

**Numbers and Aspects of Soka Gakkai in Turin (Italy):
The CESNUR Research Project of 2008–2010 and Its Relevance Today**

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ABSTRACT: Between 2008 and 2010, CESNUR conducted extensive research in Turin concerning Soka Gakkai, the results of which have remained unpublished to date. The CESNUR research included both fieldwork and a sample survey administered to over 300 members. The interest of this research derives from the particularly significant quantitative data of practitioners of Soka Gakkai in Turin, which made it the second non-Christian religious minority in the city among Italian citizens (after Islam), and one of the major Buddhist communities resulting from conversions and not from immigration present in a large European urban area. In this report, I present the main statistical data taken from the CESNUR survey and discuss their implications, fourteen years after the historical research was completed.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Italy, Modernization and Religious Pluralism, Global Buddhism, Buddhism in Italy, CESNUR.

Introduction

The interest in Buddhism in Italy is a recent and growing phenomenon, which has attracted the attention of sociologists interested in understanding the processes of cultural change in the national context (Mathé 2010).

One of the main reasons for the interest in Buddhism in Italy is the crisis of traditional religiosity, which has led many people to seek spiritual alternatives. In particular, the growing secularization of Italian society has led to the diminishing influence of the Roman Catholic Church (Garelli 2020), paving the way for the search for new forms of spirituality and meaning (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). In this context, Buddhism—with its doctrine based on meditation and the search for inner peace—seems to be a persuasive answer to this need for spiritual search, offering an alternative to the traditional model of religiosity.

Thus, the study of Buddhism—also in Italy—has become increasingly important in recent decades, partly due to the spread of this religious tradition in the Western world, where it has been analyzed under the category of “Global Buddhism” (Baumann 2001). As the American sociologist James William Coleman argues, the spread of Buddhism in the West has led to the transformation of the ancient Buddhist tradition into a new form adapted to Western culture (Coleman 2001). It is a phenomenon that goes hand in hand, according to British sociologist Colin Campbell, with a process of “Easternization” of the West (Campbell 2007). Moreover, as Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead suggest, the growing interest in spirituality in the West has contributed to the spread of Buddhism and other spiritual traditions different from mainline Christianity (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Their steady growth over the last few decades has been observed particularly among young people, university students, and professionals (Prebish and Baumann 2002).

Buddhism in Italy and Soka Gakkai

In considering, albeit succinctly, the presence and diffusion of Buddhist realities in Italy, it is appropriate to begin by summarizing the context in which this presence and diffusion takes place, that is, the process of pluralization. It includes religious and spiritual pluralization, which has characterized Italy, like other western societies, in a stable manner for some decades now.

According to the latest annual statistical report on religious and spiritual pluralism in Italy by CESNUR (2023), those who manifest a religious identity other than Catholic in our country number about 2,297,000 if only Italian citizens are taken into consideration. The figure is much higher, 6,162,000, if non-citizen immigrants are added. Immigrants’ data are mainly relevant for the Islamic world and secondarily for a Christian Orthodox immigration from Eastern Europe of considerable proportions, but also for Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikh and Radhasoami religions, and finally for a robust Pentecostal Protestantism.

We should consider the 53,800,460 Italian citizens and compare them with the total resident population, set at 58,850,717, according to the demographic balance data released in 2023, of whom foreign residents number 5,050,257, or 8.6%. The percentage of Italian citizens who manifest a religious identity other than Catholic in Italy is 4.3%. If we consider all residents in the territory, including those who do not have an Italian passport, the percentage of people belonging to

religious and spiritual minorities rises to 10.5%. The composition of the 4.3% of Italian citizens belonging to religious minorities is as follows:

