

Ikeda's Rinascimento: Daisaku Ikeda's Trips to Italy and Soka Gakkai's Globalization of the Italian Renaissance

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ABSTRACT: Soka Gakkai Italy started publishing in 1982 a monthly magazine called *Il Nuovo Rinascimento*. Its first issue featured a message from Soka Gakkai's third President, Daisaku Ikeda. Both the idea of a "New Renaissance" and an appreciation for Italian Renaissance were important for Ikeda. The article discusses "Rinascimento" and "New Renaissance" as concepts historians and philosophers now regard as controversial. It then examines Ikeda's main texts on the Italian Renaissance, mostly coming from his trips to Italy, and his assessments of some features of the "Rinascimento," including its anticlericalism. Ikeda's idea of a "New Renaissance," unlike others, did not focus mostly on technology, nor did it exhibit a naïve "technological determinism." He believed that the "New Renaissance" would be spiritual, although free from the constraints of a rigidified religion.

KEYWORDS: Renaissance, New Renaissance, Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Daisaku Ikeda and Renaissance, Daisaku Ikeda in Italy.

Introduction

On February 1, 1982, the Italian Soka Gakkai started publishing a new magazine. It called it *Il Nuovo Rinascimento*, "The New Renaissance." It carried on its first page a picture of Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) and a personal message from him about the new magazine. He wrote,

During the Renaissance, which celebrated the awakening of the humanistic culture, the role printing played to elevate the spirits was crucial. Thanks to printing, many could access the ideas of Dante [Alighieri, 1265–1321], Giordano Bruno [1548–1600], or Erasmus [of Rotterdam, 1466–1538]. But with the changing times and the rapid progress of printing technology we have reached an age when the world is literally awash in an exorbitant number of publications. Printing, which in its early days contributed to human

awakening, is now sometimes accused of depriving men of their subjectivity and creating a superficial and inferior mass culture. In this era, the presence of a newspaper inspired by Nichiren Daishonin's [1222–1282] Buddhism, rooted in true human liberation and true humanism, will become increasingly important. *Agosho* says, "The taller the pine tree, the longer the wisteria vine hanging from it. The deeper the source, the longer the stream" [Nichiren Daishonin 1999, 642]. Italian friends, ... advance with your paper into the 21st century, joyfully, peacefully, unhurriedly but steadily. I send you this message confident that your movement for a new renaissance will be a success in the bright century of life (Ikeda 1982, 1).

"New Renaissance" was an expression Ikeda used often. In a message sent to graduate students for the commencement ceremony at Soka University, he called them "the standard-bearers of a new renaissance" (Ikeda 1998). He also repeatedly expressed his love for the Italian Renaissance and the city of Florence (Ikeda 2020).

These statements by Ikeda should now be evaluated within a context where both "Renaissance" and "New Renaissance" were never uncontested categories and now have become victims of postmodernist deconstructivism. In the first and second part of the article, I will reconstruct how "Renaissance" and "New Renaissance" became contested categories. In the third part, I will assess the meaning of Renaissance for Ikeda and its importance in his thought.

Would the Real Renaissance Please Stand Up?

Postmodernist historians take great pleasure in poking fun at the popular idea of the Renaissance. Distinguished historian Matthew Gabriele explained to the readers of *Forbes* that "There Was No Such a Thing as the 'Renaissance'":

On a bright Spring day in Tuscany, sometime around 1500 CE, a dowdy merchant in the lovely city of Florence rolled out of bed. He smelled something different in the air. He sprang from his bed, but his wife and the animals in the house still asleep, moved quietly to the shutters and opened them to a bright, sunshine-filled day. "Oh my!" he yelled, waking everyone around. "Finally, the Middle Ages are over. It must be the Renaissance!" But, of course that didn't really happen (Gabriele 2019).

