

Too Secularized for French Secularism: Testing the Resilience of Soka Gakkai as a Religious Institution

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ABSTRACT: This paper will explore the hurdles that Soka Gakkai, a Japanese lay Buddhist organization, has had to triumph over in its quest to be accepted as a bona fide Buddhist movement in France. Indeed, when compared to other national branches of the group, it appears that SGI-France has had a particularly ambiguous status in the country of *laïcité*, the French version of secularism. Some media outlets, anticult groups, and even government agencies, as well as members of the Parliament, have categorized Soka Gakkai as a “cult.” On the other hand, a few years ago it acquired the legal status of a religious association, making it officially a religion in its own right, at least legally speaking. By reviewing the arguments put forward by the people who consider Soka Gakkai as a “cult,” and building on previous scholarly work on Buddhism in France, this paper will argue that one of the main reasons this new religious movement has been labelled as such may be that it does not match the archetypal image of Buddhism held by most French people. This Buddhist archetype is built primarily on Theravāda, Tibetan, and Zen monastic traditions, which are obviously quite different from the secular and socially active Buddhist organization that Soka Gakkai is. This may explain why the group has had trouble being recognized as Buddhist: paradoxically, French secularism does not seem ready to accept a secular religious organization, and is more comfortable with more “traditional,” clerical Buddhist groups. In this perspective, it is significant that SGI-France is not part of the French Buddhist Union, a national federation of Buddhist associations composed mainly of Vajrayana, Zen, and Theravāda congregations. However, in the past two decades, SGI-France has undertaken a major overhaul, both in its structure and its public image, for instance by taking on a new official name in 2007, that is *Le mouvement bouddhiste Soka* (the Soka Buddhist Movement). These changes might be viewed as evidence of the religious group’s resilience and capacity to adapt to new political and social environments.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Secularism, Anticult Movements, Buddhism in France, *Laïcité*.

Introduction

Buddhism is now a fully established and accepted religion in France despite its relatively late arrival into the French religious context. But like other world religions, Buddhism does not constitute one monolithic block. It is comprised of a multitude of traditions and sects, and all have not been met with the same response on the part of the French authorities or the French public. Whereas Theravāda, Zen, or Tibetan traditions have enjoyed a positive image that led them to quickly obtain official recognition from the authorities, Soka Gakkai, a Japanese lay organization practicing Nichiren Buddhism, has had an ambiguous relationship with the French people and the French government. The group arrived in France in the 1960s, at the same time as many other Buddhist groups, Tibetan or Japanese, but in the 1980s and 1990s it faced a strong backlash from anticult organizations within and outside the government, and from the media. And yet, in 1991, the then president of Soka Gakkai International Daisaku Ikeda was received by François Mitterrand (1916–1996), the president of France at the time.

The difference of treatment in France between Soka Gakkai on the one hand and more mainstream Buddhist traditions on the other is quite puzzling. As this paper will argue, one possible factor that played a role in this discrepancy may be found in the archetypal image of Buddhism that many French people seem to hold in their minds. This image that is based essentially on Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan monastic groups has created certain expectations regarding how and by whom Buddhism is practiced, as well as what Buddhist practitioners or organizations may look like. Because Soka Gakkai is a secular organization whose members have differing beliefs and practices, it does not fit this image, as will be explained in the second part of this paper, and it has been viewed by some as a “pseudo-Buddhist” group.

However, Soka Gakkai has shown great resilience in the face of this difficult acceptance, and has managed to adapt to the French context, notably by modifying its institutional structure. But to understand the context in question, it is first needed to review the main phases of the development of Buddhism in France, a development dominated by Theravāda Buddhism as well as by specific Mahāyāna traditions.

1. *The Development of Buddhism in France*

1.1. From Theravāda...

It is not the intention of this paper to retrace in detail the history of European contacts with and interest in Buddhism (authors with much more expertise in this field of study have already presented such an account, see for instance Donald S. Lopez and his monography *From Stone to Flesh*: Lopez 2013). However, to understand the reception of Soka Gakkai in France it is important to have a grasp of the history of Buddhism in this country, of how it has been viewed, studied, and which traditions are most present.

