana Music Vocal Class,” which was attended by students ranging from those in high school to pensioners, before they were forced to cancel all the classes because of COVID-19. The past year they had renovated the classroom where Yuri had worked as a vocal instructor for over ten years. They finally had begun to be more financially independent, when they were hit by the pandemic and forced to close. Since all events and live concerts had to be cancelled, Yuuki had watched the sleeping face of their 16-months old son, Yoshinosuke, and of his pregnant wife, as they were now supported by his work at a call center where he had previously worked.

I was almost crying. The situation felt like I was walking through a tunnel with no exit, losing my balance on the way... However, as the days went by, I came to realize how precious my Soka Gakkai friends were. All the heartfelt letters in my mailbox such as our *Ukubo District Newsletter* made by local Soka Gakkai members asking me, “How is your wife feeling?” and “Let’s do our best together.” Friends from the young men’s division also sent me encouragements through calling and using LINE (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020h).

Coming to Tokyo to find work related to music, he felt the warmth of the Soka family, which also helped him when he was anxious about his mother who was fighting against illness. The reason why they named their class “Ohana” (which means “family” and “precious person” in Hawaiian) is that they had wished their classes to be a space where people would always smile, and feel like they were part of a family. While everyday reality is harsh for many people, and it is difficult not to be anxious, Yuuki wanted to bring a smile back into people’s lives in the classroom and he deeply vowed to,

strive together with his family and fellow members of Soka Gakkai to transform adversity into a springboard that leads to further advance (*Seikyo Shimbun* 2020h).

They are now exploring the best ways to implement online lessons. Yuuki concluded with a much-quoted passage from Nichiren that he and his wife have deeply ingrained since they joined the organization, and now remember to respond to the situation.

Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life, and continue chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, no matter what happens (*WND* 1999, 86).

*Preliminary Conclusions on a Crisis Response in the Making*

There is a matrix of factors for calculating the many different human, economic, and political risks that the pandemic has come to present, as both very complex challenges as well as opportunities to address global issues such as the urgent action necessary to combat the climate crisis. In Japan, for instance the pull towards investing in new greener jobs and focusing on building resilience for communities to cope with a changing climate was already underway before the COVID-19 pandemic, and investment has doubled since (DeWit 2020). New thinking and changing old mindsets can occur while the challenge to provide economic safety for redundant workers and failed businesses, while also addressing the rising level of poverty, remain. There is a high possibility that we may have to learn to live with the virus (Sample 2020). As a result of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, a difficult balance between reinforcing a new green economy while keeping old jobs will remain the key tension. Reworking the politics of fear away from increasing social and national antagonisms, a successful global governance will more than ever need the support of a global civil society. The Soka Gakkai as a global civil society and grassroots network, together with similar civil society groups, working at this intermediate level that support international institutions such as the UN, may play a significant role.

How can the Soka Gakkai response tell us something about what it means to be a practicing Nichiren Buddhist now, with so many interrelated global issues facing humanity? Personhood and the meaning of human social action are intricately intertwined with how individuals relate to their society, others, and how they imagine the future of the world. The Soka Gakkai is a diverse organization and, as shown by anthropologists, what personhood means intertwines with the perceptions of situations people find themselves in. Yet, the nature of collective and organizational reactions to the current pandemic also tell us something general about how Soka Gakkai members see themselves in relation to others and to the wider world. While personhood and sense of self are always a lot messier than any neat ideal type may indicate (Conklin and Morgan 1996), and who one is or becomes in particular situations is not fixed, but continuously negotiated, is also indicated by the experiences described here.

Zoom and other digital conferencing tools may also both extend and change the boundaries of personhood. The immediacy of the crisis seems to have

“brought the present into consciousness,” as suggested by Bryant (2016, 20), in a way that intensified what it means for Soka Gakkai members to use their Buddhist practice and principles of Nichiren Buddhism to assess and respond to their specific situation. Many in the process found a deepening sense of their Soka Gakkai identity, as persons with a mission to transcend ordinary perceptions of self-other dualities, and to find deeper sources of what connects them as human beings.

The situation did not move into the domain of fate or destiny, which as suggested may be a common sentiment in Japan, but perhaps could be said to take on a new moral consciousness of social obligation. There is no single philosophical model for personhood, but there are tendencies that play out. In most Western countries, concepts such as individualism, autonomy, and ideas of independence have dominated ideals of personhood. Philosophers such as René Descartes (1596–1650) inaugurated a pervasive tendency to see individualism as typical of a well-developed person, proposing sharp boundaries between self and other, as well as between mind and body. Both boundaries have been challenged by this pandemic. Individuals persuaded of being autonomous have infringed several social obligations to others for a fairer and sustainable society, and our social contract with the future. Across the Soka Gakkai organizations, many members arose spontaneously to turn the immediate COVID-19 pandemic into strengthening a sense of “social obligation,” to recommit and address existential issues faced collectively, which undoubtedly affect different groups of people unequally. Just as the crisis was emerging, there has been a rising momentum and focus on support for Sustainable Development Goals across the Soka Gakkai organizations, and these continued to be reinforced through organizational news organs that aim to educate readers about the immediate actions necessary, as well as the longer-term goals to create a more sustainable world order.

It is the priority of personal well-being that has always challenged the need to address collective social obligations to both the near and the far-away. This was the central political problem of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–1778) Republicanism, with the present adding stark obligations towards the survival of future generations. The idea of the body as a material, biological entity belonging to an individual whose comfort mostly trump the consequences this may have for others is being challenged by the pandemic. Many would never have such choices to act according to simple individual consumer desire, as demonstrated for

example by the edited volume by Cooper and Pratten (2015). Whether the pandemic will result in deeper understanding and actions based on a reality of deep interconnectedness, which an organization such as the Soka Gakkai and other civil society groups argue, remains to be seen. The pandemic has given rise to new perceptions of the boundaries of the body as more permeable, making personal behavior increasingly the focus of self-discipline and a new moral consciousness, which may be used for public critique or praise, or for stigmatizing of others, as in the case of Japan's healthcare workers who faced a changed moral consciousness from people around them, who were now asking them to stay away (*Japan Times* 2020).

Judgments and actions are always part of specific sets of social, cultural, and political attitudes, which come to play out in terms of how self and body management is used to either deepen boundaries and separation, or overcome the conceptual classifications to create connections, and deeper understanding of existential relatedness. This will be greatly informed by the way the pandemic is communicated and interpreted, and the fundamental debates about what it means to be a person, and what our social responsibilities are to both those nearby, the far away, and future others. Soka Gakkai's particular concepts of personhood and Nichiren Buddhism as a social practice that now spans into a global network of people rooted in their local community, who seek global solidarity, has so far proven to be particularly well suited for a crisis that, together with other like-minded civil society groups, SG tend to engage with as "risk and crisis management," in a way that seek to address today's bigger issues without falling victim to a myopic view of the self and the other as existing in a dual world of competition.

Good governance has proven critical for governments, to deal effectively with the COVID-19 pandemic, something well supported by this layer of civil society. Soka Gakkai actively promoted scientifically informed, comprehensive, and detailed strategic responses, while keeping an eye on the bigger issues of furthering sustainable and equitable societies. Soka Gakkai's aptitude of linking individual behavior and collective solidarity, to create a new way of imagining a better future, is one way of creating hope.

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**Deception, New Religious Movements, and Claims for Damages:  
The Case of *H.E. et al. v Seosan Church of Shincheonji et al.***

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**ABSTRACT:** On January 14, 2020, the Seosan Branch of Daejeon District Court, in South Korea, rendered a decision on claims for damages by three ex-members of Shincheonji, who argued they had been converted through deceptive techniques of evangelization. While the court rejected most of their claims, it accepted that one of the ex-members had suffered “mental pain” because of the deceptive proselytization, and should be awarded a modest compensation. The verdict did not represent the “victory” the anti-Shincheonji camp promptly claimed it was. However, its assessment of “mental pain” was problematic, and may constitute a dangerous precedent for the religious liberty of unpopular movements in South Korea.

**KEYWORDS:** Shincheonji, Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony, Brainwashing, Deception and New Religious Movements, New Religious Movements: Legal Cases, New Religious Movements in South Korea.

*Shincheonji and the Courts*

Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (in short, Shincheonji) is a large Christian new religious movement headquartered in South Korea (Introvigne 2019, 2020a). Shincheonji involuntarily acquired an international notoriety when one of its devotees was diagnosed with COVID-19 on February 18, 2020. Before being diagnosed, she had attended Shincheonji events and infected many co-religionists. A national controversy followed. Shincheonji was accused of not having co-operated with the authorities in supplying a full list of its members when requested. Although this claim was not accurate (Introvigne et al. 2020a, 2020b), as members of the South

Korean government and law enforcement officers recognized (Kim 2020, Lee 2020), some local authorities and politicians used the opportunity to launch a number of legal investigations against Shincheonji and its related humanitarian organization, HWPL, with opponents asking that they should be disbanded and their leaders criminally prosecuted (Introvigne 2020b, 2020c). While international watchdogs for religious liberty such as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom denounced the campaign as an attempt to destroy a religious minority by using the pretext of the epidemic (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2020a, 2020b), the incident confirmed how powerful and well-connected politically the Christian opponents of Shincheonji in South Korea are (Šorytė 2020).

In the past, opponents have resorted to both violence (Fautré 2020a, 2020b; Di Marzio 2020) and to legal actions to try, without success, to put a halt to Shincheonji's rapid growth. When the COVID-19 crisis hit, opponents in the Reddit group r/Shincheonji, devoted to disseminating anti-Shincheonji material, noted that, while the actions about the virus may eventually fail, in January 2020 a court in Seosan, South Chungcheong Province, had created a precedent that could potentially bankrupt Shincheonji, as well as other movements labeled as “cults” or “heresies” by their Christian foes (see “Gildicchia” 2020). In this article, I examine the issue decided by the Daejeon District Court, Seosan Branch, within the context of old and new controversies about “cults.”

### *The Case: Overview and Decision*

The case was brought before the Seosan Branch of the Daejeon District Court by three former members of Shincheonji whom, in the interest of privacy, I will indicate only with their initials, H.E., H.Y. and C.T., against the Seosan Church of Shincheonji, which is part of the Matthias Tribe of the Shincheonji Church, and five individual members of that church. Shincheonji is organized through twelve tribes, and the Matthias Tribe is one of them.

The individual members of Shincheonji who were sued together with the Seosan Church are of limited interest here, as the court decided that “what exactly the defendants did during the process of evangelizing” is unclear, and at any rate they were not the “dominating force” in that process (the church was). They were exonerated from all charges, and awarded their litigation costs

(Daejeon District Church, Seosan Branch 2020, from which the other quotes in this paragraph are also taken).

All three plaintiffs had spent several years in Shincheonji. According to the decision, H.E. was a member from early 2012 to around September 2018, H.Y., from late 2014 to around September 2018, and C.T., from May 2016 to around October 2018.

All three plaintiffs claimed that they had been recruited into Shincheonji by deception, because the movement

used the evangelism method of engaging them to learn the doctrines of Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the name of a cultural experience program or Bible study. If the one who is being evangelized suspects that it is Shincheonji, the Shincheonji congregation members who are disguised as ones who are learning along with the person who is being evangelized, thoroughly and skillfully manage the one who is being evangelized to not suspect and to be obedient to the doctrines. They hide the truth until a certain degree of purification by the doctrines is reached (so called, “until the seed is planted”). Only after that, they disclose that they are from Shincheonji Church of Jesus.

The three plaintiffs claimed that they became active members of Shincheonji because of this deception. They argued that membership in Shincheonji caused to them significant material and moral damages, as they spent time for the movement without pay, and experienced painful conflicts with their families. H.E. claimed that she worked for Shincheonji full-time without pay for four years. Both H.Y. and C.T. reported that they had abandoned their studies to qualify as social workers to devote more time to Shincheonji. H.Y. added that, because he had become a member of Shincheonji, his wife had divorced him. C.T. insisted that harassment by former co-religionists when he was leaving Shincheonji added to his mental pain.

The plaintiffs calculated the damages they asked from Shincheonji, and the individual members involved in their conversion, based on the money they might have earned had they devoted to profitable activities the time they spent working for the movement, and added additional claims for the mental pain. H.E. asked for Won 40 million (\$ 33,400), including 10 million (\$ 8,346) for the mental suffering, to be paid by each defendant, in her case the Seosan Church and the two members who had converted her. H.Y. requested that the Seosan Church and the member who had converted him should each pay Won 20 million (\$16,691). C.T. asked that the Seosan Church and the two members involved in his

conversion pay each Won 10 million (\$ 8,346). The different monetary requests were justified by the fact that the period spent by each defendant in Shincheonji was different.

Besides dismissing the claims against the individual Shincheonji members, the court rejected all claims by H.Y. and C.T., and asked them to pay the corresponding legal expenses. The court regarded H.Y.'s claims as "groundless," considering that, when he joined Shincheonji, his daughter was already a member and a full-time worker for the church. That he could have been deceived, and had not recognized that the movement he was evangelized into was Shincheonji, was therefore not believable. C.T.'s claims were also dismissed as "difficult to believe." The hours he had devoted to Shincheonji in the short time he was a member (2 years and five months), the court argued, would have allowed him to continue his studies, and there was not enough evidence supporting his statement that, "if he tried to leave the church, congregation members would come bully him at work, and he would suffer at his workplace."

On the other hand, the court accepted some of the claims by H.E., the ex-member who had remained in Shincheonji for the longer period, more than six years, four of them spent working for the movement full-time. The court awarded H.E. only a fraction of what she had requested, i.e. Won 5 million (\$ 4,173), plus interests in case of non-payment. The only claims accepted were against the Seosan Church, and the award was a far cry from the Won 40 million asked by H.E., which would have become Won 120 million in case her original claims against the two members involved in her conversion would have been accepted, in addition to the claims against the church. In addition, H.E. was sentenced to pay the expenses of the individual Shincheonji members she had sued, while the expenses of the case between her and the church were divided, with H.E. paying 80% and the Seosan Church, 20%.

The court came to accept some of H.E.'s claims through three passages. First, it claimed that deceptive methods of evangelization are not protected by the religious liberty clause of the South Korean Constitution.

The first and the second section of the 20<sup>th</sup> article of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea state that, "All citizens shall enjoy freedom of religion," and "No state religion shall be recognized, and religion and state shall be separated," respectively declaring freedom of religion and separation of politics and religion. Regarding the details of the freedom of religion, it is generally explained that its contents are 3 factors: freedom of

worship, freedom of religious conduct, and freedom of religious assembly and association. The freedom of religious conduct, unlike the freedom of worship, is not an absolute freedom, and the freedom of religious conduct includes the liberty of missionary work—that is, to promote the religion that one follows and to gather new members. Inside the liberty of missionary work, there is the liberty to criticize other religions and to suggest conversion (Refer to Supreme Court September 6, 1996 Sentence 96Da19246, 19253 Ruling, Constitutional Court September 27, 2001, 2000HeonMa159 Ruling etc.).

However,

although the liberty of missionary work is a part of the fundamental rights that are guaranteed in the Constitution, it is not an absolute right as seen above. Therefore, it must be carried out so that it may not interfere with the constitutional law and the fundamental rights of others, and it must be limited when it interferes with the peaceful life of others or social order. When others refuse to listen or to accept, the act of continuing to spread one's religion or to forcefully make them accept it, the very act itself, may infringe the right to freedom of privacy, religion, and conscience.

Second, the court accepted the plaintiff's claim that she had been initially recruited into Shincheonji through deception, commenting that one effect of

the evangelism method of this case, is to block the opportunity of the target to make sound judgments and to acquire sufficient information, by offering consideration and kindness while hiding that the actants are affiliated to Shincheonji Church of Jesus, and making them end or worsen the relationship with the people who were informing them of objective facts. Not only that, they actively managed the target even after the target had been won over as a member. This act is to manipulate the anxiety of the targets, that is, that they might be left alone if the kindness and the consideration to make them members of their church is suddenly gone. Therefore, it goes beyond the limits of the freedom of religion that the Constitution guarantees. Moreover, it is illegal, because it resembles fraud or blackmailing, which are against the laws whose purpose is to protect the order of the society.

