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Religion and Politics in Japan:
The Case of the Soka Gakkai

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RELIGION AND POLITICS IN JAPAN:
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Japan has never known the domination of any single religio-philosophical tradition. Historically, different religions have flourished side by side in Japanese society. In addition, the tendency to form new sects appears to be characteristic of Japan's religious enterprise, both past and present. Despite extensive governmental pressures, new sects continued to proliferate in post-Meiji Japan. Those sects which were not branches of established, recognized religions, existed precariously indeed before 1945, and were often harassed by the police if their policies were believed to be in opposition to State Shinto and then-acknowledged standards of patriotism.

Today, religious freedom, guaranteed by Japan's post-1945 Constitution, has allowed new religious groups to emerge and has also made it possible for pre-war schismatic bodies, numbering more than one hundred, to become independent from their parent organizations.¹ According to the latest available statistics in the 1962 Religious Year Book (*Shūkyō Nenkan*) of the Ministry of Education, there are currently in Japan some 400 denominations, operating more or less on a national level; there are some 229,000 local organizations, i.e., shrines, temples, and churches, which have nearly 352,000 religious workers, ordained or unordained, promoting the different faiths. Religious organizations in Japan report the number of their adherents as approximately 140 million, and the total may even be as large as 150 million, out of a total population of less than 95 million. Obviously, a very large number of Japanese are listed as adherents of two or more religious bodies, which may often be of very different traditions such as Buddhism and Shinto, or perhaps even Christianity.

This official tabulation does not include such groups as the "Practical Morality and Pureness of Heart Association" (*Jissen Rinri Koseikai*), whose believers, by rising daily at 4:15 A.M., attempt to eliminate the "three wastes"—things, time, and mind—in order to live a "new life."

*This paper, in a somewhat shorter version, was read to the 61 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, 1962.

¹ *Shūkyō Nenkan*, Ministry of Education, Tokyo, 1962, pp. 366-371, 452-487. The Union of New Religious Organizations, which is affiliated with the Religious League of Japan, is the largest formal organization of the New Religions. It consists of eighty constituent religious bodies, some of which have already been in existence for over fifty years, while others arose as recently as ten years ago. The total number of adherents represented in the Union is estimated at six million.

While the term "New Religions" should technically be applied to those bodies having arisen in the past thirty years or so, and particularly in the post-World War II period, not all the one hundred and twenty-six or more, now officially referred to as "New Religions," belong to this category. The term in Japan is also used to denote splinter sects of both traditional Shinto and Buddhism.

The religious freedom guaranteed by the new Constitution has enabled even the older of the New Religions to develop new techniques of growth, and to apply themselves to the extensive social changes of post-war Japan. Some of these new sects are at times referred to in Japan as "crisis religions" since they attempt to meet an immediate socio-cultural need.

During the last decades of the Tokugawa period, the traditional Japanese religions encountered great socio-economic difficulties, and economic circumstances made the lot of the Japanese peasant particularly hard. Since the authoritarianism of Tokugawa rule gave little hope or redress, such New Religions as *Tenrikyō* (The Religion of Heavenly Wisdom, 1838) and *Konkokyō* (The Religion of Golden Light, 1859) enjoyed immediate success. These New Religions claimed to give a revelatory word, as well as the possibility of a new corporateness and a way of escape from the *nayami* (troubles) of daily life. Personal faith and dependence on doctrine have been emphasized in many of the New Religions, and faith healing is a common feature of their operations.

Among the numerous religious organizations that have come to general attention since World War II, none is probably more in the limelight in present-day Japan than the *Sōka Gakkai* with an estimated membership of some 3.5 million believers in eleven chapters covering all Japan, some 8000 *Sōka Gakkai* families in Okinawa, and several hundred in the United States and South America.