Even though Mahāyāna traditions can be considered the most important Buddhist ones in France nowadays, as will be shown further down, the Theravāda tradition was the one which first constituted the main object of interest of many intellectuals. Indeed, French orientalists in the 18th century, among whom was Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), considered by some as “the founding father of modern Buddhist scientific studies” (Silk 2012, 1), believed in the existence of a “pure” or “original” Buddhism, which dated back to the founder of this religion, Buddha Shakyamuni, and whose closest descendant, so to speak, was in their eyes the Theravāda tradition (Obadia 1999, 32–5 and 44–5). As Lionel Obadia further explains in his book *Bouddhisme et Occident* [Buddhism and the West] (1999), orientalists were more interested in the “original” Buddhist philosophy as presented in the exegesis of monastic texts rather than in the Buddhist cosmology or the popular religious beliefs and practices (Obadia 1999, 44). Buddhism thus came to be interpreted as a rational religion. This interest in the Theravāda tradition could be found in other intellectual circles in France, such as the Society of the Friends of Buddhism (*Société des amis du bouddhisme*) founded in 1929. However, a few years later this society turned its focus towards Tibetan Buddhism, one of the Mahāyāna traditions.

1.2. ...to Mahāyāna Buddhism

This shift of interest from Theravāda to Mahāyāna Buddhism, and especially the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition, was probably influenced by another very famous French orientalist, namely Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969). Called by Lionel Obadia the “first true apologist of Tibetan Buddhism in France” (Obadia 1999,

112), she promoted an image of Buddhism that was much more esoteric than what was presented and studied by previous orientalists. This can be seen in several of her most famous books, such as *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (David-Néel 1929), *Tibetan Tale of Love and Magic* (David-Néel 1938), or even in her travel account *My Journey to Lhasa* (David-Néel 1927). In 2016, the first part of a four-volume comic book on David-Néel's life (*Une vie avec Alexandra David-Néel* [A Life with Alexandra David-Néel]) was published (Campoy and Blanchot 2016). It was reissued in 2017, along with the second volume (Campoy and Blanchot 2017), later followed by a third and fourth installments (Campoy and Blanchot 2018, 2020), which is evidence that her life, her travels and, by extent, the image of Tibetan Buddhism she painted in her books are still a source of fascination and interest for many French people. Her house in the town of Digneles-Bains, in the South of France, has even become a museum.

The development and democratization of Tibetan Buddhism in France kept increasing throughout the 20th century, especially after World War II. This time, however, Asian practitioners and teachers took on themselves to spread their religion in Western countries. Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987), Chuje Akong Rinpoche (1940–2013), Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989), Sögyal Rinpoche (1947–2019), and other Tibetan teachers travelled to France and started not only to teach there but to create numerous Buddhist centers and temples (Rigal-Cellard 2009, 49–66). So much so that Raphaël Liogier asserted in his book *Le bouddhisme mondialisé* [Globalized Buddhism] that

France can be considered the European nerve center, not so much of Buddhism in general as of the so-called Great Vehicle (between 60% and 65% of Tibetan Buddhist centers in Europe are established in France) (Liogier 2004, 239).

The Dalai Lama also participated in this development of Tibetan Buddhism in France, at least indirectly, as he enjoys a tremendously positive public image. According to the journalist Gaël Lombart, the Dalai Lama made 21 trips to France in 35 years (Lombart 2016). One of his official translators, the French Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, is also a Buddhist figure very much liked by a significant proportion of French people, as is demonstrated by the dozens of books, and newspaper and scientific articles he (co-)published, as well as the many interviews he has given over the years on French television.