Having established that an element of deception was involved in H.E.'s conversion to Shincheonji, and declared deception illegal, the court had to go through a third passage, i.e. it should determine whether being a member of Shincheonji was actually harmful for the woman. As in the case of the co-plaintiffs H.Y. and C.T., the court was not persuaded that, during the time she spent in Shincheonji, H.E. would have been unable to organize her days in a different way, and pursue a profitable career while continuing as a believer and a member of the church. No damages were awarded to her for the loss of potential profits.

However, damages were awarded for the “mental pain” H.E. allegedly suffered. She, the court said,

was active as a church member from early 2012 to September 2018, and due to this, it is acknowledged that plaintiff [H.E.] went through mental conflict and a sense of betrayal and shame caused by worsened relationships with family and acquaintances. Therefore, the defendant church is obligated to compensate for the plaintiff [H.E.]’s mental pain, and the detailed amount of the compensation is set as 5,000,000 Won.

### *The Verdict and Anti-Cult Propaganda*

Anti-cultists fighting Shincheonji in South Korea come from conservative and fundamentalist Christian churches. They were heavily involved in the Seosan lawsuit. H.E. was introduced in the Christian media as a member of the National Association of Solidarity with the Victims of Shincheonji, an anti-cult group, whose leader Hong Yeon-ho was in the courtroom when the verdict was read. According to Christian media, which nicknamed the case the “Youth Return Suit,” the anti-cult leader and the plaintiffs,

held each other’s hands tightly and listened to the verdict. When the judge admitted that the evangelism method of Shincheonji was illegal, a sigh of relief erupted here and there in the silence of the court (Kwak 2020, from where the other quotes in this paragraph are also taken).

In reporting the case, Christian media had to acknowledge that, “although the court acknowledged the illegitimacy of the proselyting method, it granted only some of the plaintiffs’ demands for compensation.” The National Association of Solidarity with the Victims of Shincheonji, the anti-cult organization that was described as “leading the Youth Return lawsuit,” “held a press conference in front of the court after the trial.” There, Hong Yeon-ho, described as the CEO of the anti-Shincheonji association, commented that,

It is significant that deceptive evangelization, a representative method of proselytization used by Shincheonji, has been deemed illegal. This will contribute to stop their increasingly zealous missionary work and the fanatical proselytism. If we look at the damage that not only Shincheonji, but also other pseudo-religious frauds, produce, this will be a valuable precedent for obtaining legal compensation for the damages.

H.E. also spoke at the impromptu press conference, stating that,

This verdict will have a huge impact on Shincheonji. Several people of Shincheonji are watching this press conference. It is that important. A person who plays an important

role in the Shincheonji Seosan Church is in the process of leaving Shincheonji. More similar cases will occur in the future.

The lawyer who represented the plaintiffs was later interviewed, and insisted that, the decision is significant, because the deceptive evangelism that Shincheonji is conducting has been recognized as a criminal act. Now we will proceed through the appeal, to prove that deceptive evangelism was at work also in the two cases that were not recognized, and will provide further evidence. In another district, the “fruit,” the person who was evangelized, and the “guide” who lured him into Shincheonji, both simultaneously left the movement and are preparing to file a lawsuit against Shincheonji. In this case, we can expect better results because we can prove the specifics of the plot.

We cannot expect anti-cult activists to report objectively on the case. For them, the court action was part of a larger propaganda campaign. Their claims of “victory” were, however, inaccurate. Two of the plaintiffs had all their claims rejected, and even in the case of H.E., it is a telltale sign of the court’s general assessment of her position that she had to pay 80% of the legal fees for the case against the church, while Shincheonji was requested to pay the remaining 20%.

Shincheonji has also appealed the case. The appeal will take place in the heated post-COVID-19 climate, which indeed puts Shincheonji at further risk. Hoping that, notwithstanding what had become a national witch hunt, cooler tempers can prevail in the appeal court, I would now address the question of deceptive evangelism and its legal status.

### *“Heavenly Deception”*

The opponents claim that “deceptive evangelism” in Shincheonji consists in having the subject study the doctrine of Shincheonji under the guise of cultural experience programs or Bible studies, and having Shincheonji members who are hiding their identities stay by the subject side while he or she is receiving the education, and until is fully indoctrinated (Kwak 2020).

Interestingly, in my own interviews with Shincheonji members, they did not deny that a certain amount of dissimulation is at work in their proselytizing activities. They claimed that this is needed because of the massive anti-cult campaigns targeting Shincheonji and the hostile attitude of most Korean media. One devotee told me that,



Very few people would accept an invitation if we would ask them to come to a Shincheonji meeting. Even if they have not read bad articles before, they would go to the Internet and encounter the anti-Shincheonji propaganda first.

There is also, Shincheonji claims, a Biblical justification for this behavior. Apostle Paul in *1 Thessalonians* 5:2 prophesied that, at his second coming, Jesus will come “as a thief in the night.” Shincheonji interprets Paul’s passage to the effect that the “harvesting” in the last days (i.e. in our time) will be exceedingly difficult due to organized opposition, and some dissimulation will be justified.

On the other hand, the Shincheonji members I interviewed are conscious that what they prefer to call “covered evangelism” perpetuates a vicious circle. It is mentioned by opponents as evidence that Shincheonji is a devious, deceptive “cult,” generating more hostile media coverage and, in the eyes of the devotees, the need for an even more cautious approach. For these reasons, several Shincheonji local communities are moving to “open evangelism,” using now the name Shincheonji from the very first contact with potential converts.

How “covered evangelism” worked? Stalls in the streets were organized to attract the attention of passers-by, where the name Shincheonji was not used. Those approached there, or privately by friends, were invited to Christian “Bible study classes,” again not mentioning Shincheonji. There, some of the fellow students would be Shincheonji members, who would not disclose their identity as devotees to the recruit. According to the opponents, Shincheonji members would also “infiltrate” other Christian churches, where they would make friends and invite them to “Bible studies,” without disclosing that these are Shincheonji activities.

All this was not new. As the anti-cultists mentioned when commenting on the Seosan trial, the same practices are also found in other Korean new religious movements. International anti-cult literature mentions “heavenly deception” as allegedly typical of “cults” in general. The term was initially used within another Korean new religious movement, the Unification Church of Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012), which sometimes approached students and others without disclosing the name of the organization that was inviting them to a seminar on spirituality. Like Shincheonji today, the Unification Church in the 1970s and 1980s had a bad press. One branch of the Unification movement, the “Oakland family” in California, led by a Jewish-born university lecturer, Dr. Mose Durst (b. 1939), went to somewhat extreme lengths to disguise the name of the Unification

Church, and it took weeks and even months for recruits to realize which movement they were being asked to join (Bromley and Shupe 1980, 231–33). Even in the United Kingdom, in the early 1980s, as a famous study by sociologist Eileen Barker reported, it took a few meetings before one third of the recruits realized the seminars they were attending were organized by the notorious Unification Church, although it was also true that two thirds understood it very quickly (Barker 1984).

The deception was “heavenly” as it was justified by the claim that leading somebody to join the Unification Church was beneficial to the convert’s happiness and eternal salvation. By speaking of a generalized gross deception, however, anti-cultists failed to note that the practices of the “Oakland family” did not exist in other local groups of the Unification Church. They were short-lived, and might have been influenced by equally short-lived proselytization methods used in California by the not less controversial Hare Krishna devotees, who called them “transcendental trickery” (Bromley and Shupe 1980, 231–33).

It seems that this was a common reaction to hostile media by *Asian* new religious movements. In South Korea and beyond, both the World Mission Society Church of God (although it won some court cases for defamation against especially vitriolic attacks by anti-cultists: Introvigne and Folk 2017) and Providence (*ABC News* 2017) received similar accusations of practicing “heavenly deception.” Even in the case of the largest non-Christian Korean new religion, Daesoon Jinrihoe, alternatively spelled Taesunchillihoe, one critical scholar claimed in 2001 that,

Propaganda methods include haunting [...] the large bookstores, especially the Asian thought and religion sections, and the Seoul underground. The usual solicitation is to inquire if one is interested in Eastern thought or the Way, and then an invitation to a place that teaches such ideas, without mention of Taesunchillihoe (Jorgensen 2001, 84; for a criticism of Jorgensen’s methodology, see however Yongbok and Introvigne 2018).

The situation in Mainland China is different, because proselytization on behalf of a non-authorized religious group is forbidden by the law. Using alternative names when evangelizing is thus a need due to the persecution. On the other hand, some Chinese new religious movements, including the fast-growing Church of Almighty God (CAG), have been accused of resorting to deception even outside China. In the early 2000s, Christian anti-cultists circulated an alleged CAG recruitment manual, whose title was “Detailed Instructions for Sounding Out and

Paving the Way” (摸底铺路细则), where members were taught to “infiltrate” Christian churches without initially revealing they belonged to the CAG. Australian scholar Emily Dunn (2015, 147–51) considered the hypothesis that the manual was just a fabrication as not impossible, but stated that it might also have been genuine, and in this case aimed at resisting persecution rather than deceiving other Christians:

While Protestant and [Chinese] government sources depict “sounding out” as typifying the general cunning and evil of the movement, the tactic has probably been developed primarily with the goal of protecting vulnerable evangelists, rather than preying upon unsuspecting Protestants (Dunn 2015, 151).

Based on a study of the language of the text, which includes sentences not typical of CAG’s jargon and contradicting its theology, I concluded that the document was fabricated to slander the CAG, probably by Christian pastors concerned about the high number of conversions to the movement from their churches, although it might have incorporated sentences copied from genuine CAG material (Introvigne 2020d, 115).

Apart from the manual, however, the highest administrative leadership of the CAG noticed at one stage that some rogue CAG members did use “low and base means” of evangelization, which may have been a reference to deceptive strategies, and told them to stop doing this, threatening expulsion (The Church of Almighty God n.d.). On April 14, 2005, the chief administrative leader of the CAG, Zhao Weishan, known to the members as “the Man used by the Holy Spirit,” instructed that,

The gospel must be preached by using regular ways. This has been emphasized many times. Some people still use low and base means to preach the gospel. This must be forbidden. Whoever uses such means to preach the gospel must stop immediately. Anyone who uses them again will be expelled (The Church of Almighty God 2017, 68).

Outside the Asian context, Scientology has been accused of proposing “personality tests” to passers-by in the streets and other activities without disclosing its name, although some court decisions concluded that these strategies were promoted by local groups without sanction from the headquarters, and were abandoned after they had been objected to in court cases (Corte di Cassazione 1997).

When a new religious movement believes that its message is a unique and urgent call to salvation, zealous efforts at proselytization normally follows. Some

movements, or their members, may easily become over-zealous. Christian critics claim that such over-zealousness is a unique feature of Shincheonji, while it is in fact common among new religious movements. The accusation of “sheep-stealing” through deception is both frequent and understandable when a new movement grows by converting many members of older religions. From early Christians, indeed from the direct followers of Jesus Christ themselves, to the first Methodists, such accusations mark the whole history of Christianity. Normally, they disappear with time. As a subsequent generation follows the enthusiastic first one, new religious movements go through processes of routinization of charisma and mainstreaming. Most of those I have mentioned here have abandoned “heavenly deception” and similar tactics, realizing that proclaiming to the world that they are proud members of their movements is a more effective way to answer media slander. It may also save them time and money in courts of law.

### *But Is It Illegal?*

Whether “heavenly deception” is immoral or illegal, besides being bad PR, is a different question, and an old one. Within the Catholic Church, the Jesuits, who had a significant number of enemies, were also accused of dissimulating their identity. They answered by elaborating on a classification of lies, which was actually based on texts dating back to Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), but whose definitive statement is due to the Jesuit cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621, canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church in 1930). It distinguishes between jocose, officious, and injurious lies. Jocose lies are told to amuse or entertain, officious lies to achieve an aim (which in turn may be good, bad, or indifferent), and injurious lies to harm others. Catholic doctrine distinguishes between a mortal sin, a gravely sinful act that leads to damnation if the sinner does not repent and confess the sin before death, and a venial, or minor, sin. Although venial sins should also be avoided, Catholics believe that, unlike mortal sins, they require penance in this life or after death, in Purgatory, but do not lead to damnation. An unconfessed mortal sin prevents a Catholic from taking communion; a venial sin does not. Bellarmine maintained that, while injurious lies are mortal sins, both jocose lies and officious

lies told to achieve a good or indifferent aim are merely venial sins (Bellarmino 1853, 130–31).

This position still reflects a majority consensus in Christian ethics. Lies should be avoided, but “officious” lies told in service of a good cause are somewhat regarded as a minor sin, with some even believing that in certain circumstances they may be morally permissible (Kaczor 2012). Of course, any such argument would fail to persuade Shincheonji’s opponents, for whom conversion to Shincheonji is not a good cause. They may be, in turn, accused of double standards, since when they try to “deconvert” devotees *out* of Shincheonji they have no problems in telling them lies and leading them to the deprogrammers under false pretenses (Di Marzio 2020).

But what about courts of law? Is deception on behalf of proselytization illegal? Does it entitle those who converted to recover damages? In fact, there are here two different questions. The first is whether “covert” proselytization is illegal, and the second is whether it entitles those converted to claim damages, and in what amount.

The Seosan court claimed that deception may “block the opportunity of the target to make sound judgment and to acquire sufficient information.” I believe that this part of the court’s opinion is questionable, and based on a naïve model of conversion, which has been abandoned by most scholars from several decades. This model posits that one converts to a new religion by gathering information on it, placing favorable and negative information on an ideal scale, and taking a decision. Indeed, this is how converts sometimes reconstruct their own conversions *post factum*. But in real life, this kind of purely intellectual conversion is rare. The author of the *Gospel of John* already knew this.

Jesus said, “Come and see.” They went and saw the place where Jesus was staying. The time was about four o’clock in the afternoon. They stayed with Jesus the rest of the day. Andrew was one of those [...] who [...] went after Jesus. He was Simon Peter’s brother. The first thing Andrew did then was to find his brother Simon. He said, “We have found the Messiah!” (John 1:39–41).

Andrew and Simon Peter did not ask Jesus for a full doctrinal statement of Christianity, then ran to the next synagogue to obtain more information on Judaism and started a comparative study. They “went and saw”—and believed. “We have found the Messiah!”

Conversion to new religious movements is a widely studied phenomenon (Robbins 1988, 63). Most scholars concluded that, while doctrine is not irrelevant, conversion is almost never a purely intellectual experience. It is an experiential feeling of being “born again”: as Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1890–1950) famously stated,

the experience of conversion tends to be the same in all religions: a new “me” is born near the old one, a new life starts, all is transformed (Van der Leeuw 1970, 517–18).

“Feeling well” in the group, finding new friends, perceiving a new purpose in life are in most cases more crucial factors of conversion than theology (Mathé 2005), and this is particularly true for new religious movements (Lofland 1977; Greil and Rudy 1984). In a video shoot through a hidden camera during a deprogramming, later used by Korean conservative Christians to promote this practice, a girl is confronted by a Christian “counselor” who tries to prove to her that Shincheonji’s doctrine is false. She reacts by telling her parents, who are in the room, that “I was more happy when I lived there [in Shincheonji] than in the 25 years I have lived with you” (CBS 2017, 30.26, 30.30).

The Korean court seems to regard as sinister that H.E. converted because she found “consideration and kindness” in Shincheonji, rather than following a rational examination of the respective doctrines of the movement and mainline Protestantism. But in fact, this is the rule, rather than the exception, in real-life conversion processes as described by contemporary scholars. The court also seems to believe that converts are totally “passive,” another myth that has been debunked by scholars long ago (Richardson 1985). Conversion is an interactive process, where both the movement and the convert are actively and cooperatively engaged.

Finally, it is questionable that H.E.’s choice would have been more rational, had she immediately understood she had been approached by Shincheonji and searched for information on the Web. Some contemporary scholars of the fake news phenomenon would say that, given the prevalence of misleading material on the Internet, those who look for information there may in fact be led to a *less* informed judgement (Gelfert 2018).

