

Soka Gakkai in a Globalized World

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IN this paper, I investigate first the so-called global character of Soka Gakkai; then I give some reasons to explain why SGI spread throughout the Western World; and finally I discuss the relationship between religion and society—focusing on the social activity of religious organizations.

We frequently hear or read about globalization; but, what do people mean when they refer to globalization (see Voye, 1998: 71–72)? Wallerstein has a Marxist vision. He refers to a worldwide economy that capitalism has developed: a market economy that has augmented the inequalities between regions and countries which the States aren't able anymore to control. Think, for example, about the de-localization of industries; they are moved to countries with low salaries, with less rigid laws on pollution, etc. Luhmann, another sociologist, refers to the global system of communication: we are in a globalised world since we can communicate all over the world without limits. Internet is a good example. I have organised an international conference in Zagreb, Croatia, sitting on a chair in front of my personal computer in a little village in Belgium, communicating daily with colleagues all over the world, Japanese, Australians, Latin and North Americans, Eastern and Western Europeans. As suggested by Giddens—another sociologist who analyses globalization—our social relations are liberated from the constrictions of time and space. It is easy to see that in such communications space is of no importance, but more, we communicate independently of the time zones. And as a consequence, there is a global dependency which means that what happens in one part of the world has repercussions all over the world. Think about 9/11 or pollution and the Kyoto norms. However, sociologist Robertson also points out that globalization means that it stimulates regional particularism. We see in Europe that regionalism is an important factor in politics: integrated in a larger context, Europe, many regions want an integration on a lower level as a reaffirmation of their specific identity, rooted in history and culture. For example: independence of the Basque region in Spain, greater autonomy for Flanders

in Belgium, for Wales and Scotland in Great Britain, to mention a few. I will use these four approaches in analysing Soka Gakkai in the globalised world.

On the level of religions, the notion of globalization has been used by some movements to promote their own ideology as the basis for global governance of the world. Jim Beckford (2003: 111–112) points out that *Jehovah's Witnesses* insist “that the benefits of global thinking and co-operation will necessarily remain elusive until a truly global order is established,” by a government “inspired by God and based on biblical principles,” and the world order envisaged by the *Baha'is* reject representative democracy as “an appropriate model for the politics of a global civilization;” such a world order should rest, instead, “on a deliberate conflation of religion, politics and law—all governed by what they claim to be universal principles of ethics.” This makes Jim Beckford (2003: 113) conclude rightly that such forms of globalization “seem to owe less to diversity than to an imposed form of unity.”

What about Soka Gakkai?

A core concept in Soka Gakkai's religion is the notion of “human revolution,” based on the philosophy developed in Nichiren's writings. Such a revolution would promote peace and sustainable development by people who have acquired buddhahood through chanting and guidance. In analysing the practice, I have insisted on the fact that it stimulates self-analysis in a framework of social support. In fact, it incorporates *self-induced psychiatry*, during chanting, combined with *social psychiatry*, among other settings, in the *Zadankai*. However, one should not reduce the practice to these two forms of psychiatry: “to do so would be to ignore the obvious sacred element—the chanting of a religious mantra in front of a religious object—which creates a sacred mood and a sacred atmosphere for the auto-analysis and its social support” (Dobbelaere, 2001: 55).

In support of this human revolution, SG has created programmes of education—from kindergartens to universities—cultural centres—not only in Japan but also among other countries, in England, France, Italy and Germany, and research centres, like Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, whose goal is to find a common philosophical basis from which people can prevent war and promote respect for life and the environment. President Ikeda publishes each year his Peace Proposals, insisting on disarmament, dialogue, and the need for international law, sustainable development, and a global ethic. To promote such an ethic,

he enters into dialogue with politicians, scientists and philosophers all over the world and publishes these dialogues. With its periodic journals, Soka Gakkai promotes these causes which are reprinted and further developed in local SGI journals—some specifically for the members, others for a general public, like in Italy respectively *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* and *Duemilauno*. SG also promotes the causes of peace and human rights by exhibitions all over the world, in collaboration with the UN and UNESCO, and by organising festivals (for details see Dobbelaere, 2001: 60–75). I stress it here to come to a first partial conclusion: in so doing, we may call SG a global religious movement, using a global system of communication to which Luhmann was referring in defining globalization.

However, referring to Robertson, I should say that SG is also characterized by tensions emerging from particularism. In spreading all over the world and establishing itself in countries with a different cultural background, problems emerge between the traditional Japanese way of working, organising and thinking and the indigenous culture. Locally this has promoted tensions that have forced SGI to accommodate to local culture (Dobbelaere, 2001: 28 and 78–79). The Japanese practice kneeling in front of the *Gohonzon*, a way of sitting they have exercised since early childhood; this way of paying respect to the *Gohonzon* is difficult for Westerners who often do it sitting on chairs. In Great Britain, the organizational separation according to gender, typical of Japan, has been abandoned in some chapters, and this segregation is a major problem not only there but also in Canada and other European countries. According to a study done in the USA by Hammond and Machacek (1999: 34 and 96–101), during the early years, SGI-USA replicated the Japanese model: higher-ranking officials appointed leaders, aggressive proselytising (*shakubuku*) was undertaken, and massive public demonstrations were organized. Now the US leadership is chosen through a process of “nomination, review, and approval that involves both peers and leaders.” Qualified women are no longer excluded from positions of responsibility. High-visibility activities such as parades and festivals are now replaced by more neutral publicity campaigns such as the sponsorship of arts and cultural exhibits. In Germany, where membership reached a ceiling—new members simply replacing those lost through backsliding—members have complained about the organizational style of some Japanese leaders and the lack of consultation with local members, a criticism that was also expressed by members in Italy, which threatened to result in a partial breaking away of a substantial number of members, who did not, however, question the core of the philosophy.