Professor Gabriele may be as bright as that Spring day in Tuscany, but he is not telling us anything new. "Renaissance" was always a contested category. Its story has been told several times, but many would agree that no later treatment has surpassed the seminal book *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries*

of Interpretation, published in 1948 by Canadian historian Wallace K. Ferguson (1902–1983; Ferguson 1948).

Gabriele's merchant could not have uttered the sentence “It must be the Renaissance” in the year 1500 for the good reason that the word “Renaissance” did not exist at that time. It was coined in 1860 by Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), the man largely responsible both for the popularity and the controversial nature of the concept of Renaissance (Burckhardt 1860).

Religion had a lot to do with Burckhardt's “invention” of the Renaissance. Burckhardt's father was a pastor and he studied Protestant theology in Basel before turning to the study of history. There is no doubt that he was a great historian, but it is also true that his antipathy towards the Middle Ages was marked by a religious prejudice against Catholicism (Gossman 2000; Hinde 2000).

“Renaissance” for Burckhardt was defined in opposition to “Middle Ages,” or the “Dark Ages.”

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which turned outward toward the world and that which turned inward toward man himself—lay dreaming or half-awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues... In Italy, this veil first melted into air; there developed an objective consideration and treatment of the state and of all things of this world; at the same time, the subjective asserted itself with full power; man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian (Burckhardt 1921, 29, which translates Burckhardt 1860, 131).

While Burckhardt invented the word “Renaissance,” the idea that the new time was as superior to the “dark” Middle Ages as the Greek culture was higher than its “barbarian” counterparts came from Italian poets and artists of the period between the 14th and the 16th century. Both poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) and artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) theorized that their arts were much greater than those of the Middle Ages (a term coined by Petrarca himself: Mommsen 1942; McLaughlin 1988, 132). They regarded the Middle Ages as a dark parenthesis between the luminous Greek and Roman culture, which they rediscovered, and themselves. While they were at it, they coined the term “Gothic” to disparage Medieval arts as the Goths were the quintessential “barbarians” for the Romans.

The self-perception of the Italian “Renaissance” artists (the word did not yet exist, but Vasari spoke of “rebirth”: Ferguson 1948, 60) was used for their own

purposes by the Protestants, which made Catholicism responsible for the alleged darkness of the Middle Ages, and the Enlightenment philosophers, who saw the Italian awakening as a rebirth of reason against Medieval religion-dominated irrationalism. As Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff has noted, this was more propaganda than history, and hid a crucial fact: that the Italian Renaissance was in love not only with the more rational philosophers of the ancient Greece and Rome but also with the Hellenistic magic. In fact, it is thanks to the Renaissance that the ancient Hellenistic texts about hermeticism, magic, and esotericism (another word that did not yet exist) were rediscovered and published (Hanegraaff 2012). There was some magic in the Middle Ages, but (contrary to a widespread prejudice) much less than in the Renaissance (Federici Vescovini 2008).

Burckhardt's "Renaissance," which was as much an ideological manifesto as it was a historical interpretation, soon ran into three problems. The first was theoretical. Subsequent historians argued that they were under no obligation to accept the Italian artists' claims that they had broken with what they called the Middle Ages. In fact, historians found in Renaissance science, art, and literature plenty of Medieval elements (Ferguson 1948, 329). Second, Burckhardt was a theologian turned art historian, with very little interest in sociology. When social historians started looking at the Renaissance, they saw phenomena such as printing, geographical discoveries, and Europe's reaction to the Black Death epidemics (1346–1353), which killed half of the continent's population, as not less important than the enthusiasm for the classics in creating the period's epoch-making changes.

Third, while Burckhardt was busy explaining how superior Renaissance art was to its Medieval counterpart, in England, although perhaps not in his native Switzerland, the most fashionable art (Staley 2011) originated from the Pre-Raphaelite movement, whose very name referred to what was painted and sculpted "before Raphael" (1483–1520), i.e., before the Renaissance (Smith 2012). Ironically, one year after Burckhardt launched the word "Renaissance," William Morris (1834–1896) founded in 1861 with Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) the company Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., which brought furniture and decoration in a taste privileging the Middle Ages over the Renaissance to most distinguished Western homes (Mason 2021), while the Gothic Revival dominated

several countries and disseminated cities and villages with “neo-Gothic” buildings for half a century (Hill 2008).