But Tibetan Buddhism is not the only Mahāyāna tradition to have known success in this country. Zen Buddhism shares a large portion of the French

Buddhist religious market. In 1999, French scholar Frédéric Lenoir listed 51 Zen centers in France, compared to 70 Tibetan Buddhist centers and only 15 Theravāda centers (Lenoir 1999, 423–40). One of the most well-known Buddhist centers in France is that of the Plum Village, near Bordeaux, which is among the biggest Buddhist centers in Europe as it boasts a monastic community of over 200 monks and nuns and has sometimes welcomed more than 700 guests for retreats, according to its official website. This huge center was founded by the famous Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh and nun Chân Không in 1982.

1.3. The French Buddhist Union

In 1986, several Buddhist communities came together and formed the French Buddhist Union (*Union bouddhiste de France*, or UBF). It is a federation now comprised of most of the Buddhist traditions established in France, at the forefront of which are the Tibetan and Zen traditions: 8 out of the 9 presidents of this federation practiced either Tibetan or Japanese Zen Buddhism (the exception being Ven. Dr. Tampalawela Dhammaratana who is a practitioner of the Theravāda tradition). Right from the start the goal of the UBF was to become the official representative of Buddhism to the French authorities. It was quickly successful in its endeavor since only two years later, in 1988, the UBF obtained a seat on the board of directors of CAVIMAC (*Caisse d'assurance vieillesse, invalidité et maladie des cultes*), the French national health fund for members of clergy, congregations, and religious communities. Buddhism is still today the only non-Abrahamic religion on the board of directors of CAVIMAC.

That same year the French *Conseil d'État* granted the UBF another official recognition: the Karmé Dharma Chakra monastery obtained the legal status of congregation. Up until then, only Catholic worship associations enjoyed the benefits of that official status (Liogier 2005, 244). In 1997, the French Buddhist Union managed to secure a fifteen-minute time slot on France 2, the most important French public national television channel, in order to produce *Sagesses bouddhistes* (“Buddhist Words of Wisdom,” called *Voix bouddhistes* or “Buddhist Voices” until 2007). This TV program is broadcast every Sunday morning along other programs about Judaism, Islam, Protestantism, the Orthodox Church, the Eastern Catholic Churches, and before the live broadcast of the Catholic mass at 10:30 am.

It is therefore indubitable that the UBF has met with success as far as the French authorities are concerned. However, this sort of hegemony enjoyed by the UBF poses the question of the representation and recognition of Buddhist traditions that are not members of this federation, as is the case of Soka Gakkai. Even without considering the question of the UBF, the historical weight of the Buddhist traditions in France mentioned above has probably played against certain Buddhist groups such as Soka Gakkai, as the former are at the source of the archetypal image of Buddhism many French people hold in their minds, a sort of mold into which Soka Gakkai does not fit since, in many respects, it differs greatly from Tibetan and Zen traditions.

2. A “Pseudo-Buddhism”: Soka Gakkai and the Archetypal Image of Buddhism in France

2.1. Soka Gakkai Classified as a “Cult”

Soka Gakkai began to settle in France in the 1960s, around the same time as the creation of the first centers of the Tibetan and Zen traditions. Soka Gakkai and the other Buddhist traditions developed in parallel, though at a very different pace and with varying success: while the UBF was getting official recognition from the French government, the 1980s were for the Japanese sect a period of intense public rejection as it was accused of being a “cult.” Anti-cultists among French authorities, in the press, and in anti-cult associations even branded the group as a form of “pseudo-Buddhism.”

Since the 1980s, the French government has published every year or so a report on the “cults” (called “sectes” in French) established in France as well as the groups demonstrating, in the eyes of the authorities, “cultic tendencies” (“*dérives sectaires*”). Soka Gakkai was at least mentioned, if not openly criticized, in several of those reports. The first time was in 1985 with the Vivien Report which not only listed Soka Gakkai as a “cult” but went as far as to call it a “pseudo-Buddhism” (Vivien 1985, 62).