Ultimately, the question is what role the deception played in the process of conversion. When the naïve models of passive conversions, and of converts weighing on a scale the respective merits of their old and new doctrines, are abandoned, the initial deception appears to be of lesser importance. “Initial” is

the operative word here. Deception cannot be maintained for long. Pretty soon, the potential convert will be exposed to the peculiar doctrines of Shincheonji, including that its founder, Chairman Lee Man Hee, is the “promised pastor” appointed by God to lead humanity into the Millennium (Introvigne 2019, 2020a). Even the dumbest recruit will understand which group he or she is being dealing with.

Nobody can become a member of Shincheonji without fully understanding its theology. One is not baptized into Shincheonji, and members proudly proclaim that theirs is the only religion one joins by graduating after an exam. The exam comes after a demanding course, and includes 300 questions candidates should answer in writing. It is by no means a mere formality, and statistics indicate that several candidates fail and must repeat the exam (Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony 2018). Accordingly, it is impossible to become a member of Shincheonji without understanding what the movement is all about.

To claim that the initial deception had permanent effects, lasting after the deceived recruit has realized which religion he or she is being asked to join, one should believe in old-fashioned brainwashing models, such as the ones promoted by the controversial American psychologist Margaret Singer (1921–2003). Indeed, Singer’s model seems to be implicitly at work when Christian “counselors” try to deprogram members of Shincheonji in South Korea (Di Marzio 2020, 58).

Singer offered her most comprehensive statement of her brainwashing theories to the academic community in a report signed by DIMPAC (Deceptive and Indirect Methods of Persuasion and Control: DIMPAC 1986), a task force that was established in 1983 by the American Psychological Association (APA), for the purpose of assessing the scientific status of the brainwashing theories about “cults.” Singer, who was at the head of the task force, chose the other members. The DIMPAC report was firstly severely criticized by its assigned auditors, and then rejected by the APA on the grounds that it “lacks the scientific rigor and evenhanded critical approach necessary for APA imprimatur” (BSERP 1987).

Eventually, the brainwashing explanation of conversion to new religious movements was repudiated by both mainline scholars and courts of law, since the landmark 1990 *Fishman* decision (U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California 1990) in California, as pseudoscience. The name DIMPAC, with its

reference to “deceptive and indirect” techniques of persuasion, signaled Singer’s pet theory, initially formulated for the Unification Church, that an initial deception creates a permanent “brainwashing” effect in the victims’ brain. This theory, however, was repudiated by the scientific community. Israeli scholar Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, himself a well-known critic of “cults,” in his review of the report DIMPAC had prepared for the APA, asked himself,

What exactly are deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control? I don’t think that psychologists know much about techniques of persuasion and control, either direct or indirect, either deceptive or honest. We just don’t know, and we should admit it. Lacking psychological theory, the report resorts to sensationalism in the style of certain tabloids. [...] The term “brainwashing” is not a recognized theoretical concept, and is just a sensationalist “explanation” more suitable to “cultists” and revival preachers. It should not be used by psychologists, since it does not explain anything (BSERP 1987; for a detailed story of the DIMPAC controversy, see Introvigne 2014).

The Seosan court maintained that deception is illegal *per se*, and outside the constitutionally protected freedom of religion. It is unclear to me on what provisions of Korean law this conclusion was based, perhaps on some general statute about false and deceptive advertising. However, even assuming that deception in evangelism is *per se* illegal, to successfully claim damages plaintiffs should prove that they have suffered an actual harm. Here, the Seosan court was much more reluctant in following the plaintiffs. It dismissed the claims of H.Y. and C.T. Even in the case of H.E., the court refused to compensate her for the time spent in Shincheonji and her work on the movement’s behalf. These elements only entered the court’s determination to determine the amount of damages for “mental pain,” where the judges considered

the period when plaintiff [H.E.] was evangelized to and worked in the defendant church, the degree of work, the details of evangelism, and the situation after she left the church (Daejeon District Court, Seosan Branch 2020).

Damages were awarded for “mental pain,” not as compensation for post-conversion unpaid work. The “mental pain,” the court argued, consisted in the fact that, having been “deluded” by Shincheonji’s deceptive evangelism, H.E.

went through mental conflict and a sense of betrayal and shame caused by worsened relationships with family and acquaintances (Daejeon District Court, Seosan Branch 2020).

Here, the conclusion seems contradictory. Presumably, the “worsened relationships” were a consequence of her conversion to Shincheonji, not of the



initial fact of attending Bible classes without knowing they were run by Shincheonji. In this initial period, if H.E. did not know she was attending a Shincheonji course, neither did her parents and friends know it, so no conflict was generated. By denying H.E.'s claim for damages based on her post-conversion work for Shincheonji, the court recognized that there was no chain-connection between deception and conversion. This should have also excluded damages for the "worsened relationships with family and acquaintances," as this also happened after the conversion.

Concluding that damages should be paid by a religious group because those who convert to it experience a "worsened relationship" with family and friends is extremely dangerous for religious liberty. Again, this is not a unique consequence of converting to Shincheonji. It is a frequent effect of conversion in general. If a Christian converts to Islam, or vice versa, it is very much likely that he or she will be shunned by relatives and friends, not to mention legal provisions in several Muslim countries making apostasy from Islam a serious crime. It is a well-known fact that, when only one spouse changes his or her religion, divorce is frequent—in all religions. This can be documented through the case of India, where family law allows for a quick divorce in case of conversion of one spouse to a different religion, and tens of thousands of applications for "conversion divorce" are filed every year (Garg 1998). Punishment of religious proselytization because conversions lead to "worsened relationships" with these spouses, relatives and friends who remain in the convert's previous religion would strip religious liberty of one of its fundamental components, the right to evangelize and convert.

We are left with the impression that the Korean court disapproved of deception, and tried to find a way to punish it, while limiting the amount of damages. If the conclusion that deception is not directly connected with conversion to Shincheonji is, as I believe, unescapable, and assuming that in Korean law there is some basis to punish deception *irrespective of its consequences*, the damages a plaintiff can collect should be limited to the time spent (or wasted) attending seminars or courses *before* understanding which religion or movement was organizing them. Additionally, this claim should be valid only in case the plaintiff, upon understanding that the courses were organized by Shincheonji, abandoned them, and complained about the wasted time. If, having realized that the path was leading to Shincheonji, the plaintiff

continued in it, and eventually converted, he or she was implicitly declaring that conversion was not harmful.

That, after many years in a religious movement, one can decide to move on and change again a religious affiliation, is in turn normal. Ours is a time of increased religious mobility, and most new religious movements operate like revolving doors, where members come and go continuously (Barker 1984). If they should be compensated for the time spent in a religion they later repudiated, all religions, old or new, will quickly go bankrupted.

It may be a good idea, for Shincheonji, to move completely from “covert” to “open” evangelism. It would certainly improve its image in difficult times. At the same time, Korean courts of law should carefully consider claims for damages based on deceptive conversion techniques. Their decisions may be based on faulty and outdated theories of religious conversion. They may also adversely affect the already precarious state of religious liberty in a country where conservative Protestants seems to receive a dangerous amount of political support for their witch hunts against “heretics” (Fautré 2020a, Šorytė 2020).

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## Notes on a Survey Among Religious Studies Scholars

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**ABSTRACT:** The article presents the results of a survey among speakers at CESNUR's 33<sup>rd</sup> international conference, held in Turin in 2019. By using questions from the 2017 European Values Study, the survey assessed the scholars' religious (and political) opinions. While the number of those who answered (77) hardly allows for generalizations, the survey was a good starting point to study the community of scholars interested in new religious movements.

**KEYWORDS:** Sociology of Religions, Religious Studies Scholars, Academic Study of New Religious Movements, Sociology of New Religious Movements, History of New Religious Movements.

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From September 5-7, 2019, CESNUR's 33<sup>rd</sup> international conference was held in Italy, at Turin University's Campus Luigi Einaudi. Its theme was *Re-enchanting the World: Spiritualities and Religions of the Third Millennium*. It was organized by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), in cooperation with Turin University's Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, the same department's CRAFT (Contemporary Religions And Faiths in Transition) research centre, AIS' (*Associazione Italiana di Sociologia*; Italian Sociological Association) "Religion" section, the *Centro di Scienze Religiose* (Religious Sciences Centre) *Erik Peterson*, and ISSNR (International Society for the Study of New Religions). The conference enjoyed broad success as to the number of participants (about 230 people from 28 countries, of whom 160 speakers—the

highest numbers in the history of CESNUR's international conferences), national and international media coverage, and the quality of work presented.

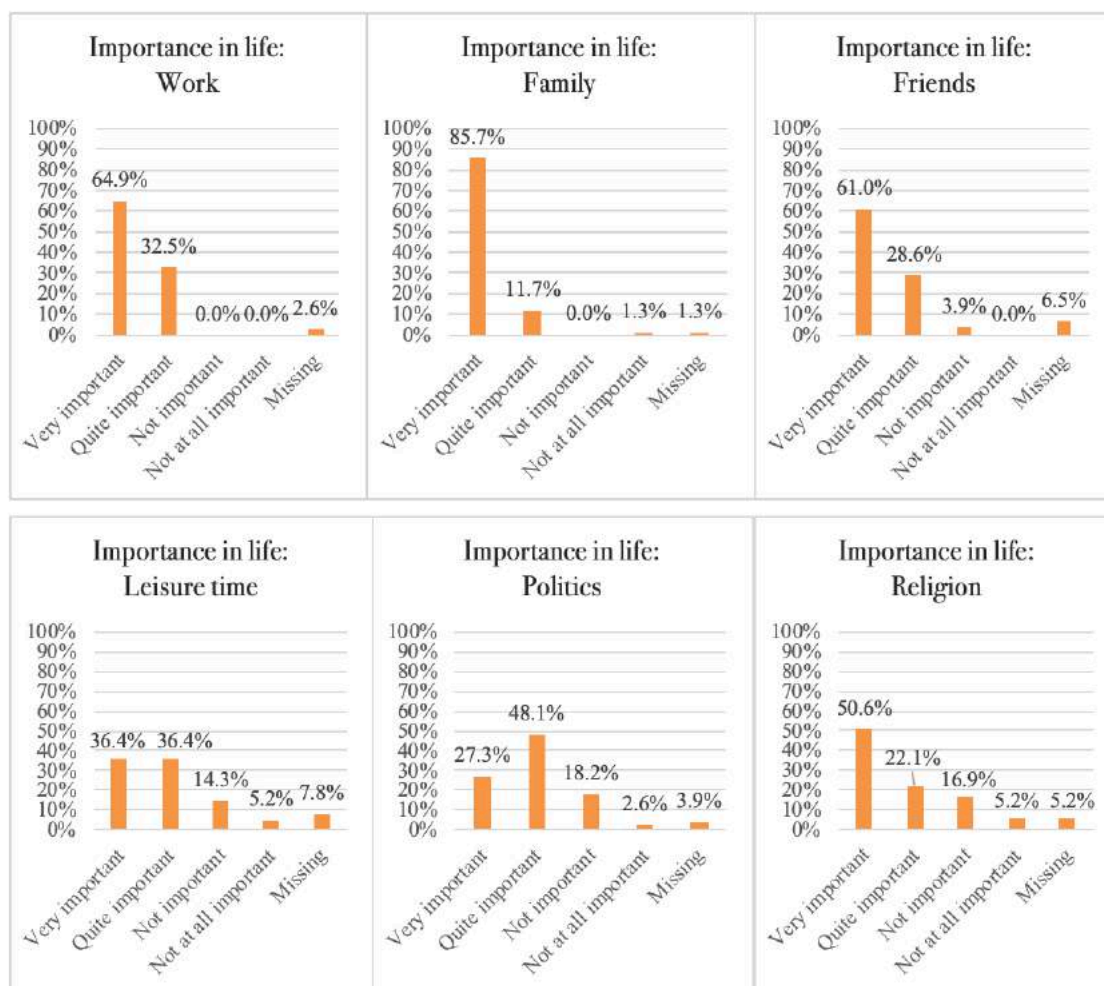
Considering the importance of the number of participants, and their qualifications as scholars in the field of religious studies, we considered it might be interesting to submit a questionnaire to participants (or, rather, to the speakers only, in order to avoid sample confusion), to find out some salient aspects of their approach to religion and spirituality, considered in their belonging, behaving and believing dimensions. The aim was to seek to approximately (and in the absence of similar attempts, as far as we know) understand the religious attitude of the community of people professionally dedicated to studying the religious behaviour of human communities, with particular reference to new religious movements and contemporary spiritualities.

To this end, we extrapolated from the 2017 European Values Study master questionnaire questions related to religion and spirituality, accompanied by some essential socio-demographic questions, and a complementary query concerning political preferences—which seemed useful to us to complete the axiological frame. We chose to use EVS survey items in the interests of uniformity, as it is a widely known and shared model among the community of scholars.

77 conference speakers (almost half) answered the questionnaire. While this was more or less the result we had expected, we are aware that our sample does not in any way allow us to generalise, or to claim to have analysed a representative sample of the universe being investigated. That would be possible only if all, or at least a sizeable proportion, of our respondents had answered. We therefore realise that, from an epistemological perspective, the theoretical problem of this survey must be consigned to the “induction category,” as a cognitive claim to refer to a greater number of people than those interviewed. Thus, it should be borne in mind that the only assessable finding from this survey refers to the sample of respondents belonging to the specific social group examined. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that in the light of the number of questionnaires received—insufficient to make wide-ranging statistical generalisations—we have decided to elaborate the data while remaining on the level of univariate analysis.

Q1: Please say, for each of the following, how important it is in your life.

	Very important	Quite important	Not important	Not at all important	Missing	Total
<b>Work</b>	50 64.9%	25 32.5%	.	.	2 2.6%	77 100%
<b>Family</b>	66 85.7%	9 11.7%	.	1 1.3%	1 1.3%	77 100%
<b>Friends</b>	47 61%	22 28.6%	3 3.9%	.	5 6.5%	77 100%
<b>Leisure time</b>	28 36.4%	28 36.4%	11 14.3%	4 5.2%	6 7.7%	77 100%
<b>Politics</b>	21 27.3%	37 48%	14 18.2%	2 2.6%	3 3.9%	77 100%
<b>Religion</b>	39 50.6%	17 22.1%	13 16.9%	4 5.2%	4 5.2%	77 100%



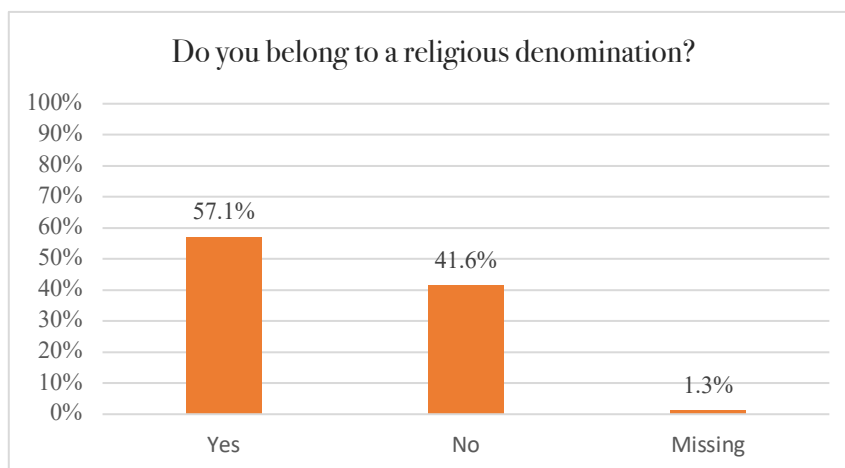


The first table suggests that work (97.4% or 75/77), family (97.4% or 75/77), and friends (89.6% or 69/77) are aspects of their lives most interviewees consider fairly or very important. Most also attribute importance to leisure time (72.8% or 56/77), with “fairly” and “very” important being finely balanced. It is worth noting that 19.5% (15/77) do not attribute importance to leisure time. Most answers agree on the importance of politics (75.3% or 58/77), but the majority considers it only fairly important. The fact that as many as 20.8% of interviewees say that politics is unimportant in their lives is noteworthy. Finally, religion: the majority of the sample (72.7% or 56/77) considers it fairly or very important (with a preponderance of “very”); but even here, a good portion (22.1% or 17/77) deny its relevance. In short, interviewees—albeit with varying distribution—consider work, family, friends, leisure time, politics and religion as important aspects of their lives. Most respondents leave very few questions unanswered, and the majority of these refer to friends and leisure time. It is interesting to observe that, although most interviewees consider religion in some way important in their lives, about one-fifth deny its relevance for them—and this excluding the fact that they are scholars with an academic interest in the subject.