Today there is surely an enthusiasm for the Renaissance, although one that emphasizes its magical and esoteric elements in *The Da Vinci Code* style (Brown 2003) rather than hiding them as Burckhardt did (Provini and Bost-Fievet 2019). However, the public taste is created by the most publicized exhibitions, and they are somewhat eclectic rather than privileging one particular epoch over the others.

“New Renaissance”

The category of “New Renaissance” is not less contested than “Renaissance.” The idea that we are living in a “new Renaissance” was first suggested by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) in the 1960s. McLuhan argued that just as printing had created a new era, the Renaissance, the modern media, including television, were ushering in an era that was radically different from the modern world as we knew it, a “new Renaissance” (McLuhan 1962, 1964).

McLuhan has been criticized as the very epitome of technological determinism, the fallacy attributing to technology the power of automatically creating social change (Fekete 1969). However, McLuhan argued that the crucial factor for the birth of the Renaissance was not the printing technology nor the rediscovery of the Greek and Roman classics. It was the turn from an education focused on logic only, a feature of the declining years of the Middle Ages, to one returning to the central role of grammar, emphasized by the great Medieval scholars of the 13th century (McLuhan 2006). Only, the technological progress of printing required a new grammar, just as McLuhan saw a new grammar, thus a new Renaissance, emerging from television and electronics.

While McLuhan did not believe that the expansion of the available information was unequivocally positive, a more visionary theory of the “new Renaissance” developed first in the United States and then in France in the 21st century. The influential 2002 report on the social effects of new technologies by the American Science Foundation proclaimed that “we stand at the threshold of a new renaissance” (Roco and Bainbridge 2002, 1). Those who noticed a secularized mysticism in this emphasis were perhaps not wrong, considering that one of the

authors of the report, William Sims Bainbridge, came from the study (and participant observation: Bainbridge 1978) of new religious movements.

As emphasized by the French scholar Martial Martin, in France and beyond the expression “nouvelle Renaissance” was popularized by journalist Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber (1937–2020), particularly through a special issue of his magazine *Clés* published in June 2011, followed by his book *Aimer (quand même) le XXI^e siècle* (Loving the 21st Century—Anyway: Servan-Schreiber 2012) and by a conference held in Strasbourg in 2014 (Martin 2019, 204–7).

The French movement agreed with McLuhan that the return to the Greek and Roman classics was not the main feature of the Renaissance. However, it did not focus on grammar but on new technologies, geographical discoveries, and the affirmation of individual liberty. These were the features they believed Renaissance had in common with the “new Renaissance” of the 21st century with its astounding new technologies, globalization, and “new rights” movement rejecting conventional religion and morality.

While the expression “new Renaissance” was adopted by companies such as Google and Apple and by several governments, as the 21st century progressed it declined among scholars. As psychiatrist Serge Tisseron objected, “there is a new Renaissance every five years,” as life-changing technologies are continuously proposed (Tisseron 2015). As Italian scholar Umberto Eco (1932–2016) had already warned, all these “new Renaissances” do not necessarily create more freedom. And today the “new Renaissance” is criticized as a legitimization of digital capitalism and a nostalgia for an era when Europe was the center of the world and liquidated the other cultures as barbarian. Postmodernist critics would also remind us that the Renaissance produced Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) but also, or so they believe, “the Holocaust of Native Americans and the wars of religion” (Martin 2019, 206, 209, 214–15).