In Germany, the practice of “guidance” has also had the effect of turning members away in the light of Germany’s recent historical past (Dobbelaere, 2001: 78).

These small changes that I have mentioned, indicate that national branches enjoy some autonomy in certain matters. However, control over SG rests in Japan and the leadership of the movement is almost exclusively Japanese. These aspects make me state that SG is rather a “transnational movement,” thus confirming Beckford’s analysis and conclusion (2003: 115). If SG wants to become a global movement, it should organizationally “de-Japanese,” if I may say so, allowing other cultures to do it their way, and also stimulate its study centres, such as the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, to search for the core of Nichiren’s teachings divesting it from Japanese cultural idiosyncrasies. This way SG could realize *glocalization*, which combines a global thinking with a local expression. And this is not only essential for Soka Gakkai, it is applicable to all would-be global religions, like Catholicism, for example, that calls this problem “enculturation.” We may thus conclude the first section by stating that SG is a transnational organization with a global reach.

How to explain SGI’s success in the Western World?

Wallerstein’s approach to globalization points out the negative effects of a capitalist global economy: loss of jobs, stress, psychological uncertainty, fear for the future, etc., which make people look for help. According to the research done by the late Bryan Wilson and myself in Great Britain, people coming to SG were not “religious seekers;” they searched for a solution to their everyday problems. Shining women and men, members of SGI, attract people searching for a solution to their problems. In SGI these seekers learn a philosophy and a practice. The law of cause and effect, which is at the heart of the philosophy, emphasizes human responsibility. What happens to human beings is the result of what they have done in the past; however, this law insists furthermore on the fact that it is possible to improve one’s situation. During the practice, people analyse their problems and look for the causes of them, and, since they cannot accuse others, they are forced to look to themselves for the solutions. The practice is really not magic, it forces the practitioners to ask questions like: “Why are there these problems? What is it that prevents me from moving forward?” This exercise is very well adapted to the posture of post-modernity that stresses the realization of the self and the necessity of reflexivity. The practice also strengthens the

person's determination and makes him or her capable of altering circumstances: it invigorates them (Dobbelaere, 2001: 37–57). The members also find support in the group for their efforts to change, and especially in the *Zadankai*. So, SG offers an esoteric means, a kind of looking glass, to solve one's problems and the members give mutual support.

However, before people search for solutions outside their own culture, as in Buddhism, changes must have occurred within their own culture. Which changes in Western culture may help to explain the success of SGI in the West? The process of secularization that occurred in the West since the 1960's has to a large extent diminished the impact of Christianity, the traditional religion of the West. The belief in God as a person, a core belief of Christianity, has become the belief of a minority; instead, a great number believe rather in a higher force. Such a belief certainly reduces the threshold for believing in the Mystic Law of Buddhism. And as the belief in an afterlife—whether of rewards in heaven or punishments in hell—has also diminished, so the disposition to get all that is available out of the present life becomes a compelling preoccupation. In such a context, where there has developed a strong belief that only in this world pleasure is available, the desire to perpetuate or repeat earthly life has made conceptions of reincarnation increasingly attractive.

Not only beliefs, but also ethics have changed in the West. Christianity, that has informed the West, was better adapted to conditions of scarcity and deprivation typical of the past. Its ethic stressed asceticism: restraint was the virtual touchstone of the moral order in the life of the individual. However, when a shift to a consumer economy occurred, this ethic, that stressed thrift, was less useful. Consumerism exists by stimulating demand, urging people not only to buy, but also to buy now. The new order required the legitimization of consumption, i.e. an ethic that promotes self-fulfilment and the pursuit of pleasure. In advertising and entertainment industries it found vehicles to promote exactly such a value system. These agencies were themselves instrumental in undermining the message of traditional Christianity, and became, before long, far more powerful than the Christian churches in their capacity for persuasion and in their control of the media.

SG, whilst drawing on ancient scriptures, none the less has a message which claims special relevance for our times, perceived in its own terms as the Latter Day of the Law. That relevance is manifest in the convergence of the general contemporary climate of economic and social permissiveness with SG's relinquishment of moral codes and its espousal of general abstract ethical principles which leave adherents free to discover

their own form of ‘taking responsibility’. Its ethic, its endorsement of the search for personal happiness, and its emphasis on personal fulfilment are a virtual espousal of the secular ethos of the post-Christian West. That its members should so largely be drawn from those engaged in the mass media, the entertainment industries, and from artistic pursuits, where personal freedom and the demand for self-expression are at a premium, reinforces the impression of a movement in which a new ethic confirms the experiences and meets the needs of those who join. SG is thus a movement in tune with the times in its stance regarding personal comportment (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994: 217–221).

