Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change

Edited by Heidi Moksnes and Mia Melin
Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change
A wealth of sectarian developments characterise the religious landscape in Japan, where the rise and fall of Buddhist sects have been intertwined with the politico-military complex and management of the population, no less in more modern times than in previous eras (see Garon 1997). Mostly in this way, Buddhist institutions in Japan can be said to have been important ‘civil society’ groups. However, they have seldom acted more independently or as a challenge to political powers of the day. Occupation forces after 1945 stripped the Japanese state of its pre-war powers to police the internal affairs of religious organisations. Importantly, it also lost its power to quite so arbitrarily determine which religion was legally recognised and which constituted a ‘pseudo religion.’ Yet, wider society has not easily discarded pre-war distinctions drawn between ‘established’ (those endorsed by the state) and so-called new religions (those seen as a threat to the state), the latter still often being presumed to be superstitious evil ‘cults’ that reject science and swindle masses of followers (ibid). The national media and rightwing tabloids (see Hardacre 2003; Gamble and Watanabe 2004 respectively) have been instrumental in shaping public opinions in this regard. When we consider what turns out to be some of the most socially active groups in Japan, namely religious organisations, it is important to understand the politicisation that has characterised 20th century public opinions about such groups. There is quite a different understanding of them overseas.

*Soka Gakkai* is a Nichiren Buddhist lay organisation that arose in the late 1920s, when the Japanese educator Makiguchi Tsunesaburo took faith in Nichiren Shōshū, a Nichiren Buddhist sect that traces its history back to the 13th century. Soka Gakkai was first named Soka Kyōiku Gakkai – *Value Creating Educational Society*. It appeared at a time when
many new religious organisations arose during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With the rise of an increasingly oppressive fascist state ideology, these organisations were seen as a threat to the state and classified under the derogatory term ‘new religion,’ despite the fact that most of them were not very different in doctrine and beliefs from established Shinto, Buddhist and folk religions.

However, many of these movements attracted masses of followers, affected by industrialisation and the rise of a bureaucratic state. Soka Kyōiku Gakkai was not a mass movement but rather attracted educators, who were disillusioned and worried about the increasingly fascist education ideology, and who saw new hope in Makiguchi’s child-centric pedagogy. Makiguchi’s approach to education was based on a modification of the then widely studied neo-Kantian value system of truth goodness beauty. A keen reader of Kant, Makiguchi proposed the formula beauty – (bi) gain – (sen) goodness (shin) (Bethel 1994). Beauty referred to an individual’s aesthetic values, or subjective state; gain or benefit to the values of individuals as living in interdependent social totalities; and goodness to the well-being of human society generally. He believed that “human dignity arises from value creation” (ibid, p 54).

His theory of value creation (sōka) came to underpin the Soka movement. ‘Gain’ and ‘goodness’ both refer to the value of human life as contributor to the wider social good. Makiguchi rejected the idea of ‘holiness’ or ‘sacredness’ as separate values pertinent to the religious sphere, or indeed to the Japanese state as promoted through the ideology of State Shinto. Instead, he sought a scheme of values in which the meaning of education comes from “what people themselves see as the purpose of human life” (Makiguchi 1989, p 18), making his pedagogy radically different than the state, top-down form of education that permeated socialisation at that time. As he took faith in Nichiren Shōshū, he came to include the principles of the Lotus Sutra: that human beings possess infinite worth, dignity and equality. Based on this view, he opposed the state ideology, and refused to accept and pray to a Shinto talisman for Japan to win the war. The organisation was forced to disperse, and Makiguchi was imprisoned from July 1943 until his death in November 1944.
His ideas became the foundation for the Soka education system, as well as for Soka Gakkai’s emphasis on seeing individual well-being and social progress as embedded in each person’s development of social engagement in broader social and political issues, often implying a critical stance towards the Japanese political and religious establishment. After the war, the organisation under Josei Toda (Makiguchi’s closest disciple) grew rapidly beyond the realm of educators to become a Buddhist movement, emphasising Buddhism as something that should play itself out in daily life. With newly installed democratic rights, Soka Gakkai felt it pertinent to change a political culture that continued to cater to elite interests, and which was essentially the same that had so disastrously driven Japan to war and invasion of its Asian neighbours. It also relentlessly promoted Nichiren Buddhism as the highest form of human philosophy and practice. Not surprisingly, its relationship with conservative governments, other Buddhist and Shinto groups, the mass media, and society at large continued to be one of conflict, as it sought to change conventional values and understandings of Buddhism.