Daisaku Ikeda and the “New Renaissance”

Daisaku Ikeda was, of course, Japanese. As such, it cannot be accused of Eurocentrism nor of what is now regarded as Burckhardt’s main sin, i.e., an ideological prejudice against the Middle Ages. In fact, the main reference of Ikeda was a Medieval Buddhist monk, Nichiren Daishonin. Perhaps because he was not

European, Ikeda went beyond the Burckhardtian controversy Renaissance versus the Middle Ages. One can appreciate the Renaissance without disparaging Medieval culture, and one can appreciate the great art, literature, and architecture of the Middle Ages without slandering the Renaissance.

Perhaps this attitude is easier in Japan. French scholar of comics Pierre-Alexis Delhayé has compared favorably the depiction of the powerful and ruthless Italian Renaissance family, the Borgia, in the Japanese manga *Cesare* of Fuyumi Soryo and Motoaki Hara with the French and international TV series *Borgia*. Delhayé finds the Japanese manga, which focuses on mercenary leader Cesare Borgia (1475–1507), much freer from stereotypes and based on serious scholarly sources. Delhayé also praised the manga for understanding the crucial role of Dante, a quintessentially Medieval man, in shaping the culture of the Renaissance (Delhayé 2017).

Both Cesare Borgia and Burckhardt are mentioned in what may well be the most important text on the Renaissance by Daisaku Ikeda, which dates back to 1994. Speaking at the University of Bologna, one of the world's oldest universities, Ikeda hailed the cosmopolitan and independent spirit of Leonardo da Vinci, but also noted that it was already present among the Bolognese students in the 13th century (Ikeda 1994). Ikeda saw Leonardo, a man of the Renaissance, as

an utterly free and independent individual, not only liberated from the strictures of religion and ethics but also unconstrained by ties to nation, family, friends, and acquaintances (Ikeda 1994).

Leonardo could work for very different patrons, including, Ikeda mentioned, the notorious Cesare Borgia, not because he was opportunistic but because

he was of a scale too grand to be measured by the norms of society. In addition, the freedom with which he transcended all worldly concerns and limitations offers us a glimpse of the essence of the truly liberated world citizen (Ikeda 1994).

Ikeda believed that “Leonardo’s transcendence of convention is rather similar to the Buddhist teaching of ‘transcending the world’ (Jpn. *shusseken*).” He reported Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) opinion that, in some mysterious way, Leonardo “knew the Orient”:

This relates, I think, [to] the similarity between Leonardo’s spirit and Eastern philosophy. The likeness is also suggested by the fact that both Leonardo and Buddhism compare the mind that transcends convention, transcends the world, to a mirror (Ikeda 1994).

Ikeda also quoted Burckhardt who, with all his limits, wrote some of the most poetic and memorable pages about Leonardo, to celebrate the Italian artist as a man who tried through the universality of the image to go beyond the limits of language, expressing a crucial aspect of “the unique spirit of the Italian Renaissance.” Leonardo, Ikeda said,

was suspicious of and even hostile to the reifying function of language to capture experience and render it fixed. Leonardo’s emphasis on the visual image and his criticism of language remind me of the thoughts of Nagarjuna [ca. 150–250], the great Mahayana Buddhist thinker of the second or third century (Ikeda 1994).

Ikeda also observed that

The spirit of the Renaissance is often described as being of the whole, of totality, of the universal. Leonardo, too, no doubt perceived a world of infinite creativity, a totality and universalism that we might call the life of the cosmos (Ikeda 1994).

After the speech he gave in Bologna, Ikeda went to Milan, where he celebrated Dante. Ikeda had a lifelong interest in Dante to whom he was introduced by his mentor, Soka Gakkai’s second President Josei Toda (1900–1958: Shiohara 2021, 15). He reminisced about his early reading of Dante “in his youth amidst the devastation of World War II” in the message for the 700th anniversary of Dante’s death (2021) he sent in 2022 to the City of Ravenna, where the poet died in 1321 and was buried (Ikeda 2022). In Milan, Ikeda acknowledged Dante as a man of his time, yet one anticipating the Renaissance with a broad “spirit of research” and “a heart as expansive as the universe” (Ikeda 2003, 94).