Q2: Do you belong to a religious denomination?

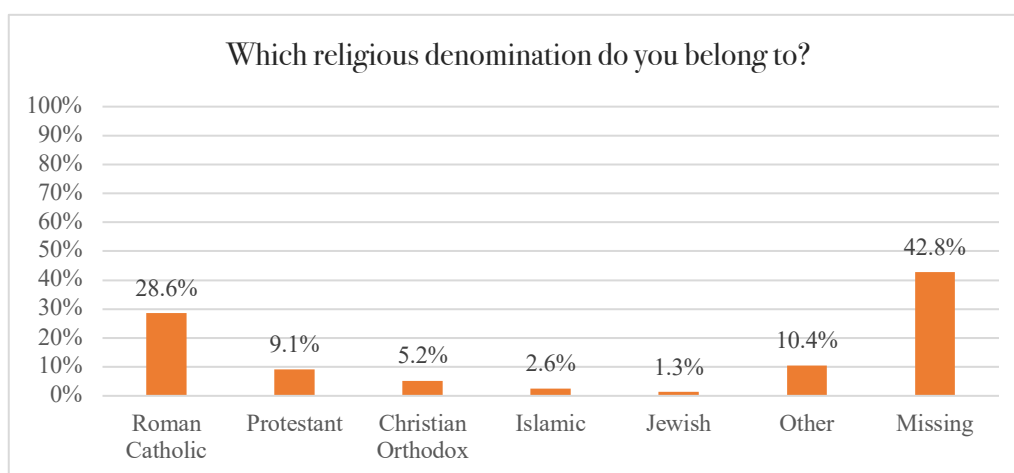
Yes	No	Missing	Total
44 57.1%	32 41.6%	1 1.3%	77 100%

The second table shows that little more than half (57.1% or 44/77) of the interviewees say they belong to a religious denomination, while little less than half (41.6% or 32/77) say they do not belong to one. Only one answer is missing. It is curious to note that fewer people declare affiliation to a religious denomination than those who say religion is important in their lives. This may indicate a shift between religious convictions and identification with a specific denomination.



Q3: Which denomination do you belong to?

Roman Catholic	Protestant	Christian Orthodox	Islamic	Jewish	Other	Missing	Total
22 28.6%	7 9.1%	4 5.2%	2 2.6%	1 1.3%	8 10.4%	33 42.8%	77 100%

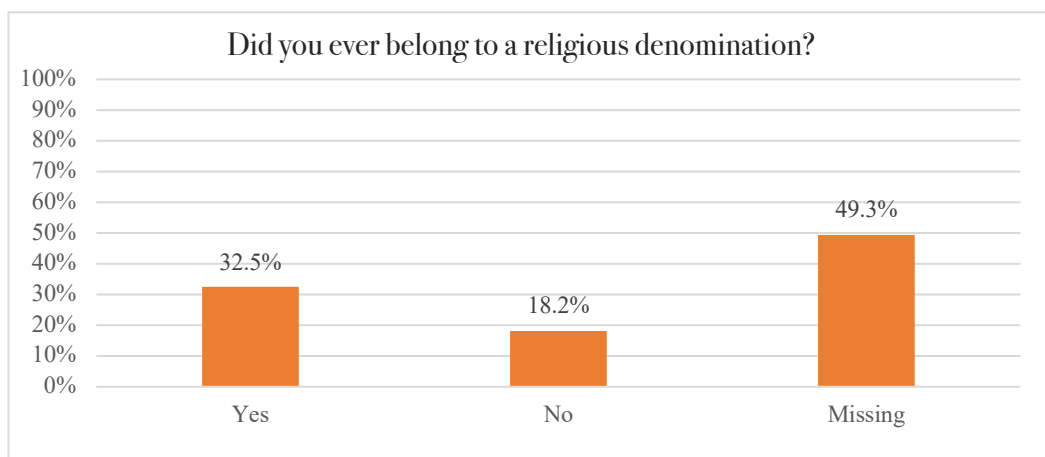


The third table indicates that more interviewees belong to Catholicism (28.6% or 22/77) than to any other denomination. Second comes Protestantism (9.1% or 7/77), followed by Eastern Orthodox Christianity (5.2% or 4/77), Islam (2.6% or 2/77), and Judaism (1.3% or 1/77). It is noteworthy that “Other” (referring to denominations not specified in the questionnaire) was the second most numerous category (10.4% or 8/77): among them two belong to Weixinism, a Taiwanese new religious movement, others to the Anglican

Communion, the Unification movement, Scientology, or even movements with parodistic origins such as the Church of the SubGenius and Discordianism. The high incidence of missing answers (42.8% or 33/77) is due to the fact that many interviewees affirm they do not belong to any religious denomination (as we have already seen). The high number of Catholics may be due to the presence of numerous Italians in the sample. Nobody responded to the options of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Jehovah's Witnesses, also present in the questionnaire.

Q4: [*If respondent is currently not a member*] Did you ever belong to a religious denomination?

Yes	No	Missing	Total
25 32.5%	14 18.2%	38 49.3%	77 100%

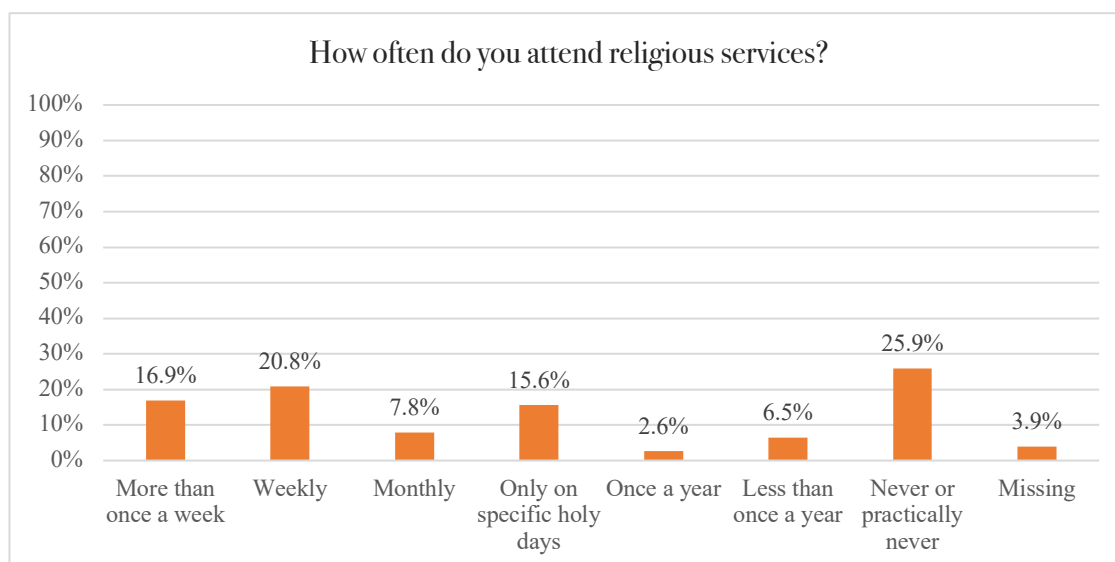


For those who answered in the negative to the second question, “Do you belong to a religious denomination?”, there was the added question, “Did you ever belong to a religious denomination?”. About one-third (32.5% or 25/77) answered in the affirmative, whereas 18.2% (14/77) said no. There were 39 valid answers to this question, meaning that even some of those who had answered affirmatively to the second question responded to this one also, a mistake making it difficult to compare these answers. On the surface, it appears that those who claim to have belonged to a denomination in the past are more numerous than those who deny it (among those who do not at present belong to a religious group). This may mean a greater frequency of abandonment, with respect to a

distant stability of religious denominations; in any case, the “supplementary” answers make it impossible to be sure.

Q5: Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings/baptism, how often do you attend religious services these days?

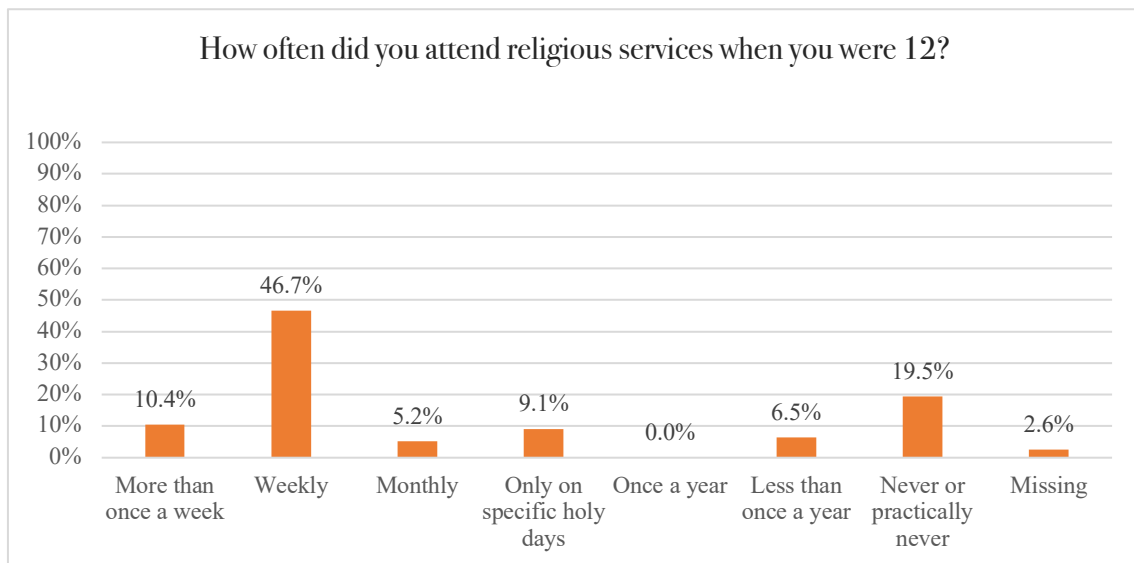
More than once a week	Once a week	Once a month	Only on specific holy days	Once a year	Less often	Never, practically never	Missing	Total
13 16.9%	16 20.8%	6 7.8%	12 15.6%	2 2.6%	5 6.5%	20 25.9%	3 3.9%	77 100%



The fifth table demonstrates that 16.9% (13/77) of the sample say they attend religious functions more than once a week, 20.8% (16/77) once a week, and 7.8% (6/77) once a month. Taken together, these statistics sum up to almost half (45.5% or 35/77) of the sample claiming to attend religious functions assiduously or, at least, with a significant measure of regularity. 15.6% (12/77) say they attend only on specific feast-days. 6.5% (5/77) say they take part once a year. The category with most answers is those who say they never—or practically never—attend ceremonies (25.9% or 20/77). There were only three missing answers out of 77 (3.9%).

Q6: Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings/baptism, how often do you attend religious services when you were 12 years old?

More than once a week	Once a week	Once a month	Only on specific holy days	Once a year	Less often	Never, practically never	Missing	Total
8 10.4%	36 46.7%	4 5.2%	7 9.1%	.	5 6.5%	15 19.5%	2 2.6%	77 100%

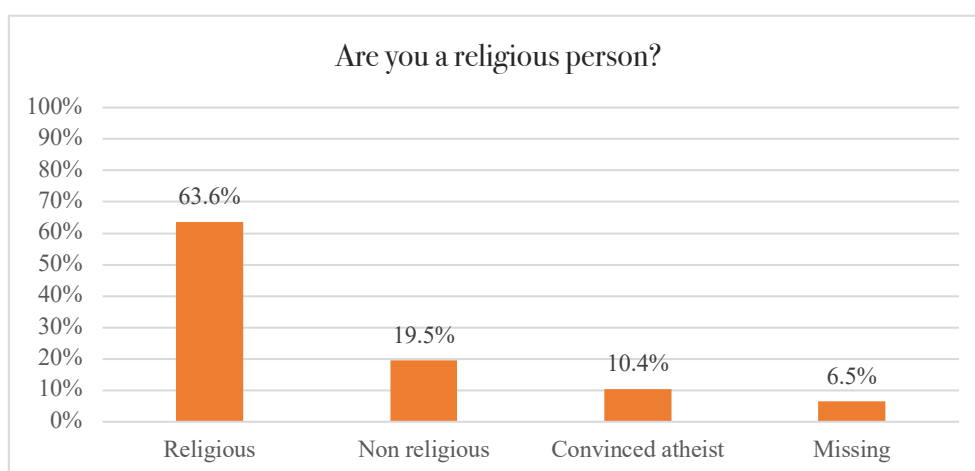


In order to understand more fully the course of religious behaviour in the interviewees' lives, we also asked the previous question from a retrospective angle. The table shows that 10.4% (8/77) declare that they attended religious functions more than once a week when they were 12 years old. The category with most answers is that referring to weekly attendance (46.7% or 36/77). Those who attended monthly are as low as 5.2% (4/77). Together, these three categories account for more than half of the sample, with 62.3% of the answers (48/77), revealing that a good part of respondents declared a more or less regular attendance at religious functions at the age of 12. Differently from the previous question, here we notice greater concentration in the category concerning weekly attendance, which may be due to the presence in the sample of many Italians, who probably grew up in a Catholic environment where weekly practice is considered the norm. 9.1% (7/77) say they participated only on specific feast-days; and 6.5% (5/77) less than once a year. Even with regard to the past, various interviewees (19.5% or 15/77) declared they had never, or

hardly ever, attended a religious function. There were only 2 (2.6%) missing answers.

Q7: Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are...

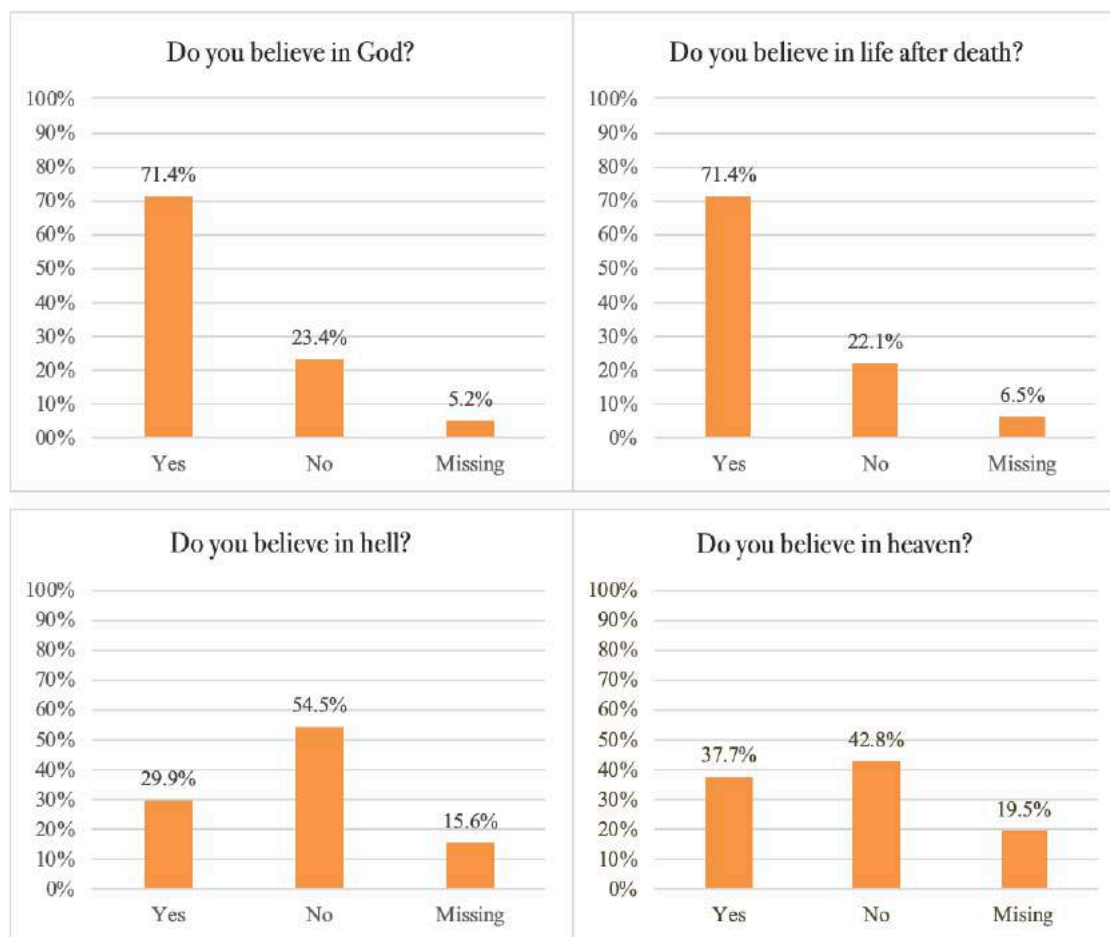
A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Missing	Total
49 63.6%	15 19.5%	8 10.4%	5 6.5%	77 100%



Most respondents (63.6% or 49/77) consider themselves religious, again a slightly higher percentage (with 5 more cases) than those who declare affiliation to a religious denomination, which indicates that some who nurture a religious sentiment do not identify with a particular denomination. 19.5% (15/77) say they are not religious, whereas 10.4% (8/77) claim to be convinced atheists. Together, these last two categories amount to almost one-third of the sample (29.9% or 23/77). As we have already seen for other questions, this distribution shows that a considerable portion of our sample takes its distance from a faith perspective while exhibiting an academic interest in religion.

