

Soka Gakkai in Italy: Periphery or Center?

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ABSTRACT: Theories of mainstreaming argue that all religious groups are born at the periphery and, if successful, slowly move to center. The article distinguishes between institutional mainstreaming, i.e., the official recognition of a religious movement, and social mainstreaming, i.e., its acceptance as a legitimate religion by the majority of citizens. Soka Gakkai's institutional mainstreaming has been completed in Italy, while its social mainstreaming continues to meet with oppositions.

KEYWORDS: Mainstreaming, Religious Mainstream, Retrenchment, Soka Gakkai, Buddhism in Italy, Anti-Cult Movement.

Two Forms of Mainstreaming: Legal and Social

In their classic 1992 book *The Churching of America*, sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark use as their starting point that no religion is “mainstream” when it is created. All religions start at the periphery of the religious field, and are criticized as “marginal” or “cults” by those who are in the center. Successful religions engage in a journey from periphery to center, called “mainstreaming.” “Winners,” Finke and Stark said, successfully complete the mainstreaming process. “Losers” remain in the periphery, or disappear (Finke and Stark 1992).

There are no exceptions to this rule. Christianity was originally regarded as a marginal “cult” in the Roman Empire, and persecuted as such (Stark 1996). The expression *xie jiao*, often translated as “evil cults” but in fact meaning “heterodox teachings,” still used in China to indicate banned groups such as Falun Gong, was

coined in the early Middle Ages by Tang courtier Fu Yi (554–639) to designate Buddhism in general (Wu 2016, 8–9).

Finke and Stark’s theory of mainstreaming inspired another well-known book of religious sociology published in 1994, *The Angel and the Beehive*, by Mormon sociologist Armand Mauss (1928–2020). Mauss noted that, while religious movements in general regard mainstreaming as desirable, there are some that resist it. If the mainstreaming process advances too quickly, Mauss also claimed, “traditionalist” resistances will appear both at the grassroots level, determining schisms, and within the leadership, which may consciously pause the journey toward the mainstream and promote a “retrenchment” (Mauss 1994).

Another factor to consider is that mainstreaming does not occur in a vacuum. Several forces may try to oppose or slow down the mainstreaming process: governments, religions that have already reached the mainline and fear competition, and those who do not like the group that is about to reach the mainstream, for whatever reason. The anti-cult movement is one example of a lobby actively trying to prevent new religious movements from joining the mainstream.

Governments, of course, can also speed up the mainstreaming process by granting to once marginal groups some sort of official recognition. However, the media and the public opinion may be slow in accepting this recognition, evidencing that there is not only one, but two different mainstreaming processes. The first is institutional, the second is social. A religion is institutionally mainstreamed when it achieves the same level of legal recognition enjoyed by older religions that are already considered as part of the mainstream. But, independently of the legal recognition, a religion is socially mainstreamed only when the public opinion, in turn shaped by the media, regards it as mainstream.

That the two processes, legal and social, are independent was recognized in Italy by the Supreme Court of Cassation in a landmark 1997 decision granting legal recognition as a religion to the Church of Scientology. The Supreme Court acknowledged that the majority of both the public opinion and the media in Italy might not regard Scientology as a “genuine” or “legitimate” religion. But it also declared that the public opinion should not guide the courts, which should use different criteria, including regarding as more authoritative than the beliefs of a misinformed majority the opinions of credentialed scholars who have published about a certain religion (Corte Suprema di Cassazione 1997).

Legal Mainstreaming in Italy

Legal mainstreaming may be achieved either by repeatedly obtaining favorable verdicts from courts of law, or by following the procedures for recognition that some national laws offer. The second was the case of Soka Gakkai in Italy.

The Italian post-Fascist Constitution uses the word “Concordat,” with a capital C, only for the agreement with the Holy See, which Italy and the Vatican signed in 1929 and amended in 1984. Sometimes, we hear it called a “Concordat with the Catholic Church,” but this is technically wrong. The Catholic Church in Italy, represented by its bishops (and in 1984 by their Bishops’ Conference), was not a part of the Concordat. The latter is an international treaty between two sovereign states, Italy and the Holy See. This has important legal consequences. As an international treaty, it can only be litigated in international courts, as any other treaty. How relevant this is emerged this year when the Holy See informed Italy that a law that was being discussed in the Parliament limiting the liberty of all Italians, including bishops, priests, and nuns, to produce statements that can be interpreted as inciting discrimination against LGBTQ persons would be against the Concordat and open Italy to international litigation (*Adnkronos* 2021).