There is no doubt that Ikeda loved the Italian Rinascimento, particularly as it flourished in Florence. He wrote, reminiscing about his first visit there:

Italy,
like the morning sun,
envelops the entire world
with the fragrance of the Renaissance
in full bloom...

I first visited Florence, often described as “an open-air museum,” in May 1981. I met with many young friends there, conversing with them while visiting their homes, sitting on a sun-dappled grassy knoll, crossing the Ponte Vecchio bridge over the Arno River, or gazing out over the cityscape from Michelangelo Square (Ikeda 2020).

In that memorable first visit to Florence, Ikeda not only admired the city but also gave a speech to the young Italian members of Soka Gakkai. The speech is important as it clarifies Ikeda’s attitude to what has been called the Renaissance

“anticlericalism” (Niccoli 2005), i.e., its criticism of the clergy. It might seem surprising that a religious leader like Ikeda admired Leonardo as a man “liberated from the strictures of religion” (Ikeda 1994). He celebrated in the same vein Petrarca and Michelangelo (1475–1564). According to Ikeda

Michelangelo lived a long time in contact with the clergy and knew well their lies and corruption; aware of the dullness and insolence of the priests, he had a deep aversion for their attitude (Ikeda 2003, 101).

Petrarca, Ikeda said, “systematically attacked the corruption of the clergy... From this anger originated the Renaissance” (Ikeda 2003, 104). These quotes are from 1994, and the context was the painful conflict and separation of Soka Gakkai from the monks of Nichiren Shoshu and their patriarch Nikken (1922–2019). Ikeda explicitly compared the attitude of Michelangelo and Petrarca towards the corrupt clergy of their time with Soka Gakkai’s reject of the equally corrupt “Nikken cult” (Ikeda 2003, 103).

In Florence, in 1991, Ikeda also hailed

the Renaissance that freed people from the shackles of a rigid belief in God. It was the heralding of a new era that awakened people to freedom and the consciousness that the human being comes first. Today, however, the world has reached another dead end, and many distinguished thinkers are calling for a new Humanism, that is, the revolution of one’s humanity. Therefore, the essential thing is to understand that only by embracing the eternal and indestructible law of *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*, which permeates the lives of all beings, can we find the sure way to realize the ideals chased by these thinkers. The key lies in embracing this law (Ikeda 2003, 5–6).

This is a key aspect of Ikeda’s gaze into the Renaissance and, indeed, into religion. He regarded formalistic, rigidified religion as “dead,” but his criticism was not directed at religion as such. Just as the main Renaissance thinkers and artists were “men of faith who did not hold the priests in esteem” (Ikeda 2003, 101), when Ikeda spoke of a “New Renaissance” he had in mind one where religion will be liberated from all forms of corruption and of rigidity that may lead to violence. As a man from Asia, and a Buddhist, he saw this “new renaissance for our global civilization” (Ikeda 2023) as favored by a wise use of technology, as opposed to its always possible use for the wrong ends and for destruction, but ultimately rooted in spirituality. In an editorial he wrote in 2021 for *The Times of India*, he praised India as a land with an enormously rich spiritual heritage that “will play a pivotal role in the emergence of a new renaissance of life” (Ikeda 2021). And he told Soka Gakkai practitioners that the key lied in embracing the Lotus Sutra.

Summing up, Ikeda loved the Renaissance and sympathized with its criticism of the corrupt clergy of the time, which should not be confused with an irreligious or atheistic attitude. Like others, he did see analogies between the great transformations of the time of the Renaissance and those of the late 20th and the 21st centuries. But he did not fall into the trap of a naïve technological determinism. He was all too aware of the destructive potential of technology. For him, the “New Renaissance” could only be spiritual in essence, centered on a religion that would not be based on “rigid belief” but on humanistic practice.

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