This term evidently implies that there exists a true or an original form of Buddhism, to which the authors of the report deem that Soka Gakkai does not belong. One might see in the use of this term and, consequently, in the act of judging the “purity” of a religious tradition, a legacy from the 18th century

orientalists who believed in such an original form of Buddhism. This is emphasized by another report, the Gest-Guyard Report (1995), which tackles the issue of what are called the “‘orientalist’ movements”:

The “orientalist” movements:

Is grouped under this term an extreme diversity of movements that refer to oriental religions and metaphysical doctrines, such as Buddhism, Hinduism or Taoism, *all while corrupting them*.

Soka Gakkai claims to be teaching (despite the 1990 schism with Nichiren Shōshū) the doctrine of Nichiren, a 13th century Buddhist monk who professed a nationalist and intolerant Buddhism (Gest and Guyard 1995, II.A.1, emphasis added).

In their review of “cults” established in France, the authors of the report created seven categories based on the characteristics of each religious group: the “‘apocalyptic’ movements,” the “‘neo-pagan’ movements,” the “‘satanic’ movements,” the “‘healing’ movements,” the “‘occultist’ movements,” the “‘psychoanalytic’ movements,” and the “‘orientalist’ movements.” As is explained in the quotation above, the orientalist movements are characterized by the fact that they corrupt “oriental religions.” Consequently, Soka Gakkai is supposedly not a genuine Buddhist group, its members can only “claim” to be practicing Buddhism. For the authors of the report, this lack of legitimacy seems further heightened by the schism between Soka Gakkai, the lay Nichirenist organization, and Nichiren Shōshū, the monastic order to which Soka Gakkai was affiliated until 1990.

2.2. The model of the Theravāda, Tibetan, and Zen Traditions

We might be here touching upon one of the reasons why Soka Gakkai has been viewed as a corrupt or fake form of Buddhism: if one follows the logic of the Gest-Guyard Report, a legitimate Buddhist group is one that is comprised of or affiliated with a monastic order. It is the opinion of the author of this paper that such a view of what constitutes a “correct” or legitimate Buddhist organization is based upon, at least partly, an archetypal image of Buddhism formed on the model of Theravāda, Tibetan, and Zen traditions. These Buddhist traditions lay great emphasis on the importance of the monks and nuns as well as the lineages they are part of (meaning the succession of direct transmission of certain teachings from

one generation to the next), as they are viewed as guarantors of the authenticity and orthodoxy of the teachings.

After all, the “ambassadors” or public figures representing and importing Buddhism in France have mainly been for more than sixty years Buddhist monks and nuns (the Dalai Lama, Matthieu Ricard, Taisen Deshimaru [1914–1982], Thích Nhất Hạnh, Chân Không, Kalu Rinpoche, etc.). Therefore, the mental image a French person may have of a typical Buddhist practitioner will probably be that of a monk or nun, with all the characteristics that may be associated with them. This is exemplified by the following quotation by Louis Hourmant who expresses his surprise at the differences between Zen and Tibetan practitioners, and members of Soka Gakkai:

Compared to Zen practitioners and more still to Tibetan practitioners, members of Soka Gakkai... blend into their surroundings because of the complete absence of exotic traits: they do not display saffron—or black—colored robes, they do not shave their head, they do not meditate in the lotus position but seated in a banal chair, they do not build pagodas or stupas... but they meet in apartments or in anonymous halls rented for the occasion (Hourmant 1999, 196).

The fact that Soka Gakkai is a secular organization and that it lacks the “exotic” characteristics mentioned above create a dissonance between its claim of being a Buddhist group in its own right and the collective mental image associated with Buddhism in the minds of many French people. These differences between Soka Gakkai and the Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan traditions were so great in the eyes of French sociologist Frédéric Lenoir that he decided not to include this Japanese organization into his 1999 study of Buddhism in France.

