

Rissho Kosei-kai:  
A Cooperative Buddhist Sect

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Rissho Kosei-kai stands as one of several amazingly successful postwar religious movements in Japan. Since its founding in 1938 it has grown to a membership of about three million in a country of one hundred million; it possesses one of the largest and most striking places of worship in the world, the Great Sacred Hall (Daiseido) in Tokyo; and it is continuing to grow and is expanding its influence into the United States, where there are "branch churches" in Honolulu and Los Angeles. In the years immediately after World War II, Rissho Kosei-kai was the fastest growing of the "new religions,"<sup>1</sup> although it has since been overshadowed by the even more spectacular growth of Soka Gakkai.

The primary purpose of this essay is to document the cooperative spirit that has marked Rissho Kosei-kai and to note some factors that may have contributed to its approach. "Cooperation" is used here to refer to the fact that Rissho Kosei-kai is willing to work with individuals and organizations related to other religious traditions, and to do so without overt efforts to undermine or subvert the faiths of the others. In part this is due to the tolerance so characteristic of Buddhism, and in part it is due to factors in Rissho Kosei-kai's own history and situation. A secondary purpose will be to note some differences between Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai with regard to cooperation with other religions. This contrast is significant because Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai are similar in their use of the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Daimoku* and in their Nichiren-oriented heritage.

In the "Catechism of Rissho Kosei-kai" the final question and the answer to it show that the organization is committed to a policy of cooperation with other religions:

*Q: It is said that Risshō Kōsei-kai is very positive about cooperation between different religions, but how is this cooperation being promoted?*

A: At present President Niwano holds several important offices, such as chairman of directors of the Union of the New Religious Organizations in Japan, councillor of the Japanese League of Religions, executive director of the Religions Center, member of the Religious Juridical Persons Council of the Ministry of Education, etc.

The Union of the New Religious Organizations in Japan is an association of new religious organizations founded during the last thirty or forty years. At present more than a hundred such organizations belong to it, only fifteen years after its birth. Though they differ in doctrine and ritual, they cooperate on good terms and are eager to exchange their experiences with each other.

The Religions Center was established by leaders in the fields of business, education, religion, etc., in order to cultivate the religious mind in the Japanese and to make Japan a great nation through a nation-wide religious campaign under the slogan, "Faith to All men!"

Besides feeling the urgent need to cooperate with Christianity for the realization of world peace, President Niwano attended the Second Vatican Council, as a special guest, and met Pope Paul VI.

Thus, in this organization President Niwano, leading all members, pledges his efforts to realize the cooperation of religions not only in Japan but in the whole world.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence of the cooperativeness of Risshō Kōsei-kai is found both in the official literature and in the record of what the organization does. President Niwano was one of the participants in a Peace Delegation of Religious Leaders in 1963, visiting, among others, Pope Paul VI, Dr. Visser 't'Hooft, who was then General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, and Archbishop Ramsey of the Anglican Church. This visit brought him into contact with many religious leaders in the West, a further development of which was President Niwano's attendance at the opening sessions of the Second Vatican Council Meetings in 1965.<sup>3</sup> His description of the occasion deserves inclusion here:

It was in the evening of the 15th when I saw Pope Paul VI. I greeted him by joining the palms of my hands according to the Buddhist custom. As the Pope extended his hand, I did so too. Then he held my hand with both his hands so that I strongly held his hands with both my hands too. During the interview we kept our hands together. This strong shaking of hands expressed the cooperation, friendship and mutual understanding between Buddhism and Catholicism in a very special way. The determination of going on as a go-between for the two great religions was deeply impressed in my mind on that day.

During the talk with the Pope, I could not but feel that despite the difference between Buddhism and Catholicism, both are the same in their essence. . . .