Sōka Gakkai first entered the Japanese political arena in 1956. Its political aspirations, however, came to public attention in the local elections of March 1959 and in the elections for the House of Councillors in May of the same year. In Tokyo, *Sōka Gakkai's* 76 candidates for the 23 ward assemblies were elected, while only 26 of its 287 candidates in other municipal elections failed. The group's candidates for prefectural assemblies were somewhat less successful, but in the elections for the Upper House, all six candidates were elected—five at large and one (a woman) in Tokyo.²

In January 1962, *Sōka Gakkai* formed a special organization called the *Kōmei Seiji Renmei* (League for Just and Fair Politics) to conduct its political campaigns. In July 1962, the group won all nine seats it contested in the House of Councillors elections. This gave the *Sōka Gakkai* a total of fifteen seats in the Upper House, making it the third largest

² Half of the membership of the House of Councillors is renewed every three years. The Election Law provides that 150 out of 250 members shall be elected in local constituencies and the remaining 100 by the country at large. Each voter casts two votes: one for a local and another for a national candidate.

political group after the conservative Liberal-Democrats and the Socialists. *Sōka Gakkai* thereby gained the right to organize its Diet representation as an opposition party, and it did just that. It was announced shortly thereafter that henceforth its parliamentary faction would be known as the *Kōmei-kai* (The Fair and Bright Association).

The group's election promises included abolition of the income tax on wage and salary income, doubling of welfare payments, and indemnity payments by the state for "private misfortunes." In addition, the *Kōmei-kai* promised fair elections, a cleaning-up of politics, and a "truly independent" House of Councillors. This last item referred to the efforts that had been made by some smaller political groupings to remove the Upper House from the sphere of party politics. In a policy statement adopted at *Kōmei-kai's* first official caucus on July 20, 1962, the group pledged efforts to secure the happiness and prosperity of Japan and to work untiringly for world peace. This same statement also expressed opposition to increases in public utility charges and advocated the following measures: revisions in the processes of fixing the national rice price, early ratification of International Labor Convention Article No. 87; and a re-examination of Japan's relations with Korea.

Sōka Gakkai's apparent success in advocating the above policies and its proved vote-getting ability has greatly strengthened its bargaining position with all other parties. On close votes, the fifteen votes it controls could prove crucial. Japanese politicians know this, but none of them are as yet quite sure what *Sōka Gakkai* and its crusading leaders intend to do with the power they control. The Left and Center parties fear that *Sōka Gakkai's* evangelical zeal and its assertion that it is the only true religion for Japan will turn it toward far Right nationalism. The ruling Liberal-Democrats, on the other hand, have found the group difficult to pin down politically, and are uneasy indeed about its ability to command support among the sick, the poor, the young, the rootless and restless of Japan.

In this context *Sōka Gakkai's* social creed gains some significance. Present leaders of the group in their public addresses often refer to *Sōka Gakkai's* "neo-socialism." They claim that the "old" socialism represented by the Socialist Party (*Shakai tō*) failed to pay sufficient attention to Man in its attempt to reform the social structure. They also believe, however, that socialism's or dialectical materialism's "good points" should be utilized in reforms destined to awaken the people of Japan to life through religion. *Sōka Gakkai* leaders, when questioned, claim to be socialists. However, their socialism does not include concrete economic or political programs. Rather, they intend to "further the happiness of the people, i.e., the suffering of the downtrodden must be eliminated." These leaders feel that Japanese society in particular, and Society in general, stand in need of renovation, and that such a renewal can only come from religion. *Sōka Gakkai* entered into the political arena, these leaders claim, because present-day Japanese politics are corrupt, and neither the Liberal-Demo-

crats nor the Socialists care about the people's happiness but simply pursue their own exclusive interests.

While the *Sōka Gakkai* is officially classified as a New Religion (and not as a political party), it claims to be neither a "new" nor even a separate religion, but a continuation of the "true Buddhism" preached by Nichiren in the 13th century. *Sōka Gakkai* states that its organization consists of believers in Nichiren (*Shōshū*) Buddhism. This claim, however, is subject to some dispute.

Nichiren's (1222-1282) emphasis on bringing the faith directly to merchants and peasants, at a time when Buddhism in Japan was largely a religion of the aristocracy, is a tradition sustained by *Sōka Gakkai*. Nichiren also insisted that his was the only true interpretation of Buddhism and the one real Japanese national religion. These traits constitute probably the closest parallel between formal Nichiren (*Shōshū*) Buddhism and *Sōka Gakkai*, which, after all, possesses its own organization, its own assembly halls, and its own leadership.³

The specific origins of *Sōka Gakkai* are to be found in the activities of Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1871-1944), who in 1937 established a "Value Creation Education Institute" (*Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai*) and began propagating his ideas as a true interpretation of Nichiren's teachings.⁴ By 1943, when the group had acquired a sizable number of adherents and had resisted governmental control, the Japanese authorities took steps to ban its activities, jailing Makiguchi and his closest associate, Toda Jōsei.

Makiguchi died in prison in 1944. Toda was released in 1945 and immediately undertook once again to propagate *Sōka Gakkai* teachings by appealing to the masses to awaken spiritually from the effects of the defeat and to follow the teachings of Nichiren, as interpreted by Makiguchi and himself. He reorganized the membership in 1946, and in 1951, when he was officially appointed as the second president, Toda inaugurated a program of winning souls by forced conversion—*shaku buku*—a rather un-Buddhist-like technique of forcing an individual to make a "decision for Nichiren."

In defense of their forced conversion policy, *Sōka Gakkai* leaders quote Nichiren's argument that with "ignorant" men tolerant moral persuasion could be used, but that with "malicious" men it was necessary to use intolerant methods. Toda incorporated *shaku buku* techniques into *Sōka*

³ The smallest unit in this organization, the *kumi* (group), is composed of ten households. Five to ten *kumi* form a *han* (section); five to ten *han* comprise a *chiku* (district); and five to ten *chiku* constitute a *shibu* (branch), which generally includes from 5,000 to 10,000 families. There are two *honbu* (headquarters), one in Kamata and one in Fukagawa, both working-class districts in Tokyo. The largest administrative unit is called *sō-shibu* (general branch). *Sōka Gakkai's* official headquarters is the Daiseki-ji (Nichiren) temple at Fujinomiya in Shizuoka Prefecture. The central administrative offices are located in Shinanomachi, Tokyo.

⁴ The *Sōka Gakkai's* officials were called professors, associate professors, and lecturers, since Makiguchi in these early days recruited many of his followers from among his schoolteacher colleagues.

Gakkai activities as an "active" way to bring the "true faith" to all in the shortest possible time. To this end, in 1951 he organized the *Sōka Gakkai* membership into a military system, trained them in its refined *shaku buku* pressure techniques, and sent them into Japanese society with instructions to compel the conversion of both the willing and the "ignorant" unwilling. These "troops," mostly young men and women, concentrate on an individual, force him to submit, or persuade him until he succumbs.⁵ Once committed, the individual must destroy the traditional home altar (*butsudan*) and substitute one approved by *Sōka Gakkai*. At the same time, the new convert is incorporated into a local group which generally prevents any relapses into former religious activities.

The term *shaku buku* literally means to "destroy and conquer" or to "break down and flatten." This method, now reaching even the wives of American Service personnel in hitherto sacred "little Americas" in Japan, is much more than zealous campaigning or an expression of extreme discipline. Doubtless the term originally occurred in traditional Buddhist scriptures such as the *Shoman-gyō*, but in these instances it was accompanied by the parallel term *shōju*, which literally means acceptance. *Shaku buku* clearly designates a process of leading to forced conversion, whereas *shōju* represents the tolerant, traditional Buddhist approach of moral persuasion. Obviously, *shaku buku* has been successful, since *Sōka Gakkai* membership in 1953 consisted of some 53,000 households or roughly 200,000 individuals, and by 1962 it amounted to some 3.5 million individuals.

Ikeda Daisaku, who became the third president of *Sōka Gakkai* after Toda's death in 1958, has stated that the organization will "grow and grow" since *Sōka Gakkai* is a "faith founded on truth, on faith itself, and not the individual. Emphasis is placed on the depth of faith of each individual believer and not on the traditional Japanese teacher-pupil, master-disciple relationship, or even a horizontal relationship between members. The members are controlled by one standard, the same faith. The solidarity of the group is maintained and strengthened by making depth of faith central. As long as there is genuine faith, *Sōka Gakkai* will live forever."⁶

When the present writer questioned members of the National Headquarters about the *Sōka Gakkai* method of counting households rather than individuals, he was told that in "some" cases the wife is a believer whereas the husband is opposed to *Sōka Gakkai*. The group counts all members of a household as believers, however, even though only one member is a "real" believer, "since he or she will surely eventually convert the others as well." When questioned further whether this meant that a new believer was always responsible for converting the rest of the family, the following rather illuminating account was given: "It is not an obliga-

⁵ In 1961 alone, the group claims to have added some 300,000 young men and women to its ranks, bringing the total of adherents between the ages of 12 and 30 to approximately 750,000.

⁶ Personal communication to the writer.

tion or responsibility in the strict sense of the term. The followers come to know that others are ignorant of the true religion and it follows naturally that they will want to share their newly-won happiness, their faith, with those who are ignorant. So efforts to convert develop naturally."