Jews	36,000	1.6%
Fringe and dissident Catholics	26,000	1.1%
Eastern Orthodox	445,000	19.4%
Protestants	366,000	15.9%
Jehovah's Witnesses	414,000	18.0%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	28,500	1.2%
Other groups of Christian origin	12,000	0.5%
Islam	566,000	24.6%
Bahá'í and other religions derived from Islam	4,000	0.2%
Hindus and Neo-Hindus	57,000	2.5%
Buddhists	218,000	9.5%
Osho movement and related groups	4,000	0.2%
Sikh and Radhasoami	25,000	1.1%
Other groups of Eastern origin	8,000	0.4%
Japanese New Religions	3,500	0.1%
Esotericism and "Ancient Wisdom"	16,900	0.7%
Human Potential movements	29,000	1.3%
New Age and "Next Age"	20,000	0.9%
Other	18,100	0.8%
Total	2,297,000	100.0%

Table 1. Religious minorities among Italian citizens (CESNUR estimate 2023).

With reference to Buddhism, in the context of the 4.3% of Italian citizens part of religious minorities, the number of people belonging to this tradition is around 218,000. They are thus 9.5% of the religious minority population among Italian citizens. This figure considers 100,000 practitioners from the area at least theoretically represented by the Italian Buddhist Union, 96,700 members of Soka Gakkai, and 21,300 Buddhists from other traditions.

Much more uncertain are the statistics on religious minorities present on the territory if non-citizen immigrants, and not Italian citizens only, are considered. According to estimates in the annual report edited by the IDOS Study and Research Centre (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2023), 140,000 non-citizen Buddhists live in Italy, or 2.8% of those belonging to religious minorities among resident foreigners.

Eastern Orthodox	1,349,000	26.8%
Catholics	830,000	16.5%
Protestants	214,000	4.2%
Other Christians	34,000	0.7%
Islam	1,719,000	34.2%
Jews	4,000	0.1%
Hindus	166,000	3.3%
Buddhists	140,000	2.8%
Other Eastern religions	62,000	1.2%
Atheists and agnostics	336,000	6.7%
“Traditional” religions	91,000	1.8%
Other	86,000	1.7%
Total	5,031,000	100.0%

Table 2. Immigrants’ religious affiliations (IDOS estimate 2023).

Adding the 218,000 Italian citizens who are Buddhists to the 140,000 foreign resident Buddhists, there are currently about 358,000 practitioners of the Buddhist tradition in Italy, or 0.6% of the total resident population. The increase in this area is the most significant figure of this first part of the 21st century, if we exclude the phenomena related to immigrants and new citizens. Within this context, the fastest growing segment, comprising the relative majority of Italian Buddhists, is that of the Japanese Buddhist school Soka Gakkai. As mentioned earlier, in Italy, at the end of 2023 Soka Gakkai had 96,700 members, or 0.2% of the total population. It is the largest percentage in the West for Soka Gakkai.

As pointed out by Massimo Introvigne:

The history and reasons of this growth have been investigated in Japan (McLaughlin 2019), as well as in the United Kingdom (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994; Dobbelaere 1995), Quebec (Metraux 1997), and the United States (Dator 1969; Hurst 1992; Snow 1993; Hammond and Machacek 1999; for early studies of Soka Gakkai, see also White 1970; Metraux 1988; Machacek and Wilson 2000; Seager 2006). Few, however, have discussed how important has been the growth of Soka Gakkai in Italy, a country where religious minorities are all comparatively small (Introvigne 2019, 3).

We owe to the Italian sociologist Maria Immacolata Maciotti (1942–2021) an initial attempt at an in-depth study on the presence of Soka Gakkai in Italy (Maciotti 1994–95; 1996), followed shortly afterwards by a further study by the Belgian sociologist Karel Dobbelaere, specially prepared for Italian readers (Dobbelaere 1998).

Ten years after the last-mentioned research by Dobbelaere, between 2008 and 2010, CESNUR conducted extensive research in the Northern city of Turin concerning Soka Gakkai, the results of which have remained unpublished to date (CESNUR 2010). CESNUR's research included both fieldwork and a sample survey administered to 308 members. The interest of this research derives from the particularly significant quantitative data of practitioners of Soka Gakkai in Turin, which makes it the second non-Christian religious minority in the city among Italian citizens (after Islam), and the major Buddhist community resulting from conversions and not from immigration present in a large European urban area.