Although there are differences with regard to the words and teaching, it may safely be said that Catholicism is the same as Buddhism with regard to what is essential, that is, the way for mankind to attain peace and the way for human beings to live. Sakyamuni says, "All are the one Buddha vehicle, neither two nor three." I had never been more convinced of the truth of this word than during my audience with the Pope. . . .

Now, "religious cooperation" is being promoted on a world-wide scale. Even Catholicism, which was said to be exclusive, is praying for the other religions.<sup>4</sup>

Their current publications indicate that the openness of Rissho Kosei-kai toward other religions is, if anything, being extended. This year the *Kosei Times*, a monthly English-language newspaper, is running a series of articles on "The Great Dialogue and the Way to World Peace." The "Great Dialogue" referred to is the conversation between different religions. So far in the series there have been articles by a Roman Catholic, an Anglican, a Methodist, a United Presbyterian, and a Unitarian-Universalist. The last-named group has had especially close relations with Rissho Kosei-kai. In Tokyo some of the staff people of Rissho Kosei-kai have joined in the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship Discussions and have established a student exchange with that group in America. Recent issues of the *Kosei Times* have included references to the attendance of President Niwano and three of his staff persons at a meeting in

Turkey of the Interim Advisory Committee for a World Conference on Religion and Peace;<sup>5</sup> to an address by President Niwano on "Buddhists Dream of World Brotherhood," in which cooperation with other religions is praised;<sup>6</sup> to President Niwano's being elected Chief Director of the Japan Religions League and to his plan to attend a meeting in Boston of the International Association of Religious Freedom;<sup>7</sup> and to Risho Kosei-kai's joining with other religious groups to protest the Yasukuni Shrine Bill.<sup>8</sup> President Niwano's address in the August 1969 issue of the *Kosei Times* carries on in the same vein. Buddhism is there characterized as "vast and boundless, tolerant and compassionate. It is not antagonistic toward Christianity, Islamism, Confucianism or any other existing true religion. . . . Some of their doctrines are identical with the Dharma, though in different expressions. There is but One Universal Truth. Its explanations are many."<sup>9</sup>

The cooperative spirit of Risho Kosei-kai has not reduced the missionary zeal of the movement. One slogan derived from the Religions Center in Japan is "Faith to All Men." This phrase has an inherent ambiguity in it. It can mean that all men should come to have faith in Risho Kosei-kai, or it can refer to "an age when mankind unites in the spirit of religious cooperation"<sup>10</sup> and lives in peace and happiness. The latter is the explicit and official meaning of "Faith to All Men." "This society, feeling its mission as a guiding and driving force in the movement of Faith to All Men on the basis of religious cooperation, endeavours to develop this movement from something merely national into a movement covering the whole world to prevent it from remaining empty words."<sup>11</sup> The mission (*michibiki*) of Risho Kosei-kai is thus related to "Faith to All Men," yet its direct aim is to lead people to become members of this particular organization. An official publication calls for "a pioneer action to open the nation's eyes to the true faith. We, aiming at the perfection of character, should show by our deeds what a splendidly guided organization Rishō Kōsei-kai is. This is nothing but *michibiki*."<sup>12</sup> The mission thrust of the organization and its cooperation with other religions at times seem to be interrelated. It is almost as though the mission of the group is to further a world religion that includes all men of faith at the same time that the cooperative stance of the organization is seen as an asset in mission work because it improves the public image of the organization. For Risho Kosei-kai a cooperative spirit

has been effective in bringing in new members and in strengthening the organization. It "works."

The contrast between Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai is never clearer than when their mission efforts are examined. Soka Gakkai's traditional *Shakubuku* (break and destroy) methods are very critical of other religions. This method is no longer promoted by the organization, but it still persists. While the officials who explain Soka Gakkai's purpose and work are respectful of the faith of others, many can testify that the attack on their faith by Soka Gakkai members was a most disturbing experience.<sup>13</sup> This approach has elicited much criticism of the sect, but it has been effective in bringing in many new members. Rissho Kosei-kai, on the other hand, has tended not to criticize other faiths.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it has stressed the things it has in common with other religions and has presented itself as a vital religion that brings happiness and well-being to the individual and peace to the world. For Rissho Kosei-kai, this approach has also worked well. Both of these groups gain from the enthusiasm that so often marks a new movement, but the ways in which they express their enthusiasm are quite different.