However just this reason may be for such a decision, the way he justified it seems to be in keeping with the argument of this paper, namely that Soka Gakkai has been rejected as an authentic Buddhist group because it departs too much from the archetypal image of Buddhism in France, which is based on Tibetan, Theravāda, and Zen traditions:

The role of the sociologist is not to say whether the criticism [against Soka Gakkai] is justified, false, or excessive, but simply to observe that such differences exist between this very particular group and the other Buddhist traditions, so much so that it becomes therefore impossible to put them together in the same study. The significant success of Soka Gakkai and its solid implementation in most Western countries having been the object of specific studies, it seems to me wiser to compare these works to those, like ours, that focus on Buddhism in its most traditional acceptance—as represented in

France by the Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan traditions—which is also the one spread by the media and in which every French person concerned directly or indirectly by this “Buddhist wave” can recognize themselves (Lenoir 1999, 23).

It is interesting to note that the anti-cult association UNADFI (Union nationale des associations de défense des familles et de l'individu, “National Union of the Associations for the Defense of the Families and the Individuals”) uses Lenoir’s study on its website as an argument from authority against Soka Gakkai (UNADFI 2014). On the contrary, other scholars who have studied Buddhism in France have included Soka Gakkai as well as other traditions in their works. This is the case for instance of Raphaël Liogier (2004), Thierry Mathé (2005), or Lionel Obadia’s 2011 article fittingly titled “Can You Judge a Monk by His Robe? Social Semiotics of ‘The Buddhist Being’ in the Western Context.” In this article, Obadia explains that

the association of appearance (the robe) and behavior (asceticism) has ideally corresponded to the prism of Western representations, to an absolute accordance between the norm (ethics) and the customs (its implementation) (Obadia 2011, 74).

2.3. A Religious Group That Is Too Secularized

Obadia is hinting here at another determining element in the reception and perception of Soka Gakkai in France when he speaks about the behavior and ethics of Buddhist practitioners, especially those wearing “the robe,” i.e. the monks and nuns, the *sensei* and the *lamas*. To paraphrase Obadia, many French people (and people from other Western countries) have suffered from a cognitive bias that overly credits Buddhist monastics with virtuous behavior. In other words, they are seen as the perfect embodiments of moral behavior, or virtue (*śīla*) (Obadia 2011, 77).

This is again reflected on the website of the UNADFI, where one of the main charges brought against Soka Gakkai is that it is “a Buddhism disseminated by a lay organization.” The UNADFI presents thereafter the difficult relationship between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū, a relationship where the monastic branch has been the victim, and the lay branch the culprit:

Fights occurred in temples; a libel suit was filed by the SG against the Nichiren Shōshū in Los Angeles. The SG keeps on dragging Nichiren Shōshū’s name in the mud, to the point that some members of the SGF [Soka Gakkai France] have thought that this fight should not be based on hate (UNADFI 2014).

This exceedingly positive image of Buddhist monastics may explain why for many years some French anti-cultists have criticized Soka Gakkai for certain types of behavior that could also be found in more mainstream Buddhist traditions.

Another of the main points of criticism that have been made against Soka Gakkai in France has to do with its engagement with the secular world. The goal of the group is indeed to generate a “human revolution” and a world of peace thanks to the propagation of the *Lotus Sutra*. Among other things, Soka Gakkai works as an NGO with the United Nations, focusing on nuclear disarmament, human rights, and sustainable development. This lay Buddhist organization went as far as to create a new political party in Japan in 1964 called Kōmeitō.

This political engagement was badly perceived in France, even after Soka Gakkai officially cut ties with this political party in 1970, as is revealed by several press articles published in the 1980s and 1990s, at the peak of the anticult movement in France. For instance, an article from the daily newspaper *Libération* titled “All This Week in *Libération*: Cults in Quest of Political Influence Abroad. Today, Japan. Soka Gakkai Infiltrates Japanese Politics. Under the Cover of Being a Religion, the Rich Organization Maintains a Power-Conquering Strategy” (Amoua 1996).