Q8: Which, if any, of the following do you believe in?

	Yes	No	Missing	Total
<b>God</b>	55 71.4%	18 23.4%	4 5.2%	77 100%
<b>Life after death</b>	55 71.4%	17 22.1%	5 6.5%	77 100%
<b>Hell</b>	23 29.9%	42 54.5%	12 15.6%	77 100%
<b>Heaven</b>	29 37.7%	33 42.8%	15 19.5%	77 100%

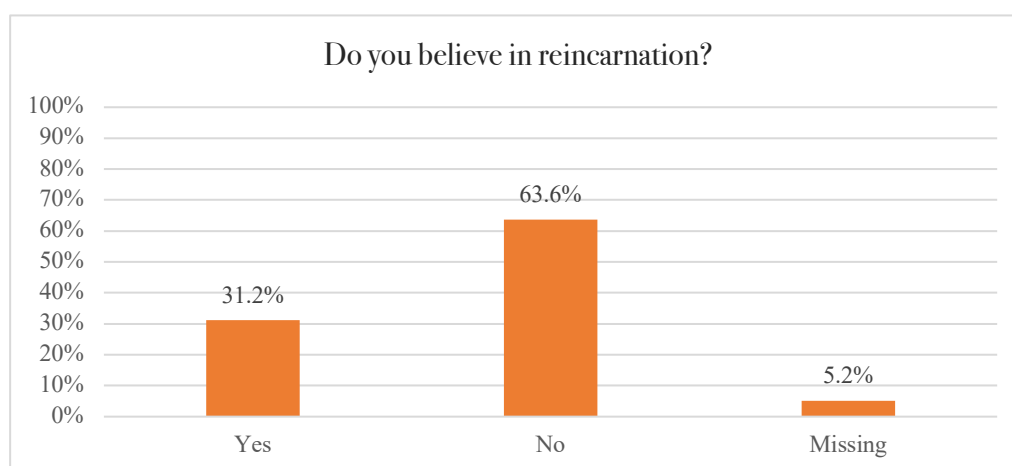


From the above table, it can be seen that a sizeable majority of interviewees (71.4% or 55/77) declares belief in God and life after death. On the contrary, 23.4% (18/77) deny belief in God and 22.1% (17/77) in life after death. However, questions referring to belief in heaven and hell resulted in a different

distribution. Most answers are negative, which is to say most respondents say they do not believe in heaven (42.8% or 33/77) or hell (54.5% or 42/77). In addition, there is a high incidence of missing answers to the questions about heaven (19.5% or 15/77) and hell (15.6% or 12/77).

Q9: Do you believe in reincarnation, that is, that we had past lives and will be born into this world again?

Yes	No	Missing	Total
24 31.2%	49 63.6%	4 5.2%	77 100%

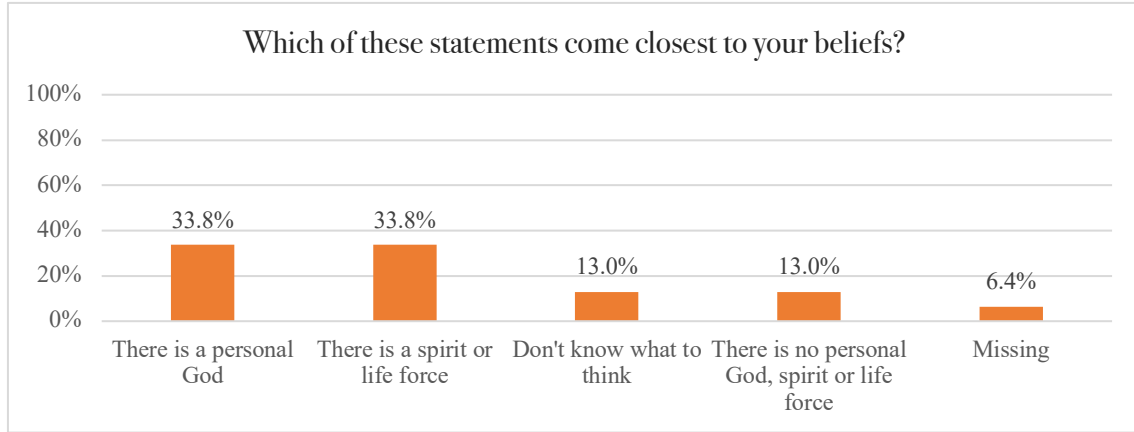


More than twice as many people (63.6% or 49/77) say they do not believe in reincarnation as those who say they do (31.2% or 24/77). The number of believers in reincarnation is, at any rate, significant.

Q10: Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?

There is a personal God	There is some sort of spirit or life force	I don't really know what to think	I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force	Missing	Total
26 33.8%	26 33.8%	10 13%	10 13%	5 6.4%	77 100%





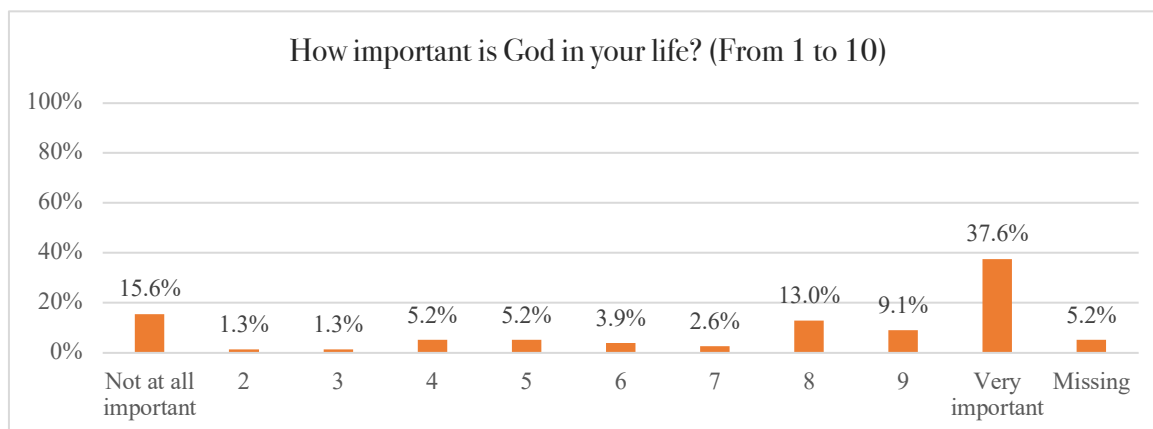
The table shows that about one-third (33.8% or 26/77) state that it is the affirmation of a personal God that draws one close to one's personal beliefs. The same percentage asserts the existence of a vital force or spirit. 13% (10/77) say they have no opinion on the matter, the same number as those who claim not to believe in God nor in a vital force or spirit. It is interesting to note that a considerable portion of our sample believes in a vital spirit notwithstanding the fact that many interviewees declare that they identify with a revealed religion. Once again, this may be a sign among some interviewees of the incongruity between religious feeling and affiliation to a "traditional" religion.

Q11: And how important is God in your life? 10 means very important and 1 means not at all important.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Missing	Total
12 15.6%	1 1.3%	1 1.3%	4 5.2%	4 5.2%	3 3.9%	2 2.6%	10 13%	7 9.1%	29 37.6%	4 5.2%	77 100%

The above table shows that a majority of interviewees attribute importance to God in their lives, with 59.7% (46/77) of the answers collocated between 8 and 10 points on the scale. It is noteworthy that the number of answers is highest in the category attributing great importance to God (equal to the highest point of the scale), with 37.6% (29/77). Few cases fall within the central categories, with a fairly uniform distribution. Altogether the answers referring to low points (from 1 to 3) reach 18.2% (14/77) of the total, where those who collocate themselves

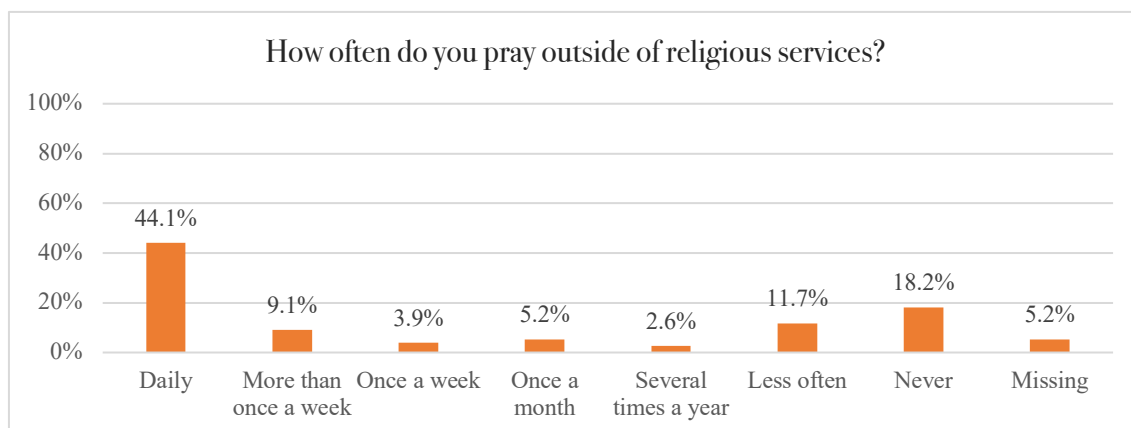
to the lowest point of the scale correspond to 15.6% (12/77) of cases. Observation of the distribution of answers reveals their concentration at the extremes of the scale; the two most numerous categories referring to the maximum and minimum points.



Q12: How often do you pray outside of religious services? Would you say...

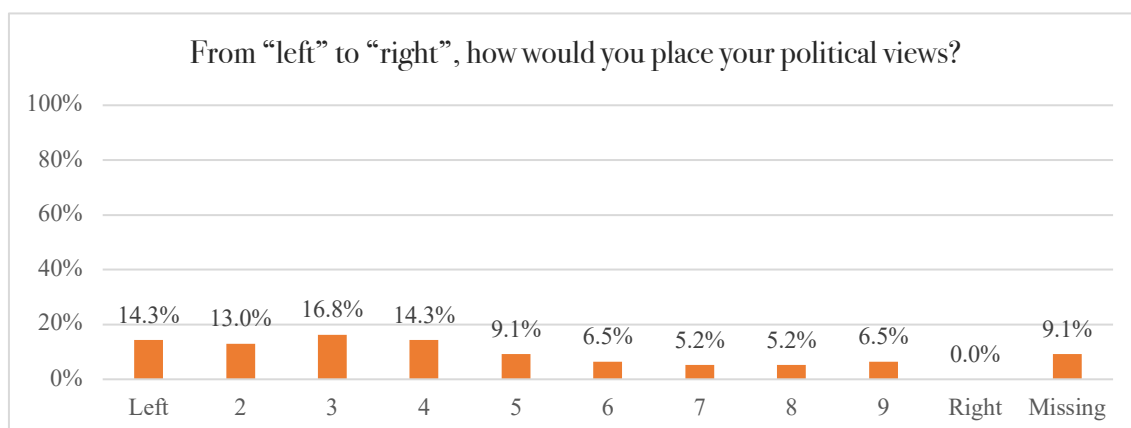
Every day	More than once a week	Once a week	At least once a month	Several times a year	Less often	Never	Missing	Total
34 44.1%	7 9.1%	3 3.9%	4 5.2%	2 2.6%	9 11.7%	14 18.2%	4 5.2%	77 100%

From the table, it can be seen that less than half of the sample (44.1% or 34/77) claim to pray daily. 9.1% (7/77) claim to dedicate time to prayer more than once a week, but those who do so once a week are only 3.9% (3/77). 5.2% (4/77) say they pray every month, and 2.6% (2/77) a few times a year. 11.7% (9/77) say they pray hardly ever or almost never, and 18.2% (14/77) never. The distribution of answers reveals that most of the interviewees claim they pray with some regularity, at least once a week or more often, for a total of 57.1%, as many as the other three categories combined.



Q13: In political matters, people talk of “the left” and “the right”. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?

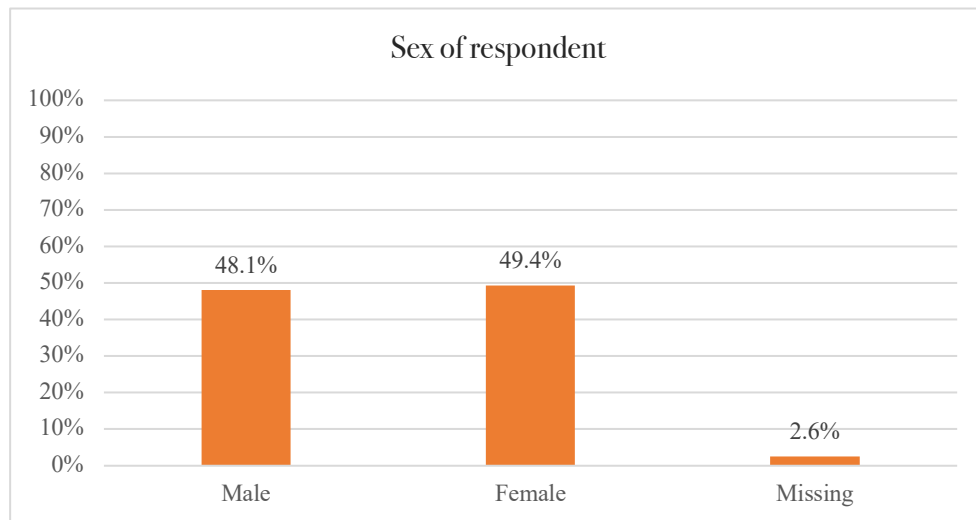
(Left) 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	(Right) 10	Missing	Total
11 14.3%	10 13%	13 16.8%	11 14.3%	7 9.1%	5 6.5%	4 5.2%	4 5.2%	5 6.5%	.	7 9.1%	77 100%



As the above table shows, many interviewees demonstrate a political orientation tending towards the left. More than half of respondents are collocated between points 1 and 4, with a fairly equal distribution of 58.4% of the answers: only 14.3% goes to 1, the most extreme point. Fewer collocate themselves at the centre of the scale (15.6% between points 5 and 6), or show a political orientation tending towards the right: in the latter case, 16.9% position themselves between points 7 and 10, and nobody at point 10. With regard to this question, there is a substantial level (9.1% or 7/77) of missing answers.

