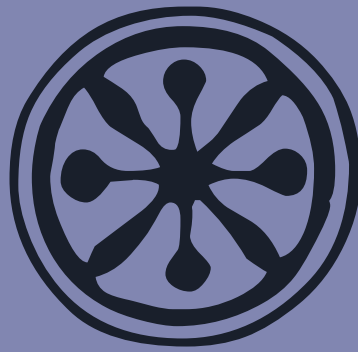

The Journal of CESNUR



Volume 8, Issue 4
July–August 2024

⊗ The Journal of CESNUR ⊗

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ISSN: 2532-2990

The Journal of CESNUR is published bi-monthly by CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions), Via Confienza 19, 10121 Torino, Italy.

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In loving memory of PierLuigi Zoccatelli (1965–2024)

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 legitimation 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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**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.

Funding and Acknowledgement

The research “Il loto sul Po. Praticanti del buddismo giapponese a Torino: il caso della Soka Gakkai” (“The Lotus on the Po. Practitioners of Japanese Buddhism in Turin: The Case of Soka Gakkai”) was made possible by the financial contribution of the Fondazione CRT. The following researchers participated in the research project, in alphabetical order: Luigi Berzano (University of Turin), Carlo Genova (University of Turin), Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR), Eliana Martoglio (University of Turin), Roberta Ricucci (University of Turin), Gian Lorenzo Venturini (University of Turin), PierLuigi Zoccatelli (CESNUR).

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Then Britain Began to Chant

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ABSTRACT: It was in March 1974 that Richard Causton, a British businessman, returned from Japan, having found himself a Japanese wife who had introduced him to Nichiren Buddhism. The following year (1975), Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom (NSUK) was officially registered, with Causton as its General Director. Before long, there was a growing number of Japanese immigrants and British natives chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*. After the break with the priests in 1991, the movement has subsequently been referred to by the name of the secular organization SGI-UK (Soka Gakkai International - United Kingdom). Under Causton's leadership, numerous cultural activities were undertaken, many of them being focused on the subject of peace. Initially the "anti-cult movement" spread negative information about SGI-UK, based largely on anti-SGI propaganda about the movement's proselytizing activities in Japan. Some British Buddhists declared that Nichiren Buddhism was not "real Buddhism" and blocked its representation in the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom. However, SGI found more acceptance with a European-based network. Today, SGI-UK receives relatively little interest in the media, especially after it moved its headquarters from London to Taplow Court, a beautiful historic house near Maidenhead, about an hour's drive west of London.

KEYWORDS: Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom, NSUK, Soka Gakkai International - United Kingdom, SGI-UK, Richard Causton, Daisaku Ikeda.

Richard Causton and the First Soka Gakkai Presence in the UK

Despite a reputation for uncompromising proselytizing (*Shakubuku*, sometimes translated as "break and subdue"), neither Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism nor the associated lay organization, Soka Gakkai (Value Creation Society), had spread far beyond the shores of Japan by the time of the death of Soka Gakkai's second president, Josei Toda (1900–1958). The handful of Soka Gakkai members in Britain were likely to have been Japanese businessmen seconded to Britain, or the Japanese wives of British businessmen who, having been posted to Japan, had returned to England (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 12–5).

Then, in 1960, Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) became Soka Gakkai’s third president and immediately began to expand the organization into a global movement. That same year he visited the members in America, who were largely the Japanese wives of American military men who had returned to the USA in the mid-1950s, and who were scattered and unorganized (Hammond and Machacek 1999, 24). Ikeda encouraged them to organize themselves and to spread Soka Gakkai throughout the States.

Then, the following year, Ikeda journeyed to Europe and on 13 October 1961 he arrived in London where at that time there were just four or five Japanese members. At the airport he met a Japanese woman whom he called “Shizuko Grant” in his novel *The New Human Revolution*, who had joined Soka Gakkai in Japan, then married a British soldier who had been stationed there. Learning that she was lonely, Ikeda encouraged her to keep in touch with the other Japanese members, telling her that she had come to the United Kingdom with a mission to pioneer *kōsen-rufu* (the mission of widespread propagation), and asked her to become the contact person for the UK (Ikeda 2006a, 86–7). On a further visit to Europe in January 1963, Ikeda was instrumental in organizing various European chapters. A District was set up in London with “Shizuko Grant” being appointed District Leader on January 13, when Ikeda was still in the United States (he arrived in Paris on January 15: Ikeda 2006a, 231).

In the 1960s, Richard Causton (1920–1995), a retired army officer who had taken up business, was posted to Japan where he was introduced to Nichiren Daishonin’s (1222–1282) teachings by the woman who was to become his wife, and in 1971 he became a practicing Buddhist. He then got acquainted with President Ikeda, who asked him to become the leader of the movement in the UK (Penfold 1995). In 1974, Causton returned to England to join the two hundred or so pioneer members practicing there at the time (Causton 1988, 1). The following year, Nichiren Shoshu of the United Kingdom (NSUK) was officially registered, with Causton as its General Director. In 1977 he gave up his business to become NSUK’s first permanent staff member (Causton 1988, 1).

Before long, there was a growing number of Japanese immigrants and British natives chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* before their newly acquired *Gohonzons*, which initially came from the Nichiren Shoshu Head Temple Taiseki-ji on the slopes of Mount Fuji. However, since the break with the priests in 1991, the *Gohonzons* have come from Soka Gakkai headquarters, and NSUK has

subsequently been referred to by the name of the secular organization SGI-UK (Soka Gakkai International - United Kingdom). According to Bryan Wilson (1926–2004) and Karel Dobbelaere, who conducted a comprehensive study of the membership in the early 1990s, there had been some 4,000 people attending meetings by 1988 (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 13); by 1995, there were around 5,000 members (Penfold 1995); and, by 2024, SGI-UK could claim a membership of 15,500.

Diverse Demographics

In the early days, most of the members either were Japanese or had a close tie with someone from Japan, but it was not long before there were just as many British members and today there are members from all over the globe.

At a ceremony on March 10 this year, out of the 76 people who received their *Gohonzon*, less than half a dozen were Japanese, and the range of nationalities was remarkable. Indeed, when I asked what they thought was unusual about the British membership, I was told that (possibly owing to Britain's colonial past) it was the variety of nations which were represented in the movement that was particularly striking. Since the recent events in Hong Kong, around 200 families with British National (Overseas) passports have arrived and more are expected as the situation in the erstwhile Special Administrative Region undergoes further changes. There have also been a considerable number of Indians who have arrived in Britain in the last few years, a large proportion of them having some connection to information technology industries, but there is a wide spread of professions represented among the membership—in fact, the previous General Director, Robert Harrap, told me he found it hard to think of an area of work or a profession where SGI-UK did not have a member.

Unfortunately, there are no current statistics giving us a demographic breakdown of details of employment to compare with the detailed information that Wilson and Dobbelaere collected in 1990. At that time members were disproportionately under 40 years of age (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 113), and the mean age for those beginning to chant was 31 to 32 years old, with the median age being 29 years (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 45).

Those whom I watched receiving their *Gohonzon* in March 2024 looked as though they ranged from their late teens to mid-80s, with the majority around 30. The sex ratio in 1990 was 2:3 in favor of women, which is roughly the same as it is now and, indeed, in most SGI organizations elsewhere. At the time of their survey, Wilson and Dobbelaere concluded that members were considerably better educated than the public at large (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 122), and more likely to be self-employed, taking responsibility for their own lives (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 116), with the caring professions and, more especially, the performing arts and the graphic arts being over-represented when compared to the British public as a whole (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 120).

The movement has continued to attract a large number of members who are artists or creatives of one sort or another (whether writers, actors, dancers, or other performers, or working on the technical side of performance as scenic designers and builders). They are encouraged to play an active role in their local District, aware that it may not always be practical to join local meetings, which may be scheduled at the same time as curtain up. Unlike some other SGI organizations (especially the larger ones), where there are often several support groups for people in the various professions, there are not that many in the UK. That said, however, SGI-UK does have a “City Finance Group,” which supports members who work in finance and law in the City of London, and a group of chefs (the Marronnier group); there is also an informal group of healthcare professionals.

A significant finding from the Wilson-Dobbelaere questionnaire was that the SGI-UK membership was far less likely to be materialistic than the UK population as a whole; the members were more likely:

to stress the need to protect freedom of speech; favour giving people a greater voice in how things are decided, at work, in their communities and in the decisions of government. They favour a friendlier, less impersonal society, and a society in which ideas count for more than money (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 143).

There is no reason to believe that the present chanters differ much in this respect. As far as the political position of the current membership is concerned, I was told that it could be assumed that “the majority are left of center with a greenish tinge.”

A Wide Variety of Programs

People with this kind of mindset have been manifest in the wide variety of programs sponsored by members of Soka Gakkai throughout the world, and those in SGI-UK are no exception. Under Causton's leadership, numerous cultural activities were undertaken, many of them being focused on the subject of peace. In the summer of 1986, Causton invited me to attend a performance of *Alice* at the Hammersmith Odeon. It was a spectacular musical adaptation of Lewis Carroll's (1832–1898) *Alice in Wonderland* with a moral story running through it. It involved hundreds of members working together for weeks, both on stage and behind the scenes. (I later learned that my goddaughter was helping with the make-up.) Another memory I have of around that time is of a beautiful Mozart concert performed by SGI-UK musicians at Taplow Court.

When I first met NSUK in the late 1970s or early 1980s, its headquarters was a house in Richmond, Surrey, to which I used to take my students every year. Causton would introduce them to Nichiren Buddhism, and the students would try chanting for a short time in front of the *Gohonzon*. Later, however, we would travel to Taplow Court, a beautiful 19th century mansion near Maidenhead about thirty miles to the west of London, situated on a site that can trace its history back to the iron age and which was home to a manor house before the Norman conquest of England in 1066 (Tomalin and Starkey 2014). In 1987, SGI-UK acquired the freehold of Taplow Court with money from the Japanese organization, and it is now the UK headquarters. The house, which accommodates a substantial library of books related to Buddhism, is open to visitors three days a week and numerous events are hosted there and in the surrounding properties, including weddings, funerals, and various rituals such as the ceremony when new members receive their *Gohonzon*. There have also been conferences held at Taplow Court, including one that resulted in a book, *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, edited by Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (1999).

A well-stocked shop carries multiple copies of the *Lotus Sutra* and other volumes related to Nichiren Buddhism, including books by Richard Causton (e.g., Causton 1988) and the erstwhile Zen Buddhist monk, Clark Strand, who, having been impressed by Josei Toda's resolve in prison, came to consider Nichiren Buddhism as "an ideal way ahead of its time" (Strand 2014, 6). One can also purchase several study guides and the SGI-UK's monthly magazine, *Art of Living*,

as well as *butsudan* (altars to house the *Gohonzon*), gongs, bells, beads, and various other paraphernalia.

SGI-UK has three other centers: the London Ikeda Peace Centre, the South London National Centre in Brixton, and the West London Centre in Acton. Local discussion meetings throughout England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are usually held in members' houses. As at the time of the study by Wilson and Dobbelaere, the concentration of membership lied mainly, but certainly not exclusively, around London and the Home Counties (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994, 41).

Each member of SGI-UK is primarily a member of a local District, consisting of 15–20 individuals who hold discussion meetings, chant together, and encourage one another in their practice and study. Volunteer leaders of the Districts are usually representatives of the four “divisions” (the men’s, the women’s, the young men’s, and the young women’s) in that particular area. The 627 Districts are organized into 171 Chapters and 69 Headquarters, and these, in turn, form 18 Areas. Currently, SGI-UK has around 3,000 volunteers taking responsibility as leaders in their local areas. While decisions on what activities take place are reached through the consensus of those involved at the various levels, there is a National Committee which is the decision-making body for faith activities in SGI-UK, and this sets the national direction.

SGI-UK’s website, <https://sgi-uk.org/>, indicates the wide variety of projects undertaken by the members. Most of these will be familiar to the international community of Soka Gakkai, stemming in large part from President Ikeda’s global concerns. Top of the list is Peace, but Environmentalism and Climate Change are high up there too, with SGI-UK having had a representative presence at COP meetings. Interfaith dialogue also features strongly, as do gender issues, with a Rainbow Committee dedicated to welcoming those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, partners being able to receive their *Gohonzons* as a couple. It might also be mentioned that although previous General Directors of SGI-UK have all been male, the present Director General, who was appointed in January 2024, is a woman. SGI-UK currently employs 35 members of staff (29 full-time and 6 part-time, not all of whom are members) and the rest of the activities are performed by volunteer members.

Although SGI-UK has autonomy in what it does, and, unlike several other national organizations, has always had a British leadership, it is closely connected

with other Soka Gakkai bodies, including the European Network. The greatest influence has, however, undoubtedly been that of President Ikeda, who inspired many of the projects carried out by the national movements through his talks and writings and frequent visits to SGI-UK. It was in the UK that he was to meet and have long conversations with two Englishmen that resulted in weighty volumes. These were the historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), whom he met in 1972 and 1973 (Ikeda 2006b, 24; Toynbee and Ikeda 1976a, 1976b), and the sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson, whom he first met in Oxford in 1977, and then in Japan in 1978 (Ikeda 2006b, 26–34; Wilson and Ikeda 1984).

SGI-UK is a registered charity limited by guarantee (number 1104491) and, as such, has a certain status and is entitled to certain tax relief benefits. It does not fundraise outside the organization and its members are not asked to give membership dues. However, most do contribute regularly whatever they feel they can, and one can pick up forms to fill in details for Gift Aid Donations for the Kōsen-rufu Fund at Taplow Court and elsewhere. For the year ending 31 December 2022, SGI-UK declared a total gross income of £2.62 million, and a total expenditure of £3.38m; £2.16m was received through donations, £363.60k came from charitable activities, £95.2k from income investment, and £297.24 from legacies (Charity Commissioners 2024).

Anti-Cult Opposition and Intra-Buddhist Controversies

The growth of Nichiren Buddhism in the West coincided with the development of the so-called “anti-cult movement,” when many of the new religions of the time were being vilified in the media, which were full of stories of youth being brainwashed by sinister cults, and hundreds of their members were being illegally kidnapped and forcibly “deprogrammed” (Barker 1989; Beckford 1982; Shupe and Bromley 1980). Although there were some reports, nearly all taken from Japanese media, of the movement having aggressive proselytizing tactics, on the whole NSUK managed to stay under the radar and escape any extreme anti-cult vitriol.

It was not, however, welcomed with open arms by the various Buddhist traditions that had been establishing themselves in Britain since the early twentieth century and who had supported each other through the Buddhist Society, which had been officially founded in 1924 by Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983).

Nichiren Buddhism was not accepted as “real Buddhism” by the members of the Buddhist Society. It was regarded as a heresy which, unlike the other traditions, had practically no ethnic Asian practitioners but, instead, trendy westerners who were chanting for materialist goals such as getting a new Porsche or job promotion, and attracting western celebrities.

The most influential body representing “accepted” religions is the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom (IFN) which was established in 1987,

...with the agreed purpose and hope of promoting greater understanding between the members of the different faith communities to which we belong and of encouraging the growth of our relationships of respect and trust and mutual enrichment in our life together (Inter Faith Network 1987).

There were nine-national faith community representative bodies in IFN, which included the Buddhist Society representing the Buddhist traditions—but not NSUK. Indeed, none of the representative bodies, including the Church of England, was keen to have any kind of dialogue with any of the new religious movements (Barker 2019).

Then, in 1993, a group of Buddhists, who were to call themselves the Network of Buddhist Organisations (NBO), met together to invite the Dalai Lama to visit the UK, and a member of SGI-UK, Jamie Cresswell, was invited by an individual from Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) to attend the meetings. A year or so later, the NBO wanted to appoint a chair and Cresswell applied but was turned down as some of the other Buddhists were still treating Nichiren Buddhism with suspicion. Cresswell persisted in attending the meetings and by the turn of the century he was on the council and, eventually, appointed chair. Around the same time, Cresswell’s FWBO friend invited him to attend a meeting of the European Buddhist Union (EBU). Again, there were objections to SGI voiced by some of the other Buddhist groups, but, again, Cresswell persisted in attending meetings and forging personal relationship with the other Buddhists, and, despite SGI-UK’s initial application to join being blocked, it was eventually allowed to join and has since played a prominent role. Cresswell has served as chair for both the EBU and the NBO, the latter eventually being admitted to the IFN.

There did continue to be some complaints, especially claims that the NBO was not representative of British Buddhism. Questions were asked in Parliament about government money for work it carried out in schools; and a few disgruntled former members, some calling themselves SGI Whistleblowers, air their complaints

online, but these tend to have little substance and to be aimed primarily at the historical SG in Japan.

While SGI-UK and Nichiren Buddhism are still relatively unknown in the UK, those who have got to know the members tend to be positive about the chanters in their midst. Many of the Districts are involved in local events and contribute to local life. Taplow Court plays a significant role in the surrounding neighborhood. The Buckinghamshire Council uses it for Citizen Ceremonies; and when a local school had accommodation problems following a flood, they gratefully accepted an offer to use Taplow Court until the problem was sorted. At a national level, the BBC has an early morning program called “Pause for Thought,” when members of different religious communities speak for three minutes on a subject of their choice, bringing in something related to their faith. For several years Robert Harrap, the previous General Director of SGI-UK, who is now Co-Chair of SGI-Europe, was regularly invited to speak and, more recently, a second-generation member, Gabrielle Westhead, fills the slot (BBC Radio 2 2023, 2024).

In short, it would seem that, over the years, SGI-UK has come to be regarded as a respectable and respected member of British society.

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Between Buddhism and Postmodern Spirituality: The Popularization of Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany

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ABSTRACT: Buddhist practices of self-improvement and mental healing are today of interest to many Western devotees. Soka Gakkai adapts Buddhist philosophy and practices such as reciting sections from the *Lotus Sutra* or chanting the sutra title *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*. These practices are disseminated as the true path to happiness. This paper explores the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany and shows the success of Buddhist practices as techniques of self-improvement and healing in postmodern societies. In Germany, “Soka Gakkai in Germany” has officially been recognized as a religious organization by the government of the State of Hessen, where it is headquartered. Soka Gakkai in Germany is the first Buddhist organization in the country to be certified as a corporation under public law. It is active at seven locations as “cultural centers.” In Austria “SGI-Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture and Education” is officially recognized as a Buddhist order within the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society (Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft). In both countries, the organization is officially committed to inter-religious dialogue and peace, is active in the fields of culture and education, and offers spiritual seekers an extensive range of lectures and workshops centered on Buddhist practices of self-improvement.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Germany, Soka Gakkai in Deutschland, Soka Gakkai in Austria, SGI Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture and Education, Österreich Soka Gakkai International—Verein zur Förderung von Frieden, Kultur und Erziehung.