The shortness of this presentation does not allow me to examine the broad spectrum of areas investigated by the research. Instead, it is my intention to summarize some of the results achieved by the research, with particular reference to the statistical data and some aspects that emerged from the survey.

Soka Gakkai in Italy: Some Statistical Data

Among the fundamental dimensions of analysis that were identified for the research was the reconnaissance in their historical series of quantitative data on the presence of Soka Gakkai practitioners in the Turin urban area. In the absence of third-party sources that could help us in the reconstruction and description of the

numerical consistency and territorial organization of members, we availed ourselves of the availability offered by Soka Gakkai leaders, through whom we were able to draw up some statistical prospectuses, the formulation of which we summarize in the following tables.

Table 3 shows the historical series of Soka Gakkai members at the national level, covering the decade 1998–2008 (a national snapshot of the situation as of 1993 can be found in Maciotti 1994–95, 165; for subsequent statistics, see Zoccatelli 2015; Introvigne 2019), both through totals and the breakdown of the four Divisions—Men, Women, Young Men, Young Women; where Youth Divisions indicate members under the age of 35—, which constitute a horizontal dimension of the organization, alongside the vertical dimension of the structure (Regions, Territories, Headquarters, Chapters, Districts, Groups). Difficulties in homogenizing the data did not allow us to fully compile the statistics for 1998. Nevertheless, the historical series adequately illustrates the steady growth in membership over the decade.

	<i>1998</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>
Men	–	8,006	9,165	10,255	11,817
<i>% Men</i>	–	<i>22.8%</i>	<i>22.6%</i>	<i>22.3%</i>	<i>23.9%</i>
Women	–	16,217	19,091	22,461	25,378
<i>% Women</i>	–	<i>46.3%</i>	<i>47.0%</i>	<i>49.0%</i>	<i>51.3%</i>
Young Men	–	4,099	4,527	4,628	4,096
<i>% Young Men</i>	–	<i>11.7%</i>	<i>11.2%</i>	<i>10.1%</i>	<i>8.3%</i>
Young Women	–	6,732	7,784	8,526	8,165
<i>% Young Women</i>	–	<i>19.2%</i>	<i>19.2%</i>	<i>18.6%</i>	<i>16.5%</i>
Total	21,043	35,054	40,567	45,870	49,456

Table 3. Italy: Total members.

Table 4 considers two statistically relevant religious aspects, namely the number of *Gohonzons*—the object of worship of Soka Gakkai, in front of which the believer performs the daily practice of his Buddhist faith, *Gongyo*, which includes chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* (the fundamental practice) and reciting the *Hoben* and

Juryo chapters of the Lotus Sutra (the supporting practice)—delivered by Soka Gakkai Italy and the number of discussion meeting places of the devotees, which as we will see in the next table coincide with the groups.

<i>Gohonzons</i>	16,938	25,943	32,644	39,373	42,462
Discussion meeting places	2,180	3,853	4,055	4,223	4,266

Table 4. Italy: *Gohonzons* and discussion meeting places.

Table 5 reconstructs the composition of what I have previously described as the vertical dimension of the organization, at a national level. It should be noted that as far as the number of Regions is concerned, at the time of data collection—in 2008—a geographical homogenization was still in progress, so that the national territory was not yet effectively subdivided firstly into Regions, then into Territories, etc. In certain geographical areas, instead of a Region there was still what was called the Area.

<i>Regions</i>	<i>Territories</i>	<i>Headquarters</i>	<i>Chapters</i>	<i>Districts</i>	<i>Groups</i>
13	50	151	414	1,125	4,266

Table 5. National structure (2008).

Table 6 reconstructs the composition described in the previous table, applied in this case to the specific territorial unit called “Piedmont and Aosta Valley Region” and to the city of Turin. Regarding the territorial distribution of the Turin area with respect to the Piedmont and Aosta Valley area, it should be noted that certain Territories, Headquarters and Chapters in Turin sometimes also covered slices of territory outside the city, while the Districts and Groups in Turin referred only to the city context.