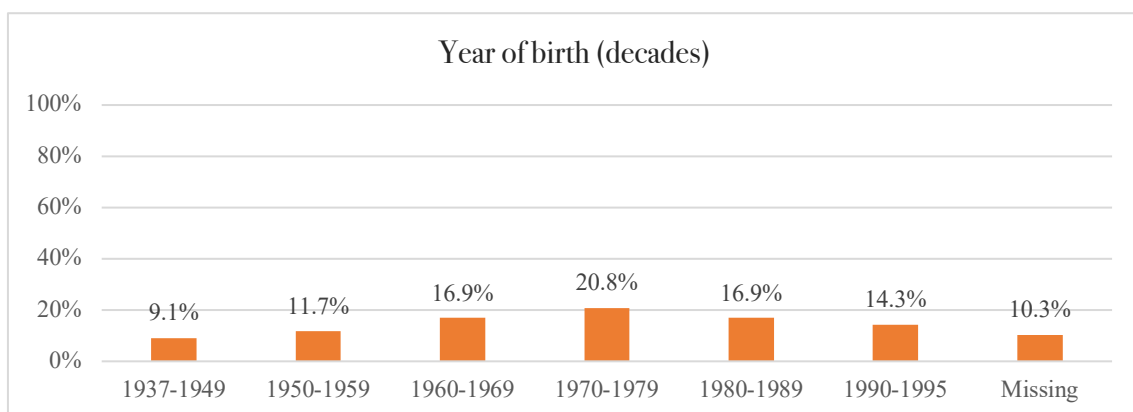
Q14: Sex of respondent.

Men	Women	Missing	Total
37 48%	38 49.4%	2 2.6%	77 100%

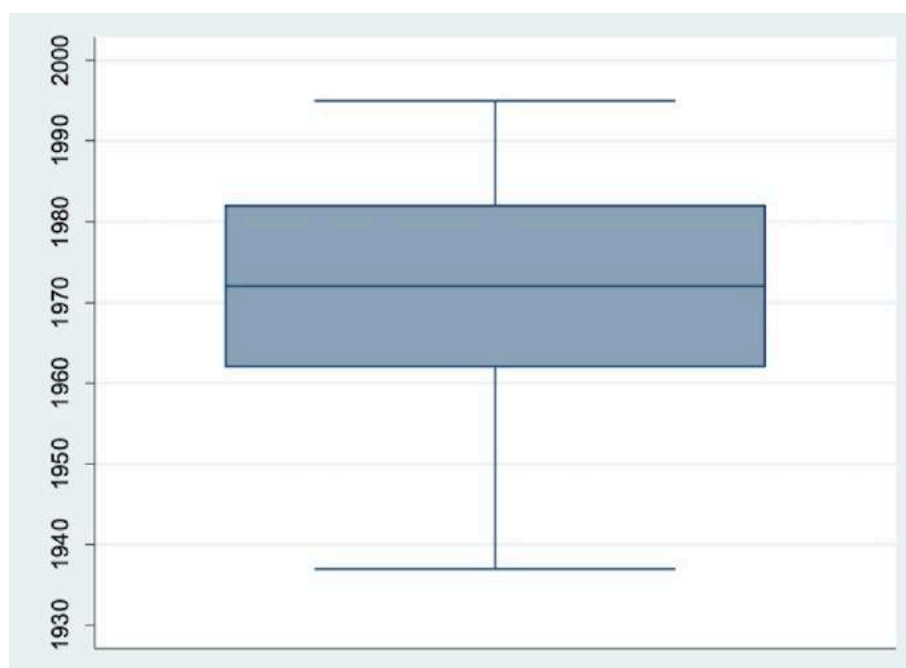


The sample is divided equally between men and women, who supply respectively 48% (37/77) and 49.4% (38/77) of the answers.

Q15: Can you tell me your year of birth, please?



<b>1937</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1963</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1981</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1942</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1965</b>	4 5.2%	<b>1982</b>	3 3.9%
<b>1944</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1967</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1984</b>	3 3.9%
<b>1945</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1968</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1985</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1947</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1969</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1986</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1950</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1970</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1988</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1951</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1971</b>	2 2.6%	<b>1989</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1952</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1972</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1990</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1956</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1973</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1991</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1957</b>	2 2.6%	<b>1975</b>	2 2.6%	<b>1992</b>	3 3.9%
<b>1958</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1976</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1993</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1960</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1977</b>	3 3.9%	<b>1994</b>	2 2.6%
<b>1961</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1978</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1995</b>	1 1.3%
<b>1962</b>	1 1.3%	<b>1980</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Missing</b>	8 10.3%
				<b>Total</b>	77 100%

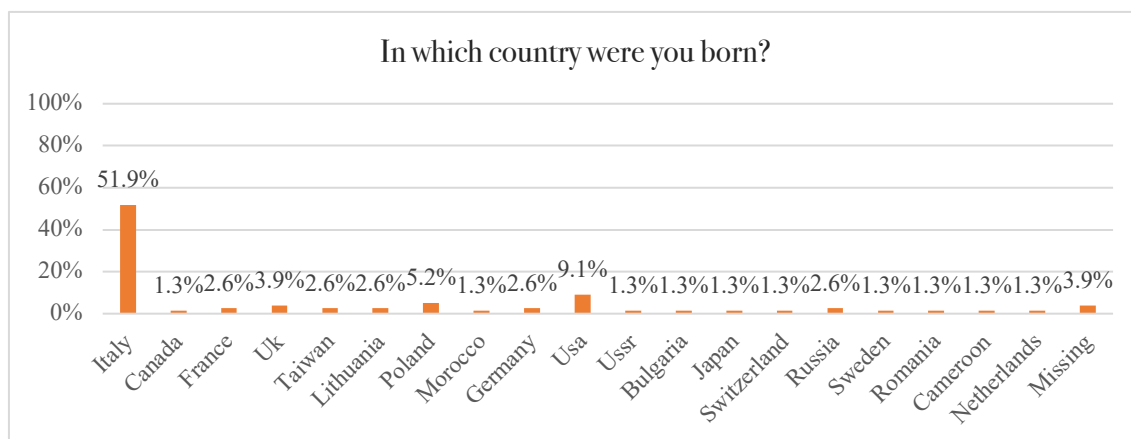


As can be observed from the above table and graphics, the distribution of answers to this question is close to average, with a slight shift towards younger interviewees (more easily seen in the above box plot). It is worth noting that most cases affirm that they are younger than 50 (52% or 40/77; 2019 data), and a little fewer than one-sixth is under 30. Given the cardinal nature of the variable, it is possible to calculate its central tendency and dispersion: the mean year of birth is 1971, with a standard deviation of about 15 years (15.3); the case that divides the sample in half answered 1972 (the average). 8 interviewees (10.3%) did not answer.

Q16: In which country were you born?

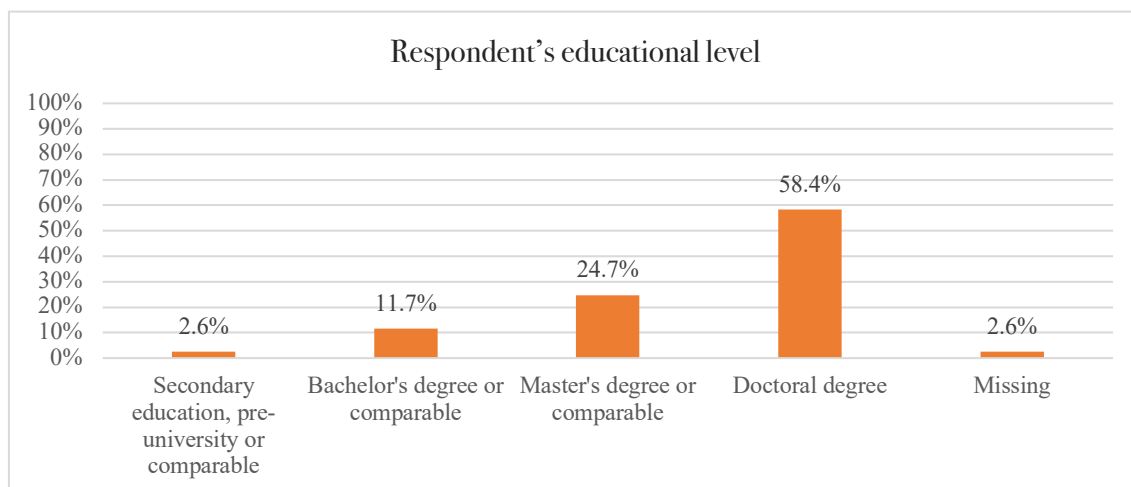
<b>Italy</b>	40 51.9%	<b>USSR</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Canada</b>	1 1.3%	<b>Bulgaria</b>	1 1.3%
<b>France</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Japan</b>	1 1.3%
<b>UK</b>	3 3.9%	<b>Switzerland</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Taiwan</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Russia</b>	2 2.6%
<b>Lithuania</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Sweden</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Poland</b>	4 5.2%	<b>Romania</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Morocco</b>	1 1.3%	<b>Cameroon</b>	1 1.3%
<b>Germany</b>	2 2.6%	<b>Netherlands</b>	1 1.3%
<b>USA</b>	7 9.1%	<b>Missing</b>	3 3.9%
		<b>Total</b>	77 100%

As the above table shows, the majority of respondents were born in Italy (51.9% or 40/77). The others are fairly evenly distributed among a total of 19 countries, the only ones having more than 2 interviewees being the USA (7 cases, 9.1%), Poland (4, 5.2%), and the UK (3, 3.9%).



Q17: What is the highest educational level that you have attained?

Secondary or post-secondary	Bachelor's degree or comparable	Master's degree or comparable	Doctoral degree	Missing	Total
2 2.6%	9 11.7%	19 24.7%	45 58.4%	2 2.6%	77 100%



The table shows that the majority of interviewees have a PhD (58.4% or 45/77) or a Master's degree (24.7% or 19/77): together these two categories make up 83.1% (64/77) of respondents, indicating the high educational level of the sample. 11.7% (9/77) have a primary degree, and only 2 (2.6%) do not have a university qualification.

## *Conclusions*

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this survey was to investigate the religious attitudes of a group of religious studies scholars, in the three contexts of belonging, behaving, and believing. Because of the sample's nature, generalizations would not be appropriate. Rather, the results may offer some suggestions for further research. It is in this spirit that, in addition to the comments offered in connection with each item, some general conclusions are proposed.

The answers evidence that a significant number of respondents are engaged in a process of distancing themselves from the very religion they study as scholars. Some were never personally close to religion. There is another significant segment of respondents, perhaps the majority, depending on what questions we consider, who are personally involved in religion, besides studying it. There are more respondents who claim they believe in God (71.4%) in comparison to those who regard themselves as religious (63.6%), or belong to a religious group (57.1%). 46.8% reported an identification with a monotheist tradition (Christianity, Judaism, or Islam). However, a smaller number of scholars in our sample accept the core doctrines of these traditions. 42.8% do not believe in heaven, and 54.5% do not believe in hell. 31.2% believe in reincarnation.

As we can see, even when studied only at the univariate analysis level, data are complicated, and offer a rich array of suggestions. It would certainly be worthwhile to follow up with similar studies, if possible with larger samples. One question to be discussed will be whether being personally involved in subjects scholars are studying would be useful or detrimental for monitoring, understanding, and explaining religion. A parallel question is what leads scholars to choose religion as their preferred academic field. Perhaps belonging to one religious tradition, or rejecting religion as a whole, may be relevant factors for this choice. In their 2000 book *Acts of Faith*, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke noted that sociology of religion was once dominated by those intent at “developing social science to attack religion,” but in recent years a growing number of religious believers had entered the field, notwithstanding the initial risk of being discriminated or marginalized by the anti-religious majority (Stark and Finke 2000, 1 and 14–6). This was written twenty years ago, and their conclusions may



now be reconsidered and tested empirically by surveying religious studies scholars.

It would also be interesting to ask whether studying religion from an academic perspective and reflecting on one's own faith and religious affiliation are connected, and whether encountering different religions may reinforce or change the scholar's own beliefs. The relevance of all these questions was the theoretical framework of the research, aimed at understanding whether "researching those who do research" may lead to a better understanding of the research field in itself.

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Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

**“New New Religions” in North America:  
The Swaminarayan Family of Religions**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Swaminarayan movement, which emerged in the early nineteenth century in the Indian state of Gujarat, has grown into a significant Indian sectarian group through the twentieth century. After 1965, it began to expand in America, and has emerged into a family of almost a dozen individual new religious movements, notable for the large temples they have erected. Their presence calls for an expanded focus of interest by new religions scholars, to include those diverse groups that have emerged into prominence on the religious landscape in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS:** Swaminarayan, Hinduism, Vaishnava Hinduism, Hinduism in America, New Religious Movements in America.

*Sahajanand Swami*

The Swaminarayan movement holds a particular status within the modern development of religion in India. This reformist Hindu movement initially appeared in the Indian state of Gujarat in the early nineteenth century, as a new religious sect within the larger milieu of Krishna-oriented Vaishnava Hinduism (Dave 1996; Kim 2000; Williams 1984; Williams, 2001). While plainly a new religious thrust, which founded its own new temples and made significant innovations on the tradition, it emerged just as Britain was assuming control of India, and prior to the massive arrival of Christian missionaries through the middle of the century. As such, it preceded the India-wide response to the spread of Christianity and the resultant Hindu Renaissance, the Renaissance leadership's search for the essence of Hinduism, and the move of the new set of Indian-based

religion into a confrontation with the modern world. The Swaminarayan movement certainly stands over against the many guru-led spiritual movements that became so important in introducing Western believers to various forms of modernized Hinduism in the last half of the twentieth century.

Traditional Hinduism, much like Medieval Catholicism in the West, had an all-pervasive presence in India. Centered on its many temples, which served as local homes to the many deities who received worship and acknowledgement, its life was punctuated with a cycle of holidays, the more important mobilizing the whole community in their administration and celebration. Three major communities of Hinduism (roughly analogous to the Eastern Orthodox, the Western Catholic, and the Protestant communities of Christianity) emerged—Vaishnavism, focused on the god Vishnu, Saivism, focused on Siva, and Goddess worship, focused on a female deity venerated variously as Devi, Durga, Kali, or Lakshmi (though a variety of other names also appear). Each of the three communities had its own temples that housed its deities, and a distinctive festival cycle with unique holy days and major celebrations.

Among Vaishnava devotees, Vishnu is believed to have incarnated in the world on several occasions. By far the most popular of those incarnations was as Krishna, who was born in Mathura and according to the ancient texts lived in various locations across northern India. Among the sacred sites devoted to the deity is Dwarka in Western Gujarat, which according to the stories was the capital of Krishna's kingdom and the site from which he left for the great battle of Kurukshetra, which occasioned his famous conversation with Arjuna recorded in the *Bhagavad Gita*. By the end of the eighteenth century, Krishna worship was strongly established across northern India from Bengal to Gujarat.

The Swaminarayan Movement grew out of the group begun around Shree Sahajanand Swami (1781–1830), a monk who would become revered toward the end of his life as Lord Swaminarayan. From the days of his childhood in the state of Uttar Pradesh in north central India, Sahajanand manifested an inclination to the religious life. When he was eleven, his parents died, and he adopted the life of a renunciate. The remainder of his life became a spiritual pilgrimage. He spent his teen years wandering through northern India, the last year of which was spent in the ashram of Sri Ramananda Swami (1738 or 1739–1802), a prominent Vaishnava teacher.

Ramananda’s most prominent disciple and heir apparent, Muktananda Swami (1758–1830), came to believe that the pious Sahajanand was, in fact, an incarnation of Krishna. Subsequently, when Ramananda died, Muktananda took the lead in naming Sahajanand as his successor, and under the name Ramananda had given him, Swami Narain or Swaminarayan, this relatively new addition to the community assumed leadership of the largest group of Ramananda’s devotees, who thus became the original core of the Swaminarayan movement. He was also from this time (1802), publicly revered as an incarnation of Krishna.