Under Daisaku Ikeda, who succeeded Toda in 1960, Soka Gakkai increased its social participation as a grassroots movement and even established its own political party in 1964. This continued to make the movement a real political force in Japanese society, and one of controversy.

From a sociological perspective, Soka Gakkai can be seen as accommodating changing circumstances in post-war Japanese society. Yet, its ability to attract 7-8 percent of the population in Japan, despite an unsupportive mass media, cannot be understood only in sociological terms, such as an effect of urbanisation and rapid social change. Buddhist doctrine, a political philosophy that fostered modern, social democratic sensibilities, and the daily Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo have empowered millions of people to develop extensive grassroots networks that engage actively in wider issues of social concern. Believing that each individual is key to shaping their own life as well as that of a wider social reality was the foundation of Soka Gakkai’s view of nobility as the truest human condition. Its success is also connected to its critical stance towards pre- and post-war governments, based on its call for a more socially just society.
Long-term, organised social action and support for a political party is rooted in the followers’ interpretation of Nichiren and ‘Buddhism.’ In the words of Ikeda:

The Human Being is not a frail wretch at the mercy of fate. Shakyamuni insisted that to change oneself now is to change the future on a vast scale. The Western impression that Buddhism is all about meditation is alien to the spirit of Shakyamuni. The goal of Nichiren Buddhism is neither escape from reality nor passive acceptance. It is to live strongly, proactively, in such a way as to refine one’s own life and reform society through a constant exchange between the outside world and the individual’s inner world (Ikeda 2006).

My long-term, firsthand observations as well as hundreds of interviews support the idea of Soka Gakkai as a socially engaged form for Buddhism, trying to create a society of social justice, which is conspicuous and unusual in the Japanese context. The inclusion of this ideological side to Nichiren (see Satō 1999; Sueki 1999) makes Soka Gakkai an example of a politically important Buddhist movement. The reading of Nichiren’s political attitude as a call to promote what he considered ultimate good human principles in wider society is paramount to understanding how Soka Gakkai has defined its relationship to politics and political authority in the Japanese context. Nichiren Buddhism in Soka Gakkai became a form for Buddhist humanism, acting as an ethical filter for collective human agency. (For an extended discussion on Soka Gakkai’s function as an enduring social democratic force in the Japanese politics, see Fisker-Nielsen 2012.)

Let us now turn to another aspect of the organisation, namely, as a so-called faith-based organisation in the recent Great Eastern Japan Earthquake of March 2011. These observations are based on various interviews with Soka Gakkai members and officials, as well as on two field trips to Tohoku in June 2011 and April 2012.

What happened in Soka Gakkai at the time of the Tohoku disaster of March 2011? In Japan, mass media has focused much on NGOs’ and individual local people’s response and efforts, but it has been strikingly
silent on the role of FBOs, despite the fact that the few organisations that were able to respond immediately to and in the disaster areas were often religious organisations. Their organisational strength and preparedness and, most significantly, members who were themselves ‘victims’ turning into ‘volunteers,’ illuminated the strength of vast grassroots networks and local knowledge. Local temples and shrines still standing became spontaneous shelters. Religious organisations, such as Tenrikyo, established a disaster centre and built on its long history of volunteering and ability to dispatch its own technically equipped staff, who could remove debris. Other FBOs were able to send in small groups of individuals by the second and third day already, to offer assistance and encouragement. Because the devastation was so vast, few organisations – apart from the government and Japanese Self Defence Forces (SDF) who were deployed the next day – were able to assist immediately. For most NGOs, non-profit organisations and other groups it took 3-4 weeks to organise concrete assistance. For NGOs from outside the area, with no facilities to house volunteers during the first crucial weeks and months, relief efforts were very challenging.