	<i>Territories</i>	<i>Headquarters</i>	<i>Chapters</i>	<i>Districts</i>	<i>Groups</i>
Region	6	16	42	99	398
Turin	5	10	15	35	141

Table 6. Piedmont and Aosta Valley Region structure (2008).

Similarly to Table 3, Table 7 shows the historical series of Soka Gakkai members at the level of the city of Turin. Again, this historical series adequately illustrates the steady growth in membership over the decade under consideration.

	<i>1998</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>
Men	253	356	424	473	498
<i>% Men</i>	<i>32.5%</i>	<i>27.4%</i>	<i>26.7%</i>	<i>24.9%</i>	<i>24.1%</i>
Women	457	710	841	989	1,049
<i>% Women</i>	<i>58.6%</i>	<i>54.6%</i>	<i>52.9%</i>	<i>52.1%</i>	<i>50.7%</i>
Young Men	26	85	108	143	170
<i>% Young Men</i>	<i>3.3%</i>	<i>6.5%</i>	<i>6.8%</i>	<i>7.6%</i>	<i>8.2%</i>
Young Women	44	149	217	293	353
<i>% Young Women</i>	<i>5.6%</i>	<i>11.5%</i>	<i>13.6%</i>	<i>15.4%</i>	<i>17.0%</i>
Total	780	1,300	1,590	1,898	2,070
<i>% of Italy</i>	<i>3.7%</i>	<i>3.7%</i>	<i>3.9%</i>	<i>4.1%</i>	<i>4.2%</i>
<i>% of Region</i>	<i>43.5%</i>	<i>42.3%</i>	<i>41.5%</i>	<i>40.9%</i>	<i>39.7%</i>

Table 7. Turin: Total members.

The table just presented not only testifies to a constant numerical growth of members in the Turin area, which we have also verified on a national scale. It also indicates an increase in the proportional incidence of the city context. In Turin, in fact, percentages of Turin members within the national Soka Gakkai membership went from 3.7% in 1998 to 4.2% in 2008. Again, the figures just summarized show how the territory examined stood for a salient numerical context for the

overall size of Soka Gakkai in Italy. Indeed, in 2008 Soka Gakkai had in Turin 2,070 members, i.e., 4.2% of its total Italian membership (49,456), while residents in Turin (908,263) represent only 1.5% of all residents in Italy (59,619,290).

Participation of Members

Further, Tables 8–9 reconstruct the attendance at *zadankai*—the “discussion meetings” that constitute the standard Soka Gakkai internal activities—at national and local levels, again in the historical series covering the decade 1998–2008, providing the percentages for comparison with the total number of members, thus enabling useful elaborations for a consideration of the relationship between membership and practice.

	<i>1998</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>
Men	3,199	4,670	5,099	5,697	5,921
<i>% of Men</i>	–	<i>58.3%</i>	<i>55.6%</i>	<i>55.5%</i>	<i>50.1%</i>
Women	6,059	9,829	11,158	13,387	13,873
<i>% of Women</i>	–	<i>60.6%</i>	<i>58.4%</i>	<i>59.6%</i>	<i>54.7%</i>
Young Men	1,662	1,788	1,778	1,586	1,504
<i>% of Young Men</i>	–	<i>43.6%</i>	<i>39.3%</i>	<i>34.3%</i>	<i>36.7%</i>
Young Women	2,636	3,131	3,122	3,122	2,997
<i>% of Young Women</i>	–	<i>46.5%</i>	<i>40.1%</i>	<i>36.6%</i>	<i>36.7%</i>
Total	13,556	19,418	21,157	23,792	24,295
<i>% of members</i>	<i>64.4%</i>	<i>55.4%</i>	<i>52.1%</i>	<i>51.9%</i>	<i>49.1%</i>

Table 8. Italy: Total attendance.