As he assumed leadership of the movement, several issues quickly came to the fore. Swaminarayan had, for example, been a strict, even extreme, renunciate. He owned nothing, and in keeping his vow of celibacy refused to have any contact or dealing with females. But immediately upon recognizing their new leader, Ramananda’s followers showered him with gifts, and he found that he would have to make at least some modest accommodations to acknowledge his devoted female and wealthy male followers. As an incarnation of Krishna, he received worship from his followers, many of whom reported entering a state of blissful trance in his presence.

Despite the vast amount of material on Swaminarayan’s life and work (Koshalendradas 2001; Mukuncharandas 1999; Trivedi 2014), including his own writings, reconstructing his life is difficult if not impossible. While we know much of what he did and taught, putting dates to his activities, ordering the events in his life along a timeline, and separating real occurrences from apocryphal tales remain problematic. We do know he placed a great emphasis on both personal and social morality, and imposed a strict ethical code on his followers and led efforts at social reform, most notably attacking the practice of *sati*, in which recent widows committed suicide by immolation on their late husband’s funeral pyre. Though a relatively rare phenomenon, with most cases being reported in Bengal, on the other side of India from where Swaminarayan resided, the practice was indicative of the low esteem granted widows in some parts of Indian culture.

Swaminarayan not only campaigned against the practice of *sati* (which he equated with common suicide), he moved to create a special place for widows who chose to live their life in devotion to Krishna. They would not be formally initiated into a nun’s role, but they were allowed to shave their hair, don special clothing, and receive the acknowledgement of the community for their ascetic choice

(Vijaytetram 2000). Today, the movement credits their founder with having successfully eradicated *sati* from most areas of Gujarat (Mukuncharandas 1999).

He also moved against the practice of infanticide, there being several subgroups in Gujarat who were accused of killing their female infants to avoid the dowry payments that would be incurred at the time of their later marriage. Swaminarayan's contemporary followers credit their founder with helping to eradicate this practice across Gujarat.

The ethical system assembled by Swaminarayan, and written down in his major writing, the *Shikshapatri*, set the reformist tone of what otherwise would have simply been another variant Krishna devotional (*bhakti*) movement (Vijaytetram 2000). The reformist tendencies began with the five vows which all devotees took, which required them to refrain from stealing, committing adultery, eating meat, partaking of intoxicants, and receiving food or water from "someone from whom one is not allowed to under the guidelines of the caste system." Those who went on to become ascetics took additional vows that included strict separation from members of the opposite sex and a renunciation of all worldly possessions.

Anticipating changes of the nature of the ascetic life, which would become widespread during the Hindu Renaissance, Swaminarayan informed the renunciates that their vows did not place them above manual labor and active service to the community. He ordered the *sadhus* into the towns across Gujarat, there to work among the people and to engage in activities that benefited the community. Most remembered throughout Gujarat are the *sadhus* who dug wells and water reservoirs, repaired roads, and constructed new living quarters. The ascetics were also mobilized to build the Swaminarayan temples. During the several famines that occurred in Gujarat throughout Swaminarayan's life, the ascetics organized food distribution in those areas hardest hit. Estimates vary, but the movements reached several hundred thousand members prior to Swaminarayan's death in 1830.

### *Organizing the Movement*

In the early years of the movement, Swaminarayan operated as a charismatic leader with an assumed divine status, and made all the major decisions relative to belief and practice, policies, and administration. While Swaminarayan lived, he

appointed the *sadhus* (the monks who had taken renunciate vows) to head the various temples, and further, also named the lay temple administrators who, unlike the *sadhus*, could handle money and interact with female members. The gradual separation of spiritual and temporal authority in the group led to the most important decisions relative to the succession of authority at the time of Swaminarayan's death.

In 1826, Swaminarayan turned to his own family and his two brothers, Ramapratap and Ichcharama, both of whom had married and fathered children, and adopted two of their sons. He then installed them as *acharyas* (or preceptors) to head the movement. At this time, he divided Gujarat into two areas, beginning at Dwarka and extending eastward toward Bengal. Ayodhyaprasad (1809–1868), Ramapratap's son, was appointed the *acharya* of the NarNarayan Dev Gadi, or Northern division, based in Ahmedabad, whilst Raghuveer (1812–1863), the son of Ichcharama, became the *acharya* of the LaxmiNarayan Dev Gadi, or Southern division, based in Vadtal. Each jurisdiction, sometimes comparable to a Christian diocese, contained a large temple in their headquarters city and several additional temples constructed during Swaminarayan's lifetime. The six temples that were constructed during Swaminarayan's earthly life have become the most sacred sites of the movement (Vyas n.d.).

The two jurisdictions worked quite well through the nineteenth century. Each lay *acharya* administered the work in his half of Gujarat, and each respected the territory of the other. Disciples, of course, felt free to make pilgrimages to all the temples throughout the country. It was also the case that the *acharyas*, while primarily temporal leaders, had been assigned several essential spiritual functions, most notably the final act of installation of deity statues in a new temple and the reinstallation of the deities in older temples following major renovation. The *acharyas* also initiated candidates into the ascetic life as *sadhus*. Though the *acharyas* were expected to be examples to followers, they lived as married householders.

Swaminarayan thus left the movement with a bifurcated authority system. Spiritual authority was largely given to the *sadhus*, the renunciates, who were expected to lead a holy life, most notably manifest by their vows of poverty to the point of not even handling money, and celibacy, which included the additional restriction of not having even the slightest contact with females. Temporal authority fell entirely to the *acharyas*, selected from members of Swaminarayan's

own family, and the authority and power of the *acharyas* grew through the century, as new issues arose, and as the movement grew and the members became more affluent.

The two *acharyas* grew wealthy and between them controlled all the movement's property. Though expected to be detached from the wealth they acquired, the amount they controlled and used left them open to charges of corruption. In addition, the temporal duties mingled with some of the essential spiritual tasks. After seeing to the initiation ceremonies for new *sadhus*, for example, they were expected to pay for their mundane needs of food, clothing, and shelter. They also oversaw the various educational and charitable services delivered by the movement. Perceptions that an *acharya* was not living up to the high standards that had been set for him, or was neglecting his duties, could become a crisis moment for the movement as a whole, and prepare a path toward schism.

### *Swaminarayan Divided*

Trouble developed within the Swaminarayan movement early in the twentieth century. In 1899, the Southern division at Vadtal had installed Lakshmiprasad (1892–1909) as its new *acharya*. Within a few years, however, it became evident that he was not living up to his role. Unable to resolve the issue otherwise, in 1906 an assemblage of leaders, both *sadhus* and householders, formally deposed him. By this time, there had arisen in the Vadtal temple a popular *sadhu*, Swami Yagnapurushdas (1865–1951), later known as Shastri Maharaj. These events followed on the heels of a succession dispute in the Northern division of the movement when the will of the *acharya* Purushottamprasad (1870–1901), who died in 1901, designated as his successor his adopted son Vasudevprasad (1899–1937), who was at the time only two years old. Another claimant to the position, an adult, took the issue to court where it was resolved in the child's favor.

Shastri Maharaj was a vocal critic of the life at the Vadtal temple, and especially targeted his fellow *sadhus* whom he saw as following a relaxed discipline. He complained that they did not keep their ritual observances, were accumulating wealth, and had contact with female devotees. The *sadhus'* lax life, in the context

of Lakshmiprasad’s failure, led Shastri Maharaj to a most radical idea. He suggested, contrary to what the movement had unanimously assumed since Swaminarayan’s death, that Swaminarayan had actually appointed a close confidant and fellow ascetic, Swami Gunatitanand (1785–1867), as his spiritual successor—not the two lay *acharyas*. In making his case, he highlighted a promise that Swaminarayan would remain always present within the movement in the person of his chief successor. Shastri Maharaj would trace an alternative lineage of Swaminarayan succession from Gunatitanand to Pragji Bhakta (1829–1897) to himself (Amrutvijaydas 2006, 2014).

Shastri Maharaj left the Vadtal temple in 1906, prior to the removal of Lakshmiprasad from office. Immediately after his departure, the *sadhus* in the temple gathered and formally expelled him from their fellowship. By that time, however, Shastri Maharaj had built a small following which he organized into a separate movement now known as the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (or BAPS). He reinstituted a strict discipline among the six *sadhus* who left with him. As the movement around Shastri Maharaj gained traction, the BAPS organization grew by attracting both people new to the larger movement and some who had formerly been associated with the Vadtal organization. A lawsuit in 1935 set strict boundaries between the two organizations, and stopped any attempts of the BAPS group to operate within the older Swaminarayan temples.

All three of the Swaminarayan groups, the two original groups and the new BAPS organization, prospered and found themselves on an upward trajectory through the twentieth century, though each suffered multiple schisms. In 1942, for example, Muktajivandas (1907–1979), a prominent *sadhu* in the Northern division, withdrew and founded a separate jurisdiction, or *gadi*, which grew under the name the Swaminarayan Gadi. Muktajivandas reached some of the same conclusions as had Shastri Maharaj four decades earlier, namely that leadership through a householder lineage was not what Swaminarayan had intended. He traced the true lineage, however, through another prominent nineteenth century *sadhu*, Gopalananda (1781–1852). Muktajivandas headed the small *gadi* he founded for more than three decades. In 1972, he proclaimed himself the personification of the organization and thus it was proper to acknowledge his divine status. Subsequently, images of him began to appear in all the temples under his care (Anon. 2005).



Integral to his new lineage, Muktajivandas further championed the notion that Swaminarayan, in order to keep the promise to remain among his disciples, had taken birth a second time in the person of Jeevanpran Abji Bapashree (1845–1928), a well-known *sadhu* from the north of Gujarat. According to Muktajivandas, Ishwarcharandasji Swami (d. 1942), the *sadhu* through whom he received his lineage, had ordered Muktajivandas to install *murtis* of Abji Bapashree next to those of Swaminarayan in all the temples.

More recently (1987), Swami Devnandandasji (1933–2019), also known as H.D.H. Bapji, who acknowledged the lineage of the Swaminarayan Gadi through Ishwarcharandasji Swami and the divine status of Abji Bapashree, established the independent Swaminarayan Mandir Vasna Sanstha. As the leader of one of the smaller Swaminarayan groups, in 1996 Bapji designated a piece of land located between Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar in Gujarat, where he wished that a new center for the movement (a heavenly abode or “dham”) be built. The land was subsequently purchased, and the main building completed in 2001 (Anon. 2001).

In 1947, Swami Dharmajivandas (1901–1988) left the Vadtal temple to launch an educational movement that provided support and schooling for high school and college students. The new organization, the Swaminarayan Gurukul, incorporated separately but remained in relationship to the Southern division. However, in the 1970s, the group opened a hostel in the territory of the Northern division adjacent to Gujarat University in Ahmedabad, and Swami Dharmajivandas was unable to persuade either *acharya* to perform the formal installation ceremony for the hostel’s temple room. From that time, the Swaminarayan Gurukul has continued as a separate organization, overseeing its own autonomous centers and temples, but never formally making the final break with the larger movement (Anon. 1996; Anon. 2003; Anon. n.d.).

In 1966, the BAPS organization excommunicated a prominent lay preacher Dadubhai Patel (1918–1986) (popularly known as Kakaji) and his brother Bapabhai Patel (1916–2006) (popularly known as Papaji). As a result of their leaving, three new and separate Swaminarayan groups would emerge. During the 1950s, Kakaji was important in the spread of the BAPS organization in East Africa, and in the early 1960s began to raise up a movement of dedicated youth who entered an ordered devoted life, though without the full vows of a *sadhu*. In the mid 1960s, Kakaji began to create a similar structure for young women.

Meanwhile, as this youth movement was proceeding, questions were raised about Kakaji’s preaching activity in Africa, where he had both recruited some dedicated young women into the ordered life and raised money to support the proposed new center for the young female devotees. At this point, the BAPS leadership decided that Kakaji had overstepped his authority in promising initiation to the young women. Thus in 1966, both Kakaji and Papaji were excommunicated from the BAPS organization.

A small group of BAPS *sadhus* sided with the brothers and joined with them in the organization of a new wing of the Swaminarayan movement called the Yogi Divine Society. Among the young men in the ordered community Kakaji had established, a strong leader emerged in the person of Jashbhai Saheb (b. 1940, now known as Guruvarya Param Pujya Sahebji). He took control of the group and in 1967, with Kakaji’s blessing, reorganized the male branch as the Anoopam Mission. This group has continued to grow and spread. The men at the core of the mission did not wear the saffron robe of the renounced life. They practiced what was termed “renunciation from within,” and continued to wear lay apparel (though they adopted a uniform appearance—a blue shirt and beige pants). They thus resembled the lay brothers of the Third Order of the Franciscans.

The young women’s movement followed a path similar to the Anoopam Mission. Papaji assumed leadership of the movement, named Gunatit Jyot (in honor of Swami Gunatitanand, the *sadhu* through whom the BAPS organization traced their lineage from Swaminarayan). Papaji served as Gunatit Jyot’s inspirational leader for the rest of his life. It developed as a female ordered community and, while much smaller than its male counterpart, created several centers in India and more recently abroad. Kakaji died in 1986, and was succeeded by a close associate, Hariprasad Swamiji (b. 1934), who currently leads the Yogi Divine Society.

The Southern division headquartered at Vadtal began the new century with a major organizational problem concerning the leadership of their *acharya*, a dispute that landed them in court. In 2000, the court ruled against the *acharya* and removed Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji (b. 1949) from office. Accepting the ruling, the main body of the organization moved ahead and selected a new *acharya*, Rakeshprasadji (b. 1966). Meanwhile, Maharashtra Ajendraprasadji did not accept the jurisdiction of the court in the case, nor its action. With the minority that continued to support him, he organized the Shree Swaminarayan

Agyna—Upasana Satsang Mandal, and continued to claim his office as the Vadtal *acharya* and the rights and authority that comes with that office. The members of the Mandal affirm him as the true lineage holder, which has traditionally been passed through Swaminarayan's family.

In tracing the development of a movement, it is always easier to document divisions than to discern the relative importance of the underlying causes, especially when the focus falls on any one particular division. In a religiously free society, schisms are a part of religious group life, and the Swaminarayan movement has not been an exception. In its case, the separation of authority between the temporal and spiritual leadership provided a context for schism, especially in times when leaders on one side or the other failed (or appeared to have failed) to adhere to the exemplary standards expected of them. Also, over time as the movement grew and moved into different contexts, those committed to the tradition have clashed with those who attempted to provide innovative leadership to meet the needs of changing environments and circumstances. Finally, it is the case that members in expanding movements always face the choice between adhering to established leadership that is often unavailable to them or favoring less credentialed but locally available leadership.

### *Swaminarayan to the West*

Were we to limit our consideration to India, the Swaminarayan movement would be a more or less interesting example of modern Hindu sectarianism. It has emerged out of Gujarat to become a national movement, initially following the twentieth century dispersion of Gujaratis throughout India while also attracting many non-Gujaratis to its relatively modern, reformist, and communally active outlook. While maintaining traditional temple worship and participating in the annual cycle of Vaishnava holidays, the movement has trimmed the number of deities to which it gives attention, and even as it refrained from directly attacking other Hindu groups, it has dismissed much of the traditional Hindu pantheon from any significant consideration.