1. Introduction: “The Circle of Life”

Embrace the circle of life
That is the greatest love
Go beyond fear
Go beyond fear
Beyond fear takes you into a place
Where love grows
When you refuse to follow the impulses
Of fear, anger and revenge (Turner and Shak-Dagsay 2009).

One of the most prominent representatives of the Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai was the pop singer Tina Turner (1939–2023), who came into contact with the group in the early 1970s. Since then, she took every opportunity to point out the “power behind” (Craig 2023) to which she attributed her success. It was only through her encounter with Soka Gakkai and the integration of the chanting of *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* (“Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra”), she said, that her personal life improved and her professional career was optimized. The recently deceased artist demonstrated her interest in Buddhist practice by incorporating Buddhist signifiers into her cultural productions. In one of her autobiographies, *Happiness Becomes You: A Guide to Changing Your Life for Good*, she talks about her spiritual path and describes herself as a “musical bodhisattva of the earth” (Turner 2020, 105).

In this respect, it is not surprising that her spiritual identity is also expressed in her musical productions. In the lyrics quoted above from the 2009 album released together with yoga teacher Regula Curti and mantra singer Dechen Shak-Dagsay, there are Buddhist elements such as the motif of the “circle of life” (*bhavacakra*), the practice of mastering (negative) emotions, and the idea of physio-psychic self-improvement, which are central aspects of Soka Gakkai (Dehn 2022, 85–91). The album includes both Buddhist and Christian chants. The artists wanted the entire proceeds to go towards projects promoting peace between different cultures and spirituality in education, training, and research for children and young people (“Laila” 2009).

These lyrics illustrate an essential aspect that characterizes contemporary religious movements and is discussed in this paper: the emphasis on the self and self-optimization, which, according to the thesis put forward here, makes a significant contribution to the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Western societies. Not only do the boundaries between religion, popular culture, and psychology dissolve, but also those between religions (in her album Tina Turner combines Buddhist and Christian elements).

On the other hand, the quote includes a “self-reference” to current religious offers that are currently experiencing mass dissemination in contemporary society as practices of self-optimization. Building on this, the main thesis of this paper is that “traditional” religious ideas and practices are currently undergoing a

transformation that is an expression of contemporary social dynamics and that this is particularly (but not exclusively) evident on the fringes of institutionalized religions and in new religious movements. The transformation is characterized by an increasing psychologization and an accompanying “universalization” of religious offers. Religious ideas and practices are detached from their traditional contexts and universalized as techniques of self-optimization. The “self” and its “optimization” become the focus of religious practice.

Buddhist practices of self-improvement are of interest to many Western devotees. The new religious movement Soka Gakkai adapts Buddhist philosophy and practices such as reciting sections from the Lotus Sutra or chanting the sutra title *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*. These practices are disseminated as the true path to happiness. This paper explores the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany and shows the success of Buddhist practices functioning as techniques of self-improvement and healing in postmodern societies. In both countries, the organization is officially committed to inter-religious dialogue and peace, is active in the fields of culture and education, and offers spiritual seekers an extensive range of lectures and workshops centered on Buddhist practices of self-improvement.

2. Soka Gakkai in Austria and Germany

2.1 Soka Gakkai in Germany

Soka Gakkai has been active in German-speaking countries with local groups since the end of the 1960s, but with around 8,000 followers in Germany and a few hundreds in Austria and Switzerland, of which around 15% are Japanese, it remains what Hutter defined in 2001 a comparatively marginal religious phenomenon (Hutter 2001, 253).

The history of Soka Gakkai in Germany can be traced back to the 1950s. As part of Daisaku Ikeda’s (1928–2023) mission plan, the first pioneers migrated to Europe, including ten Japanese who settled in Germany (Ionescu 2000, 188–89). The aim of the followers was to convert people to Nichiren Buddhism through *shakubuku*, the method of proselytizing used at that time (Kötter 2006, 48–51). Initially, missionary work was carried out only among Japanese immigrants, but in

the subsequent decades non-Japanese also became the focus of missionary endeavors.

In September 1961, Ikeda visited Düsseldorf. At that time, there was only one woman practicing in Germany. The number slowly grew in the following years. However, the first general meeting was not held until 1965 in Frankfurt, where the issue of expanding Soka Gakkai in Germany was discussed. One of the goals that was set was to increase the group membership to 1,000 followers. In 1970, “Nichiren-Shoshu” was registered as an association called “Deutsche Nichiren Shoshu e.V.” This existed until Soka Gakkai separated from the Nichiren Shoshu monks in 1991. At the time, the religious community consisted of 516 members, who were mainly Japanese migrants (Schweigkofler 2014, 49; Kötter 2006, 24).

The umbrella organization Soka Gakkai International was also founded in 1975, but this had little effect on the structures in the various localities. Until the 1980s, the group consisted mainly of Japanese members who were particularly well represented among the functionaries. However, this began to change in the 1990s. In his 2006 research paper on Soka Gakkai, Kötter stated that over 82% of members were German and showed that the internal structures of the organization had also changed (Kötter 2006, 25).

To this day, the group is divided into men’s, women’s, and youth divisions. Meetings usually take place in small groups of around ten people who meet regularly to recite the *Daimoku* together and discuss various topics. However, meetings also take place in larger units at certain locations, including nationwide meetings. Today, according to the Soka Gakkai in Germany website, there are around 500 groups in Germany where regular events take place, and which are open to non-members. In addition, larger Buddhist gatherings take place at Soka Gakkai centers (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024a).

The national center of Soka Gakkai in Germany has been located in the “Villa Sachsen” in Bingen am Rhein since 1994 and was officially opened in 1997. Regular Buddhist weekend seminars take place there, as do other cultural events which are also organized in cooperation with the town of Bingen (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024b). Soka Gakkai centers are also to be found in Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, and Frankfurt, where regular large Buddhist gatherings also take place. The social activities of Soka Gakkai communities include exhibitions, cultural events, conferences, and interfaith dialogues. In addition, Soka Gakkai is involved in campaigns for non-violence, charitable activities, and humanitarian

aid programs. In Germany, for example, Soka Gakkai has co-operated with UNESCO and UNICEF on an exhibition of children's pictures and is part of the Earth Charter Initiative. In addition, the organization is a member of the anti-nuclear-arms movement *Atomwaffenfrei.jetzt*. In 2023, Soka Gakkai in Germany was granted the legal status of a public corporation by the State of Hessen, where it is headquartered. It was the first Buddhist religious community in Germany to be recognized as a public corporation (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024c).

2.2. Soka Gakkai in Austria

In Austria “Österreich Soka Gakkai International—Verein zur Förderung von Frieden, Kultur und Erziehung” (SGI Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture, and Education), incorporated in 1991, is the largest Japanese Buddhist community in the country (Pokorny and Dessì 2023, 236). In 2001, it was admitted into the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society, an official representative body of Buddhists in Austria. There are currently 23 groups and institutes of different schools and traditions registered as members of the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society, 15 of which are based in Vienna (Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft 2024). The Austrian Buddhist Religious Society was officially recognized by the Austrian government in February 1983 (BGBl 33/1983) and according to the society's statutes, its main tasks are to represent Buddhism to the public and to create an organizational framework for the best possible development of the religion. Austria was the first European country to officially acknowledge Buddhism as a religion, and thus to offer a range of state support benefits, e.g., religious school education (Pokorny 2014, 3).

According to the historical narrative, the foundation stone for the establishment of Soka Gakkai's Austrian site was laid by Ikeda, who also visited Vienna on his first trip to Europe in 1961, setting an important “identity marker” in the history of Soka Gakkai:

On May 3, 1960, Ikeda Daisaku was inaugurated as third president of Soka Gakkai, expediting the internationalization of the movement. Five months later, on October 2, 1960, he departed for his first overseas ‘peace journey’ (*heiwa tabi*), an event which marked the official beginning of *kōsen-rufu* on a global scale. This date is thus celebrated today by members of SGI as World Peace Day (*sekai heiwa no hi*) (Pokorny 2014, 10).

Ikeda's journey to Europe was viewed by members as the official kick-off of *Kōsen-rufu*, the dissemination of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra in Europe. At this time only a few Japanese members had settled in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the UK and “were pioneering small-scale missionary activities” (Pokorny 2014, 10).

The first member in Austria was a Japanese immigrant called Yoshio Nakamura (b. 1942), who moved in 1969 as a missionary from Tokyo to Geneva (Switzerland) and then to Vienna. He founded the Austrian Soka Gakkai, which was called the Austrian Nichiren Shoshu until the separation from the monks in 1991. The community developed slowly but steadily over the following decades. While the group initially consisted mainly of Japanese immigrants, since the 1980s non-Japanese members have gradually been attracted to its programs (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024).

The first non-Japanese follower joined at the beginning of 1975. In May 1981, shortly before Ikeda's second visit to Austria at the end of June, two thirds of the 37 formal members (half of whom were considered active) were already non-Japanese (Pokorny 2021, 237). Since the 1980s, Soka Gakkai in Austria has also made public appearances. Important events that brought the group to the attention of the media and thus also contributed to the popularization of the movement included the world tour exhibition (1982–1988), and “Nuclear Arms: Threat to Our World” (1983), held at the Vienna headquarters of the United Nations. Since 1981, Soka Gakkai has also been accredited by various United Nations organizations and maintains a UN presence in Austria (Pokorny 2021).

After the founding of SGI-Austria—Association for the Promotion of Peace, Culture and Education in 1991, the Austrian headquarters moved into a new center at the Villa Windisch-Grätz in Vienna (1995), which still serves as its national center and where larger meetings are held several times a year (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024). In December 2013, Soka Gakkai Austria had 853 members (Pokorny 2014, 3). In the same year, Nakamura stepped down from his role as General Director and was replaced by long-time supporter (since 1986) Lawrence “Larry” Williams (born in 1956), who still leads the Austrian group today.

There are currently around 1,200 Soka Gakkai members in Austria, most of whom live in Vienna. There are local groups in all Austrian federal states,

consisting of between 3 and 10 people. In total, there are around 30 local groups in Austria, 23 of which are in the various districts of Vienna. Followers meet in small groups to chant together, share experiences, and discuss problems. The groups are also divided into women's, men's, and youth groups. According to Williams, there is a pragmatic reason for this: the gender and age-specific group structures minimize the potential for conflict due to gender and age differences (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024). Larger meetings take place two to three times a year at the Vienna location of the Villa Windisch-Grätz, where the leadership of the organization is located and where all organizational and administrative matters are handled.

In addition to the practice of chanting, the study of Buddhist teachings also plays a central role in the group. Members meet to study both in small groups and at the head office in Vienna, where once a year they have a "test." Since the pandemic, the relevant courses have also been held online (Interview with Mr. H., February 24, 2024). However, the courses are only accessible to members, and information about group meetings and other offers is also restricted to members. Membership itself includes a formal act of application and requires a serious interest in religious practice and Buddhist teachings and active involvement in the group. As a visible sign of belonging to the religious group, the member receives a *Cohonzon*, an object of worship containing a scroll and mandala on which the *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* is inscribed (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024).

3. The Popularization of Soka Gakkai in Germany and Austria

Particularly important for the popularization of Soka Gakkai in Germany and Austria is the change from missionary practice, which had come under criticism, to an organization that focuses on socio-ethical and cultural engagement.

The group's socio-political commitment is now at the center of its identity in both countries, which becomes evident in the interviews with members:

This type of Buddhism is not so easy to understand. By practicing you can understand slowly, and I need my time to understand. And there are a few topics that triggered me. Like world peace. (...) And world peace is simply the most important thing. We have no

other options and Soka Gakkai offers a way to achieve it (Interview with Mr. A, February 15, 2024).

An important aspect for the popularization of Soka Gakkai in the West, especially in German-speaking countries, was the adaptation to social and cultural conditions in the respective countries. In addition to the softening of hierarchical and patriarchal structures by allowing women to have leadership positions, the opening of the group to non-Japanese members and the inclusion of these in positions of leadership was an important moment in the establishment of the community.

Beyond the democratization of the group structure, the reduction in group size (3–10 people) was also a contributing factor that met the needs of Western members (Schweigkofler 2014, 73). In small groups, for example, interpersonal problems can be discussed more openly than in large meetings, the usual form in Japanese structures. There is also room for individual needs and the discussion of religious experiences, such as those gained through chanting (Interview with Larry Williams, February 24, 2024).

Another promising aspect of Soka Gakkai is the concept of religious practice consisting of chanting the Lotus Sutra as a vehicle for self-optimization, thus offering a technique that meets the needs of Western spiritual seekers. This is also reflected in the self-descriptions of German Soka Gakkai members, who place particular value on individualism, self-determination, religious experience, and individual development in matters of religiosity (Schweigkofler 2014, 64). The aspect of self-optimization is also emphasized in interviews with Austrian members. Chanting is said to have a direct effect that can be practiced “several times a day” and “anywhere, even on the toilet” (Interview with Mr. A., February 15, 2024).

The teachings of Soka Gakkai, which are offered in the form of self-help literature on the organization’s website and in its bookstores, also offer Western seekers a comprehensive range of tools for coping with the contingencies of life. Based on the Buddhist doctrines of karma and reincarnation, it offers content on how to deal with individual crisis situations and overcome fate, which also strengthens the self-empowerment of members and draws on current spirituality discourses (Schweigkofler 2014, 75).

In addition to its practices and teachings, Soka Gakkai presents itself as an organization based on ethical principles that are fully in line with Western values

and reflect Western aspects of current social discourses. In particular, cultural diversity, (Buddhist) humanism, intercultural endeavors, and the commitment to “world peace” remain at the heart of Soka Gakkai’s activities:

By endeavoring to set positive examples of non-violence, hope and civil courage in their everyday lives, [members] want to contribute to a sustainable culture of peace. Their actions are based on the understanding that individual happiness and the realization of a peaceful world are inextricably linked (Soka Gakkai in Deutschland 2024d).

This structural openness to socially relevant topics appears to be an important factor in the popularity of Soka Gakkai in Germany and Austria and thus attracts people from all walks of life who try out Soka Gakkai’s offers and often decide to become permanent members.

Conclusion

In Germany and Austria, Soka Gakkai is a central representative of Japanese Buddhism. The openness of the group, the fluidity of its structures, and the availability at different local locations ensure the presence of Soka Gakkai throughout both countries and also offer those who live outside major cities, where there are larger locations, the opportunity to join the group. The existing structures, such as the formation of small groups, also offer the opportunity to fulfil individual needs and at the same time to strengthen the sense of community.

In addition to the structural framework, however, it is the religious teachings and Buddhist practices in particular that make Soka Gakkai attractive in Germany and Austria. While chanting can be easily integrated into everyday life, the teachings also offer a simple and understandable answer to complex social, psychological, and socio-political questions and challenges in life. Soka Gakkai thus offers the postmodern seeker something that can be customized to their needs, an “education for the happiness of the individual” (Ikeda 2010).

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**Glocalizing the *Gohonzon*:
The Historical Experience of SGI Australia 1945–2016**

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ABSTRACT: Soka Gakkai arrived in Australia post-World War II with Japanese war brides, during a period when Australian societal attitudes toward the Japanese were often still colored by wartime propaganda and racial prejudice. Despite these challenging beginnings, from the time when the first Soka Gakkai member Tsutomu Teitei arrived in 1962 the group quickly obtained followers during the 1960s and 1970s, before other Asian new religions began arriving in the late 1960s. Soka Gakkai attracted a variety of adherents drawn from different demographic niches and unlike later new religions has encountered little social opposition or controversy. Indeed, it has proven a success story for religious settlement, its numbers have grown steadily, and it has continued to appeal to a wide cross-section of multicultural Australia. Utilizing primary source material and demographic data, this paper analyzes the history and development of SGI Australia against the backdrop of the wider Australian societal contexts of post-World War II multiculturalism, religious pluralism, opposition to new religions, and the rapid growth of Australian Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Australia, Buddhism in Australia, Religious Pluralism in Australia, Tsutomu Teitei.

Introduction

Australian society has given a mixed reception to various forms of religion that have migrated from elsewhere over the period since European settlement in the late eighteenth century. This has been especially the case for new or alternative religions (Bouma 1995; Doherty 2020a, 2020b). Soka Gakkai is an interesting case study when viewed comparatively with other new religions and the history of what are often called “cult controversies” from the latter half of the twentieth century into the present. Rather than becoming a target for opprobrium, Soka Gakkai has consistently maintained a low profile, quietly growing without generally attracting the types of social hostility and opposition that other new religions have encountered in Australia.

Bearing this in mind, it is worth comparing Soka Gakkai's religious settlement in Australia with that of other new religions, both from Japan but also more widely. Examining Soka Gakkai's experience from a historical perspective, what follows seeks to offer a partial explanation of why Soka Gakkai has proven comparatively more successful than most new religions in negotiating the twin processes of religious settlement and cultural diffusion in Australia.

In terms of terminology, here I adopt the distinctions drawn by the late sociologist Gary Bouma (1942–2021: 1998, 204), who wrote extensively about religion in contemporary Australia in terms of “cultural diffusion” and “religious settlement.” By the former, Bouma meant “the process whereby beliefs, values, and practices that emerged in one place and time are adopted in other places and times.” The latter Bouma defined as “the related process of religious settlement in which the religious group takes on features peculiar to its new host society.” With reference to Soka Gakkai International Australia (henceforth SGIA), it underwent these processes in a series of waves and each of these are worth examining alongside contemporaneous social and cultural changes that were taking place in Australia at the time, and how these changes impacted on the growth and success of SGIA and other new religions.

The First Wave: Japanese “War Brides” 1945–1960

The first wave of Soka Gakkai's cultural diffusion in Australia occurred between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s. This period is poorly documented for the simple reason that at the time Soka Gakkai did not have a public or organizational presence in Australia and many of its foundation members had very limited English. Soka Gakkai travelled to Australia by way of Japanese “war brides,” women who were already involved with Soka Gakkai in Japan who came to Australia after marrying servicemen involved in operations in Japan following the Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945. The experience of these war brides was, more generally, often a very unpleasant one (see e.g., Easton 1995; Tamura 2002).

These women encountered racism from the very start, with no less a figure than Australia's post-war immigration minister, Arthur Calwell (1896–1973),

expressing a sentiment that became widespread among Anglo-Australians during the 1950s,

while relatives remain of the men who suffered at the hands of the Japanese, it would be the grossest act of public indecency to permit a Japanese of either sex to pollute Australian or Australian-controlled shores (quoted in Tamura 2002, 60).

Indeed, while necessity forced some moderation of the hostile policy of non-fraternization between Australian servicemen and Japanese women, this remained an exception to the rule, granted only

if the Australian husband was of good character and could maintain and accommodate his wife and children with the appropriate government authority and if the wife, after investigation of her general behaviour, was considered to be the type who would readily be accepted by the Australian community (Palfreman 1967, 44).