	1998	2003	2005	2007	2008
Men	–	–	176	194	203
<i>% of Men</i>	–	–	41.5%	41.0%	40.8%
Women	–	–	418	456	445
<i>% of Women</i>	–	–	49.7%	46.1%	42.4%
Young Men	–	–	72	55	44
<i>% of Young Men</i>	–	–	66.7%	38.5%	25.9%
Young Women	–	–	135	127	121
<i>% of Young Women</i>	–	–	62.2%	43.3%	34.3%
Total	574	731	801	832	813
<i>% of members</i>	73.6%	56.2%	50.4%	43.8%	39.3%

Table 9. Turin: Total attendance.

We can first note how in the data just presented, the progressive increase over time in the absolute number of members taking part in the *zadankai* is matched by a parallel decrease in the percentage of participants in relation to the total number of members (which we have previously seen growing steadily). For example, we go from 64.4% of Italian members participating in the *zadankai* in 1998, to 49.1% in 2008; from 73.6% of Turin members in 1998 to 39.3% in 2008.

These figures indicate the difference between the dimensions of membership and practice. However, to integrate this assessment, we must also consider aspects that strictly speaking are unrelated to practice and participation. One is the loyalty of the members to the private study of the philosophical writings of President Daisaku Ikeda (1928-2023)—and therefore the level of importance attributed to him in connection with the crucial theme of the “mentor of Buddhist philosophy.” This is what I will try to summarize by reproducing Tables 10–12 below, resulting from the survey proposed to the members of Soka Gakkai.

Never or hardly ever	1.3%
Sometimes	28.7%
Usually	70.0%

Table 10. Apart from group meetings, do you read works by President Daisaku Ikeda at home or privately? (valid cases n = 300)

Nichiren Daishonin	38.7%
Daisaku Ikeda	46.8%
Josei Toda	1.8%
Tsunesaburo Makiguchi	0.0%
All three presidents of Soka Gakkai	10.6%
The general director or one of the leaders I meet in Italy	0.0%
I don't have any mentor of Buddhist philosophy	2.1%

Table 11. Considering that in your Buddhist school Nichiren Daishonin is respected as the Original Buddha, whom do you consider to be your “mentor of Buddhist philosophy”? (valid cases n = 284)

Not very important	0.7%
He is a landmark along with others equally important	50.5%
He is the main reference point for my life	48.8%

Table 12. What importance does the mentor have for you? (valid cases n = 291)

About Practicing

As a first approximation, as shown in Tables 8–9, we can assume that the decreasing percentage of *zadankai* attendance in relation to total membership—a fact we verified both on a national and local scale—had a certain correlation with the constant numerical growth of members. This circumstance seems to testify to what was probably a physiological difficulty in maintaining a high level of practice within

a movement that was experiencing strong expansion. Indeed, looking at the data in Tables 3 and 7, we can see that over the decade in question, membership more than doubled in the national territory and almost tripled in the Turin area.

Against this significant performance, however, one must consider the circumstance that indicates how, precisely where the numerical context appears entirely salient for the overall size of Soka Gakkai, one witnesses a more significant decrease in the percentage of *zadankai* participants with respect to the total number of members. The national decrease in the period 1998–2008, with a shift from 64.4% to 49.1%, was matched by a decrease in the Turin area from 73.6% to 39.3%.

One hypothesis that we did consider as an explanation for this flow is the internal difficulties that Soka Gakkai went through in Italy particularly in the two-year period 2000–02 (Maciotti 2002), and which two decades later still did not seem to have been completely reabsorbed (Busacchi 2022). While they had a national significance, these internal tensions proved to be particularly present in the Turin area, as the researchers were able to ascertain.

On the other hand, the survey also made it possible to reconstruct further aspects relating to the religious practices of Turin members of Soka Gakkai, as described in the concluding tables of this section.