In view of the fact that Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai are both related to Nichiren and use the *Lotus Sutra*, it is fitting to ask why Rissho Kosei-kai has such a cooperative spirit toward other religions. Nichiren himself is usually remembered for his violent opposition to Zen and Amida Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> Soka Gakkai reflects the same general attitude in its opposition to other religions, even to Shintoism, which is so deeply rooted in the Japanese psyche.<sup>16</sup> It will be argued in this paper that there are at least five elements that may contribute to the fact that Rissho Kosei-kai tends to cooperate with other religions: (1) Cooperative elements can be seen in the Nichiren-*Lotus Sutra* tradition; (2) some events in the early history of Rissho Kosei-kai have tended to relate it to other religions; (3) the warm and inclusive personality of President Niwano has tended to produce a spirit of cooperation in the movement; (4) some socio-psychological factors function at the present time to support the mood of openness toward other religions; and (5) many of the doctrines of the movement support the idea of cooperation with other religions.

1. In the first place it should be noted that the Nichiren-*Lotus Sutra* tradition provides some basis for a cooperativeness in Rissho Kosei-kai. Nichiren was a much more complex man

than he would seem to be in most of the angry portraits of him in textbooks. His life falls into two quite distinct periods. In the first he was seeking to call the nation to use the *Lotus Sutra*, to reform, to be the great Japan that he envisioned. This period, when he was exiled and narrowly escaped execution, makes fascinating reading; but his later period, which is largely overlooked, showed a more irenic spirit and involved an effort to create a center from which spiritual power could flow forth.<sup>17</sup> President Niwano, in a personal interview with this writer, argued that Soka Gakkai follows the early Nichiren, while Rissho Kosei-kai takes the later Nichiren as its model.<sup>18</sup>

It is also true that the two groups interpret Nichiren differently. Soka Gakkai makes Nichiren the true Buddha, replacing Sakyamuni.<sup>19</sup> Nichiren is thus the central figure for that movement. On the other hand, Nichiren is important for Rissho Kosei-kai because he recognized the value of and advocated the use of the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>20</sup> It is my impression that Nichiren's importance is declining in Rissho Kosei-kai. The publications say relatively little about Nichiren and much about "Fundamental Buddhism," a uniting of the *Lotus Sutra* with the Four Noble Truths and other teachings of Sakyamuni.<sup>21</sup> Nichiren's mandala is being replaced with figures of the Eternal Buddha as the object of worship.<sup>22</sup> It is true that Nichiren's *Daimoku*, "Namu Myoho Renge kyo" (Adoration to the *Lotus Sutra*), is still used, but it honors the *sutra* rather than the author of the phrase.

The *Lotus Sutra* itself contains two passages that have opened the way for Rissho Kosei-kai's cooperation with other religions. It must be added that these passages do not require such a cooperative attitude, but they permit it. The *sutra* does not limit religious cooperation. These passages make possible both Rissho Kosei-kai's cooperative attitude and Soka Gakkai's hard line toward other religions. The two passages are extensively used by both of these groups. The first is chapter 2 of the *sutra*, where there is a discussion of *hoben*, which is variously translated as "tactfulness" or "expediency."<sup>23</sup> The point of it is that Buddha used all sorts of *means* to bring people to enlightenment. These means need not be absolutely and eternally true; they may even be untrue in a literal sense. The truth of them is not to be judged in terms of how well the statement conforms to reality; rather, the truth is what achieves the Buddha's objective.<sup>24</sup> This concept of *hoben* can be used either to abandon a