This was a vestige of what was known as the “White Australia Policy,” which from the early 1900s through to the 1970s sought to exclude migration from Asia. The government policy regarding immigration during the 1940s and 1950s was, moreover, one of assimilation, and language became a major barrier to these war brides in finding their place in Australian society. The total number of Japanese war brides during the period between 1952 and 1957 was around 650, and as such the numbers in this first wave of Soka Gakkai adherents were statistically minuscule, particularly compared to mass migration from Southern and Eastern Europe during the 1950s.

In terms of their cultural diffusion and religious settlement, the early Soka Gakkai adherents were quiet and unassuming, if not completely invisible, in the conservative and overwhelming Christian demographics of 1950s Australia. Indeed, the decade of the 1950s is in many ways seen as the high point of Christian ascendancy and relative cultural homogeneity in Australian history before the impact of the 1960s and the subsequent growth in religious pluralism (see e.g., Bouma 1995; Hilliard 1991).

The Second Wave: Organizing Soka Gakkai in Australia 1960–1970

The second wave of cultural diffusion and religious settlement of Soka Gakkai in Australia was associated with two developments in the 1960s. The first was the arrival in Australia of Tsutomu “Tom” Teitei in 1962, who had come to Australia to undertake doctoral studies in chemistry and eventually settled as a research

scientist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Teitei was a Japanese born migrant who received one of the first doctorates awarded to an Asian migrant in Australia—an education trend which was to grow in subsequent decades. Teitei took up a leadership role in Soka Gakkai in Australia over the ensuing decades. The second key event during the 1960s was the visit to Australia of President Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) on 13 May 1964. During his visit, Ikeda encouraged a small group of adherents in Melbourne to form the first Australian chapter of what became Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

During the remainder of 1960s, Soka Gakkai went largely unnoticed by the Australian media, or indeed the wider public, except for very occasional comments about its role in Japanese politics (see e.g., Blackall 1964; Murata 1966). However, it is important to contrast this experience with that of other new religions at the time. The 1960s was a decade in which the highly negative Australian media portrait of new religions began to take its current form, with a highly successful, acrimonious, and concerted campaign by a large sector of the Australian media directed against the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International (later known as the Church of Scientology), which led to legislative bans in three Australian state jurisdictions. This pattern was to repeat, with less dramatic official sanctions, with a number of other new religions over the 1970s—but notably not with Soka Gakkai (see Doherty 2020a).

By the 1960s, Australia's post-war hostility toward the Japanese had somewhat thawed—though it was to continue in some pockets well into the 1990s—and governments were, moreover, winding back the White Australia Policy, and taking greater cognizance of the strategic and economic importance of Australia's relationship with its regional neighbors in Asia. While there was some small growth in Soka Gakkai at this time and into the early 1970s, this was overshadowed by other events of the late 1960s and 1970s that in some ways obscured Soka Gakkai's presence in Australia.

The Third Wave: Migration and Multiculturalism 1970–1990

A series of factors coalesced in the late 1960s and 1970s to create a new multicultural reality in Australia. The first was the large increase in the size of the

wider Buddhist community in Australia primarily as a result of the impact of political instability in Indochina, in particular the influx of Buddhist migrants and refugees from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and especially Vietnam. While Australia had encountered earlier waves of migration from majority Buddhist regions, including Chinese miners and prospectors during the 1840s and 1850s Gold Rushes and later Sri Lankan laborers who came in the 1870s to work in the Queensland cane fields, Buddhism had a relatively low profile in Australia before this period (see Adam and Hughes 1996; Croucher 1989). This mass migration was, moreover, boosted in the early 1970s by the removal by the Whitlam Labor government of the final vestiges of the White Australia, Policy which opened Australia to greater migration from Asia.

This led to growth within Soka Gakkai in a surprising way. As documented by Daniel Metraux in a series of detailed demographic studies of SGIA undertaken in the early 2000s (e.g., Metraux 2001, 2003, 2004, 2013), these migration patterns of the 1970s and into the 1980s created a body of migrants culturally attuned to Buddhism but not necessarily wanting to embrace a form of the religion that was bound to ethnic communities. Soka Gakkai, in Metraux's words, provided a "means of reconnecting with an Asian heritage" (Metraux 2004, 66). Moreover, as Bouma observed, during the period from roughly 1973 through to 1996 successive Australian federal governments of both political persuasions adopted a policy of multiculturalism, that "encouraged migrants to maintain aspects of the cultures they had brought with them," and where "[r]ather than insisting on assimilation, cultural difference was valued and seen as contributing to the well-being and quality of life of all Australians" (Bouma 1998, 209). This breakdown in the relative cultural homogeneity of 1950s and 1960s Australia had widespread social ramifications, not least of which was an increase in religious pluralism. In terms of growth, Buddhism's number of adherents grew exponentially and has continued to grow sizably since (see Spuler 2000).

During this period, Soka Gakkai continued to be seen as one among many Buddhist groups—Adam and Hughes (1996, 61) estimated 170 in 1996 and Spuler (2000, 31) counted nearly double this number four years later—which had been established in Australia and was viewed with some suspicion by other Buddhist organizations. While some prejudice arising from ignorance certainly occurred, these ethnic religious groups, if not necessarily the communities they served, fared much better than the wave of new religions that became controversial

in Australia during this same period. Moreover, while the early organized Soka Gakkai group in Australia was somewhat mission-oriented, in Australia their proselytizing was far less aggressive than other groups. This set it apart from more controversial new religions like the Children of God and the Unification Church, both of whom proved extremely, if episodically, controversial in the late 1970s (Doherty 2020a). While, like these groups, Soka Gakkai did encounter some youth who experimented with new religions in the wake of the 1960s counterculture, during the 1970s Soka Gakkai did not attract the same level of social hostility or the same public profile—any negativity was predominantly in the form of internecine conflict in the growing Australian Buddhist milieu.

During the early 1980s, moreover, an important legal case strengthened the legal position of all new religions in Australia. In 1983, the Church of Scientology won an appeal to the full bench of the High Court of Australia against the Victorian commissioner of pay-roll tax. This case had repercussions much wider than Scientology in casting the net of what legally qualified as a religion extremely wide, removing some of the legal impediments to institutionalization that disproportionately impacted new religions. Soka Gakkai was here an unintentional beneficiary of this legal situation, though interestingly, and poignantly, this also indicates another aspect of Soka Gakkai's experience in Australia—that it has been markedly absent from various types of legal conflicts that have plagued other new religions (see Richardson 1994/1995). Indeed, I am unaware of any legal proceedings involving Soka Gakkai in Australia. At this time, however, Soka Gakkai did attract some minor opposition and according to historian Paul Croucher they were the one group excluded from the Buddhist Council of New South Wales, which formed in 1984, on the grounds of their perceived “extremism” (Croucher 1989, 104).

The Fourth Wave: The Australian Turn to Asia 1990–Present

With the accession of Paul Keating to Prime Minister in 1991 following a successful challenge of Bob Hawke's (1929–2019) Labor Party leadership, there was a marked turn in the direction of Asia in terms of Australia's foreign policy, signaled in particular by Keating's foreign policy speech “Australia and Asia: Knowing Who We Are” on April 7, 1992. Continuing the multicultural policies of his predecessors since Gough Whitlam (1916–2014), Keating's enthusiasm for

Asia, and Japan in particular, fostered a positive social climate for Asian new religions and Soka Gakkai certainly benefitted from this. During this period, Soka Gakkai became better known for its involvement in peace initiatives and engagement in various interfaith activities for the betterment of society (Bowen 2011). Here Soka Gakkai became a valued member of community networks and from this point onwards has been generally viewed as a force for the common good. This cannot be said of most other new religions, most of whom are still considered extremely suspicious when they engage in various types of community building or engagement.

To provide two examples of groups which in the period since 2000 have proven the most controversial new religions in Australia, the Church of Scientology has regularly encountered negative publicity for its various social betterment programs that are immediately surrounded with an air of suspicion. The same can be said for recent community engagement by the historically introversionist group now known as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church, whose Rapid Relief Teams have become a regular presence during periods of natural disaster. Despite this, the Brethren's earlier attempts to quietly influence Australian politics has cast a shadow over their charitable activities. The Brethren's attempts to influence politics, moreover, highlights another aspect of Soka Gakkai's quiet settlement in Australia. SGIA has not engaged in active partisan politics—Australia remains extremely suspicious of any religious intervention in politics, whatever direction it comes from. Moreover, as far as I have been able to ascertain, Soka Gakkai's membership is diverse and not overly drawn from any one political persuasion. This has made it difficult to pigeonhole Soka Gakkai in the way other new religions have been viewed.

Surprisingly, given Keating's enthusiasm for Asia and for the promotion of greater cultural awareness in Australia, for instance by encouraging the learning of Asian languages, SGIA continued to appeal more broadly and among Western converts cultural factors seem to have been secondary to pragmatic concerns. As Metraux found in his survey work with Ben Dorman, "a slight majority expressed no real interest in any aspects of Japanese culture." As one Caucasian member told interviewers, "SGIA is indeed a Buddhist movement from Japan, but its message and appeal are universal. I have become a Buddhist, not a follower of Japanese Buddhism" (Metraux 2004, 66). This highlights one aspect of SGIA's religious settlement in that its members have embraced aspects of SGI but not to

the detriment of local conditions in Australia. This has not always, however, proven easy and without laboring the point some institutional tensions between Japanese cultural expectations and Australian realities have emerged (see e.g., Bowen 2011).

One area where these kinds of tensions can be viewed, and the point on which I will conclude this brief survey, is in terms of media profile. While compared with just about every other new religion in Australia in the last seventy years (see e.g., Richardson 1996; 2001; Doherty 2020a), Soka Gakkai has received enviably even-handed treatment by the Australian media, one aspect that has consistently marked coverage since the 1960s has been the group's perceived wealth and power in Japan. In the year 2002, for example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) aired a documentary about SGIA entitled "The Power of Chanting" on its religious affairs program *Compass* in which aspects of the group's wealth and influence in Japan were mentioned by one more critical academic. However, the overall portrait of SGIA was far more positive (Edmondson 2002).

This contrasts heavily with the experience of other new religions in Australia. It moreover highlights the gatekeeper function of the Australian media in terms of religious respectability. There is a sense in which how a religion appears on the national broadcaster, at least in previous generations, will influence its wider reception in Australian society. This has certainly been the case with other groups, with the program *Compass* and ABC's flagship current affairs program *Four Corners* often serving as a platform for wider public discussions, and controversy, regarding religion in Australia. That Soka Gakkai was given a positive hearing is no small thing. Moreover, while Soka Gakkai has occasionally been criticized for its perceived wealth, this is standard secularist critique of religion in Australia more broadly and SGIA has fared far better than any mainstream church or religious school in this regard.

Conclusion

Despite Soka Gakkai's positive image in Australia overall, and its valuable contribution as a successful example of cultural diffusion and religious settlement, it is uncertain what the future holds. Writing in 2004, Daniel Metraux suggested that SGIA would continue to grow steadily in Australia. This does not appear to be

the case, perhaps because SGIA is subsumed under the broader category of Buddhism in census data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics I am hesitant to comment further on this. More research on the contemporary situation of SGIA is certainly worthwhile, not least on what one member described as the “active and articulate” youth cohort of the movement, which is a promising sign for its future wellbeing. What is clear is that SGIA has proven a small, but vibrant example of glocalization in Australia as this country has embraced what has been called the “Asian Century.” As the celebrated Australian historian of religion Wayne Hudson opined in his recent book *Beyond Religion and the Secular: Creative Spiritual Movements and Their Relevance to Political, Social and Cultural Reform* “Soka Gakkai provides a model for how a spiritual movement which was originally narrow and ethnocentric can become universalistic and postreligious” (Hudson 2023, 50).

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The Functions of the Promotion of Art in the Globalization of Soka Gakkai

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ABSTRACT: Among Soka Gakkai's educational activities is the foundation of museums, which received great impulse from President Daisaku Ikeda. The article explores museums connected with Soka Gakkai in Japan (including Tokyo Fuji Art Museum), France (Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo), and Taiwan (TSA Mobile Art Museum, Kaohsiung Soka Art Museum). It challenges the opinion by critics that museums are tools for Soka Gakkai's proselytization. They are not, although they certainly enhance Soka Gakkai's prestige and authority. Soka Gakkai museums should also be seen as part of the movement's campaigns to foster international dialogue and better relations between countries that experienced reciprocal tensions in the past.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai Museums, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo, TSA Mobile Art Museum, Kaohsiung Soka Art Museum.

Introduction

Soka Gakkai is well-known for its deep commitment to educational pursuits that has materialized in the founding of a private comprehensive educational system from preschool to universities, of some 1,200 cultural centers across Japan, of a museum of musical instruments and concert hall, Min-on, and of visual art and literary museums which are the particular focus of this study: the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, the French Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo, and in Taiwan the Mobile Art Museum and the Soka Art Museum in Kaohsiung.

To understand the originality of President Daisaku Ikeda's (1928–2023) museal endeavors, one must look at the history and the social and political functions of museums in general. We will then see how he followed the educational project initiated by Soka Gakkai founder Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944). Both men were inspired by the progressive theories of pedagogues like John Dewey (1859–1952) and believed that cultural expressions allowed individuals to develop their potential in a way that could improve the well-being of societies. Yet, both men's vision transcended the mere social and cultural level of education

and of the appreciation of art thanks to museal institutions to aim at the implementation of the spiritual fullness of *Kōsen-rufu*, that is to say the overall revolutionary transformation of the whole world, and not just Japan, through the practice of Nichiren Buddhism.

However, Soka museums do not just offer a form of initiation to elevate the moral consciousness of visitors because they play many other functions, in particular, a subtle and powerful diplomatic one: promoting art bolsters the reputation of the institution and through the forging of international alliances, helps promote peace in endangered regions.

1. Soka Gakkai Museums

– Tokyo Fuji Art Museum (Tōkyō Fuji Bijutsukan): the celebration of East and West complementarity

Envisioning it right after he became President of the Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda founded the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum in 1983 near the Soka University campus in the district of Hachioji. It was extended in 2008. As it is not built abroad, it is not at first sight an actor of the international expansion of the religion, yet it is part and parcel of the globalization of culture Ikeda privileged, since it seeks to offer to the viewers exemplars of the creative genius of humankind. Following its definition as “A museum creating bridges around the world,” it is the first and major shrine Ikeda founded to combine the cultural wealth of the East and that of the West. The collection holds about 30,000 works of Japanese and more generally Asian art that includes paintings, prints, photography (20,000), ceramics, lacquer artefacts, swords, medallions, and of Western art from the Renaissance to our time, in particular French paintings, which are visible in the Permanent Exhibition Gallery.

The “bridges” are the numerous partnerships with international museums: the Fuji Museum prides itself in having held 49 international exchange exhibitions with works coming from 25 countries and territories, and in having organized in return 33 exhibitions of its possessions in 20 countries (Gokita 2022).

The union between East and West was given priority right in the beginning, since to consecrate its 1983 opening in a grand manner, the museum held a major exhibit of French masterpieces with loans from the Louvre and the Versailles Museum of the History of France. The operation was made possible thanks to the famous French historian of art, René Huyghe (1906–1997), a member of the French Academy and then curator of the Louvre’s Department of Paintings, who had befriended President Ikeda on a visit to Japan, when, with other conservation specialists, he had accompanied the Mona Lisa (or La Joconde) which had been exceptionally loaned to the National Museum of Tokyo from April to June 1974.

As a mark of their reciprocal admiration, René Huyghe facilitated the visit of President Ikeda in Paris later, in 1981, and introduced him to various influential people in the field of politics and of the arts. Daisaku Ikeda was granted the title of “Officier du mérite des Arts et des Lettres” (Officer in the Order of Merit for Arts and Literature) in July 1992 by Jack Lang, the then French Minister of Culture. The founding of the Victor Hugo literary museum in Bièvres in 1991 on the outskirts of Paris is the continuation of those rich encounters between President Ikeda and the French artistic and political elites.

– The Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo

The property of the Soka Cultural Association of France (L’Association Culturelle Soka de France, ACSF), the Maison is rather unique in its conception: not so much because it is a shrine dedicated to the talent of Victor Hugo (1802-1885) since there are five more museums devoted to him, but because it is the fruit of the fascination for him of one Japanese religious leader, Daisaku Ikeda. The latter explained that he discovered the work of the novelist and poet when he was very young, and that the humanism expressed in his books informed his own life vision. He saw Hugo as an eternal companion, a model for humankind:

I wish this Maison will strengthen the bonds between France and Japan, and I will be most happy if it allows the immortal soul of the great poet to lead men to universality (Ikeda 1991, 25).

The collection holds numerous manuscripts and first editions of Hugo’s books in glass cabinets, as well as rare editions of other writers’ works, pamphlets, political cartoons, and so on. Several extremely valuable items are listed as “National treasures in the register of Historical Monuments”: the printed proofs

corrected by the hand of Hugo of *Les Misérables*, *Les Contemplations*, *La Légende des Siècles*. Most precious is the actual slip of paper on which Hugo penned his very last words on his death bed: “Aimer, c’est agir” (“To love is to act”).

The Maison is, however, far more than a mere conservatory of manuscripts. It obeys the demand of President Ikeda to promote the life-long education of all people and all age groups, which is the goal of all the museums founded by him. It was envisioned as paving the way towards world peace thanks to the union of free and enlightened citizens (for an in-depth analysis of the reception of Victor Hugo in Japan and of the contents and functions of the Maison, see Rigal-Cellard 2021).

– The museums in Taiwan

The Mobile Art Museum was founded in 2012 by the Taiwan Soka Association (TSA) to bring art to schools because it was easier to move art works than busing thousands of pupils to fixed exhibitions. The mobile collection promotes Taiwanese art to make it better known and to make islanders proud of their cultural roots. After being exhibited in the cultural centers of the Soka association, the pieces travel even to isolated audiences living in remote mountains and outlying islands. The Mobile Museum also reaches out to various specific institutions, such as the Taipei School for the Hearing Impaired. In 2020, it created a radio program, Treasure Island Art Museum, to educate about the power of art even without any possible mobility of the works, such as during the COVID pandemic, and it has continued to be aired with success since then (Taiwan Soka Association 2021).

The Kaohsiung Soka Art Museum is the important player TSA added to its commitment to promote art by commissioning a building designed by Da-Ju architects and completed in July 2022. Like the Mobile Museum, its focus is “searching for the roots of culture and constructing a century-old history of Taiwanese art” (*Daily News* 2022; Soka Gakkai 2022). The presence of the Director of the National Palace Museum Wu Mi-Cha at the inauguration testifies to the bonds uniting the TSA and this world-famous institution. For example, Soka holds lectures to present exhibitions of the National Palace Museum, in particular one in July 2019 to promote one exhibit of ancient ceramics (Taiwan Soka Association 2019).