As opposite to the only Concordat, the Constitution calls “Intese,” a word also translated into English as “concordats,” but with a small c, the agreements the Italian State may stipulate with other religions. They are negotiated and signed by the government, but come into force only after having been ratified by the Parliament. Unlike the Concordat with the Holy See, they are agreements between the Italian state and associations of Italian citizens, governed by Italian domestic law.

Whether there is a legal right for religions that technically qualify for one to enter into an “Intesa” with Italy is a matter raised in 2016 before the European Court of Human Rights by the largest single religious minority organization in Italy, the Jehovah’s Witnesses (there are more Muslims and Eastern Orthodox, but they do not belong to a single organization). The case is still pending (see questions sent to the parties by the European Court of Human Rights on November 3, 2019: European Court of Human Rights 2019). Two different governments signed “Intese” with the Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2000 and 2007, but the Parliament never scheduled a session to ratify them. The Jehovah’s Witnesses complain that this is because of an attempt by Italy to discriminate

them. Italy counters that there is no “right to the Intesa.” Granting or rejecting an “Intesa” is a political decision on which both the government and the Parliament should concur. The size or the social influence of a religion are not factors guaranteeing that an “Intesa” will be signed and ratified, Italy argues, and political decisions are not justiciable. Islam is the largest religious minority in Italy, and does not have an “Intesa” either.

The case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses shows that size in itself does not lead to institutional mainstreaming. Certainly, members of the Parliament consider how many voters are involved, and Jehovah’s Witnesses are a special case since the answer to this question is “zero.” Jehovah’s Witnesses do not vote in the elections for theological reasons. But tiny groups such as the Lutherans have had their “Intesa” signed and ratified, while larger groups did not.

Not having an “Intesa” in Italy creates a discrimination for taxpayers who are religious believers. In Italy, when filing their tax returns, taxpayers should choose to whom they want that 0.8% of their taxes will be given by the tax office. They may choose the Catholic Church, one of the religions with “Intesa” (except those who have opted out of this system), or a state fund, which will use the money for cultural or social activities. This is often mistaken as a clone of the German system, but it isn’t. In Germany, taxpayers who do not indicate an option for their religious tax keep the money in their pockets. This is not the case in Italy. In fact, most citizens do not indicate an option but they should pay this part of their taxes anyway.

Many Italians believe that, if they fail to indicate an option, 0.8% of their taxes will go to the state fund by default. This is also not the case. 0.8% of their taxes will be divided between the Catholic Church, the state fund, and the religions with the Intesa (except, again, those that opted out either of the 0.8% system in general or of the division of the money of the taxpayers who did not indicate an option). How will it be divided? The answer is, considering how many of those who did choose chose each participant organization. In a simple example, let’s assume that there are twenty taxpayers. Ten indicate an option, five for the Catholic Church, three for the state fund, one for the Lutherans and one for the Jews. Ten leave the form blank. 0.8% of the taxes of those who left the form blank will be levied anyway by the tax office and divided. Fifty percent will go to the Catholic Church, because 50% of those who did make a choice opted for the

Catholic Church, thirty percent to the state fund, ten percent to the Lutherans, and ten percent to the Jews.

An interesting question is why the Italian government and Parliament signed and ratified certain “Intese” but not others. The size of a religion is a factor, but more important is what is perceived as its positive contribution to society. Their “separatism” (rightly or wrongly interpreted) played against the Jehovah’s Witnesses. I was myself a member of one of the governmental commissions that entered into a dialogue with Italian Muslims. One reason why this did not lead to an “Intesa” is that Italian Muslims quarreled between themselves, and never managed to have a single organization or body that might reasonably claim to represent the majority of them. Another was 9/11 and the fact that some political parties, for their own reasons, cultivated the popular hostility to Islam, and claimed that Italian Islam had not been able to marginalize its radical or fundamentalist elements.

The “Intesa” with Soka Gakkai: 2015–2016

This context was necessary to explain the meaning of the “Intesa” between the Italian government and Soka Gakkai, which was signed on June 27, 2015, and ratified unanimously by the Parliament through law no. 130 of June 28, 2016.

An “Intesa,” as mentioned earlier, certifies that a religion has been institutionally mainstreamed in Italy. “Intese” are limited in number (only twelve have been ratified so far) and, in more than one sense, make the religious groups a trusted partner of the state.

Certainly, the size of Soka Gakkai was considered. In 2021, Soka Gakkai has 94,000 members in Italy, almost half of the 208,000 Italian Buddhists. No other Italian Buddhist group approaches the size of Soka Gakkai, including those that are part of the Italian Buddhist Union (UBI). Soka Gakkai is not a part of UBI, which has its separate “Intesa” with the state.