Becoming a member of *Sōka Gakkai* is relatively easy. A convert who has "destroyed his idols" and "renounced his old gods," will be taken to the nearest Nichiren (*Shōshu*) temple, where he will participate in a twenty-five minute ritual ceremony. Each new member is then entrusted with a *gohonzon*⁷ (a piece of paper with some words of the Lotus sutra), which he enshrines in the family altar at home. A morning and evening recitation of part of the Lotus sutra is required as a formalized attestation of faith.⁸ By the power of the *gohonzon*, a *Sōka Gakkai* member not only is said to be able to escape from poverty, but "a man troubled with domestic discord will find his home serene and happy; a man suffering from disease will completely recover his health and will be able to resume his former job, a mother worried over her delinquent son will see him reform, and a husband plagued with a neurotic wife can see her return to normalcy."⁹

Sōka Gakkai meetings in general bear a distinct resemblance to revival meetings. Members are encouraged to communicate their personal experiences, particularly those "divine favors" (*go-riyaku*) gained through faith and observance of the correct religious practices. Those gatherings, as well as the closely-knit *Sōka Gakkai* organization, impart to the participant a deep sense of belonging—to a spiritual elite of the one and only faith—and offer, particularly in Japan's ever-growing urban areas, an escape from the loneliness and isolation of mass society. Participation in human drama and personal contact with people carrying the same or even a greater burden, in an increasingly more complex social organization, result often in a spiritual experience with a religious significance.

A still further dimension of *Sōka Gakkai* is its internationalism. Nichiren's self-styled mission is said to have been to save the whole world by the attainment of each individual's happiness. Thus each *Sōka Gakkai* member is charged to make all Japanese and others realize the "true" Buddhism as soon as possible. As the Buddhism of Sakyamuni found its way to Japan from India by way of China, *Sōka Gakkai* claims its Buddhism conversely will return from Japan to India by way of China.

In this context it should be noted that *Sōka Gakkai* in the past 15 months has carried out three overseas campaigns—in the United States, Southeast Asia, and Western Europe. Campaign plans for Taipei, Manila, and

⁷ Literally *go* is an honorific prefix, *hon* means foundation and *zon* may be translated as esteem. Adherents are told that the *gohonzon*, in the tradition of Nichiren, is the fundamental object of worship for the believer.

⁸ Following the established liturgy of Nichiren *Shōshu*, each convert should conduct the *goza* and *sanza*, i.e., read the Lotus sutra five times in the morning and three times in the evening. This is, however, not always done. Furthermore, each believer should recite as many *Daimoku* (*Nam-myōho-enge-kyō*) as possible.

⁹ *The Declaration of the Sōka Gakkai*, Tokyo, 1960, p. 15.

Hong Kong are said to be in the making, and according to some rumors the group will even run its candidates in the Okinawan elections.

A *Sōka Gakkai* official told the writer: "Without a doubt, the Buddhism of Nichiren (*Daishonin*) will spread all over the East in the near future, and finally throughout the whole world. World peace as well as the welfare of an individual nation can be achieved only when the true religion is made the basic thought. This is the spirit of *kōsen-rufu* (propagation of Nichiren's teachings), and the *Sōka Gakkai* is positively striving to achieve this purpose."

Sōka Gakkai thus adds another facet to its doctrine that has an appeal to the Japanese. But perhaps of even greater significance is the manner in which *Sōka Gakkai*, as is the case with most of the other New Religions in Japan, restores the solidarity of the group for those Japanese who have had to witness the progressive disintegration of the traditional family system. The Japanese, long accustomed to communal patterns, have really never had to live before as personalities in a Western sense. In the fellowship of the New Religion, the lonely individual finds new warmth and the meaning of community at a deeper level, as contrasted, for example, with Western Christianity which continues to emphasize the individual. The *Sōka Gakkai* convert is not simply left in a position of dependence, but he has a part to play, he is assigned a task. There is the "conquering" by *shaku buku*, there is the voluntary work (*hinokishin*) of *Tenrikyō*, the social work of *Reiyukai*, and so on. One by one, the convert is led to believe that his problems seem to be settled and his inner tensions resolved. He is provided with a faith to persevere, and, what is more important, his new activist approach to religion means that he has less time for morbid introspection. The prosperous Japanese businessman now can even take his exercise on the *Sōka Gakkai* golf course and feel that he is realizing to the fullest the teachings of Nichiren.

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