2. East Meets West: The Place of Soka Gakkai Museums Within the History of International Museums

Museums are a European invention that came to be exported to the whole world. In Antiquity, the *mouseion* was an institution devoted to literature and learning, with a library and an observatory, which included rituals for the worship of the Muses. Later, aristocratic families would collect and store treasures for the beautification of their palaces and private admiration. The museums as we know them today derive from the transformations that followed the French Revolution (1789). Art came to be seen

as a public heritage by right rather than an aristocratic privilege: many Church collections were secularized, and treasures of dispossessed royal houses and aristocratic families were transferred to public ownership (Osborne 1985, 42).

Gradually museums were entrusted with a nation-building role:

The French revolutionary model of the Louvre... aimed to associate the museum with the nation and the constitution of a unified collective, if not of a universal, memory (Brown and Mairesse 2018, 528).

Public museums came to be seen as tools to complete schooling in a more experiential contemplative and pleasurable mode, as understood in the definition given by the International Council of Museums (ICM) in 2007:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, research, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment (in Brown and Mairesse 2018, 526).

In the program Ikeda entrusted to the institutions he envisioned, the preoccupation of museums in the ICM definition for education, study, and enjoyment, is compounded with the quest for the collective good. It is important to recall that Soka Gakkai was founded (in 1930) by an educator, Makiguchi, who followed the teachings of Dewey, the American philosopher who built a new theory of education based on pragmatism. Dewey stressed the need for the individual to engage in interaction, to learn from doing, a method that would train citizens to implement true democratic ideals in their societies, ideals he developed in his 1916 volume *Democracy and Education*.

Underlying all of Dewey's work, and that of most progressive educators both in the formal sector and in museums, was a deep moral sense and two intense beliefs: faith in democracy

and in the efficacy of education to produce a more democratic society (Westbrook 1991: xv).

Makiguchi likewise believed that the most efficient form of education for the progress of humankind was the one promoting creative thought and personal experience (see Ming 2017). Daisaku Ikeda voiced the same vision:

Nothing is more crucially important today than the kind of humanistic education that enables people to sense the reality of interconnectedness, to appreciate the infinite potential in each person's life, and to cultivate that dormant human potential to the fullest (Ikeda Quotations 2024).

Reiterating the journey of the Iwakura embassy of 1871 dispatched by Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) to explore Western countries, learn from them (and negotiate treaties and trading agreements) (Tsuzuki 2009), in 1960 Daisaku Ikeda undertook a trip to the USA, and in 1961 to Europe. Both times he visited many museums, “honing his vision of the institution he would go on to found” (Gokita 2022). He understood how through the active contemplation of the beauty they displayed, museums could complement, or better still, elevate to the fullest, the efforts of teachers for, as he declared in his mission statement at the opening of Fuji Museum:

Great works of art possess a timeless quality with a capacity for creativity and beauty that draws people together and inspires them to greatness (Tokyo Fuji Art Museum 2023).

His preference for collecting treasures of European art, along with Asian antiques, testifies to the conviction he often voiced that not only had art reached one climax in Europe but that only in the awareness and appreciation of universal culture could mankind reach peace and harmony. Furthermore, Ikeda knew that as a museum developer, he had to abide by the advice of Dewey who drew attention to several matters in order to implement an authentic progressive museum education:

Recognition that the goal of education is further education... applying progressive education theory universally. Museum educators need to do more than challenge their visitors; they need to constantly challenge themselves, examine their practice, and reflect on the extent to which it matches—both in process and in content—the theory they espouse... Dewey not only recognized the confusion and complexity of life, he embraced it. His philosophy of pragmatism did not attempt to describe an ideal world, distinct from the awkward and constantly changing realities of actual existence (Hein 2006, 349–50).

Once we see the impressive outreach strategy of the Soka museums towards all sorts of audiences—school children, adults, retirees, and in particular the actions

of the Mobile Museum in Taiwan for isolated villagers and islanders—, we realize that such innovations all respond to Dewey's recommendations.

Museums also play a variety of interesting functions in the public space that Soka museums fully share. Like cathedrals or temples, museums, in general, offer public proof of the wealth and power of the institution founding and managing them. This is particularly obvious with the Louvre Museum that has perpetuated its original function: it was the French royal palace in the center of Paris and now as the most visited museum in the world, it serves as a fabulous ambassador for France itself. In countries that only recently entered the fray of international museum competition, rich people or states will tend to commission famous architects to erect state-of-the-art and eye-catching buildings that often remain empty shells housing meagre collections. On the contrary, Soka museums, whether in France, Tokyo or Kaohsiung, do not display extravagant architecture but one that is sober and harmonious, and they do harbor rich collections. Another result of art possession will be to comfort members as to the good use of their own financial investment in the company, whether a secular or a religious one, and to instill pride in it. Obviously, Soka Gakkai devotees can only be elated when they visit their museums and see so many non-members laud them as well. But there is more to these Soka cultural institutions.

The Spiritual Function of Soka Gakkai Museums

At this point in our study, we must move beyond the mere acknowledgement of the complementarity of East and West we constantly find spelled in Ikeda's words for it seems clear that in his grand project, he in fact imagined the success of the East over that of the West. As a Japanese, he accepted the fact that the West had triumphed from the 19th century until the second half of the 20th century, but in his eyes the West was now running out of breath. This is an often-heard judgement that is in fact a product of post-colonialism. Regions previously colonized or "visited" and "intruded upon" by the Westerners are wont to disparage the West as being "passé," decadent, and immoral, whereas they claim that their own nations are strong and pure and will dominate politically, economically, *and* spiritually the previously domineering Christian powers.

A good example of such an approach is expressed in *A New Humanism*. First, the author, Ikeda, quotes a Western poet and an Eastern one who celebrated the very goal he himself pursued in founding the Victor Hugo museum, that “East and West must marry on the altar of humanity” (Ikeda 2010, 11). However, in the very same book he also states that the powerful spirituality expressed in Christian cathedrals has died out, for with modernization the forces of integration Christianity achieved have waned, and now “people are isolated and alone.” He pursues that it is the East, with Buddhism, which brings the solution: “a connection, it denotes a causal relationship or a function that joins life and its environment...” as is explained in the Lotus Sutra (Ikeda 2010, 6–7). He then lists the subtleties of art connected to Buddhism: “Connected with Totality,” “Sutra of this World,” “Metaphor of Dance.” In the latter section he writes:

The unfolding of creative life according to the Lotus Sutra, then, encompasses all the dimensions of human life... the religious, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. They come together to form a whole, cosmic current... (Ikeda 2010, 9).

We are thus vividly reminded of what McLaughlin termed the “twin legacies” of Soka Gakkai:

first, a tradition of self-cultivation derived from lay practice under the minority temple Buddhist sect Nichiren Shōshū, and, second, intellectual currents that flourished in late nineteenth to early twentieth century Japan that valorized standardized education and philosophical ideals aimed at the elevation of the individual, all inspired by Euro American traditions generally associated with “culture” (McLaughlin 2019, 3).

These lines imply that we must never forget the prime spirituality at the root of the concept, the “first legacy,” that of the “tradition of self-cultivation” characteristic of Nichiren Buddhist practice. The very mission statement imposed by President Ikeda to the Fuji Museum does call us back to a Buddhist understanding of the definition of human:

It is only through fusing and merging ourselves with the eternal—that which lies beyond our finitude as individuals—that we can manifest the full scale of our potential. And yet that potential is not foreign to us, but is of us, within us, and always has been (Tokyo Fuji Art Museum 2023).

This paramount spiritual preoccupation was evident in a 2015 exhibition in Taiwan when Taiwan Soka Association partnered with the Institute of Oriental Philosophy to organize an exhibition in its Fongshan Cultural Center in Kaohsiung City on “The Lotus Sutra: A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence.” Calligrapher and professor Hung Ken-Shen presented the twenty-eight chapters

of the Lotus Sutra, and Wu Lien-Shang, President of National Kaohsiung Normal University,

referred to the crisis of “The Clash of Civilizations” facing the contemporary world, and emphasized that the causes of such a crisis are rooted in the human heart. He said, “In order to harmonize people’s hearts to prevent such clashes, and to fuse the eastern and western worlds, the spirit of the Lotus Sutra is vital” (Institute of Oriental Philosophy 2015).

The exact same conviction was voiced by President Ikeda himself when he rejoiced at the realization of the spiritual fullness of *Kōsen-rufu*, the propagation of the practice of Nichiren Buddhism, which actuates the overall revolutionary transformation of the whole world, and not just Japan:

Today the expansion of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism to 128 countries and territories worldwide [192 countries and territories in 2024] attests to the realization of these golden words of the Daishonin: “The moon appears in the west and sheds its light eastward, but the sun rises in the east and casts its rays to the west. The same is true of Buddhism. It spread from west to east in the Former and Middle Days of the Law but will travel from east to west in the Latter Day” (“On the Buddha’s Prophecy,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*: Ikeda 2022, which quotes Nichiren 1999, 401).

Conclusion: Soka Gakkai Museums, Humanism, and the Art of Diplomacy

How can we delineate the real vested interests of Soka Gakkai’s promotion of art? Clearly, they are multifaceted: educational, social, cultural, and ultimately spiritual and political.

Soka Gakkai has opted for the promotion of education and art through the foundation of cultural centers and museums, which have been our specific focus. Since I ended my study on the satisfaction of President Ikeda seeing the success of *Kōsen-rufu* that can be experienced through a certain understanding of art, we need to address the question of the actual functions of those museums. Must their educative purpose be understood as exclusively geared towards the eventual adoption of Nichiren Buddhism? Or, on the contrary, as aiming at the benefit of humankind without religious strings attached?

In fact, Soka Gakkai operates like those religions that interact in a more or less intense manner with their surroundings. When they are not on a separatist path, religions will often attempt to present themselves as beneficial to society in a variety of ways. The issue touches on the intrinsically dual nature of most human actions,

whether secular or religious: is philanthropy a mark of genuine altruism and of disinterested humanism or is it on the contrary a subterfuge for self-promotion, or *pro bono* promotion, to entice the recipients of one's generosity to convert to one's political view or religion?

In this regard, are Soka Gakkai museums tools of proselytism as some critics have said? It is well known that when on May 3, 1951, Josei Toda (1900–1958) took over as the second president of Soka Gakkai, he announced the group would enforce a specific form of proselytism, the “great march of *shakubuku*.” If this could be an asset at some point to expand the following, it soon led to adverse reaction from the part of the public. The movement then opted for the other method, *shoju*, which means “to embrace and accept,” a softer method that does not force conviction but leads to acceptance through negotiation. The museums presented in this study could consequently be interpreted as tools for *shoju* on the global stage. Yet, the more I have studied them, the less I have seen them as subterranean tools of proselytism. In no way do they function as religious museums set up to promote specific faiths: such institutions will typically narrate the history of the community, of its founder(s), explain its tenets, and exhibit the achievements of the movement to impel the visitor towards admiration and potential attraction. In a class by themselves, the art and literary Soka Gakkai museums display no trace of proselytist maneuver.

The reason is that *pro bono* generosity mostly operates through immediate relief such as humanitarian aid and rescue, hospital care, financial support—that may potentially transform the beneficiaries into neophytes as a mark of gratefulness. In this equation, the return for visiting an art exhibit is far off the mark. The Soka museum that I know best, the Maison littéraire de Victor Hugo near Paris, never mentions the institution behind the project. As for the Fuji Art Museum, though it is adjacent to Soka University, it does not proclaim the superiority of Nichiren Buddhism on its cards or posters either.

It does seem then that the function that Soka Gakkai's museums play best (but constantly in partnership with the other functions) may be a political one: the gathering and the exhibiting of art collections in an international setting require far more than just scholarship, they demand considerable diplomatic skills. As we saw, the opening exhibit of the Fuji Museum could only be organized because of the political connections President Ikeda had been able to knot, and which led him to be held by French authorities as a most respectable patron of the arts. It was this

diplomatic tour de force that permitted the loan of works from one of the most important museums in the world, the Louvre, to a then totally unknown budding private Japanese museum.

The other result of the official recognition of Daisaku Ikeda himself was to allow his religion to be considered in the same light, at least for that period in time. The Fuji Museum was connected to a foreign religious group that the few people in France who knew of it probably suspected of being a “dangerous cult,” and in France, the slightest connection to a “cult” is a sufficient condition to forbid any public partnership with its members. Later, with the aging of President Ikeda’s friends in France, his own reputation was not sufficient to protect the Victor Hugo Maison littéraire from anti-cult attacks. In 1996, the Maison was denounced as the child of the “financially powerful Soka Gakkai” and it took the Soka Cultural Association of France years of legal action to obtain in 2007 the legal status of “worship association” that officially legitimated it as a *bona fide* religion in France (see Ben Hammouda 2019).

In Taiwan, Soka museums play another major diplomatic role. The fact that they essentially showcase Taiwanese art first surprised me and led me to wonder whether this was not a strategy in the pursuit of two interconnected goals. First, I see the choice of privileging Taiwanese art as a gesture of reparation for the long decades (1895–1945) of Japanese colonization of the island. The museums promote the value of local culture with no attempt to impose the contemplation of international art that could be felt as an imposition of a superior or colonial model.

Secondly, this social and cultural action of the Soka Taiwanese museums seems to me to be part of a grander function of international political range: the deep concern of Soka Gakkai members to strengthen the friendship between Japan and Taiwan by being facilitators of the political alliance the two countries have been forging these past years to maintain a united front in the face of cross-straits threats coming from China, and to maintain peace in the region. The cultural policy of the promotion of Taiwanese art demonstrates how Soka Gakkai truly acts as the micro “mimetic nation” of Japan itself, to use McLaughlin’s terminology (McLaughlin 2019, 1–34).

The Soka museums presented here must first be viewed as expressions of genuine altruism and philanthropy with a global scope whose final goal is to help their visitors grasp the ultimate value of art as an expression of transcendent spirituality. If for President Ikeda this spirituality is best expressed by

Nichiren Buddhism, in no way did he impose such an understanding on the visitors to the cultural institutions he created. The second major function of the art promoted by Soka Gakkai is to act as an efficient agent of international diplomacy: both to enhance its own standing in the world as a most valuable religion, and to help promote peace in critically endangered regions.

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Globalizing Sugihara: Daisaku Ikeda's and Soka Gakkai's Role in Commemorating Chiune Sugihara

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ABSTRACT: Chiune Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat who in 1940 saved thousands of Jews living in Lithuania by issuing to them, without the authorization of his government, visas to go to Japan, from where they planned to go to the West. Daisaku Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have promoted the figure of Sugihara in Japan, in particular through the second version of the exhibition “The Courage to Remember,” launched in 2015, and internationally. Recent criticism of what some perceive as the mythologization of Sugihara for political purposes has extended to Soka Gakkai. The article argues that the criticism is unfair and emphasizes that Ikeda saw in Sugihara a model of universal values rather than the embodiment of an alleged quintessential “Japan-ness.”

KEYWORDS: Chiune Sugihara, The Courage to Remember, Soka Gakkai and Chiune Sugihara, Yad Vashem, Daisaku Ikeda.

Introduction

In 2023, a controversy erupted about Chiune Sugihara (1900–1986), a Japanese diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Jews during World War II. A campaign was launched arguing that Sugihara was just a minor character and that his motivations were not purely humanitarian. The campaign criticized the governments of Israel, Lithuania, and Japan for having “invented” a hero, each for its own motives. Soka Gakkai was also criticized for having contributed to creating the alleged “myth” of Sugihara and having unduly compared him to Holocaust victim Anne Frank (1929–1945). Although with international echoes, this controversy happened mostly in Israel and became connected with both the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

While the controversy is both historically and politically interesting, my paper aims at understanding the appreciation of Sugihara by Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023). I will present the life and career of Sugihara according to the present

status of the historical research about him. I will then shortly reconstruct the 2023 controversy and discuss more in depth why Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have considered Sugihara an important figure worth promoting.

Who Was Chiune Sugihara?

Chiune Sugihara was born on a very symbolic date, January 1, 1900, the first day of the new century. While the date is undisputed, where exactly he was born is not. The town of Yaotsu, in Gifu Prefecture, claims Sugihara as his most illustrious son. The town has a museum called Chiune Sugihara Memorial Hall, inaugurated in 2000, which by 2020 had received half a million visitors (Kowner 2023, 53). However, the city of Mino, also in Gifu Prefecture and located some thirty miles west of Yaotsu, also claims to be Sugihara's birthplace, with the backing of one of the diplomat's sons (Haime 2023). The uncertainties may be due to the fact that Sugihara's father worked for the Japanese Tax Administration Office and moved frequently from one city or town to another.

His dream was that his son Chiune, a bright student, might become a medical doctor. Chiune, however, was looking for a more international profession. He deliberately failed the entrance exam to medical school and went to study languages at Tokyo's Waseda University, becoming proficient in English and Russian (and later German). After his military service, he passed the exam of the Foreign Ministry in 1922 and became a diplomat. He was stationed in Harbin, the largest city of the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo state, where he converted to the Russian Orthodox Church and married a Russian woman, Klaudia Semionovna Apollonova (1870–1930). They divorced shortly before he left Harbin to be reposted to Helsinki and then, in 1939, to Kaunas, which was at that time the capital of independent Lithuania, where he served as the representative of Japan with the title of Vice Consul. In the meantime, he had married a Japanese woman, Yukiko Kikuchi (1913–2008), from whom he will have four sons. He remained a devotee of the Russian Orthodox Church, to which Yukiko also converted (Levine 1996, 67–9).

There is some evidence that in Kaunas Sugihara also worked for the Japanese intelligence service, analyzing for Tokyo the political situation of the Baltic States, Poland, and Russia (Krebs 2017, 123–24). As Japanese Vice Consul in Kaunas, he entered history in 1940, at a time when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet

Union, but under threat of an imminent attack and occupation by Nazi Germany. Jews who lived in Lithuania—both Lithuanians and Poles who had escaped the Nazi occupation of Poland—were looking for a way of leaving Lithuania. So were non-Jews who also feared persecution for political reasons. To understand the role of Japan, we should consider that we were in 1940, a time when almost nobody in the world was ready to help the persecuted Jews.

Jan Zwartendijk (1896–1976) was the consul of the Dutch government in exile in Kaunas. That government did not control the Netherlands, occupied by Germany, but did control the Netherlands Antilles in the Caribbean. He was willing to stamp the Jews' passports with a "safe-conduct" stating they will be welcome in the Netherlands Antilles, which did not require an entry visa. However, the only possible way to reach the Netherlands Antilles avoiding Germany and German-occupied lands was by going East and sailing from China or Japan. The Dutch consul enrolled the help of his Japanese colleague Sugihara, who started issuing visas to the Jews. This happened without the authorization of the Japanese government, which Sugihara was prepared to disobey, since his priority was helping the persecuted. How many he saved is a matter of discussion. Japanese archives include 2,140 files (Kowner 2023, 36) but it is possible that he issued many more visas without sending records to Tokyo and the total number was as high as 6,000 (Sugihara 1995).

It is important to note that Lithuania was not occupied by the Nazis at that time. It was occupied by the Soviets. Jews were afraid that Nazis might soon come but, as even critics of Sugihara recognize, "they were invariably worried about the Soviets" (Kowner 2023, 35). The Soviet Union had annexed Lithuania and offered to the Jews, including the refugees from Poland, the alternative between becoming Soviet citizens or be relocated to Siberia. Becoming a Soviet citizen meant for adult men to be immediately drafted in the Red Army, which was not an option for some 2,000 *yeshiva* (rabbinical school) students. So, Sugihara helped the Jews in Lithuania to escape *both* the Soviets who were already there and the Nazis who might soon arrive. Armed with Sugihara's visas, thousands left Lithuania. Some were able to reach the Netherlands Antilles, others were held by Japan in a refugee camp in Shanghai from where they were liberated by the Allies at the end of the war and granted American visas to go to the United States.

Sugihara was transferred to Kaliningrad in September 1940 after the Kaunas Consulate was closed on August 29, then to Prague and to Bucharest, where the advancing Soviet Army arrested him (Levine 1996, 271–76). He was liberated in 1946 but dismissed from Japan’s Foreign Ministry in 1947. Whether this happened because of the downsizing of Japan’s diplomacy after the war or (as Sugihara himself perceived it) as a punishment for disobeying Tokyo’s orders is a matter of controversy (Levine 1996, 276). What is certain is that the once wealthy Sugihara had to take “odd jobs” to survive, including as salesclerk in a Ginza department store (Levine 1996, 277).

When Japan re-established commercial relations with the Soviet Union in 1960, Sugihara was able to obtain a more well-paid job as representative of Japanese companies in Moscow, where he remained for fifteen years, putting to good use his perfect command of the Russian language and knowledge of how Soviet bureaucracy worked. He got a visa only for himself. Although he was allowed to visit periodically his wife and children in Japan, their relations became “strained” (Levine 1996, 278). By 1975, Sugihara was experiencing health problems, and he retired in Kamakura, Japan, where he died on July 31, 1986, and is buried.

After the end of his diplomatic career, not many knew Sugihara’s whereabouts. When sociologist Hillel Levine, who published in 1996 the first comprehensive biography of Sugihara, visited the former diplomat’s Russian first wife Klaudia, who had ended up in a nursing home, in Sydney, Australia, she told him her ex-husband was dead (Levine 1996, 67). In 1964, a Japanese scholar who had helped the Jews Sugihara had sent to Japan, Abraham Kotsuji (1899–1973), wrote in his autobiography that the diplomat had “disappeared, possibly assassinated by the Germans” (Kotsuji 1964, 160).

Those whose lives had been saved by Sugihara, however, had not forgotten him. Some tried to discover whether he was still alive. In 1968, Yeoshua Nishri (1919–1991), who had been one of Sugihara’s beneficiaries as a child, came to Tokyo to work as economic attaché at the Israeli Embassy. Through Japan’s Foreign Ministry, he was able to locate Sugihara in Moscow and had him invited to Israel in 1969 to receive an award. Alerted by Nishri, hundreds who had been saved by him joined in asking that Sugihara be honored by the Yad Vashem, Israel’s official center for the remembrance of the Holocaust, with the title of “Righteous Among the Nations,” conferred to non-Jews who saved Jews from the Nazi persecution. The Yad Vashem denied the title to Sugihara in 1968, since at

that time it was only conferred to those who had “risked their lives” to save Jews. By 1984, the criteria had changed to include those who had put their careers in jeopardy, and Sugihara got the title (Kowner 2017).

Both the Yad Vashem honor and the discussions preceding it were crucial for the fame of Sugihara in Israel and among the Jewish diasporas. In Japan, however, not many knew him before a series of seven articles was published in 1982 in the popular *Shukan Sankei* weekly, followed by a documentary film by Fuji Television Network in 1983 (Kowner 2023, 42–3). While books and movies continued to be published, Sugihara's fame and honor extended to Lithuania only in the 21st century. Obviously Sugihara, who had denounced the Soviet mistreatment of the Jews, could not be mentioned in Soviet times. Only after independence Lithuanians “discovered” and embraced Sugihara and eventually museums, monuments, and gardens were inaugurated. 2020 was even proclaimed the “Year of Sugihara,” although several initiatives had to be cancelled due to the COVID pandemic.

The 2023 Sugihara Controversy

In March 2023 an important scholarly journal, the *American Historical Review*, published an article by University of Haifa's professor Rotem Kowner. The article (Kowner 2023) was advertised as an “event” and was covered by non-specialized media in Israel (Haime 2023), the United States (Medoff 2023), and China (see Ryall 2023), although to the best of my knowledge had no echo in Japan.

Kowner, who had published a much more moderate article on the issue in 2017 in a Lithuanian journal (Kowner 2017), criticized both Sugihara and the motivations of those who promoted his “cult” (Kowner 2023, 44). The Israeli academic argued that Sugihara's was “a minor episode” (Kowner 2023, 32), that he rescued the Jews not from the Nazis but from the Soviets and had anti-Soviet prejudices, and that his motivations “remain obscure” (Kowner 2023, 38).

Kowner does not refrain from mentioning gossip, as he reports based on interviews with Japanese Foreign Ministry officers he conducted in 2019 (i.e., eighty years after the events), that there were “rumors” among Japanese diplomats that Sugihara “profited financially” from helping the Jews. The scholar admits that

these rumors are “without substantial proof,” yet he insists they are “not improbable” (Kowner 2023, 39). He also criticizes Sugihara “apologists” for not reporting that he worked for Japanese intelligence and that he abandoned his wife and sons when he went to work in Moscow in 1960 (which may explain why the only surviving son of the diplomat expressed a cautious support for some of Kowner’s theories: Haime 2023).

All these claims may be disputed. That Sugihara made money by issuing his visas is just unsupported slander. Saving several thousand human beings is not “minor,” and while his first wife was both Russian and “anti-Bolshevik” (Levine 1996, 87), Sugihara could not have been a fanatical anti-Soviet if he was allowed to live and work helping Japanese business companies in Soviet Moscow for fifteen years. Certainly, he was a Japanese diplomat and worked for his country. But the fact is that, as Kowner admits, the Jews in Lithuania were harassed, ill-treated, and threatened by the Soviets, although certainly the Nazis were responsible of the worst carnages.

A large part of Kowner’s article is devoted to explaining why, in his opinion, three countries—Israel, Japan, and Lithuania—“manipulated” the Sugihara story (Kowner 2023, 34) and promoted it. He uses repeatedly the word “camouflage” (Kowner 2023, 39, 62). He argued that Japan needed Sugihara to “camouflage” its own war crimes and alliance with Nazi Germany and show to the world that Japanese, or at least Japanese diplomats, cared for human rights. Lithuania needed to “camouflage” the cooperation of Lithuanians with the Nazi exterminations of Jews and had also a vested interest in criticizing the Soviet Union. Israel by honoring Sugihara tried to ingratiate the Japanese public opinion and “camouflage” its own atrocities against the Palestinians.

This part of the article is heavily political. It is certainly true that Japanese, Lithuanian Nazi collaborators, and Israelis all committed atrocities, but how commemorating Sugihara may effectively “camouflage” them is unclear. Another Israeli scholar, Mordecai Paldiel, the former head of Yad Vashem’s Department of the Righteous Among the Nations, answered by stating that he “was present at the relevant meetings” of Yad Vashem when the decision to honor Sugihara was adopted, while Kowner “wasn’t there.” Paldiel insisted that any suggestion that the Yad Vashem’s decision was politically motivated is ridiculous, that hundreds of documents about Sugihara were examined, and that the article

“makes one wonder why Kowner seems to be personally so uncomfortable with the recognition of Sugihara’s good deeds” (Medoff 2023).

Without speculating on Kowner’s motivations, we can perhaps note that what was born as an academic controversy made it to the general media and continued to be debated within a context where both the Visas for Life organization, founded by the Sugihara family, and the Chiune Sugihara Memorial Hall in Yaotsu have come under criticism for having collected money to support Ukraine after the Russian invasion (Haime 2023), something that it was argued was not part of their mandate, while Russia had become more sensitive to any criticism of Soviet behavior during World War II and beyond. And of course the controversy continues in the context of the events in Gaza, with the risk of making Sugihara a victim of collateral damage caused by events that have nothing to do with him.

Kowner’s criticism also targets Soka Gakkai and Soka University, which co-hosted with the Simon Wiesenthal Center the second edition of the exhibition “The Courage to Remember” that toured Japan since 2015 and presented together Sugihara and Anne Frank. Kowner finds the “confusing proximity” of Frank, a victim, with Sugihara, a diplomat for a Germany’s ally, offensive. Kowner claims that it was Soka University that “insisted” with the Simon Wiesenthal Center to include Sugihara and that one of the aims was to create

a useful diversion that allows ordinary Japanese to identify with a wartime humanitarian compatriot and be proud of him... as they avoid a full acknowledgment of their own historical wrongdoings in Asia (Kowner 2023, 56).

This criticism was demonstrably wrong.

Daisaku Ikeda and Sugihara

In 1993, Daisaku Ikeda was the first Japanese who visited the Museum of Tolerance, created by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, even before it was open to the general public (Ikeda 1996). In 1996, he gave a speech there commemorating Anne Frank. He mentioned the Buddhist teaching on “righteous anger,” which is not “self-absorbed emotionalism” but condemns evil and “reforms and rejuvenates society.” He expressed this anger both against the Nazis who killed Anne Frank and against the “Japanese militarism” that had imprisoned both the founder of Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), who

died in jail in 1944, and his successor Josei Toda (1900–1958), Ikeda’s mentor (Ikeda 1996). He denounced Japan’s “military fascism” and clearly did not use Anne Frank to divert attention from the Japanese forms of disregard for human rights—quite the opposite.

Nor did he or Soka Gakkai use Sugihara for this purpose. There are two main sources for Ikeda’s assessment of Sugihara. The first is a conversation collected in *Discussions on Youth*, whose English edition was first published in 1998. Ikeda tells the basic facts of Sugihara’s story. However, the focus is not on the good heart of Sugihara, but on the shortcomings of the Japanese government, who tried to derail his humanitarian effort. Sugihara’s bravery was in disobeying a government that he served and respected but whose instructions on the visa issue he regarded as morally wrong.

According to Ikeda,

Mr. Sugihara asked the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs three times to give him the green light to issue the visas, but each time the ministry refused. He was deeply troubled but finally came to a decision. “I couldn’t abandon those who have come to me for help. If I did, I will be turning my back on God.” So, he ignored the orders and issued the visas... (Ikeda 2010, 86).

Ikeda goes on to blame “problems within the Japanese educational system,” which had existed “since the Meiji Restoration” (1868) for the authorities in Tokyo’s failure to compassionately understand the problems of the Jews in 1940 (Ikeda 2010, 86). Rather than using the story of Sugihara for glorifying Japan, what he did becomes an opportunity for discussing Japanese problems and shortcomings.

The second set of references to Sugihara by Ikeda comes from his 2016 yearly Peace Proposal. There, he gave a key to understanding the spirit of the second version of the exhibition “The Courage to Remember” organized with the Simon Wiesenthal Center by Soka University in cooperation with the Soka Gakkai Peace Committee. The first version of the exhibition had toured Japan between 1994 and 2007, visiting seventy-three cities and gathered 2.1 million visitors. It focused on Anne Frank and did not include a section on Sugihara. The second, who did, was launched in 2015 and by 2023 had toured twenty-two Japanese cities with some 220,000 visitors. The reason the second exhibition had less visitors was not that Japanese were less interested in Sugihara. It was that exhibitions in several cities were planned for 2020 and 2021 and had to be cancelled due to COVID.

The exhibition was positively reviewed by mainline Japanese media (see e.g., *Japan Today* 2015). During the COVID pandemic the second exhibition went virtual, and the success of the dedicated website brought the number of offline and online visitors to figures presumably comparable to those of the first version.

In the Peace Proposal for 2016, Ikeda did not compare Sugihara with Anne Frank. He compared the diplomat to “the women who risked their lives to support the Frank family while they were in hiding,” part of “a network for the protection of Jewish refugees.” This comparison helped Ikeda to make his point, which was about an “empathy, which exists independent of any codified norms of human rights [and] is the light of humanity that can shine brightly in any place or situation.” As a Buddhist, Ikeda found the root of this empathy in Buddha’s teaching that we should always be able to “put ourselves in the place of another”:

Buddhism takes as its starting point the universal human impulse to avoid suffering or harm and the undeniable sense of the unique value of our own being. It then leads us to the realization that others must feel the same. To the degree that we can put ourselves in the place of another, we gain a tangible sense of the reality of their suffering. Shakyamuni called upon us to view the world through such empathetic eyes and thus commit ourselves to a way of life that will protect all people from violence and discrimination (Ikeda 2016).

While we can also find in Kowner’s article useful information about how Sugihara’s fame grew gradually, and it is true that governments use historical celebrations for their own purposes, about the role of Soka Gakkai he totally misses the point. One wonders whether he knows what Soka Gakkai was and is all about. Any idea that Sugihara was promoted and globalized by Soka Gakkai or Ikeda to divert the attention from the evil of Japanese militarism is ludicrous, particularly because Soka Gakkai itself was a victim of that militarism.

It is clear that Ikeda loved the exemplary story of Sugihara, as do all those who know it, with the exception of a few misguided ideological or political critics. Soka Gakkai did contribute to make Sugihara better known in Japan and among the movement’s members internationally. It did so not because Sugihara embodied some imaginary stereotype of Japan-ness but because he was a good and brave man whose example is valid for all countries and times. As Ikeda noted,

Mr. Sugihara refused to obey those in authority in Japan because he felt that by failing to help those who came to him, he would be betraying his faith and most cherished beliefs. He had the courage to act in accord with his conscience, with what he believed was right,

no matter how severely he was pressured. That kind of courage comes from deep conviction, from the philosophy or religious beliefs one holds dear (Ikeda 2010, 87).

It would be in the humanity's interest to find more women and men with the courage of Sugihara, capable of loving their countries and at the same time affirming that their leaders may make terrible mistakes, in both the Ukrainian and the Palestinian wars.

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**From NSA to SGI in the USA:
The Emergence of Soka Gakkai in America**

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ABSTRACT: An early step in the globalization of Soka Gakkai began in the United States in 1960. The initial local centers of Soka Gakkai were brought together by President Daisaku Ikeda during his first foreign trip immediately following the announcement of the policy of *Kōsen-rufū*. The first American district opened in the recently formed state of Hawaii but within weeks, Ikeda also established the work in San Francisco, the state of Nevada, Seattle, Chicago, New York, had formed a chapter in Los Angeles, and a group in Sacramento. The trip culminated in Ikeda appointing to lead the American work the youthful Masayasu Sadanaga who, soon after being officially named General Director, changed his name to George Williams. During Williams' thirty years of leadership, SGI will become the largest Buddhist group in the United States. The last year of Williams' directorship was marked by a period of turmoil that saw Soka Gakkai break with its parent body, the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists, and its emergence as an independent Buddhist movement. Significant changes followed in 1995 with the adoption of the SGI Charter that committed the organization to strive for a peaceful world, based on the philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism. Simultaneously, President Ikeda announced a new emphasis on "dialogue" as a tool for spreading Buddhism and opened the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century (now the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By 2010, when SGI celebrated the 50th anniversary of Ikeda's initial visit to the United States, SGI-USA reported more than 300,000 members, a figure based on the issuance of individual *Cohonzons* to new adherents.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Nichiren Shoshu, Daisaku Ikeda, Buddhism in the United States, Soka Gakkai in the United States

The Origins

Soka Gakkai, a contemporary representative of the Nichiren Buddhist tradition that burst upon the world in the last half of the twentieth century, really had two beginnings in the United States. It was originally brought to the United States by Japanese women who married American servicemen in the years after World War II. These women engaged in the basic practice of chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge*

Kyō in the privacy of their own homes, and rarely met together in groups. Most resided in California but others were in communities across the country.

Their quiet life would change in 1960 when back home in Japan, a youthful Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023) became the third president of the organization. Almost immediately, he established a new Overseas Affairs Section, the first visible indication of his intention of spreading the organization internationally and inviting non-Japanese into its membership. This was not just a whim of the new president, but part of a vision that has been passed to him by his predecessor, Josei Toda (1900–1958), who had wanted to spread Nichiren Buddhism globally.

Then, on October 2, 1960, Ikeda began what would become decades of international travel with a flight to the United States. He was armed with a list of members who had moved to America and was intent upon calling them together and organizing them for growth. His initial stopping point was in Honolulu where some three dozen members had come to reside. While there, he called them together and organized the first Hawaii District, the first Soka Gakkai organization outside of Japan. He understood that the future of the organization in America would rest upon its becoming an American movement, and he strongly encouraged the members (1) to integrate fully into American life and culture by learning English, (2) to obtain a driver's license, and (3) to earn US citizenship. He also released the first copies of a book, *The Soka Gakkai*, an initial text in English for introducing Nichiren Buddhism to Americans. Ikeda clearly indicated that Soka Gakkai was not opening in America merely to serve the Japanese diaspora (Ikeda 1995).

In his talks to the small group with whom he met, Ikeda spoke of his purpose as spreading *Kōsen-rufu*, generally translated to mean “wide propagation,” (English Buddhist Dictionary Committee 2002, 344), which manifests in Soka Gakkai members disseminating the *Lotus Sutra* broadly throughout the world, introducing people to the basic practice of chanting *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*, and inviting people to join the movement. Ikeda will later mark October 2 as the beginning point of his efforts at the international propagation of Buddhism. And as it grew, Soka Gakkai attracted a spectrum of observers to track its progress. (Dator 1969; Metraux 1988; Hurst 1992; Snow 1993; Hammond and Machacek 1999; Seager 2000; Machacek and Wilson 2001; Metraux 2010).

As Ikeda moved on to the mainland, he initially establishes districts in San Francisco and in Nevada, followed by stops in Seattle, Chicago, and New York. The newly established San Francisco district was to comprise three groups, encompassing the San Francisco, Suisun City, and Sacramento areas. While in NYC, Ikeda visited the United Nations. He also broke up his American schedule with side trips to Toronto and then to San Paulo, Brazil. He finished his American visit in Los Angeles, his last stop on the trip. A chapter was established in Los Angeles. Within the chapter, six districts were formed: St. Louis, Olympic, First, West, Long Beach, and San Diego.

In Los Angeles, he encountered Masayasu Sadanaga (1930–2013), a young practitioner who had moved to California in 1957. At the time of their meeting, Sadanaga's father had just died, and he wanted to return to Japan. Ikeda pressed him to stay and direct the work of the dissemination of Buddhism. Ikeda organized the North American chapter of SG and left Sadanaga in charge. He assumed his duties while working odd jobs and pursuing his studies at UCLA.

Remembered for its energetic pace, Sadanaga's leadership was initially marked by his setting up headquarters in Los Angeles and the founding of a periodical, the *Seikyo News* (later, English-speaking readers were offered the *Seikyo Times* an English monthly magazine edited and printed in Japan, and the *World Tribune*). In 1972, Sadanaga finally became a US citizen and celebrated the event by anglicizing his name. He was from that point on known as George Williams. In 1963, Ikeda visited the US for a second time and formally named Williams the America General Chapter Chief and oversaw the opening of the first official headquarters for North America in Los Angeles. Simultaneously, it was determined that enough English-speaking members had been attracted to the movement, beginning with the husbands of the initial members, and Williams readied himself to lead a focused effort to recruit more non-Japanese.

Through the mid-1960s Ikeda visited America annually. He was present, for example, to receive the first issue of the American chapter's periodical under what will be its longstanding name, *World Tribune*. He also regularly celebrated the movement's expansion by officially designating each new district. That expansion reached a notable plateau in 1966 when the American work as a whole assumed a new name—the Nichiren Shoshu of America (NSA).

Ikeda was back in 1967 to celebrate the opening of two traditional Nichiren Shoshu temples, the Hosei-ji Temple in Hawaii and the Myoho-ji Temple east of Los Angeles in Etiwanda, California (now a part of Rancho Cucamonga). President Ikeda was accompanied by Nichiren Shoshu High Priest Nittatshu Shonin (1902-1979). These temples, together with the Washington, D.C. temple opened in 1972, became important ritual centers for the NSA as places where new members could officially receive their personal *Gohonzon*, before which they will chant daily, as well as celebrate weddings and funerals.

The 1970s

While the 1960s became the time of initially establishing the Soka Gakkai as a growing movement across America, the 1970s became the decade of it making new thrusts in its upward trajectory that will herald its impact upon American popular culture.

In 1972, jazz music superstar Herbie Hancock was introduced to chanting. Just a month later his friend and colleague Wayne Shorter (1933–2023) attended a lecture by President Ikeda at UCLA (Hancock and Dickey 2014). They were the first of a cadre of A-list celebrities to pick up the practice and affiliate with NSA (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017). Possibly the most notable was singer Tina Turner (1939–2023). Quietly suffering a great deal of physical abuse from her husband Ike Turner (1931–2007), she was introduced to chanting in 1973 by singer Valerie Bishop (1940–2017), who was employed by Tina's husband at the time. Valerie was an acquaintance of Hancock. Immediately drawn to the chant *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*, soon afterward Tina received her *Gohonzon*, and the *butsudan* in which to keep it. She utilized the chant to assist her in building her own inner strength, and eventually leaving her husband and continuing her own record-breaking career independently of him (Turner and Loder 1987; Turner, Davis, and Wichmann 2018).

After getting her life and her career back together, and winning a favorable divorce from her husband, Turner wrote a best-selling autobiography, *I, Tina: My Life Story* (Turner and Loder 1987) which would be turned into a movie *What's Love Got to Do with It* (1993), both of which covered the role of Soka Gakkai in providing the strength to recover from her abusive situation and go on to new

heights as an international star performer. Turner would put her celebrity status to use as a star performer at NSA national events, and eventually emerge as an accomplished public advocate for Soka Gakkai (Turner 2020). Additional celebrities who became quite open in discussing their adherence to SGI would include musician Courtney Love, television star Patrick Duffy, and movie stars Chow Yun-fat, Patrick Swayze (1952–2009: Swayze and Niemi 2009), and Orlando Bloom—to name a few.

The adherence of celebrities to NSA was indicative of both the movement's success at integrating itself into American culture and its growth beyond the Japanese American diaspora. That integration in American life was on full display in its July 4th events, the most notable being the celebration in 1976 of the American Bicentennial during which NSA organized events in New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia. In New York, the NSA Bicentennial Convention projected a theme of "Toward the Dawn of World Peace." It featured a parade down Fifth Avenue, for which it mobilized some 10,000 members and attracted a million spectators. An additional "Spirit of '76" show filled Shea Stadium.

The 1970s would bring to the fore the leadership efforts of George Williams. As NSA's General Director, Williams had dedicated himself to the movement's growth. In 1968, he inaugurated a set of seminars at university campuses across the country aimed at explaining the basic affirmations of Nichiren Shoshu practice and teachings. By 1971, he had given 70 such seminars on some 40 campuses stretching from UCLA to Harvard (Williams 1972b). He followed by organizing NSA's leadership across the country to motivate members to join their peers to engage the street people who had come to live much of their life on the streets of America. This effort at disseminating Buddhism came as the Jesus People and numerous new religions, both homegrown and from Asia, were already engaged in similar activities (Williams 1972a, 1972b, 1986).

As the membership grew, Williams also nurtured their own commitment to Nichiren by organizing *tozans*, pilgrimages through which believers were able to come face to face with the religion's source of faith and practice, the original *Dai-Gohonzon*, enshrined at Nichiren Shoshu's Head Temple Taiseki-ji, located at the base of Mount Fuji in Japan. The early *tozans* set the stage for a proposal by President Ikeda that resurrected a plan originally suggested by President Toda, to construct a new main temple at Taiseki-ji, designed to physically house the *Dai-Gohonzon*. A formal effort to raise the necessary funds began in 1965 and

raised some 35 billion Yen (100 million in US dollars). Construction was initiated in 1968 and completed in 1972. Many Americans, including Williams, participated in the giant Sho Hondo Convention in 1973.

For Americans, the 1973 Convention both celebrated NSA's growth and began to make visible some tensions within the larger Nichiren Shoshu movement. Some traditionalists within the Nichiren Shoshu, for example, opposed the idea of moving the *Dai-Gohonzon* into the new Sho Hondo (Great Main Temple) at the Head Temple. One result of this tension would be the forced resignation of Ikeda from his presidency of Soka Gakkai in Japan.

While political considerations were playing out in Japan, Soka Gakkai's international growth, spearheaded by its success in the United States, led to the formation of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a global association, formally networking the otherwise independent Soka Gakkai organizations around the world that had previously been linked primarily by the visits of the globe-trotting Ikeda. The organizational meeting of SGI was held in the US territory of Guam. Guam was selected as a symbolic gesture referencing its history as the site of some of World War II's bloodiest battles, and its proximity to Tinian Island, the launching place of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This meeting location, and indeed the formation of SGI, would herald the increasingly central role that peace will come to have in Soka Gakkai life.

The organization of SGI (officially on January 26, 1975) also signaled a coming reorganization of Soka Gakkai. In 1979, as Ikeda relinquished his role as president of Soka Gakkai in Japan, the presidency of SGI became his base of operation. Henceforth, for American members, he will no longer be simply the leader from Japan who drops in for occasional visits to fine tune the local organization. He was emerging as an international Buddhist statesman of global stature, was exchanging insights with political and intellectual leaders, and positively influencing their actions in an increasingly conflicted world. Among the first significant figures with whom he would meet would be the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1923-2023), then in the midst of ending the Vietnam War, opening relations between the United States and China, and negotiating the end of the Yom Kippur War between Israel and its neighbors. Kissinger's activity culminated in his winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973.

The 1980s would begin with a singular event, the celebration of the NSA's twentieth anniversary. Ikeda led the main events of the celebration in

San Francisco. Nichiren Shoshu High Priest, Nikken Shonin (1922–2019), also visited the United States for the anniversary, the highlight of his journey being the enshrinement of a *Gohonzon* at NSA's World Culture Center in Santa Monica, California. For members, the twentieth anniversary confirmed the NSA's unique place in the global Nichiren Shoshu movement, among other important attributes being its integration of democratic processes in its structure, a very American understanding of Ikeda's call for a more democratic organization of Soka Gakkai's national entities.

Through the decade, many of the programs initiated earlier, such as the pilgrimages to Japan, would continue. The patriotic emphasis that emerged in the Bicentennial celebration would find a new expression when the members in Honolulu organized the two-day *World Peace Culture Festival*, featuring the appearance of actor Patrick Duffy, one of the stars of the very popular TV series *Dallas*. The event culminated with a July 4th parade, featuring 13,000 flag-carrying marchers, a floating (and erupting) volcano stage, a 200-person roller-skating human pyramid, cowboys, Native Americans, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, fast food restaurant workers marching in uniform, and the Liberty Bell.

The Hawaii event set the stage for the NSA celebration of the bicentennial of the US Constitution two years later. Beginning in April, celebrants toured more than 40 cities with a replica of the Liberty Bell, gathering some 200,000 signatures on a pledge "to work for the principles of freedom embodied in the Constitution." The effort culminated on July 4th with the NSA presenting the bell to the city of Philadelphia (where the original Liberty Bell is located), following a massive Independence Day parade.

While the patriotic display mobilized the largest numbers of people, possibly the decade's most important event for the long-term future of the movement was the establishment of the first American Soka University at Calabasas (near Los Angeles, California). It was the first full extension of Soka Gakkai educational practice to the United States (and thus globally). The focus of this campus was to train Japanese students in English (and later other international students in English language education). As a result, the Calabasas campus did not offer undergraduate degrees. It does have a small master's degree program in foreign language education, as well as offering non-degree-granting English-as-a-second-language classes for students from Japan, and other foreign language classes for students from a wide range of countries. Its curriculum has

received approval from the California State Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education (Storch 2015).

From NSA to SGI-USA

In the wake of the founding of Soka University of America in Calabasas, the NSA appeared to be on a steady upward course; however, trouble had been brewing both within the American movement and within the larger Nichiren movement. A longstanding issue existed over the very different self-image held by the Nichiren Shoshu leadership, which viewed itself as the true bearer of the Nichiren tradition and saw Soka Gakkai as simply a lay organization (lacking in ritual powers). In stark contrast, Soka Gakkai envisioned itself as an independent (albeit lay) organization, which possessed its own realm of action and a program on a global scale that ultimately drew its authority from Nichiren (1222–1282) himself. Metraux described the basic difference thusly,

The priesthood claims that it is the sole custodian of religious authority and dogma, while the Soka Gakkai leadership argues that the sacred writings of Nichiren, not the priesthood, represent the ultimate source of authority, and that any individual with deep faith in Nichiren's teachings can gain enlightenment without the assistance of a priest (Metraux 1992, 326).

As the 1990s began, issues between the Nichiren Shoshu administration and Soka Gakkai led the former to excommunicate the latter, effectively ending their forty years of working together. A war of words through 1991 reached a new plateau on November 8, 1991, when Soka Gakkai learned of the Nichiren Shoshu leadership's ordering the dissolution of Soka Gakkai. Rejecting the request, a few weeks later, the Soka Gakkai and its overseas organizations were formally excommunicated, and its 11 million members worldwide were encouraged by High Priest Nikken to resign and reaffirm their loyalty to Nichiren Shoshu (Metraux 1992).

In response, the Soka Gakkai countered by outlining Nichiren Shoshu's deviation from their own interpretation of Nichiren's doctrines, along with accusations of simony and hedonism among its ranking priests. The Nichiren Shoshu leadership condemned Ikeda's disrespect and his attempt to assume the teaching role properly held by the priesthood. Once the break occurred, a continuing verbal war would characterize the relationship between the

two organizations. The ongoing polemics would be punctuated by occasional actions such as occurred in the late 1990s, when the Nichiren Shoshu leadership at Taiseki-ji tore down the recently constructed Sho Hondo (Grand Main Temple), largely built with Soka Gakkai dollars, and built a replacement temple. In 2014, the Soka Gakkai edited its bylaws by adding a statement that emphasized its lack of any relationship with the Nichiren Shoshu.

Meanwhile, even as the Nichiren Shoshu leadership and Soka Gakkai fought, in the United States another scenario was unraveling. Through the 1980s, criticism had been building over George Williams' leadership. Having been appointed to office as a young man, he had been General Director for more than a quarter of a century and showed no signs of leaving office to make room for others to demonstrate their talents and implement their ideas for the organization's future direction. In particular, some complained that in showing himself a dedicated student of Ikeda, Williams had abandoned his Japanese heritage. Others thought that in his enthusiasm for *Kōsen-rufu*, he often overworked the members in evangelistic endeavor and drove them from the movement. Meanwhile, since the late 1970s, some capable new leaders from Japan, including Fred Zaitzu and Danny Nagashima, had arrived, assumed duties at local centers, and waited in the wings to move center stage.

In February 1990, NSA celebrated its 30th anniversary at a gathering in Malibu, California, which President Ikeda attended. He had canceled a previously scheduled trip to South America to extend his time in the United States, during which he attended a variety of meetings and training sessions in various locations. These meetings were tied together by his focus on fostering youthful successors to the current leadership (Ikeda 1995, 2001). In the midst of these meetings, somewhat to Williams' surprise, Ikeda openly criticized the General Director in what became a moment of public humiliation. Though he remained in office for two more years, Williams had lost much of the power he had accumulated over the years. The events of these weeks took on greater significance the following year when Soka Gakkai was excommunicated by the Nichiren Shoshu leadership. Ikeda also announced that Eiichi Wada, the vice president of Soka Gakkai, would become its new executive advisor.

In July 1991, the Nichiren Shoshu of America changed its name to SGI-USA (short for Soka Gakkai International-USA). Then in November 1992, in another open meeting, Williams was publicly removed from office. His final act as General

Director was a brief recounting of what he saw as his accomplishments intermixed with multiple apologies for times he had fallen short. Williams was named General Director Emeritus and remained in his position as the vice-president of the Soka Gakkai, neither position carrying any real leadership duties.

Williams was replaced by Fred Zaitso, who had originally joined Soka Gakkai as a college student in Japan in 1962. Zaitso studied Trade at Kanagawa University. Upon graduating, although he was offered a job by a trading firm, he chose to work for the Asia People's Association, an affiliate of Soka Gakkai. Since 1967, he worked for the *Seikyo Shimbun* newspaper, mainly as a reporter. Zaitso served SGI-USA through the remainder of the 1990s and completed his time in office as the decade ended (December 1999).

Ikeda continued his frequent visits to the United States through the 1990s. In 1993, for example, he visited twice, the first time in January and February, moving to South America and then back to the U.S. in March, the second time in September. In that year, he addressed an SGI-USA representatives conference in Miami. Here, he picked up the polemics with the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, whom he accused of appearing to embrace the *Gohonzon* but in fact abusing the faith to serve their own ends. He claimed that they were undeserving of any respect.

Later in the years, Ikeda addressed the SGI-USA Executive Conference held in Malibu. In his important speech, "Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism Lives Only in SGI," Ikeda confronted the immediate problem faced by SGI-USA in that the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood had served a vital function in welcoming new members that included the official presentation of their personal *Gohonzon*. Ikeda made his initial mention to American members that SGI would henceforth confer the *Gohonzon* on its new members. The new *Gohonzons* will be based upon a *Gohonzon* transcribed by a Nichiren Shoshu high priest in 1720. This action by SGI marked a new era of worldwide *Kōsen-rufu*. In the same speech, he declared the *gojukai* ceremony (in which the new believers accepted the basic precepts), which had previously accompanied the bestowing of the *Gohonzon*, unnecessary. Henceforth, SGI-USA would assume the priestly role and began conferring *Gohonzons* to members (Ikeda 2001, 287–312).

In September 1993, Ikeda delivered a lecture titled "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization" at Harvard University. He highlighted the contributions Mahayana Buddhism can make to the peaceful evolution of humanity

(Ikeda 1993). Soon after, he established the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century (BRC) in Cambridge as a tangible commitment to the spirit behind his talk—the spirit to engage diverse voices in contributing value to humanity. In 2009, the BRC changed its name to the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue.

The founding of the Boston center can be seen as a major symbol of the changes that had overtaken the American Soka Gakkai as it transitioned from being the Nichiren Shoshu Academy to becoming SGI-USA. In its first generation, Soka Gakkai had vigorously pursued a program of membership recruitment that by the end of the 20th century had made it by far the largest Buddhist group in the United States. Essential to its growth was its exclusivist claims that emphasized Nichiren as the greatest teacher of Buddhism and his teachings as the most pristine presentation of the Buddha’s message. Beginning with the founding of SGI, and without backing away from its earlier position, the movement began to pivot toward a new emphasis on Buddhism’s role in promoting more general human values and especially the religion’s potentials in promoting global peace and human welfare. Rather than proselytize, members were called upon to use dialogue with fellow Buddhists, the faithful of other religions, and secular women and men of good will everywhere as the instrument of furthering the goals of Nichiren’s teachings. As many observers of the movement have noted, this has the effect of presenting the movement not so much as a new religion out to change the world but viewing it as a relatively large global religious community ready to cooperate fully with the larger religious world in “creating value.”

The new focus on dialogue would be embodied in SGI new charter adopted by the representative of the global movement, including SGI-USA in 1995. The relatively brief document includes in its ten “Purposes and Principles” the affirmation that

SGI shall promote an understanding of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism through grassroots exchange, thereby contributing to individual happiness... SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity (Soka Gakkai International 1995 [2017]).

These two affirmations were retained largely unchanged in the revised Constitution of Soka Gakkai, which was adopted in 2017.

Conclusion

Soka Gakkai has been an enigma in the American religious community. On the one hand, from a minuscule community informally transplanted to the United States after World War II, in one generation it became the largest of the 200-plus groups that now represent Buddhism to the American public. By 2010, when SGI celebrated the 50th anniversary of Ikeda's initial visit to the United States, SGI-USA reported more than 300,000 members, a figure based on the issuance of individual *Gohonzons* to new adherents. Simultaneously, of the hundreds of new religious movements that have appeared in America through the last half of the twentieth century, it is among the very few that have established itself as national religious communities and have found acceptance among the older more-established religious communities, even as its leadership have been welcomed as partners in conversation with the country's intellectual leadership.

Much of the credit for SGI present status must be attributed to the work, persistence, and lengthy tenure of SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, who guided the movement to accept his vision of Nichiren Buddhism. It now remains to be seen how the next generation takes that vision into the future and actualizes Ikeda's hopes and dreams of the world to come.

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APPENDIX

The History of Soka Gakkai in America: A Selective Bibliography

The items cited below have been assembled from the extremely large collection of material on Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism in general (including the extensive writings of Daisaku Ikeda), to focus exclusively upon materials especially related to the origin, growth, and development of the movement in the United States, the first country outside of Japan in which Soka Gakkai formally organized. Now reporting some 300,000 members, the American branch of the movement is also one of its largest branches outside of its country of origin.

SGI-USA is one branch of an international movement and has often acted in concord with the international thrusts of the global SGI leadership, most notably in following up on the efforts toward world peace initiated by President Ikeda during his long tenure in office. This bibliography has limited its coverage to materials that focus primarily on the particular activity of the American branch of SGI.

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Celebrities Affiliated with SGI-USA

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Tina Turner meets with SGI President Daisaku Ikeda in 1987.

Secondary Materials

The secondary materials on Soka Gakkai discuss the variety of issues that animate the movement's history in America including its relation with the Nichiren Shoshu establishment, the role of its first General Director George Williams, its status as a new religion, its methods of membership recruitment, SGI's changing relation to the larger Buddhist community, and its ability to create and maintain a functional racial and cultural diversity among its members. The large amount of attention paid to SGI by scholars is a testament to its relative success among the hundreds of new religious movements that arose in the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

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**Musical Bodhisattvas:
African American Musicians in the Soka Gakkai**

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ABSTRACT: The American branch of Soka Gakkai is known for having achieved a remarkable racial balance, which makes the criticism formulated by Rima Vesely-Flad against the hidden racism in meditative Buddhist sanghas difficultly applicable to its organization. The paper explores the experience of African American musicians who embraced Soka Gakkai's Buddhism, including Tina Turner, Herbie Hancock, and Wayne Shorter. While their experience was remarkably different from the one described by Vesely-Flad, they were always aware of the presence of racism in the world of American entertainment. They found in Daisaku Ikeda's idea of global citizenship a tool to combat it.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in the United States, Musicians and Soka Gakkai, Tina Turner, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Daisaku Ikeda.

Racial Balance in the American Soka Gakkai

This paper is a continuation of research started last year. I summarized my first findings in a presentation at the 2023 EASSSR (East Asian Society for the Scientific Study of Religion) meeting, entitled, "Religion, Anti-Racism, and Race in the American Soka Gakkai Association" (Folk 2023). As someone who studies Buddhism in America, I am aware of the racial realities characterizing the religious landscape. Many scholars put forth the view that there are "two Buddhisms": communities of first- and second-generation Asian practitioners with practices consistent with their countries of origin, and non-Asian converts to forms of Buddhism that stress meditation, such as Vipassana or Zen, and "Shambhala." It is well-known that the latter form, sometimes called "white Buddhism," has a distinct membership population: highly educated professionals who are, in fact, overwhelmingly white Americans.

It is difficult to put Soka Gakkai (SGI) under either umbrella, and many studies of Western Buddhism have failed to address SGI at all. But when they do, scholars marvel at how Soka Gakkai has managed to “crack the diversity code,” being the single form of Buddhism in America to successfully achieve racial balance. As I looked into this topic, I was surprised to see how consistent scholarly literature was in stopping at that observation. That is to say, despite the longstanding awareness of Soka Gakkai as different in its engagement across racial lines, there has been astonishing little research. The sparse interpretations I found tended to reify stereotypes about both Soka Gakkai and Black religiosity: depicting Nichiren Buddhism as a form of “prosperity theology,” and citing “deprivation theory” to explain the receptivity of African Americans.

I believe better explanations can be found in observations about Soka Gakkai and the statements of its African American practitioners. My research last summer revealed that many African American converts started out hoping for practical success, but they very soon turned their attention to chanting for things like personal transformation, social justice, or world peace: things associated with the enlargement of their goals for themselves and humanity. African American participants in Soka Gakkai value the practice as a means of personal and psychic transformation. They also cite the diversity in membership and the commitment to social justice as elements that draw them to the tradition.

It should not go unnoticed that despite having a distinct understanding of Buddhist philosophy, the focus on chanting makes Soka Gakkai practice more similar to Asian Buddhism than the meditative (“white”) systems. One could go so far as to invert the question—rather than ask why is Nichiren Buddhism popular among people of color, to recognize that the atypical, meditative emphasis of Western Buddhism has rendered it inaccessible except for a narrow demographic.

Rima Vesely-Flad’s Anti-Racist Critique of Meditative Buddhist Sanghas

Chanting is one of the elements of Buddhism Rima Vesely-Flad notes as “congruent” with African American religious practice, in *Black Buddhists and the Black Radical Tradition: The Practice of Stillness in the Movement for Liberation*. Vesely-Flad sees chanting, ancestor veneration, and the maintenance of altars as practices of special meaning to African American Buddhists. Vesely-Flad’s study focuses on meditative Buddhism, and not all her findings transpose. As an

anti-racist activist, she writes from the perspective of Black radical politics, and her understanding of Buddhism emphasizes psychological healing from racism. For Vesely-Flad, “trauma” is the defining experience for African American people in a raced society (Vesely-Flad 2022).

While Vesely-Flad understands Buddhist meditation as something that provides self-quieting, she notes in her work that racial identity and experience are important to African American people. Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes non-dualism and no-self, is in tension with that. Vesely-Flad seeks to redefine certain Buddhist concepts to fit an anti-racist framework—for example, framing suffering as the Black experience under racism.

Vesely-Flad makes a cogent critique of meditative Buddhist sanghas being “white spaces”: upper-middle-class and characterized by a culture of “respectability.” In such environments, it is difficult for people of color to feel they belong. Vesely-Flad is one of several African American Buddhist teachers and practitioners calling for affinity groups within sanghas in order to provide a certain amount of protection from systemic racism. There have been a number of reactions in the American Buddhist world to this development. Especially for younger Buddhists, it is vital that Buddhist communities confront their own, raced histories. Others worry such discussions give unnecessary power to social constructs like race, so as to misdirect people away from Buddhist teachings.

African American Musicians’ Encounter with Soka Gakkai

I would like to talk here about an alternative vision of Buddhism expressed by a group of African American Soka Gakkai members: musicians who first encountered Nichiren Buddhism in the 1970s in Los Angeles, when they knew each other from the world of jazz music. Their circle encompassed many artists, including Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter (1933–2023), and Art Blakey (1919–1990). Along with their wives and families, they created a close community of Nichiren Buddhism practitioners.

Their story is discussed in many books, including *Reaching Beyond: Improvisations on Jazz, Buddhism and a Joyful Life* (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017), and *Dancing in My Dreams: A Spiritual Biography of Tina Turner* (Craig 2023).

The musicians articulate a very different type of solidarity than what emerges in Vesely-Flad's study. It is important that their wives are Buddhists, too, and that many of them are in interracial marriages. We learn how important women are to this network in the biography of Tina Turner (1939–2023), whose life story is one of the best illustrations of how Soka Gakkai practice effects psychological transformation.

Tina Turner's escape from an abusive marriage is well-known. In the film, *What's Love Got to Do with It*, her introduction to Nichiren Buddhism coincides with a new quest for agency. For Tina Turner, chanting the *Daimoku* first began as an act of rebellion—even though her husband Ike Turner (1931–2007) forbade her from chanting, she could and did still do so whenever out of his sight. Chanting next became the means by which Turner developed a human support system, as women from the Los Angeles jazz circle started coming to her house to chant with her. After leaving Ike, Turner lived with several members of the jazz-Buddhist community, including Wayne and Ana Maria Shorter (1953–1996).

Tina Turner described her finding Nichiren Buddhism as a “cosmic turnaround” (Craig 2023, 160). For her, Buddhist principles were the means to personal transformation.

After I embraced Buddhism, I never doubted I would get where I wanted to go. But much of the time I had no idea how exactly I would get there. I left the “how” up to the universe and the mystical workings of my mind and soul. All along, I kept this encouragement from Daisaku Ikeda close to my heart: “One thing is certain: The power of belief, the power of thought, will move reality in the direction of what we believe and conceive of it. If you really believe you can do something you can. That is a fact. When you clearly envision the outcome of victory, engrave it upon your heart, and are firmly convinced that you will attain it, your brain makes every effort to realize the mental image you have created. And then, through your unceasing efforts, that victory is finally made a reality.” As I worked through mastering my mind in this way, and approached obstacles as catalysts for growth, continually changing poison into medicine without complaint, I experienced a deep-seated shift (Craig 2023, 148).

Like Tina Turner, Herbie Hancock believes Nichiren Buddhism offers a psychic empowerment that, distinctly, enables one to achieve their goals:

Before I embraced the faith of Nichiren Buddhism, I didn't realize what it was that I was fighting for. It was as though I was in a deep sleep. Now I feel that I am awake—far more aware than before. I have a long way to go, but I'm not afraid anymore. I have the confidence to shoot for bigger and bigger dreams, and I'm not afraid to be proactive and assertive, and move forward in my life (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 203).

Hancock, Shorter and Turner all use the phrase, “Turn poison into medicine,” to describe the Soka Gakkai belief that adversities, when understood correctly, are a means to growth and empowering change. Hancock writes,

I really came to understand what my mission is in life after I began practicing Buddhism. I began to see more deeply into what life is all about. It’s so wonderful. Most people, whether they realize it or not, see themselves as victims. In Nichiren Buddhism, our main concern is taking whatever negative things happen to us and transforming them into positive things. What we need to do is take any negative effect we experience and reframe it as a new cause, a new stimulus for enhancing and elevating one’s life (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 193).

While Vesely-Flad presents Buddhism as a way to heal from ongoing trauma, Hancock’s view leans to self-reliance:

Nichiren teaches that we must accept full responsibility. This means that we have to accept responsibility for our own behavior and role in whatever is happening around us and all that happens in the social arena. I think this is a really marvelous concept (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 193).

The artists are connected by both music and Buddhism, and they see the two as linked. All three credit Nichiren practice with enhancing their creativity. Hancock writes,

Through my practice of Buddhism, I discovered a new way of looking at myself that has opened up a completely new dimension of creativity for me. This new perspective has provided me a broader canvas that continues to open up possibilities I had never before imagined, in my performances as well as in every aspect of my life (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 148).

For Hancock, Buddha nature is a universal creative force. Improvisational jazz unleashes a certain type of creative energy, which Nichiren Buddhism also unleashes. Shorter agrees, writing,

Jazz is a creative process, an improvisational dialog that can break through the superficial constraints of dogma, decrees, and mandates (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 7).

In Soka Gakkai, chanting transforms persons, awakening their possibilities. This first brings individual empowerment, but in the stories of Turner, Hancock, and Shorter, this impulse is quickly directed outward. For the Soka Gakkai musicians, it is not only their own individual creativity that is released in their performances. Collectively, the three put forth an interesting idea: that their performances are intended to unleash the Buddha nature—the creative power—of their audiences even more than their own. Hancock writes,

Even though the roots of jazz come from the African American experience, my feeling has always been that jazz really developed from a noble aspect of the human spirit common to all people (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 8).

All three artists talk about chanting before performances, in order to get in touch with themselves so as to reach their viewers, with each note arriving at the awareness that their music is “for others.” Hancock writes,

As a Buddhist and a performer, I came to realize that the value of the performance had changed for me. I began to think that my performance was not just for my own sake—for my own pleasure and to lift my spirits. Yes, it was fun, and it could lift my spirits. But it became more important for me to use that platform as a way to encourage people to realize their own greatness (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 64).

For Hancock, music becomes both a form of self-transcendence, and a kind of healing work.

Buddhism teaches the principle of practice for self and practice for others. In other words, while we are engaging in Buddhist practice for our own benefit, we must also practice so we can help uplift others.

Advancing Buddhism is an even more pronounced goal in the life work of Tina Turner. Turner was introduced to Soka Gakkai Nichiren Buddhism in 1973, publicly declared herself a Buddhist in 1975, and formally converted in 1976. In 1982, Turner sang at the SGI Buddhist Peace Festival (Aloha, We Love America), by which time she described her desire to become a “musical bodhisattva.” In an interview with Larry King (1933–2021), Turner told of her ambition to become a Buddhist teacher—a goal that was realized in several projects, including a set of instructional CDs for chanting, and a memoir about Buddhism entitled, *Happiness Becomes You: A Guide to Changing Your Life for Good* (Turner 2020).

Music, Anti-Racism, and Global Citizenship

It should not go unmentioned that the artists are from an older generation, and articulating a different message from Vesely-Flad, who was born in 1976—the same year in which Tina Turner formally converted to Soka Gakkai. Part of her challenge to meditative Buddhism is generational, and it is consistent with efforts by young adults in many new religions for more recognition.

But it would be a mistake to present the Buddhist musicians as overly optimistic because of their era. A statement from Tina Turner is evidence of her awareness of the concerns of the present age, which only the global recognition of Buddha Nature will resolve:

I believe that only by awakening to this shared identity can we save ourselves, individually and collectively, from the problems we face around the world. We must urgently work together to find solutions that can transform the global poisons of systemic racism and homophobia, climate crisis, pandemics, loss of the Amazon jungle, factory farming of animals, fossil fuel consumption, nuclear weapons, plastic pollution, and more. The universal solution to all of the problems confronting humanity is for us to unite as one global team, honoring our truest roots as members of the same circle of life (Craig 2023, 212).

The Buddhist musicians are aware of systemic racism, and each one experienced racism personally. Tina Turner makes her feelings explicit: “[In America] it hurts to be a minority. I am looked down upon because I’m black. It’s forever. It’s like a curse on you” (Craig 2023, 169). For Turner, racism in America was among the main reasons she chose to live in Europe, moving to Switzerland in 1994 and becoming a citizen there in 2013.

The other musicians made different choices, but all three respond to racism as “global citizens.” Shorter writes,

On the road, I have shared with people my experiences of prejudice and bigotry. I incorporate stories of breaking through such obstacles without using words like bigotry, hatred, and prejudice. I always relate or lead them to the level of happiness (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 85).

It is important to note that all three artists have traveled extensively as a result of their work, including to Africa. Their global vision is undergirded by many intercultural experiences.

Hancock sees jazz as political subversive and highlights its association with the civil rights movement. It is relevant here that under Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023), Soka Gakkai International developed social models of intentional inclusion that included peace work with known civil rights leaders like Vincent Harding (1931–2014). Ikeda writes,

We must not permit discrimination of any sort. Our Soka Gakkai International movement is based upon the fundamental principles of Buddhism—peace, equality and compassion—that compel us to build a society protecting human rights and the dignity of all life (Harding and Ikeda 2013, 26).

Ikeda had a unique understanding of global citizenship:

(1) the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living [beings]; (2) the courage not to fear or deny difference, but to respect and strive to understand people of different cultures, and to grow from encounters with them; (3) the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in different places (Ikeda 2008, 444).

This ideal resonates with Hancock:

I feel that it's very important to embrace cultures outside my own. Doing so represents the wisdom of inclusion, the wisdom that stems from openness and respect for others, respect for something outside myself (Hancock, Ikeda, and Shorter 2017, 86) .

For these musicians, Soka Gakkai communities are a major vehicle for breaking down social boundaries. They all cite the basic dialog sessions held in Soka Gakkai meetings, where people are encouraged to share personal stories of their lives. These settings are interracial and egalitarian—anyone can speak, and everyone is encouraged to speak. These forums create inclusion and offer a structural model different from meditative Buddhism. I believe they are an important factor in why there have been so few calls to address systemic racism within the Soka Gakkai movement.

It would not do, however, to say that the dialog sessions are the key to solving the “diversity code.” The metaphor implies that once a solution is found, it might be applied universally, so as to “fix” the problem of racial inequities in every form of Buddhism. Soka Gakkai practice shows reconciliation is both closer to and farther away from that abstract goal. Reconciliation starts with people working together, lovingly, toward a shared goal, whether interfaith dialog, jazz improvisation, or the chanting of the *Daimoku*. Like the activities on which it is based, it is a dynamic practice.

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**Among the Wild Geese:
The Canadian Wing of Soka Gakkai International**

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ABSTRACT: The “Wild Geese” of diverse Buddhist communities is a crucial part of Canada’s multicultural mosaic, but the study of Buddhism in the West is still in its nascent stages. Moreover, since the publication of *The Lotus and the Maple Leaf*, there has been a surprising lacuna of academic studies of Soka Gakkai in Canada. This study is an attempt to construct an up-to-date profile of SGI in Canada, established in this country since 1976. It is based on fieldwork that includes interviews with two SGI leaders and one long-term member. Besides presenting basic (statistical and historical) data, this study addresses the question: “Is there a quintessentially *Canadian* Soka Gakkai?”

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Soka Gakkai in Canada, Buddhism in Canada, Religious Pluralism in Canada, Globalization of Soka Gakkai.

Introduction: Japanese Immigration in Canada

Soka Gakkai arrived in Canada in 1960, a time when the Canadian government was more hospitable towards Japanese immigrants than it had been in the past. As Mark Mullins explains in *Religious Minorities in Canada*, between 1870–1908 many Japanese immigrated to British Columbia to work in the lumber, fishing, railroad, and mining industries. But they found it impossible to assimilate into Canadian society, due to Anglo-American racial and cultural prejudice. For this reason, until 1942, 96 % of Japanese Canadians lived in the “Little Tokyo” district of Vancouver, where they maintained their language and culture (Mullins 1989). After the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the government banned immigration from China and forced Chinese settlers to move eastward, bringing their Buddhist faith with them. But it was the Japanese who built the first Buddhist

temple in Vancouver in 1905, as well as the first Buddhist temples in Alberta, in the late 1920s (Hori 2010).

In 1942, following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour, the Canadian government, under the *War Measures Act*, detained and dispossessed over 90 percent of Japanese Canadians (around 21,000 people) who were living in British Columbia. They were placed in internment camps until 1945, when the war ended. When they were released, they found their homes and businesses had been seized and sold by the government to pay for their detention. This history forms the backdrop to *Snow Falling on Cedars*, a 1994 mystery novel by David Guterson (Guterson 1994). In 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1939-2024) apologized on behalf of the Canadian government for the wrongs it committed against Japanese Canadians.

Two great social changes occurred in Canada in the 1960s, which helped provide a favorable ecology for Buddhism (Hori 2010; Harding 2010; Harding, Hori, and Souci 2010; Souci 2010). In 1967, Canada revised its immigration laws to be race-neutral, with points based on education, skills, and language. The second was the proliferation of new “oriental import” forms of spirituality during the “hippy” counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Victor Hori writes, “since then, Buddhism in many forms has grown exponentially among Westerners” (Hori, 2010, 4–5).