As we have seen, size alone would not be enough. The unanimous approval of the “Intesa” by the Parliament meant that Soka Gakkai was both visible and trusted. Many Parliamentarians had been personally involved in its humanitarian and peace activities, including its campaigns against nuclear weapons. Media emphasized that celebrities are among the members of Soka Gakkai, including

actors, singers, and football players. Personally, I believe that even more important was the fact that several Italian MPs had met Soka Gakkai members engaged in leading roles in humanitarian and charitable activities they were familiar with. This cooperation continued, and in 2020 Soka Gakkai announced during the COVID-19 crisis that it will transfer the 0.8 percent money it will receive to projects supporting the efforts against COVID-19 and its social consequences, including one managed by the Catholic Community of Saint Egidio (*Il Mattino* 2020).

Italian media were overwhelmingly favorable to the “Intesa.” They mentioned the celebrities who had joined Soka Gakkai, but also what one of the main Italian wire agencies, *AGI*, called its “extraordinary message of peace” (*AGI* 2016).

The Social Mainstreaming of Soka Gakkai and Its Opponents

When the “Intesa” was signed and ratified, there were some dissenting voices too. Perhaps the most negative article was published by the Italian version of the *Huffington Post*, and signed by reporters Gianni Del Vecchio and Stefano Pitrelli (Del Vecchio and Pitrelli 2015).

The article, however, had a prehistory. In 2011, the two reporters had published a book, *Occulto Italia* (Occult Italy), where they presented an analysis of the presence of new religious movements in Italy inspired by the usual clichés of the anti-cult ideology. More than other anti-cult books, the volume focused on the fact that some members of what they called “cults,” including Soka Gakkai, were active in politics. Leaders of Roman Catholic lay organizations have also been active in Italian politics, and became cabinet ministers or governors of regions, but for whatever reason Del Vecchio and Pitrelli saw the fact that citizens belonging to Soka Gakkai and other religious minorities were also active in political parties as a sinister “infiltration” of the institutions (Del Vecchio and Pitrelli 2011).

The book was full of innuendo and inaccurate information about religious minorities, and academics reacted. In 2012, veteran sociologist Luigi Berzano edited *Credere è reato?* (Is Believing a Crime?), which collected critical articles about *Occulto Italia*. Rather than a “cultist,” Berzano is a Roman Catholic priest,

and the book was published by one of the oldest and most well-known Italian Catholic publishers (Berzano 2012).

In 2018, the campaign of *Occulto Italia* was revamped by another couple of journalists, Flavia Piccinni and Carmine Gazzanni, with the book *Nella setta* (In the Cult: Piccinni and Gazzanni 2018). Concerning Soka Gakkai it was, if anything, even more aggressive. It repeated old stories on how the leader of Soka Gakkai, the internationally respected Daisaku Ikeda, had allegedly consorted with criminals and Japanese mafia godfathers, ignoring the fact that these tall tales had been debunked in Japan decades ago.

Nella setta is more readable than *Occulto Italia*, but equally full of inaccurate information (Introvigne 2019a). Both books were quickly dismissed by scholars of new religious movements, but their authors appeared often in Italian printed media and television. Sensational claims about “cults” always make for good copy. Soka Gakkai was particularly targeted by these campaigns. Why?

A first answer is that sometimes personal stories do have an unpredictable influence on larger events. A gentleman who was once a Soka Gakkai member, and left in troubled circumstances, became one of the most vocal Italian critics of “cults,” and the president of a tiny association, AIVS (Italian Association of Victims of Cults), which evolved from a group of “victims of Soka Gakkai.” AIVS uses an extreme language, and it is difficult to take seriously its criticism of Soka Gakkai, which is mostly a collection of insults. Nor is it possible to have a polite discussion with its president. After I explained on Facebook how and why in a scholarly conference I co-promoted in 2019 at the University of Turin a session on the book *Nella setta* was organized, I got as an answer from the official account of AIVS that I am a “filthy motherfucker” and a “son of a bitch,” and an invitation to visit AIVS so that we can “manly punch each other.” One of the messages concluded, “Go back, Introvigne: to the Hell from which you came out” (I preserve screenshots of these posts in my archives).