The earthquake in Tohoku hit at 14:46; by 16:15 a central emergency communication centre had been organised at the Soka Gakkai headquarters in Tokyo, which communicated with the main Tohoku Centre in Sendai, the nearest big city to the epicentre. Meanwhile, neighbouring local Soka Gakkai organisations – members in Hokkaido, Niigata and Kobe who had all experienced big earthquakes and tsunamis in recent years – immediately put together emergency supplies and dispatched them to Iwate, one of the affected prefectures. Forty-two Soka Gakkai centres exist in Tohoku; at the peak, just after the disaster, there were 5,000 evacuees at these centres around Tohoku. To take in 5,000 people required dealing with a number of challenging tasks, such as providing water, toilets and the preparation of 15,000 meals a day. Making use of a professional transport company to get the goods to the main centres, Soka Gakkai sent 650,000 emergency items in the first month and a half.1 The organisation also donated 540 million yen, about US$ 6.7 million, to various municipalities in the affected areas. In this way, the national organisation complemented the efforts at the local level.
Thus, Soka Gakkai leaders turned their centres into evacuation places, and in many instances, Soka Gakkai evacuees in public evacuation centres took on leading roles, used as they were to participate in discussions and the organisation of events. The importance of quick decision-making to minimise fatigue and confusion has been commented on as the crucial factor in those evacuation centres that were run most successfully.

Their daily Buddhist practice and philosophy sustained them psychologically, and motivated them into action. They describe their Buddhist practice as “training in caring for others,” responding to any situation with courage, focusing on the person right in front of them. To describe Soka Gakkai members as ‘volunteers’ in this situation would probably be somewhat inaccurate; but through their ability to take action in such dire circumstances, they themselves overcame their ‘victimhood’ and encouraged others to do the same. The underlying conceptual and emotional challenge to see oneself as a resourceful individual is probably one of the most significant aspects in the long term. ‘Victims’ who turned out to be both volunteers and self-empowered individuals continue to tell their stories of overcoming often unimaginable hardships, expounding the possibility of hope as they draw on internal resources.

As indicated, it is difficult to place Soka Gakkai within the secular/religious divide, because the so-called religious is not something that lies outside human conduct. The faith of the followers lies in believing in the narrative of human beings as inherently capable and worthy of respect, and in manifesting this in interaction with others. The response to the Tohoku disaster is a conspicuous example of this. A desire for conceptual and existential change to empower people is what makes Soka Gakkai so successful. However, this has not happened without controversy, at least partly because of Soka Gakkai’s ability to organise a significant number of people politically in a way that fundamentally challenges other deep-seated social conventions about what Buddhism is, and how ‘religion’ ought to behave.

The tradition is not new, albeit perhaps rare in its success to expound the ultimate human good as an inner source of wisdom and courage to work for others. Unlike most other forms for Buddhism in Japan, the concept of wider social justice has been central to Soka Gakkai Buddhists.
from the beginning. Their concept of justice is rooted in a philosophical position but plays itself squarely out in history; their belief is in human beings as creators of societies, and ideal human conduct is to act as an equal in a dignified manner, aiming towards a society of social justice and mutual flourishing. In the Japanese case, the creation of this kind of humanistic society has meant inevitable involvement to influence dominant political ideologies and practices. Thus, the most significant accomplishment of this Buddhist movement has been to consistently engage a vast number of ordinary people in the furthering of social issues for the common good. Buddhism is here clearly a practice that goes well beyond ceremonial services and the protection of the status quo that have characterised Japanese Buddhism.

Note
1. 60,000 portable toilet; 24,000 items of clothing; 4,700 blankets, futons and bed linen; 243,000 items of daily necessities; 296,000 food items; 40,600 medical supplies, and 33,400 other commodities, such as fuel, blood pressure gauge, bicycles, whiteboards, washing machines, dryers, kettles, portable cooking stoves, gas cartridges. By comparison, Japan Red Cross sent 132,000 blankets; 30,132 emergency kits; 13,500 sleeping kits, and a number of other items.

References


Socially engaged Buddhism


Author affiliation
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK