

The Background and Methodology of Sōka Gakkai Propagation: An Overview and Brief Rhetorical Analysis

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"A Postwar Phenomenon—Strange Magnet of the Sōka Gakkai,"¹ "Sōka Gakkai: Communist Envy,"² "Sōka Gakkai Emerges as a Powerful Force,"³—these and similar headlines have become quite commonplace in the newspapers of postwar Japan. Among the "newly risen religions" (*shinkō shūkyō*) that have sprung up from the soil of abject defeat and traumatic shock in Japan, none has achieved the auspicious success of the Sōka Gakkai. Numerically it has grown from a postwar remnant of three thousand prewar members⁴ to approximately thirteen million believers in 1965.⁵ Socially it has made its presence felt in the labor movement, educational circles, and the business world as well as in the crowded city apartment and thatch-roofed village home. Politically it has astounded the nation by its ability to muster votes for candidates of its own choosing. Religiously it has occasioned both the envy and antipathy of other religious movements by its virility and success on the one hand, and its aggressiveness and intolerance on the other.

Sōka Gakkai literally means "Value-Creation Society." The Society is a lay auxiliary of Nichiren Shōshū (the Orthodox sect of Nichiren Buddhism). It is a hybrid which has developed from two distinct strains—the exclusivistic religion of Nichiren and the

pragmatic philosophy of Tsunesaburō Makiguchi and his protégé, Jōsei Toda.

THE RELIGIOUS STRAIN

As is well known, Nichiren was profoundly disturbed by the proliferation of sects and teachings in Buddhism and the apparent inadequacy of any to make an impact on the governing families of his day. His conclusion was that though the truth is to be found in Tendai Buddhism, the incorporation of Amidism into that school had resulted in corruption and decay. Instead of practicing *nembutsu* (invoking the name of Amida) true faith involved calling on the Buddha of the Lotus Sutra with the words "*Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō*" (Homage to the wonderful Law of the Lotus Sutra).

Nichiren became a fearless opponent of the *nembutsu* and a vigorous preacher of orthodox truth as he saw it. Forced to leave the Tendai Sect in 1253, he became a kind of *persona non grata*; but though he suffered banishment, malignment, and sentence of death, he never ceased to threaten and admonish religious and political leaders and appeal to the common people. The wrath to which Nichiren was never a stranger was occasioned by his exclusivism, vituperation, and the wholesale condemnation of other sects and teachings. His opinion of them is summed up in the oft-quoted words: "The *Nembutsu* is hell; the Zen are devils; Shingon is national ruin; and the Risshū are traitors to the country."

Concerning him Masaharu Anesaki wrote,

If Japan ever produced a prophet or a religious man of prophetic zeal, Nichiren was the man. He stands almost a unique figure in the history of Buddhism, not alone because of his persistence through hardship and persecution, but for his unshaken conviction that he himself was the messenger of Buddha, and his confidence in the future of religion and country. Not only one of the most learned men of his time, but most earnest in his prophetic aspirations, he was a strong man, of combative temperament, an eloquent speaker, a powerful writer, and a man of tender heart. He was born in 1222, the son of a fisherman, and died in 1282, a saint and a prophet.⁶

In addition to passionate iconoclasm, the Nichiren legacy includes numerous writings and the all-important *Houzon*, or object of

worship, which the Nichiren Shōshū claims to have in its possession and keeps at Taisekiji, its head temple located at the foot of Mount Fuji.⁷

THE PHILOSOPHICAL STRAIN

The second strain discoverable in the Sōka Gakkai is a philosophical one. Tsunesaburō Makiguchi and his younger disciple, Jōsei Toda, were Tokyo schoolteachers who developed an extremely utilitarian philosophy of education. At the heart of their pedagogy was the contention that happiness is the goal of education and that educators are to give guidance in the ways to achieve "benefit" (*ri*), good, and beauty for the individual and society. Makiguchi claimed to have exposed for the first time the contradiction which exists in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The main Kantian categories are, of course, truth, good, and beauty. Indeed, human thought, learning, and education have trifurcated human values in this manner from time immemorial until the present day. But, according to Makiguchi, this is a misconceived division which is characterized by both inconsistency and a glaring omission.

Good and beauty are values which immediately affect man's happiness. Truth, on the other hand, is not a value and is not directly related to happiness. Truth is objective and unchanging. Values are subjective and relative. Truth simply is, while values are created. Makiguchi proposed that truth be supplanted by *ri* (benefit, advantage, gain, profit). This value is created by scientifically controlling the relationship between the external world and the life of the individual (considered in its entirety) and community, and affecting that relationship in a manner that will bring "benefit" to both.

THE FLOWERING OF THE SOCIETY IN JAPAN

Both Makiguchi and Toda were converted to Nichiren Shōshū in 1928. The organization which they founded some nine years later in order to better promote their pragmatic pedagogy became increasingly concerned with religion. In fact, the religious value was made central to the whole system by virtue of the fact that none of the other three values is realizable if "life power" (*seimeiryoku*) is

weak. "Life power" comes through faith in the true religion which is Nichiren Shōshū. Faithful worship of the *Honzon* is at once the *segis* and the *sine qua non* of the happy life. In this way a synthesis was achieved between Makiguchi's relativistic, utilitarian value theory and the authoritarian, absolutist faith of Nichiren Shōshū.

Faithful to the Nichiren tradition, Makiguchi, Toda, and twenty-one other leaders of the Society withstood the Shinto militarists and were arrested on charges of lese majesty in 1943. Makiguchi succumbed to the rigors of life in Sugamo Prison in 1944, but during Toda's two-year confinement he is said to have chanted the Sacred Title (*Daimoku*) over two million times. As a consequence he reached enlightenment (*jōbutsu*) and firmly resolved to propagate the teachings of the Society throughout the world.

The success of Jōsei Toda and his associates was not immediate, however. Until 1951 the Sōka Gakkai made but very modest gains in its reconstruction. It stirred the surface, as did numerous other ideologies, but it failed to touch the deepest spirit of the masses which had responded so enthusiastically to the intransigent summons of Shinto imperialism. With the introduction of the Great *Shakubuku* Advance (*Shakubuku Daikōshin*) by Toda in 1951 the situation changed, and changed radically. Adherents were numbered in the thousands, then in tens of thousands, then in hundreds of thousands, and finally in millions. Before the end of the decade Toda himself had passed off the scene, and young, energetic Daisaku Ikeda had taken over the reins of leadership. But the Sōka Gakkai continued to grow. Currently it has overseas branches in North and South America and Europe as well as in other countries of the Orient. In addition, it has become a major political force in Japan through its political arm, called the Kōmeitō (Clean Government party).

THE SHAKUBUKU APPROACH TO PROPAGATION

The word "*shakubuku*" refers to an extremely aggressive means of propagating the Nichiren Shōshū Sōka Gakkai faith and involves making new converts by vehemently attacking competing beliefs, insisting on Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism as the true faith, and exerting every possible pressure to secure the individual's worship of the

Honzon of Taiseikiji. The word is a compound of two Chinese characters which mean "to bend" or "to break down" and "to make prostrate" or "to make submissive" the opposition.⁶ It is usually translated as "forced conversion" and this certainly does no violence to the term, because the implication is that submission may be secured by means of physical force. I prefer the translation "coercive propagation" for two reasons. In the first place, "coercive" is as suggestive of ideological browbeating as it is of physical violence. Though *shakubuku* allows for physical force, it also applies when the situation does not demand or allow the use of force. Secondly, "propagation" seems to be a better choice of words than "conversion" because it relates the word *shakubuku* more directly to the approach or method of propagation and by so doing does not focus exclusively on the object of the process.

The term "*shakubuku*" is often contrasted with "*shōju*," which has reference to gaining acceptance of the doctrine by mild, persuasive methods so that the individual receives the new faith willingly and apart from pressure of any sort. However, in the present age (called *mappō*, or "the age of the deterioration of the Law" in Nichiren Shōshū Sōka Gakkai) people in general are held to be "malicious" in their attitude toward the true Law. For this reason the only way to turn men from their folly is to follow the example of the great Nichiren in adopting the harsh, severe, iconoclastic methods of *shakubuku*.

As an over-all strategy *shakubuku* has been implemented by an elaborate organizational structure, an extensive use of mass media, and an increasing reliance on the small-group technique. The military-type hierarchical organization reaches from the central headquarters in Shinanomachi, Tokyo, through general branches, regional branches, districts, squads, and groups to the family unit or individual believer in the remotest corner of Japan. Sōka Gakkai publications include a bimonthly pictorial magazine (*The Seikyō Graphic*), a bimonthly magazine (*The Dailyoku Rengō*), a biweekly newspaper (*The Seikyō Shimbun*), and other regular publications in addition to numerous books and pamphlets—all done according to the highest standards. When public opinion was aroused against the invasion of shrines, temples and churches in the 1950's, the primary battleground of *shakubuku* shifted more and more to the *zadankai*, or small group. Members of these local groups are

unrelenting in their efforts to get acquaintances and strangers to attend the meetings. Once there, the newcomer may find that his own faith (or lack of it) is under concentrated attack, but he will also find an island of camaraderie and homogeneity in the sea of an atomized, confused, and heterogeneous modern society. Thus there is promise of fulfilling all his fondest dreams by virtue of one simple act—the worship of the *Honzon*.

By way of review and summary, the Sōka Gakkai strategy involves three primary aspects: the explicit, unmerciful attack of all opposing forces or ideologies; the positive presentation of Nichiren Shōshū doctrine; and the utilization of every possible pressure and promise to secure actual conversions. Furthermore, this is not simple idle theory. This is the practice of Sōka Gakkai leaders, writers, politicians, and ordinary believers throughout Japan. For example, in a study of one of the main teaching organs (the *Daiyoku Revue* magazine) over a six-month period, I found that almost as much space was devoted to social and religious criticism as was devoted to an elucidation and defense of Nichiren Shōshū Sōka Gakkai teachings (18 per cent of the total space as contrasted with 24.9 per cent).⁹ In this way, the Sōka Gakkai strategists have actually reinforced the estrangement of postwar Japanese from their religious and political institutions so that the bond between the Japanese and "true religion" might be strengthened. A similar study of a total of 422 testimonials which appeared in the *Seikyō Shimbun* revealed how Sōka Gakkai propaganda holds out the promise of every possible "benefit" in exchange for faith. Some kind of ethical or moral change in the subject or others around him was noted in 109 instances. A total of 231 persons reported that they had found employment or a better job, received a promotion, experienced business prosperity, or acquired money as a result of entering the faith. A total of 244 mentioned that they had been healed of some sickness or had experienced easy, safe childbirth. As many as 100 testified to receiving "life force," a life goal, protection, happiness, or appreciation as an individual.¹⁰ When a prospect is faced with these possibilities, the natural response (reinforced verbally and infinitum by the propagator) is "Haite miyō" (let's enter and find out). Once in the Society other pressures are brought to bear, and the new convert himself becomes a propagator before he can become a backslider.

The final stage in Sōka Gakkai propagation in Japan involves the establishment of a national altar (*kaidan*) at Taisekiji and the union of religion with government. The eventual realization of this goal will be accomplished by political means and through "democratic" processes. Ultimately the whole world is to become a Buddhist state with its politico-religious center at Taisekiji.

A RHETORICAL APPRAISAL

The success of the Sōka Gakkai must be studied from the perspective of the Japanese mind and the situation in Japan—particularly the mentality and circumstances of postwar Japan. The reasons for success are to be found in a propitious confluence of many factors—some adventitious and fortuitous, some premeditated and strategic. In other words, the soil was especially well adapted to this plant, and this plant was specially adapted to the soil.¹¹

It is difficult for an outsider to appreciate the depth of estrangement from traditional religious loyalties evident in Japan after the war. The very foundations of her religious ideologies were shattered by military disaster. The Japanese were spiritual orphans.

The immediate situation, however, called for more than religious and spiritual revitalization. Families had to be brought back together. Houses had to be repaired or rebuilt. Hungry mouths needed food. The sick needed medicine and care. Once these most basic needs were fulfilled, others came to the fore. Newspapers were augmented by new radios, the radio was augmented by television. Once *geta* (wooden footwear) were plentiful, shoes were desired. After shoes were acquired, the wearers wanted new bicycles. Bicycles are in the process of being exchanged for the automobile. Thus economic resurgence has resulted in the satisfaction of many of the elemental needs and desires of the Japanese, but the needs and desires of the Japanese have never ceased expanding and multiplying.

There is yet another fundamental factor in the postwar situation in Japan. After the steadily increasing regimentation and control imposed by the militarists over the years, the Japanese suddenly fell heir to a new inheritance of freedom. Complete freedom to work out the nation's own destiny did not come overnight—but it did come. And individual Japanese were free to exert themselves in the rebuilding of their own lives and fortunes. They were free also to

choose any religious faith that suited their needs or fancy—or to reject religion altogether. They were even free to assume the responsibilities of freedom or to return to some form of totalitarianism by choice or default.

In this critical situation, millions of Japanese possessed what we might call the "fully open mind." By this I mean that they were engaged in a search, fully ready to listen and be persuaded, but without knowing how to evaluate what they heard—indeed without knowing where the criteria for such an evaluation were procurable. Moreover, there was the simultaneous inner propensity toward religion and irreligion, utilitarianism and absolutism, logicity and irrationality, the traditional and the innovative, free decision and resort to authority, material goods and spiritual hope.

It seems to me that one can make a good case for saying that the synthesis between Nichiren's absolutism and Makiguchi's pragmatism is philosophically tenuous; that many of the basic words of Sōka Gakkai propaganda such as "happiness," "enlightenment," and "proof" are vague and ambiguous; that *shakubuku* is a tacit denial of individual freedom; that the proposed Buddhist state is a rejection of democracy; etc. But while this may be true, it is somewhat beside the point. What is philosophically tenuous, epistemologically invalid, definitionally deficient, and ethically questionable may still be rhetorically productive. The *sui generis* "fully open mind" of postwar Japanese has not demanded cogency, consistency, and clarity—only the façade of these qualities. The hallmarks of Sōka Gakkai propaganda and methodology are vagueness and ambiguity, anachronism and inconsistency. But far from impeding Sōka Gakkai propagation, these characteristics have allowed for (perhaps even assured) its success. Several salient examples may serve to illumine the point.

(1) Chauvinistic, militaristic State Shinto is thoroughly discredited and denominated "heretical." At the same time, some of its fundamental ideas and ideals are retained in Buddhistic garb. Thus the old doctrine of *saisei itchi* (the union of government and religion) is promoted in terms of *ōbutsu-myōgō* (the unity of civil law with Buddhist law). Japan is still the geopolitical center of the world. The emperor is to be converted and lead all in the worship of the *Honzon*. The Japanese still walk in the "way of the gods," but the

gods are no longer the Shinto *kami* (deities, gods) but the Buddhist *hotoke* (the Buddha, gods).

(2) Happiness is anything a Sōka Gakkai propagator chooses to make it. If the unbeliever is happy, his happiness is temporary at best, so he is exhorted to embrace the *Honzon* before he encounters disaster. If a believer meets serious difficulties, the resultant unhappiness is less in degree than it would have been had he not trusted the *Honzon*. The unhappy man with the *Honzon* before him is happier than the happy man without it! One might be led to conjecture that the do-it-yourself definitions which start "Happiness is . . ." are a cross-cultural contribution of the Sōka Gakkai.

(3) Postwar Japanese have focused their attention on immediate needs and desires.¹² Truth has not been a fundamental concern in that quest. The Sōka Gakkai fully exploits this preoccupation with the immediate. The *Honzon* is a "happiness machine" producing money, health, and well-being much as the fictional goose laid golden eggs. Then with unerring intrepidity Sōka Gakkai rhetoric leads the way from utilitarianism and relativism to ultimate religion and absolutism.

(4) The Japanese are oriented to the happiness of the group, and for that happiness the individual must sacrifice self-interest. At the philosophical level the Sōka Gakkai makes a distinction between individual and group happiness. That the distinction is vague and the treatment superficial is not a matter of great moment. What is important is that Sōka Gakkai rhetoric has really made individual happiness identical with the happiness of the group. The happy life of the individual and the advancement of society are basically one and the same. The sacrifice of self-interest is not really necessary.