former practice or relationship or to introduce a new one. Professor Kubota feels that Rissho Kosei-kai has consciously used *hoben*—the principle of expediency—to adjust its message to the needs of the people, thus instituting new patterns.<sup>26</sup> President Niwano justified the shift from the Nichiren mandala to the figure of the Eternal Buddha by calling the mandala *hoben*, an expediency or device that can be abandoned when it no longer serves its purpose.<sup>26</sup> *Hoben* frees Rissho Kosei-kai to shift in any direction that is felt to be best, therefore very extensive cooperation with other religions is perfectly fitting. It is equally fitting, however, for Soka Gakkai to appeal to this teaching to justify its mission methods, which are certainly *hoben* in the sense of being effective in bringing in new members. *Hoben* is significant for Rissho Kosei-kai in the sense that it is a teaching that makes change congruent with the *sutra*.

The other passage in the *Lotus Sutra* that is important in this connection is the Eternal Buddha theme in chapter 16. This passage is useful to support the notion of cooperation with other religions. Sakyamuni here discloses that he is not just a man but that he is the Eternal Buddha, who has always been. He is thus the ultimate Reality, not just one religious leader among others. One passage expresses this in the words of Buddha:

If in other religions there are beings,  
Reverent and with faith aspiring,  
Again I am in their midst.<sup>27</sup>

This notion becomes the explicit basis for a cooperative attitude toward other religions, for it can be understood as a sort of universalism. Buddha is in all religions, no matter what name is given to him. He is the Reality behind the words and forms of all religions.

2. A second major element in the cooperative stance of Rissho Kosei-kai lies in factors in its history that have involved it with other religions. President Niwano himself, while a diligent student of the *Lotus Sutra*, has had little technical training in Buddhist doctrine. His background includes many influences from folk religion, such as divination, onomancy, and faith healing.<sup>28</sup> His motivation has not been to preserve any particular traditional doctrines, but to help people. He has tended, therefore, to draw on any practices that are helpful, regardless of whether they came from Buddhism or folk religions. In this sense, *hoben* freed President Niwano to use ideas from other



religions so long as they helped people. Myoko Sensei, the woman who was the other major personality in the founding of Rissho Kosei-kai, was a charismatic type of person with many shamanic characteristics.<sup>29</sup> This type of leadership is not customarily found in traditional Buddhism but derives from the folk-religion motifs. Even when one operates within a tradition such as Buddhism, a shaman is relatively free of the restrictions of the tradition, because a shaman receives guidance directly and immediately, rather than through institutional forms or traditions. Thus both of the founders of Rissho Kosei-kai can be seen as drawing from the folk-religion motifs. They felt value in them and thus tended to be more open toward them.

An additional historical factor is implicit in the above, namely, that Rissho Kosei-kai has not been institutionally related to any Buddhist priesthood. It is an independent Buddhist layman's movement. Priesthoods have generally tended to be more self-conscious about doctrinal distinctions and differences than have laymen. Where such awareness of differences exists, it is more difficult to cooperate with other religions as fully as might be done if there were less sensitivity to details, which is more typical of laymen. Soka Gakkai has a much different history from Rissho Kosei-kai in this regard. Connected with Nichiren Shoshu as the layman's movement of the sect, it has been associated with a most uncooperative form of Nichiren Buddhism.<sup>30</sup> Soka Gakkai tends to be less cooperative in part because of its close association with the relatively uncooperative Nichiren Shoshu. Rissho Kosei-kai has no such association to inhibit cooperation.

3. A third major element in the cooperative stance of Rissho Kosei-kai is the personality of President Niwano. He, with Myoko Sensei, was the founder of the sect in 1938, and he continues as the central figure of the movement. He seems to be a kind of father figure for the entire group and has a broad appeal. His approach to other religions has a spirit of openness and acceptance about it. Something of his personal attitude can be sensed from the following passage, written shortly after he had met the Pope.

I firmly believe that religious cooperation among Buddhists will lead to cooperation with Christianity in Japan too. This should be natural in view of the fact that in Rome an agreement was made at the conference

with the Japanese bishops, and it also corresponds with the idea of the Pope. The great ideal of "religious cooperation" for which I have spent twenty-seven years of activity centering around Kōsei-kai, my forty years of religious life and the sixty years of my life, is now steadily going to be established.<sup>81</sup>

It may be that the impact of President Niwano's personality on the movement is even greater since the passing of Myoko Sensei. In the years since her death President Niwano has held the central position alone. In some ways the movement has passed beyond Myoko Sensei, who, while still honored, is seen by some as *hoben*.

There is a circular character to all of this. President Niwano's openness to other religions has led to close relationships with leaders in other religions, and these relationships have, for the most part, been happy ones. The fact that the leaders of other religions are men whom Niwano looks upon as friends encourages him to cooperate still further.<sup>82</sup>

4. A fourth major element in the cooperative attitude of Rissho Kosei-kai is found in what may be called socio-psychological factors. Some of them are related to elements mentioned earlier, but they all are part of the social and psychological situation in which Rissho Kosei-kai has come to its present form. At least seven points can be noted in this connection: (a) As mentioned above, Rissho Kosei-kai, unlike Soka Gakkai, is not related to a regular Buddhist sect. It does not have a priesthood or tradition that might limit religious cooperation. (b) The early attempts at cooperation were happy and profitable. As Father Stepfér of the Oriens Institute in Tokyo expressed it, Rissho Kosei-kai "sees a future in cooperation" based on its past experiences.<sup>83</sup> (c) Group counseling, or *hosa*, which has been helpful in bringing members to Rissho Kosei-kai, is a practice possible in any religion. The result is that a number of scholars from the West have come to observe and study it to learn from it. This fact alone has brought about many contacts with other religions under the most favorable of conditions. (d) Becoming a member of Rissho Kosei-kai causes only a slight disruption of a new member's loyalties. It is not looked upon as a rejection of the religion of the family, and there is provision for ancestor veneration. Also, there is no rejection of Shinto practices relating to birth and marriage, so a member can keep the traditions

of the family and nation while still sharing in the new religion. A conciliatory attitude toward other groups is thus maintained. (e) Many of the new religions have felt a need for cooperation among themselves if they are to achieve a place of respect in Japan. These new organizations, by working together, have sought to gain the respect of the Japanese people. The pressing concern for peace has led to further cooperation between the new religions and Christianity.<sup>84</sup> It must be noted that Soka Gakkai has taken the opposite approach with amazing success. (f) The concern for a good public image has also fostered a cooperative attitude in Rissho Kosei-kai. It is generally easier for a movement to be accepted by the public if it stresses those concerns that it holds in common with other accepted groups. (g) In my judgment, there is a desire in Rissho Kosei-kai to dissociate itself from some of the activities and attitudes of Soka Gakkai.<sup>85</sup> There are two issues that make this clear: its explicit opposition to the formation of religiously based political parties and its fosterings of, rather than opposing, cooperation with other religious groups.

5. The fifth element that enters into the cooperative spirit of Rissho Kosei-kai is the very content of its doctrines. There has been little effort to develop new doctrines. Rather, the teachings tend to be general and to have a practical bent. "Fundamental Buddhism" is an effort to unite as much of Buddhism as possible into one system, thus making it possible to cooperate with other Buddhists. The notion of Sakyamuni as the manifestation of the Eternal Buddha<sup>86</sup> who is in all true religion is surely favorable to cooperation with other faiths. The Buddha Nature is already in every man regardless of his religion and needs only to be "polished." Perhaps the general statement that best captures the doctrinal concern of the movement is that Kosei-kai seeks to recover "humanity"<sup>87</sup> in a world that seems to be losing it. These doctrines tend to have a universalism about them that makes it easier for the sect to cooperate with other religions, because the doctrines themselves establish some common ground and concerns.