Morning and evening every day	80.9%
Once a day every day	14.1%
Twice a week	3.0%
Once a week	1.3%
Rarely	0.7%
Never	0.0%

Table 13. How often do you recite *Gongyo*? (valid cases n = 298)

Every day	95.6%
Twice a week	2.3%
Once a week	1.3%
Rarely	0.7%
Never	0.0%

Table 14. How often do you chant *Daimoku*? (valid cases n = 298)

One hour or more	48.5%
Half an hour	37.8%
A quarter of an hour	11.4%
Ten minutes	1.7%
Five minutes	0.3%
Less than five minutes	0.3%

Table 15. How long do you chant *Daimoku*? (valid cases n = 299)

Conclusion: Fourteen Years After

The CESNUR research completed in 2010 precedes by a few years some important developments concerning the social and legal mainstreaming of religious pluralism in Italy and Soka Gakkai itself. Firstly, mention must be made of the stipulation of an “Intesa”—a word usually translated into English as “concordat”—between the Italian State and the Soka Gakkai organization in Italy, ratified unanimously by the Parliament through law no. 130 of June 28, 2016. This allows us to specifically identify Soka Gakkai as a religious actor with an important level of social impact in Italy (Introvigne 2021).

Meanwhile, in the two-year period 2022–23, the Universities of Padua and Turin promoted a new research project on Buddhism in Italy (Giordan, Palmisano, Zoccatelli, Breskaya, and Sbalchiero forthcoming; Ventura 2024), in this case studying the Italian Buddhist Union (UBI), which from 2012 has its separate

“Intesa” with the Italian State. This research, based on qualitative and quantitative tools, included a survey based on 515 quantitative interviews.

	<i>Soka Gakkai</i>	<i>Italian Buddhist Union</i>
Roman Catholic	63.4%	52.3%
Protestant-Evangelical	0.3%	1.2%
Christian Orthodox	0.3%	0.4%
Judaism	0.7%	0.2%
Islam	0.0%	0.2%
Buddhist	1.3%	0.6%
Hindu	0.3%	1.0%
Jehovah’s Witnesses	0.0%	0.4%
New Age and similar	1.0%	1.6%
Other	0.0	2.4%
Non-affiliated (none)	32.6%	39.9%

Table 16. When you joined Soka Gakkai / When you started practicing Buddhism, what religion did you belong to?

The circumstance allows for some quick comparisons, which will deserve further study in the future. First, here the question arises of how the “imaginary” of the Buddhist universe is articulated, as indicated by the respondents. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that Buddhism is mainly associated by UBI participants with a “philosophy of life” (36.3%) far more than with a “religion” (18.7%). Nor should it be forgotten that the Italian Buddhist Union is an organization that represents a multiplicity of Buddhist traditions—Vajrayana, Zen, Theravada, Nichiren, Chan, Inter-Buddhist, Seon, Tendai—, with a significant prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism.

	<i>Soka Gakkai</i>	<i>Italian Buddhist Union</i>
Yes	64.1%	23.1%
No	35.9%	66.5%
I don't know	–	10.4%

Table 17. Would you define your affiliation with Soka Gakkai /
Would you define your affiliation with Buddhism as a conversion?

	<i>Soka Gakkai*</i>	<i>Italian Buddhist Union</i>
Buddhist	99.0%	34.6%
Roman Catholic	1.3%	10.4%
Religious none	1.7%	52.8%
Other	1.0	2.3%

Table 18. Currently, which religion do you feel you belong to? *
[* multiple answers were possible]

From this point of view, if we look at the results of the CESNUR survey on Soka Gakkai, we realize that while in the case of UBI practitioners 34.6% declare themselves Buddhists and 66.5% do not consider their adherence to Buddhism as a conversion, in the case of Soka Gakkai 99.0% declare themselves Buddhists and 64.1% consider their adherence to Buddhism as a conversion. This testifies to the importance of the results I have presented here and the theoretical framework within which we have to propose the discussion, and nevertheless its level of complexity, which future research and analysis—like those recently conducted in the United States (Kawabata and Inaba 2023; Akiba 2024)—will have the task of further validating.

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