On the contrary, other Buddhist groups’ engagement in worldly affairs has been perceived in a more positive light, if it was perceived at all. For instance, the numerous books and talks by the Dalai Lama on social issues such as abortion, democracy, the environment, economics, politics, and many others do not seem to have created as much antagonism in France as it has for Soka Gakkai (Obadia 1999, 148–49; Liogier 2004). Here again the fact that Soka Gakkai is a secular organization might explain the differences of treatment with other Buddhist groups. Members of the Buddhist clergy, as well as the doctrines they may teach, have long been viewed as primarily, if not only, concerned with spiritual matters and contemplative practices, to the point that some have viewed Buddhism as an “apathetic” religion (Obadia 1999, 80–1).

Contrary to Liogier’s argument that the

representation of Soka Gakkai as an organization that is both completely religious and completely secular... is actually an asset for its Westernization (Liogier 2002, 11),

it seems rather that in France the secular character of this Buddhist organization has hindered its process of public acceptance. Put differently, Soka Gakkai is—

quite paradoxically—too secularized a group for the country of *laïcité* as it goes against many of the characteristics attributed by many French people to what is considered to actually be Buddhism. However, Soka Gakkai's French offshoot has not remained passive in the face of these difficulties regarding its integration in France but, on the contrary, it has shown resilience.

3. *The Resilience of Soka Gakkai in France*

In August and September 2021, the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) held in Pisa its 18th annual conference on the topic of resilience. The concept of resilience was defined as follows in the conference's website:

Resilience can be considered as the ability to counteract or absorb a process of transformation. It is also characterized by a capacity to endure changes without having to adapt permanently, an ability to find what best suits new environmental conditions; and an awareness of how to cope with a crisis (EASR 2021).

Soka Gakkai in France seems to fit this description since at the beginning of the 21st century the organization resolved to change some of its practices (by using a more moderate form of proselytism for example), and adapt its institutional organization to the demands of the French authorities, as well as to fit the model set by other religions long established in the country. Since I have discussed in a previous article the evolution of proselytization practices by Soka Gakkai in France (Ben Hammouda 2019), the point of focus here will be on the institutional changes.

These changes took place mainly in 2007, when SGF went through a major overhaul that aimed at countering the arguments regarding the lack of transparency of the group. From that year on, Soka Gakkai in France was divided into three main branches, each branch having specific responsibilities. The group was first granted the legal status of “worship association” (*association cultuelle*) by the French authorities and chose a new official name that clearly asserts its affiliation to Buddhism: “Soka Worship Association of Nichiren Buddhism” (*Association cultuelle Soka du bouddhisme Nichiren*). Obtaining the legal status of a worship association was of paramount importance for the group as this status “provides public accreditation for legitimate religions” in France (Hervieu-Léger 2004, 55). In other words, it meant that the French Ministry of the Interior

(which manages all the questions related to religious groups established in the country) officially recognized Soka Gakkai as a legitimate religion and no longer as a dangerous “cult.” This does not mean however that the group has been completely free of this accusation. In 2017, for instance, Soka Gakkai was again mentioned in the yearly report published by the MIVILUDES (the Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combatting Cultic Deviances: MIVILUDES 2017).

The second new branch of Soka Gakkai in France is the Soka Cultural Association in France (*Association culturelle Soka de France*). It is in charge of the organization of cultural activities, such as (interreligious) conferences and seminars. It also administers the Maison Littéraire de Victor Hugo (see Rigal-Cellard 2021). The last branch, or association, is the Association of Commerce, Edition, and other Services (*Association de commerce, d'édition et de service*), which manages the publications of the movement in France.

This separation of the religious activities from the cultural and commercial ones into three specific official associations is proof of the capacity for structural resilience of this Buddhist sect. Beyond the question of transparency, it is also a way to fit, if not the French archetypal image of Buddhism, then the French administrative and institutional framework for religious organizations. In his 2004 article “Perspective: Toward a Definition of ‘New Religion,’” Gordon Melton underlined the capacity of new religious movements (NRMs) to adapt and change their beliefs and behaviors in order to overcome the accusations they may face:

[I]t has been observed that the new religions change rapidly, especially those still in their first generation of life. Newly founded groups, which may adopt beliefs and practices that set them in heightened tension vis-à-vis the establishment, can significantly lower their tension by altering behaviors with only minor adjustments to their belief systems (Melton 2004, 83).