A further fact is that the practical aspect of religion is stressed rather than the doctrinal one. Members are encouraged to "read with your body,"<sup>88</sup> which is the appeal to *act* in accordance with the dharma. It has been easier for Rissho Kosei-kai to cooperate with other religions because its concerns are not strongly doctrinal but have been largely for the improve-

ment of the quality and conditions of human life, concerns shared by other religions as well.

This paper has attempted to show that Rissho Kosei-kai tends to be cooperative in its relationships with other religions and to indicate some elements that may contribute to the cooperative spirit. There is a need for a much more extensive investigation of these elements. It has also been noted that Soka Gakkai—which, like Rissho Kosei-kai, uses the *Lotus Sutra* and is related to Nichiren—is a most obvious example of an uncooperative religious movement. Some effort has been made here to note differences between Soka Gakkai and Rissho Kosei-kai that may contribute to the differing postures that they take toward religious cooperation.

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## NOTES

1. H. N. McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods* (New York, 1967), p. 177.
2. *Rissho Kosei-kai* (Tokyo, 1966), p. 157.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
5. *Kosei Times*, Apr. 1969, p. 1. At this meeting there were representatives of Buddhism, Shintoism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Unitarian-Universalism.
6. *Ibid.*, May 1969, p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, June 1969, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, July 1969, p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, Aug. 1969, p. 1.
10. *Rissho Kosei-kai*, p. 112.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
13. An American student mentioned to several Soka Gakkai youth that she was with a program sponsored by Florida Presbyterian (italics mine) College and was greeted with ridicule and a fervent invitation to chant the *sutra* and receive the benefits that the students felt they had gained (Aug. 1969).
14. *Rissho Kosei-kai*, p. 141. On the conversion of members to Rissho Kosei-kai, see also E. Watanabe, "Rissho Kosei-kai: A Sociological Observation of Its Members, Their Conversion and Their Activities," *Contemporary Religions in Japan*, Vol. IX, Nos. 1 and 2, Mar.-June 1968.
15. M. Anesaki, *Nichiren: The Buddhist Prophet* (Gloucester, Mass., 1966), pp. 8 ff.
16. *Nichiren Shoroku Sokugakukai* (Tokyo, 1966), pp. 142, 203.
17. Anesaki, *Nichiren*, chaps. 9 and 10 *passim*.
18. Interview, Nov. 27, 1967. A similar observation was made by Professor Kubota of Rissho University.

19. *Nichiren Shōshū Sokugakukai*, p. 188.
20. McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods*, p. 184.
21. *Rissho Kosei-kai*, pp. 43-79.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 79. President Niwano notes that while Nichiren opposes Zen and Amida Buddhism, the *Lotus Sutra* does not (*Travel to Infinity* [Tokyo, 1968], p. 131).
23. *Rissho Kosei-kai*, p. 91.
24. The parable of the burning house tells of a father's deceiving his sons in order to get them to act wisely.
25. Interview, Nov. 27, 1967.
26. *Ibid.* See also *Rissho Kosei-kai*, p. 16, for more on the use of *hoben*.
27. *Lotus Sutra*, chap. 16, quoted in *Rissho Kosei-kai*, p. 94.
28. McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods*, pp. 185, 189 ff.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 188. See also H. B. Earhart, *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity* (Belmont, Calif., 1969), pp. 87 ff.
30. *Nichiren Shōshū Sokugakukai*, preface; McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods*, p. 201.
31. *Rissho Kosei-kai*, p. 32.
32. Interview with Shuten Oishi, Secretary General of the Japan Religions League, Nov. 8, 1967.
33. Interview, Nov. 14, 1969.
34. *Rissho Kosei-kai*, pp. 110-11.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
38. Niwano, *Travel to Infinity*, p. 136. The phrase was originally used by Nichiren.