SGI in Canada: The Leadership

Since Soka Gakkai was known outside Japan as “Nichiren Shoshu,” at least in North America in the 1970s and 1980s, it is important to explain the relationship between the two movements. Soka Gakkai is a lay Nichiren Buddhist organization that was founded in Japan in 1930. It was associated with and supported the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood in the spirit of upholding and spreading the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282). Until 1991, Nichiren Shoshu priests conferred the *Gohonzon* on new members in Japan and around the world. The Soka Gakkai organizations outside Japan often used the name “Nichiren Shoshu” to denote their school of Buddhism.

The change of names for the constituent organizations came about in 1991, after the chief priest Nikken (1922–2019) of Nichiren Shoshu, as a consequence of a

conflict with the lay leaders, announced that all 12 million lay Soka Gakkai members around the world were hereby to be excommunicated. Soka Gakkai named this day “Spiritual Independence Day,” and its leaders report that after the separation it has grown and flourished more than ever (Email from Tony Meers, March 5, 2024).

After November 28, 1991, all the constituent organizations around the world renamed themselves as Soka Gakkai or Soka Gakkai International (SGI). In 2017, the Constitution of the Soka Gakkai was established, which defines the Soka Gakkai as a worldwide religious organization.

Daisaku Ikeda (1928–2023), the President of Soka Gakkai, visited Canada in 1960. It was his very first trip abroad (Metraux 1996, 43). Ikeda’s aim was to purchase building materials at his flight’s stopover in Toronto for the new main temple at Taiseki-ji in Japan, and to continue on to the U.S. to establish the first American chapter there. Unexpectedly, he was greeted at the airport by Akiko (Elizabeth) Izumi (1936–2021), a pregnant housewife, whose mother was a Soka Gakkai member in Japan. This turned out to be a fateful meeting. Akiko Izumi describes her meeting with President Ikeda in her memoir, as follows:

It was about six months after I married my husband, Hugh Izumi [1928–2024]... and was living in Toronto that I received a letter from my mother saying: “President Ikeda will be visiting Toronto... As there are no... members in Canada, please go and meet him at the airport.” Though it was my mother’s request, I wasn’t eager to comply. I was pregnant and not feeling very well, and I also didn’t want to be pressed into practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. Nevertheless, to please my mother, I went to the airport (on October 11, 1960). I saw a group of Japanese people who looked like they had just arrived. It was President Ikeda and his party. I went up to greet him saying: “My mother asked me to come and welcome you.” Smiling, President Ikeda said: “I see. Thank you so much for taking the trouble to come here. I’m Daisaku Ikeda. How kind of your mother to worry about us and ask you to come to the airport to welcome us!” During our conversation he didn’t press me to join the Soka Gakkai, but simply talked about the value to be found in practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism and suggested that if I was ever having trouble, I could try chanting daimoku... I was deeply moved by the thoughtfulness and sincerity he had shown me. I waved to him until his car was no longer in sight. This encounter with President Ikeda completely changed my previous, somewhat negative image of the Nichiren organization (Izumi 2010).

Akiko Elizabeth Izumi, SGI Chairperson, 1977–2000

Akiko Nakagawa (later Izumi) was born in Tokyo, Japan, one of nine children. She grew up training to be a ballet dancer, but after meeting Hugh Hiroo Izumi, a second-generation Japanese Canadian who was studying at a Japanese university,

her plans changed. They married on March 16, 1960, and moved permanently to Toronto, Canada. They had three children and six grandchildren.

In May 1962, Akiko, unaccustomed to life in a new country, felt ill. She decided to receive the *Gohonzon* and performed *gongyo*, following her mother's instructions in her letters. She began to attend the meetings in Buffalo, NY, traveling by Greyhound bus.

Izumi was the very first person to join Soka Gakkai in Canada, and she would become Canada's first Chairperson. She was one of the few women to be appointed to top SGI leadership in the world at the time. Over the years, she would build a solid core of SGI membership throughout Canada, and as SGI Canada's Executive Advisor, she traveled to Hawaii, Guam, Tokyo, USA, France, and the U.K., networking for the movement.

In June 1981, President Ikeda visited Toronto after an interval of 21 years. Akiko Izumi writes about her experience accompanying him and Mrs. Ikeda on a visit to Niagara Falls:

Most people who see the huge waterfalls, with their thunderous, earth-shaking roar and the mist of spray... cry out in awe. But President and Mrs. Ikeda simply stood there in silence, gazing at them intently. I'll never forget this scene and how, when President Ikeda asked her, "Are you glad we came?" Mrs. Ikeda nodded her approval... and warmly replied, "Yes." The mighty Niagara Falls flows unceasingly with a powerful intensity and a vibrant rainbow often appears above them. I couldn't help but feel that for President Ikeda, the waterfalls mirrored his own unceasing efforts to take on all manner of hardships and obstacles and create a rainbow of hope in the hearts of members around the world. In 1987, recalling his visit to Canada, he composed a long poem entitled "A Rainbow over Niagara." It was a great source of courage and inspiration for members throughout Canada (Izumi 2010).

The story of Akiko's relationship with her non-believer husband appears to be a cautionary tale among Canada's SGI community that warns practitioners not to pressure or try to convert their relatives, but to strive to be a shining example in the hope to inspire them ("Hiroo Hugh Izumi Obituary" 2024).

Hugh Hiroo Izumi

Hugh worked for the Japanese Trading Company Marubeni that had opened an office in Toronto. His wife was responsible for the *Kōsen-rufu* movement in the Toronto area, so many visitors came to their home for meetings. Hugh did not attend the meetings, but he would chat amiably with the members afterwards, and he

frequently drove his wife to these meetings, waiting patiently in the car to drive her home (Metraux 1996, 51).

Four years after her first meeting with President Ikeda, Akiko Izumi traveled to Tokyo and met with him again, and Ikeda gave her advice about her husband, who had shown no interest in joining her Buddhist practice. Ikeda advised her not to pressure him: “Start by being an excellent wife and mother. It is your example that will enable your husband to understand and appreciate the Daishonin’s Buddhism” (“Akiko Izumi Obituary” 2021).

Hugh did eventually joined SGI, in April 1980, eighteen years after his wife’s conversion, following the deaths of his two sisters and mother. Writing his memoirs for a SGI newsletter, on the anniversary of the 7 December 1951 attack on Pearl Harbour, Hugh Izumi stated:

I feel as though I have two homelands. Japanese Canadians were forced into internment camps during the war, and when it ended found their homes and belongings had been confiscated and their only choice was to move to eastern Canada or return to Japan (Metraux 1996, 52).

Hugh’s family chose the second option but found chaos and poverty when they arrived in Japan. Hugh wrote:

When war is declared, enemy nations are compelled to hate and destroy each other. Having personally experienced this suffering, my desire for lasting peace may be much deeper (Metraux 1996, 52).

The Izumi family’s war experience mirrors Canada’s shameful history regarding the Japanese in Canada.

Tony Meers, General Director, 2000–2022

I interviewed Tony Meers via Zoom on February 7, 2024. His first contact with SGI was in 1972 at the age of 18, when two Japanese women missionaries approached him on the Yonge Street in Toronto and invited him to a meeting. He was on his way to the hospital to visit a sick friend, but he took down the address and went later. He described his conversion experience as follows:

After attending a few times, I tried practicing at home and found it was like meditating with your eyes open. I got this feeling of meditating, but with an added sense of being connected to the world. I decided to practice, no one pressured me. When I began to work as a volunteer, I was inexperienced and working with people older than me, but what struck me was an equality, a respect for people of all ages, backgrounds, some educated,

others not much, it didn't matter. I had come across elite attitudes, intellectualism in some of the readings on Buddhism, but in SGI everyone was down-to-earth and yet profound. The values were human values, to be able to transform one's own inner state to activate an inner reservoir of positive energy, the life force of the universe itself. This philosophy in practice elevates one's spiritual state and at the same time expands one's ability to care for others. There was a sustainability in our efforts of giving and receiving (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

Tony was a volunteer for SGI for decades, working closely with Akiko Izumi. In 1985, he served as National Youth Leader. In 1998, he retired from his profession as a commercial artist and became a full-time staff member, paid as an administrator. He worked with Akiko as Vice Chairperson. She stepped down as Chairperson in 2000 and Tony Meers became the General Director of SGI for the next 22 years. She worked with him as the Executive Advisory until she passed away at the age of 85 in 2021 (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

Glenn Turner, General Director, 2022 to 2024

In my interview with Glenn Turner, he described a classic conversion experience where he initially joined because of the social life, and then later discovered the religious dimensions of his involvement (Cox 1977). He gives a succinct account of his conversion in the SGI Canada newsletter:

As a young man, I had no clue where I was going. I had dropped out of university twice... In 1983, I was working for a moving company in Ottawa. A colleague at work had been trying to introduce me to Buddhism for a year, but I was not interested. Finally, he invited me to a party one weekend. What he didn't tell me was that we had to go to a Buddhist meeting first, in order to get to the party. It was a surprise to me, but I liked the sound of the chanting, and the people were all very nice... I began to attend district meetings regularly in the following weeks. I was learning about SGI and Buddhist philosophy—and I liked what I heard—but I still wasn't practicing on my own. After a few weeks, a district leader said to me, "Glenn, you can come to as many meetings as you like, but if you don't try practicing for yourself, you'll never really understand." That made a lot of sense, and so I started to chant and do *gongyo* at home, on my own. The difference was remarkable. Almost at once I realized that I had the power to change my life, and that it was possible for me to become absolutely happy—something I had never even thought was important before (Turner 2020).

Cathy Watt, Long-term SGI Practitioner

Cathy Watt happens to be an old friend of mine. We have sung in the same Balkan Choir, Dragana Montreal, for twenty years. I knew she was a Buddhist because she occasionally invited me to meetings at her house, but I didn't realize until recently that she was an SGI member. Cathy described how she joined SGI in 1974, through a classic encounter with street missionaries like the Hare Krishna or the Children of God, a practice that was common in North America during the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. The Japanese word for this practice is *Shakubuku* ("Break and subdue"), and in contemporary usage the term often refers to the old system of proselytization and conversion of new adherents in Nichiren Buddhism and Soka Gakkai.

In 1974 on a beautiful day in May, two women, Akiko Masida and Muriel Gordon crossed McKay Street to ask me if I'd like to discover my Buddha nature. They invited me to my first Buddhist meeting. I loved the sound of the chanting, which was like singing in rhythm with the universe.

Cathy explained how she lived *la vie d'artiste* at the time, and had been singing in the Broadway musical, *Hair* and touring with the rock group April Wine, singing backup vocals and playing piano. During her roller coaster lifestyle as a rock musician, Cathy found, "the profound concepts in Buddhism gave my life a stronger foundation, helping me stay grounded in reality" ("Cathy Watt: A Life of Treasures" 2016).

SGI Membership in Canada

By the late 1960s, there were only a few NSA members scattered across Canada. They tended to be linked vertically with the chapters in U.S. cities south of the Canadian border. Not until 1976 were there enough members to create an independent Canadian branch of SGI, which was officially established in June 1976 (Shiu 2010, 91). The next challenge was to unite the western and eastern chapters. Izumi noted that there was very little communication between the fledgling chapters of the far-flung regions in eastern and western Canada in the 1970s. Today Canada has nine SGI centers: Toronto, Markham, Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec City, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary.

Metraux points out that, although Buddhist movements began in North America as Asian-dominated groups, they quickly attracted non-Asian members and by the time of his writing, SGI was already dominated by non-Asians (Metraux 1996, 3).

Glenn Turner confirmed in our interview that in the early years, SGI's membership was composed mainly of Japanese women, most of them married to Canadian servicemen who were in occupied Japan after the war (Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). It was also Japanese women who were the early leaders in SGI Canada. Besides Akiko Izumi in Toronto, Hiroko Wanner in Calgary was working since 1964 with other Japanese women to build a movement.

Metraux noted in 1996 that SGI Canada had “around 50% of white Canadians,” but that “immigrants play a major role,” and that Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver had a “huge immigrant population.” As far as the Quebec Separatism/Sovereignty issue is concerned, Glenn Turner said SGI recognizes and supports Quebec's distinct culture (Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). Out of 15 SGI Canada districts in Quebec in the late 1990s there were 9 that were French-speaking (Metraux 1996, 1997).

President Ikeda's visit in 1981 undoubtedly brought together Canada's scattered divisions, when 600 members attended the national meeting in Toronto. Further unifying events were the completion of the 1985 SGI Canada Culture Centre in Toronto, and the 1990 30th anniversary General Meeting. In 1993, President Ikeda made his third visit to Canada. Glenn Turner reports there are around 10,000 members in Canada today (2024: Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). There are around 300,000 in the U.S.

Typologies of Buddhism in the West

If one attempts to fit Canada's SGI membership into Jan Nattier's “Asian/Ethnic or Western Convert” typology (Nattier 1998), it does not fit neatly because SGI originated in Japan but is widely recognized to be the only Buddhist organization in the West to attract members from a range of economic and racial groups. Victor Hori examines a typology of three types of Buddhists in North America:

1. Elite Buddhists with an artistic, intellectual, or upper-class background that allows them to “import” Buddhism to the West through writing projects or within their elite social circles.

2. Evangelical Buddhists who “export” Buddhism through proselytization projects.

3. Ethnic Buddhists who immigrate to the West, bringing in Buddhism as part of their cultural baggage (Hori 2010, 17).

SGI Canada’s Buddhists most closely fit the second type of “Evangelical Buddhists”—except that their missionary methods no longer conform to earlier methods. From *shakubuku* proselytization they went to invite friends and colleagues to attend *Kōsen-rufu* meetings in members’ homes. Metraux comments, “the Canadian chapter’s modest growth reflects a ‘very Canadian attitude.’” He quotes a statement by Tony Meers (SGI’s second General Director) to prove his point:

We move slowly in a deliberate manner, making sure that each new member is committed to Buddhism and the movement and is satisfied with its practice. It is better to have a firm base than a myriad of dissatisfied and disaffected followers (Metraux 1996, 9).

In the 1960s and 1970s, SGI Canada appeared to fit the “Ethnic Buddhists” type, except that its Japanese women missionaries were determined to convert non-Asian Canadians, and succeeded very well until the Japanese Canadians were outnumbered.

Certainly, SGI Canada does not fit the “Elite Buddhists” category, given its democratic quality and openness to first generation immigrants. Tony Meers observed this quality when he first attended SGI meetings:

What struck me was an equality, a respect for people of all ages, backgrounds, some educated, others not much, it didn’t matter. I had come across elite attitudes, intellectual snobbism in some of the readings on Buddhism, but in SGI everyone was down-to-earth and yet profound (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

The Canadian Versus the American SGI Movement

One of our first tasks in studying Canada’s SGI movement is to try to extricate it from the much larger, more dynamic, American SGI movement with which it was initially intertwined. There are some important differences, cultural and historical.

First, the SGI movement in Canada is significantly smaller than in the U.S. In 1996 there were “under 5,000 members” in Canada (Metraux 1996, 79). Jane Hurst wrote, “as of 2016 Soka Gakkai International claims... over 300,000 members in the U.S” (Hurst 2018).

One other difference is that SGI-Canada is more neutral, politically speaking. It has always had a less patriotic orientation than SGI-USA. Metraux quotes a Canadian who attended the SGI Bicentennial celebration in New York City in 1976 during the Gerald Ford (1913–2006) administration:

What the American Soka Gakkai is doing was fine for Americans, but Canadians are culturally different. For example, during the Bicentennial, we found ourselves in an auditorium where the speakers were lauding the American Revolution against the British. It was only then that we from Canada realized we were the redcoats! (Metraux 2010, 53).

Another Canadian member witnessed SGI members at a New York meeting saluting the American flag. “I can’t imagine us paying attention to the Canadian flag at our meetings!” she observed. In 1989, Nichiren Shoshu of America was criticized by a journalist as “cloaking itself in super-patriotism” (Golden 1989).

SGI Canada seems more “laid back” than its U.S. counterpart. Metraux quotes an unnamed SGI leader saying, “Canadians are very reasonable people who discuss their differences in a calm, collected manner. Canada is a very civil society and so is SGI Canada” (Metraux 1996, 53).

Metraux argues that SGI caught on in Canada because of its concept of community; that it presents a haven of peace in the midst of a rootless population of immigrants, and fast-paced Canadians constantly on the move in their jobs and locations. Of course, the same argument could be applied to “rootless populations” and “fast-paced” lifestyles in other countries where SGI has flourished. It might also explain the appeal of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or China’s House Churches whose members also meet at each other’s homes.

How to Categorize SGI as a New Religious Movement?

In *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, Roy Wallis (1945–1990) offers a tripartite typology of new religious movements (NRMs): the “world-rejecting,” “world-affirming,” and “world-accommodating” types (Wallis 1984). *World-rejecting NRMs* are hostile toward society and tend to view the secular world

as inherently evil or corrupt. They tend to be sectarian in their social organization and are often communal. They view their charismatic leader as a messiah or a divine figure, and they tend to have millenarian beliefs and evangelistic goals. *World-affirming NRMs* embrace secular society and its materialistic goals. Their aim is to help individuals achieve success within mainstream society by tapping into their hidden spiritual powers. They offer training in magical techniques that help individuals to achieve their goals. Their leaders are perceived as wise teachers or shamans. *World-accommodating NRMs* offer their members spiritual paths to enlightenment. They exhibit a neutral orientation towards society and generally make few demands on their members. They offer instruction and spaces for meditation and spiritual growth. Their leaders are examples of ordinary men or women; “gurus” or “masters” who have achieved spiritual advancement, even enlightenment, through following a *sadhana* or spiritual path and can show others the way.

Within the framework of Wallis’ typology, I would argue that SGI fits the “world-accommodating” type of NRM, with some of the characteristics of the “world-affirming” type. Some SGI members report using chanting as a magical technique that can cure illness or help get their son into medical school. (For example, I once met a taxi driver who told me that whenever he had trouble finding a parking space, he would chant the *Daimoku, Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*—and it always worked).

As mentioned earlier, Soka Gakkai (which means “Value Creation Society”) originated as a lay movement closely affiliated with the Buddhist school of Nichiren Shoshu in Japan. Later it developed an international SGI, which defines itself as an NGO concerned with world peace, humanitarian relief, education, human rights, cultural exchanges, and ecumenical dialogue.

Although Nichiren Shoshu was criticized by journalists in the past for its aggressive proselytization and close political affiliations, SGI today maintains a neutral stance towards society and politics. As Glenn Turner noted, “We are a charity, a non-profit organization” (Interview with Glenn Turner, January 29, 2024). While SGI has worked with the United Nations on peace projects and exhibitions on the nuclear threat, it does not support political parties or specific political agendas. When asked how SGI leadership functioned, Tony Meers explained the purpose of leadership, from beginning to end, is to help each person

achieve the life state of absolute happiness, called Buddhahood (Interview with Tony Meers, February 7, 2024).

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