The case of Soka Gakkai in France may invite us to add to these observations that new religious movements’ specific capacity for change does not solely concern the beliefs and behaviors of the groups in question, but might also pertain to their ability to alter their institutional structure(s).

One last element—but not the least—regarding SGF’s institutional overhaul needs to be examined. Indeed, there is another organizational body which oversees the religious activities of the group. This body is the French national

Soka Consistory of Nichiren Buddhism (*Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren*). Its official goal, as delineated in its Constitution available on its website, is to guarantee “the unity of the religion and the respect of the belief as well as the Buddhist practice of Nichiren Buddhism.” This is done in concertation with what they call the “world Consistory” (i.e. Soka Gakkai International). It currently consists of six members who have been chosen “by the world Consistory” for “their spiritual qualities and their knowledge of Buddhism” (*Consistoire Soka du bouddhisme de Nichiren* 2006, 6). The Consistory is also the official interlocutor of Soka Gakkai for the French authorities.

This description of the Soka Consistory is not dissimilar from Protestant presbyteries. The term “Consistory” itself is also used in French Judaism: the Central Israelite Consistory of France (*Consistoire central israélite de France*) was the first institution of that type created in France, in 1808, under Napoleon I’s (1769–1821) regime. In a way, one might argue that Soka Gakkai had to become less secularized, while remaining a lay organization, by adopting institutional traits of more mainstream religions so as to fit the administrative requirements of French secularism.

This adaptation of Soka Gakkai to the French political and religious context is in keeping with the Nichirenist precept of *zuihō bini*. As explained by McLaughlin in his monography *Soka Gakkai’s Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan*, this term is “a term Nichiren used to mean the precept of adapting to local customs.” In the words of Nichiren,

if one does not go against the heart of the precepts, even if one departs ever so slightly from the teachings of the Buddha, one should avoid going against the customs of the country (McLaughlin 2019, 10).

McLaughlin further explains that *zuihō bini*

enabled Gakkai adherents to introduce suppleness into rigidity as it allowed members to fit exclusive Lotus adherence into local customs and to adapt *shakubuku* conversion techniques to suit situational mores (McLaughlin 2019, 10).

It seems that this precept has enabled Soka Gakkai to adapt not only its conversion techniques but also its institutional framework at the national level by mimicking—to use McLaughlin’s expression—other religions that have long been established in France.

Conclusion

Despite being active in France for almost as long as Theravāda, Tibetan, or Zen traditions, Soka Gakkai has faced many more difficulties to be accepted both by French authorities and French society at large. This paper has thus tried to demonstrate that what may explain in part this difference of treatment between these Buddhist groups has to do with the archetypal image of the Buddhist religion many French people hold in their minds. As a new religious movement, Soka Gakkai did not benefit from the same long history of contact and interest between Europeans and practitioners of Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions such as Tibetan and Japanese Zen Buddhism. Because French people have engaged with these specific traditions since at least the 18th century, be it through scientific studies or personal philosophical and spiritual interest, these groups have inevitably become the source of the collective mental image brought up to many French people's minds when they are asked the questions "What is Buddhism?" "What is a Buddhist?" or "What does practicing Buddhism look like?"

Soka Gakkai went against this fixed archetypal image of Buddhism since it was a completely secular organization with religious practices and beliefs that did not resemble those of other Mahāyāna traditions. However, this movement has shown great resilience in confronting these difficulties as it changed its institutional structure at the national level in order to meet the standards of organized religions within the framework of French secularism. By doing so, Soka Gakkai paradoxically had to present a less secular image of itself and assert its status as an actual, legitimate Buddhist religious movement. This is still however an ongoing process since as recently as 2017 the MIVILUDES report still ranked Soka Gakkai in the category of "pseudo-Buddhism."

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