While AIVS language is a matter of study more for psychiatrists than for scholars of religion, a second reason why folk accusations against Soka Gakkai sometimes appear in the media is the disproportionate presence among reporters of the anti-cult ideology. The ideology that “cults” are different from religions as they convert their members through sinister techniques of “brainwashing” and “mind control” has been debunked by scholars as pseudo-scientific already in the

past century (Anthony 1996; Anthony and Introvigne 2006) but, while supported only by a small minority of academics, is still successful among reporters as a quick, if false, explanation of the success of religious movements they regard as “strange.” USCIRF, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan federal commission whose members are designated by the congressional leaders of the two major American parties and appointed by the President, has denounced in 2020 the anti-cult ideology as one of the main international threats to religious liberty (USCIRF 2020). Italian scholar Raffaella Di Marzio has studied an almost stereotypical attempt to apply to Soka Gakkai the faulty anti-cult model of the “cult” (Di Marzio 2018).

A third reason anti-Soka-Gakkai propaganda is promoted, and relayed by some media, in Italy is that anti-cultists and those who publish sensational articles on “cults” need to argue that the “danger of the cults” is widespread. For this reason, they cannot only target small groups, which perhaps commit real crimes but have only a handful of members. To come to a significant total of “cultists,” they have to add the members of large movements such as Soka Gakkai (or the Jehovah’s Witnesses), even if they hardly fit even their own definitions of “cults.”

A fourth reason of the obstacles created to Soka Gakkai’s social mainstreaming is connected with Matteo Renzi, who was the Prime Minister who signed the “Intesa” with Soka Gakkai in 2015. Renzi had been Mayor of Florence, a city where the peace and humanitarian activities of Soka Gakkai are well-known, but anti-cult journalists created a close link between the politician and the Buddhist movement (Del Vecchio and Pitrelli 2015) that never existed. Originally, this was a tool to attack Renzi, but later it became mostly a tool to attack Soka Gakkai.

Renzi is a flamboyant politician. He became Prime Minister of Italy at age 39, and his bold, in-your-face statements and unpredictable political about-faces determined the premature end of this experience, and explain why he has a significant number of enemies. Legends about Renzi are not limited to Soka Gakkai. He is a main target of the American conspiracy movement QAnon, who accuses him of having changed the results of the last American presidential elections, in a conspiracy also involving former U.S. President Barack Obama, through a mysterious machine hosted in Pisa that can send from Italy to the United States impulses able to influence the voting machines through Italian military satellites (Gilbert 2021). Why Renzi did not use the machine to improve the poor electoral performances of his own party in Italy is not explained.

Finally, a fifth reason of the resistances to Soka Gakkai's social mainstreaming in Italy comes from within Soka Gakkai itself. The movement went through a process of mainstreaming in Japan, which sped up when it terminated its relationship with the conservative monastic order Nichiren Shoshu in 1991 (McLaughlin 2019). This converted Nichiren Shoshu and its patriarch Nikken Shonin (1922–2019) into mortal enemies of Soka Gakkai. Although they were able to gather only a small minority of Soka Gakkai members (and a *very* small one in Italy), the followers of Nikken became the main source of slanders against the movement and its President Ikeda internationally.

In Italy, the rapid journey towards the mainstream of Italian society determined a predictable “traditionalist” reaction. For a time, Soka Gakkai in Italy was led by advocates of a “retrenchment” promoting conservative moral and political positions not shared by most members. The internal conflict was solved in 2002 through a reform that led to the appointment of Tamotsu Nakajima as the new general director for Italy. Most of the arch-conservatives remained within the fold, but some defected (Introvigne 2019b). Anti-cultists do not have an exact understanding of the reasons of the Italian problems of 2002, nor of the Japanese split with Nichiren Shoshu in 1991. They are, however, happy to use any criticism of Soka Gakkai and its leadership, without pausing to ask from where it comes and what motivations may explain it.

Soka Gakkai has completed its institutional process of mainstreaming with the “Intesa.” Reading attacks on the Internet and in some sensationalist media, one can have the impression that, on the other hand, Soka Gakkai has still not completed its process of social mainstreaming. This would not be surprising, as the two processes do not necessarily coincide. However, Internet and some media create a games of mirrors. By quoting each other ad infinitum, they try to give the impression that “the public opinion” is critical of their targets.

It is true that sustained media and Internet campaigns do influence public opinion. However, what Italians really think of Soka Gakkai should be ascertained through further research and different tools. Despite the opponents, who are vocal but not many, the number of devotees makes more and more frequent that Italians may know Soka Gakkai from the direct contact with a member rather than from a TV program against the “cults” or from the Internet. Thousands of Italians also have a direct experience of Soka Gakkai activities such as the anti-nuclear campaign “Senzatomica.”

Also, institutional mainstreaming is independent from social mainstreaming but, in the end, normally influence it. The most reasonable prediction is that Soka Gakkai will become a permanent feature of the Italian religious landscape, and will remain part of it when its opponents will have long been forgotten.

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