In the last generation, however, the different segments of the Swaminarayan movement have joined the Indian diaspora, initially to East Africa and then to Europe and North America. Assisted by the particularly high number of Gujaratis who have moved to the West, the movement has become one of the most visible

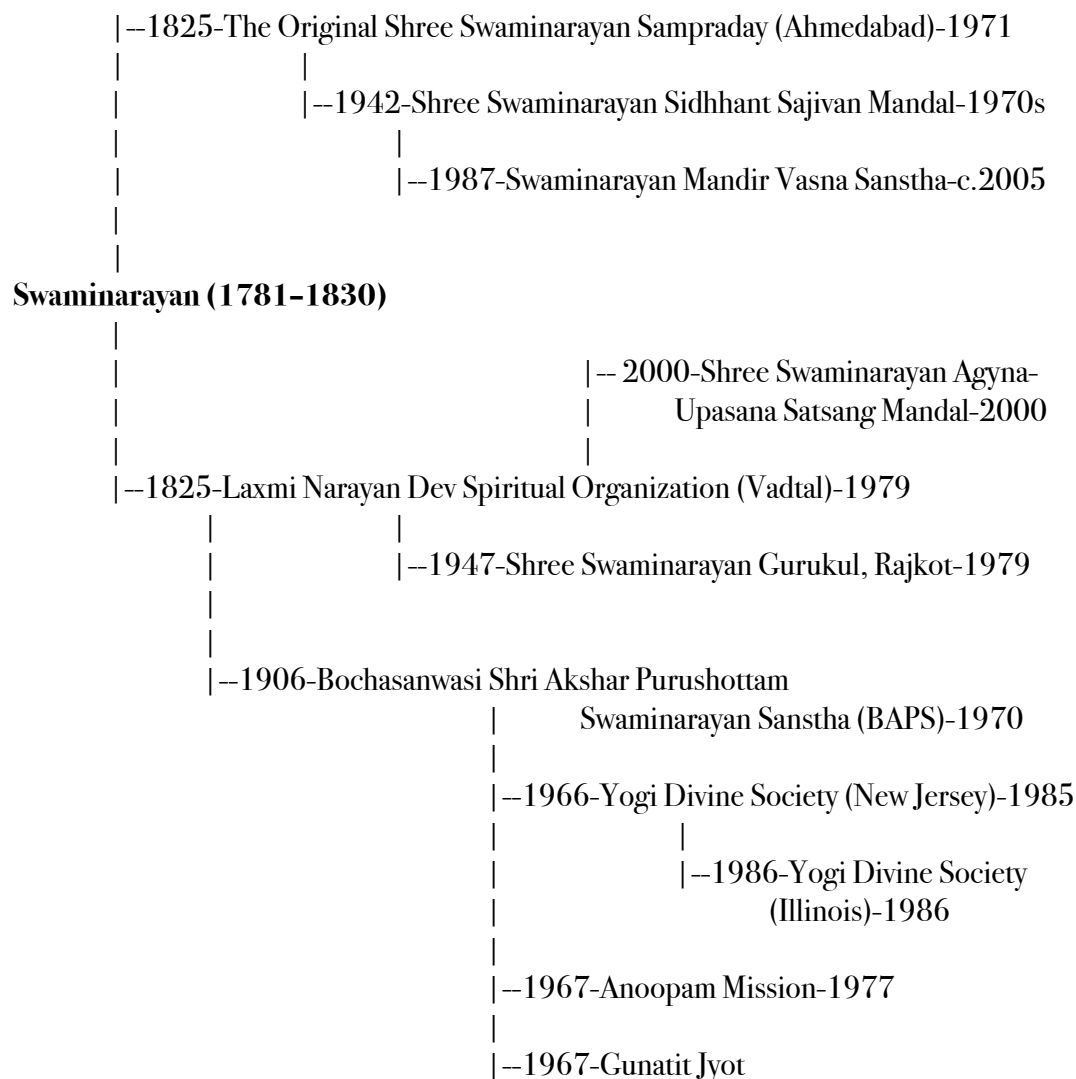
elements of Hindu life abroad with the tightly organized BAPS group jumping out ahead of the others. In fact, BAPS has developed such a high profile in the West that even many Hindus are unaware that the other elements of the Swaminarayan movement exist, or that they are now present in some strength in the West, especially England, the United States, and Canada.



**Figure 1.** The Swaminarayan BAPS Temple in Los Angeles.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the American branch of the BAPS organization has assumed a high profile as a result of its having constructed four large temples in the midst of four of the largest Indian American communities (Houston, Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles). The Atlanta temple has been cited as the largest Hindu temple outside of India, while the only slightly smaller but very similar temple in suburban London is now the largest Hindu temple in Europe. News coverage of its temple openings have eclipsed the presence of the rival elements of the movement on the web, though the two older parts of the movement remain the largest groups in India.

The older Swaminarayan groups have a major asset—the many artifacts owned and used by their founder, including several items Swaminarayan presented as *prasad* (sacred souvenirs) to his many followers. A few such items are on display in their various temples around the world, but a concentrated collection had been assembled at their museum in Ahmedabad. The BAPS temple in Delhi, dedicated in 2007, was briefly acknowledged as the largest Hindu temple in the world, though the International Society for Krishna Consciousness’ temple in Mayapur, West Bengal, has more recently been touted as the world’s largest.



**Table 1.** The Swaminarayan Tradition in America. The dates before the name of each group indicates its date of original formation, and following each group, its formation in the United States.

### *Swaminarayan in the United States*

Following the change of United States immigration laws in 1965, the largest recognizable segment of new residents from India to enter the country were of a Gujarati background. Joining the early immigrants were members of the BAPS organization, who settled in what has become one of the largest Asian American communities in North America, in and around Flushing, Queens, just minutes from New York’s JFK International Airport. The BAPS members who originally settled in the area founded the first Swaminarayan temple in a private house in 1971, and began constructing the building to house it immediately across the street from the Ganesh temple, the oldest traditional Hindu temple in the country. The international leader of the BAPS movement arrived for his first visit in 1974 and formally installed the deities in the original *mandir* (temple). He returned in 1977 to dedicate and reinstall the deities in the permanent temple on Browne Street (Williams 1988, 162–64; Anon. 2007a, 2007b, 2017). Thus the BAPS movement got a head start on the other segments of the Swaminarayan movement and continued to out distance them as the Indian American community grew year by year. Its leader regularly visited the country, and its more centralized organization allowed quicker responses to the developing work.

The two older Swaminarayan organizations were somewhat slower to organize in the United States, but on a visit to members in 1978, Tejendraprasadji Maharajshri (b. 1944), the head until 2004 (when he retired) of what is termed in the West the Original Shree Swaminarayan Sampraday (Under Shree Nar Narayan Dev Gadi), the Northern Swaminarayan jurisdiction headquartered in Ahmedabad, established the International Swaminarayan Satsang Organization (ISSO) a missionary society designed to coordinate efforts to build the movement abroad. The two older groups had been somewhat stymied as the geographical boundaries which separated the two jurisdictions in India did not function in the West. ISSO, however, was designed to facilitate cooperation between the two groups, and, since the Northern division’s *acharya* was much more active in North America, the Ahmedabad group grew much faster. It would be the late 1980s before temples loyal to the Southern division were organized.

The Ahmedabad group established an initial temple, originally located in a private home, in 1981 in Weehawken, New Jersey (immediately across the Hudson River from New York City). In 1986, the Weehawken group purchased

the building formerly used by the Church of Christ, Scientist, which in 1987, was dedicated as a *mandir* and has subsequently served as the headquarters of the Northern division (Sullivan 2001). After its initial organization, the Original Shree Swaminarayan Sampraday has moved rapidly, and now has a set of associated temples in almost all of the Indian American communities across the country.

Meanwhile, through the 1980s, members of the Vadtal group in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex organized, and in 1989 purchased a former church building in suburban Grand Prairie. Two years later, on July 4, 1991, *acharya* Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji, the then leader of the Vadtal Swaminarayan group, known in the United States as the Laxmi Narayan Dev Spiritual Organization, visited. He dedicated the *mandir* and formally installed the deity statues. The progress of the American wing of the Vadtal group was somewhat blunted by Ajendraprasadji's problems that led in 2000 to his removal from office by action of the court in India. The group existed for several years without an *acharya* before the present leader, Rakeshprasadji, assumed office (2003). The new *acharya* has been less effective in growing his movement overseas, and the American branch has shrunk, with only two temples remaining loyal.

The Vadtal schism has been responsible for the most recent Swaminarayan group to manifest in the United States—the Shree Swaminarayan Agnya-Upasana Satsang Mandal, which continues the leadership of the deposed Southern division (Vadtal) *acharya*, Maharajshree Ajendraprasadji. As the Indian court ruling has no effect outside of the country, Ajendraprasadji was able to establish an American headquarters temple in New Jersey to serve those members who remained loyal to him, and he had success in wooing members to his cause, especially in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. His strongest single American center is the former Vadtal temple in the Chicago suburb of Wheeling, Illinois, that switched its affiliation to the Mandal. The stance of the Wheeling temple was not surprising, as it had originally been dedicated by Ajendraprasadji personally when he visited the United States in 1991. He also now has an affiliated temple in suburban Atlanta and additional growing centers of activity, yet to establish their own temples, in other Indian American communities across the United States.

Even before the first BAPS temple was organized, in 1970, Muktajivandas, the founder of the Swaminarayan Gadi, made his first trip to North America to

organize followers. During this trip, accompanied by several *sadhus*, he visited the New York City Metropolitan area, Chicago, Washington D.C., Seattle, and the Niagara Falls area. He also founded the Shree Swaminarayan Sidhant Sajivan Mandal, USA, and established its first temple located in Seattle, Washington.

In 1979, Acharya Shree Purushottampriyadasji Swami (b. 1942), who had accompanied Muktajivandas on the 1970s visit, became the new leader of the movement. At that time, he founded the temple in Secaucus, New Jersey, which currently serves as the group's headquarters temple. In steps, the group was able to move from rented facilities to their own property and finally was able to construct a large temple, at which the formal opening and deity installation ceremony was held in 2001.

The groups associated with the Yogi Divine Society also established work in the United States. Kakaji initially toured the United States in June 1973, visiting numerous locations across the Eastern half of the country. Among the people he met was Dinkarbhai Patel (b. 1944, affectionately known as Dinkar Uncle), an engineer residing in suburban Chicago. Through the remainder of the decade, he became an increasingly devout follower and, following the death of his wife, took a vow of celibacy. In 1981, Kakaji formally installed a *murti* of Swaminarayan in Dinkar Uncle's Waukegan home, thus transforming it into a *mandir*. Before his passing, Kakaji also installed a *murti* of Gunatitanand Swami in the *mandir*. Dinkar Uncle now leads two Yogi Divine temples in Chicago's northern suburbs (the second being in a home in Des Plaines).

Meanwhile, Kakaji's successor in India, Hariprasad Swamiji (b. 1934), initially visited the United States in 1985. He continues as head of the Yogi Divine Society in India, but has no administrative role in the Illinois temples, which are also not listed as YDS temples by the Society's headquarters. He is more directly the leader of two American temples, the largest being Haridam, the Hindu Swaminarayan Temple & Cultural Center in Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey. This temple was formally established in 1996, and has acquired a meeting hall designed to accommodate some 1,300 attendees. The other temple under his care is in Delaware, Ohio.

The Anoopam Mission and the Gunatit Jyot have both established a single American center that serves affiliated followers nationally. The Anoopam Mission headquarters is located in Coplay, Pennsylvania, the organization having grown



following founder Guruvarya Param Pujya Sahebji's initial visit to the United States in 1973. The relatively small Gunatit Jyot has a small center in New Jersey.

The Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul, Rajkot, had extended its work to the United States and remained in an ambiguous relationship with the Vadtal Swaminarayan community. When the first Southern division temple was opened in Grand Prairie, Texas, some *sadhus* from the Gurukul were the first to take advantage of the facilities that had been set aside as residence space for the group's monks. Their leader, Purani Balkrishnadasji Swami, frequently spoke there. That being said, the Gurukul maintains its own autonomous center in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in Plano, some distance from the Grand Prairie temple. It also has a center in Phoenix, Arizona, and maintains an outreach program to its members scattered in metropolitan areas across the country.

### *Observations*

This excursion in the evolving Swaminarayan community offers a variety of observation on the larger world of new religious movements (NRMs). First, several Indian-American groups led by gurus were prominent among those movements that entered the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and soon emerged as among the most prominent targets of the new cult awareness movement—the Sikh Dharma/3HO of Yogi Bajan (1929–2004), The Divine Light Mission of Guru Maharaji (b. 1957), the Sai Baba Organization, and so on. Indeed, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), an expression of the Indian Vaishnava *bhakti* movement of Bengal, supplied the most popular image for media coverage of the “cults” for several decades. In the new century, however, ISKCON, which began with several thousand Western converts, has become dominated by first generation Indian American immigrants, and has largely been accepted for what it claimed to be all along, just another traditional Hindu group.

Since the media attention to new religions has waned, a variety of Vaishnava *bhakti* groups have established themselves in the West, including several active in recruiting Westerners into their community. All arrived under the radar of both the cult awareness community and the scholarly world. In addition, several older Hindu groups that existed for many years as convert groups have in the last two decades been changed by an influx of devotees from India. While attention to

Islam replaced the media interest in new religions, the integration of convert groups into the growing Indian American Hindu community served to remove the guru groups from the cult awareness agenda. Simultaneously, scholarly papers on the new Hindu groups from a new religions studies perspective have become quite rare.

Second, the continued growth and splintering of the Swaminarayan community points to the larger history of new religions. Scholarship on new religions, lest we forget, began with questions of the seemingly unique situation of the late 1960s, and we wasted time exploring the role of the cultural upheavals of the period in causing the dramatic upswing in the formation of NRMs. That inquiry was informed by a popular hypothesis that quickly proved to have no foundation apart from secularization theories, namely that NRMs were little more than an epiphenomenal manifestation of social stress. We have now observed societies from around the world for the last forty years in as diverse places as Japan, North America, Western Europe, and Nigeria. The story is always the same, in free societies, new religions are constantly being formed in both more stressful and more calm times. The only places their appearance is limited are in societies where government power actively suppresses them—China and Saudi Arabia being prominent examples.

There are certainly social correlates to NRM formation—urbanization, government support of religious freedom, and population—but social unrest is not one of them. Religions, including new religious movements, are not epiphenomenal, they are an integral part of human culture. Like art and family life, religion changes and alters over time and place, governments seek to coopt and control it, and some individuals may live comfortably without it, but it keeps popping up in new and interesting ways wherever it is not actively suppressed by the sword.

In the United States, the passing of a series of anti-Asian immigration laws beginning in 1908 slowed and then almost stopped the development of Hinduism in the United States. The one necessary cause of its sudden revival in the late 1960s was the 1965 change in the immigration laws relative to India. While the coming of age of the baby boom generation supported the revival with a momentary increase in the number of prospective converts, and American urbanization brought them into the cities, without the legislative change, no Indian teachers/founders would have been present to recruit anyone to the

different forms of Hinduism. And neither the process of recruitment nor the introduction of new Hindu groups stopped with the aging of the baby boomers. Annually, for the last half-century, a new crop of prospective recruits and new Hindu groups for them to join have appeared as the Indian American community continues to grow.

Third, in studying the American segment of the Swaminarayan movement, during which time I have been invited to comment on several court cases that have involved American Hindu communities, I have again been reminded of the importance of property issues in determining the future of new religions. During their first generation, new groups have accumulated property, and new religious groups have frequently been lax in designating the ultimate ownership of that property. They will leave the second generation to fight over that property, and those factions that emerge as the owner most often claims the allegiance of the followers. Most Hindu temples in America are congregationally owned, but some branches of the Swaminarayan movement are prominent exceptions. As groups move out of homes and rented facilities, property ownership has already proved important in the split of the Yoga Divine Society, where local ownership of the home-based temples was significant, and the Vadtal group has seen the movement of the majority of their temples to the dissenting group formed by the *acharya* deposed in 2000.

The presence of almost a dozen Swaminarayan groups in the US, all of which are on growth trajectories at the moment, suggest a slight tweaking of our picture of new religions, which I suggest might aptly be seen as the foam formed by the fermenting elements of the religious community. Rather than seeing new religions in stages, as our Japanese colleagues did in proposing the category of “new new religions” to designate those groups formed by the second generation after World War II, we should see NRMs as those groups constantly being formed on the fringe of the older, more stable parts of the religious community, and those older fringe groups that are able to maintain a high tension with the religious establishment.

New religious tendencies are all around us. They appear as dissenting and innovative movements in established churches that at any time can separate from the parent body, such as the New Apostolic Reformation movement on the edge of Pentecostalism; sectarian movements that in a different context become new

religions, like the Swaminarayan groups; and new innovative religious impulses that synthesize a new religious gestalt.

The religious community is always changing, even more so today as it aligns with a fast-moving culture. We who spend a significant amount of our time studying new religions must always be reexamining the present even as we monitor the change. To remain overly focused on groups that emerged in the 1970s is to transform ourselves into antiquarians, when our proper role is to be the generalists of the present generation’s religious newness.

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