(5) Sōka Gakkai propagation necessitates regimentation and the acceptance of authority. Of course, the Japanese are by no means strangers to authority and the necessity of taking one's proper station in a hierarchical societal structure. But the new Japan also espouses democratic ideals and is oriented to egalitarian groupings. Sōka Gakkai rhetorical and methodological strategies appeal to both orientations. The *zadankai* (discussion meeting) is an excellent illustration. It epitomizes democracy and equalitarianism for the member of the Gakkai. At the same time, the *zadankai* serves "relay" and "reinforcing" functions that preserve authority and

control. Further, one is even "put into" this "democratic" group by the decision of others rather than of his own free will.

CONCLUSION

In a word, the Society lays claim to scientific verifiability, philosophical profundity, and religious ultimacy. But its success is more dependent on the fullest exploitation of the potential for propagation in postwar Japan inherent in its system. Those parts of its religious and philosophical heritage which could not be sacrificed in part without sacrificing the whole already possessed that potential. Subsequent modifications and innovations have not made the system more sound but more "salable." They have not made it more profound, but more persuasive. Sōka Gakkai strategists have tapped the wells of the available means of persuasion and have found that postwar Japanese demanded many things, but clarity and consistency were not among them. What was not required made possible the effective appeal to all that was desired. Daisaku Ikeda spoke volumes when he urged the Society's faithful to practice *shakubuku* "defiantly, merrily, amicably, and gallantly!"¹⁰

The obstacles to continued success probably do not stem from the ambiguities and inconsistencies to which analysts may be prone to point. If the occasion for a leveling off is nascent in the ambiguities and inconsistencies of Sōka Gakkai rhetoric and methodology, the likelihood is that this will not come about because critics point them out. The danger is rather from within. For example, political ascendancy may require definitions and clarifications that will disrupt and divide. Or, there may be strategic errors in the process of determining how to be sufficiently "defiant" to maintain the loyalties of the exclusivist element while being sufficiently "amicable" to avoid alienating the masses who still do not believe.

It remains to be seen how the great majority who still survive the battle of *shakubuku* will react. The world awaits their answer. Japan is a highly educated and literate nation. Of all the nations inheriting political and religious freedom, Japan should be at once one of the most appreciative of that freedom and in many ways one of the best qualified to assume the responsibility of freedom in the world struggle. Japan's answer is of vital importance to all of us.

NOTES

1. Tokyo *Asahi Evening News*, June 26, 1959.
2. Tokyo *Japan Times*, June 25, 1959.
3. Tokyo *Asahi Evening News*, May 2, 1959.
4. *The Sokagakkai* (Tokyo: Seikyo Press, 1960), p. 28.
5. This figure is based on information contained in a personal letter of March 4, 1965, from Mr. Hiroo Matsuyama of the Sōka Gakkai Overseas Bureau. Mr. Matsuyama gives the membership at the end of 1964 at 5,246,458 households or family units. The 13,000,000 figure is obtained by multiplying the number of households by 2.5. Other estimates range down to 10,000,000.
6. Masaharu Anezaki, *Nichiren the Buddhist Prophet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), p. 3.
7. According to Ichijo Suzuki, Nichiren wrote 78 treatises and 356 "epistles," of which more than half have been preserved (although a number of these are incomplete). Cf. Kanko Mochizuki, Ichijo Suzuki, and Gison Shioda, *The Nichiren Sect*, trans. Senchu Murano (Tokyo: Young East Association, 1958), Part 1, Nichiren's life and Teachings, p. 7.
8. The normal Sino-Japanese reading is *setsuboku* or *setsuku*. The *shobutsoku* reading currently used by the Sōka Gakkai is unusual. The term itself, however, is not a new one, since it appears in the *Shōman-gyō*, *Dainichi-kyō*, and other ancient Buddhist scriptures.
9. David J. Hesselgrave, "A Propagation Profile of the Sōka Gakkai" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota), p. 194.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
11. For an excellent study of the postwar situation in Japan, see Yoshiharu Scott Matsumoto, "Contemporary Japan: the Individual and the Group," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. L, Pt. 1 (January, 1960).
12. The average national income per capita in Japan in 1949 was only one-fourteenth that of the United States. During the following decade the situation improved appreciably, but postwar Japan has been absorbed in "the immediate ends of livelihood." Cf. Matsumoto, "Contemporary Japan," p. 62.
13. Daisaku Ikeda, *Lectures on Buddhism*, trans. Takao Kamio (Tokyo: Seikyo Press, 1962).