Consequently, the answer to our second question, on the basis of our research, is that SG offers an esoteric means to achieve control over one’s life, which attracts people in need of help, and its beliefs and ethics fill the vacuum created by the decline of Christian beliefs. The decline of the Christian belief in a personal God predisposed many to adhere to a belief in the Mystic Law; and the decline of the belief in heaven and hell made the belief in reincarnation congenial to many. Finally, its ethic is a virtual espousal of the secular ethos of self-fulfilment that expects reincarnation.

The Religious sub-system and the other sub-systems

If the ethos of SG stresses the fulfilment of the self, the attainment of personal happiness, the development of the potentialities typical of the person and the attainment of Buddhahood, SG also stimulates a positive attitude towards the world, which one should ameliorate. We live now in a functionally differentiated society: the economy, the polity, the family, the juridical system, education and the medical world, all these sub-systems function autonomously without reference to religious norms. Consequently, the religious system has lost its overarching function. That is what we call the secularization of society. In such a society, the religious sub-system has lost its privileged position. It may, however, still be functional for *individuals*, giving them meaning and rituals, including those at the festive times of the year—think about the visits to the temples and shrines at New Year—, or the celebration of rites of passage, among others, at the ages of 3, 5 and 7, “coming of age,” marriage, and death. But religion must also prove its importance for *society*, like other sub-systems have to do, e.g. science that has to prove its importance by rendering services to the economy and medicine. The only way of doing that is indeed by rendering services to the other sub-systems of society. The leaders of SG have understood that: this is why they render services

to the society through education, culture and politics. Most religions do this: in Western Europe they offer education; organise movements for children, youth and adults; offer health insurance; run hospitals; etc. New Religious Movements do that also: e.g. Scientology offers services to drug addicts and prisoners. And sectarian movements like the Seventh Day Adventists organise education and hospitals. Some also provide smaller services like cleaning the highways by picking up garbage that people throw out of their cars. When my wife and I go visiting her mother, we read on a billboard “this section of the highway is cleaned regularly by the Mormons.” If they “advertise” it, it means that they want to be recognized for the services they render to the society in general.

SG renders a lot of services to society. I mentioned already their educational system and the instructive exhibitions on human rights and the horror of wars that SG has organised. But, I could mention also emergency relief that is offered when an earthquake occurs, relief efforts and medical care given in war-torn parts of Africa, and its environmental concern, e.g. the Soka University Center for Environmental Research that in collaboration with Amazon National Researches Institute aims at the restoration of the tropical forest along the Amazon River. SG also offers scientific books and equipment to schools and universities of poor countries to help them to improve their education. It also gives grants to Japanese university students and sponsors international exchange programs. They are in line with SG’s aim to improve the life conditions of mankind.

However, SG organises its service for society differently from most Religious Movements. Besides a “*corporate channel*”—composed of presses, an educational system, cultural agencies and programs, and associations for children, youth and adults, it is linked to a “*political channel*” in Japan. Consequently, it is an institutionalised pillar, according to Stein Rokkan’s definition (1977), even if still embryonic compared with what we have in Europe. Over the past fifty years a Soka Gakkai-related party has functioned on the local level and for forty years on the national level to pursue politics characterized by an interest in peace, disarmament, citizens’ well being, and religious freedom. This way, it has achieved political leverage for the corporate channel and Soka Gakkai as a religion; and the New Komeito has even entered into a coalition government. It would be interesting to study the functionality of this situation and for Soka Gakkai as a religious organization and for its corporate channel. Finally the political engagement on the international level is mainly accomplished within the framework of the UN and

UNESCO. For example, as an NGO, it has participated in the U.N. world summit in Rio de Janeiro on environmental problems and sustainable development. To prepare for this conference, SG organised a preparatory conference in Taplow Court, Great Britain.

Whereas many other preparatory conferences focused on the political, economic, scientific and technical methodologies envisioned to solve these problems, the Taplow Court conference, true to SG's vision, centred on the development of an ecological conscience and its declaration stated: "the ethics of environmental concerns are at the heart of our common future and shall abide though political movements fade, economic systems change and ideologies are eclipsed and forgotten." Indeed, the declaration insists on the spiritual values and cultural contributions, inter-religious dialogue, and education for the development of an ecological ethic, and on the important role that women and young people should play in it. In his introduction to the published document, President Ikeda underlined the role of local populations in implementing environmental protection measures. All these recommendations are in accord with the spirit of the "human revolution"—the major driving force behind social change according to the SG philosophy.

We may then conclude that Soka Gakkai, as a religion, is a driving force to promote peace and sustainable development. It is a trans-national organization with a global reach on the communication-level and through its international actions. It not only promotes its vision, SG also has an organised workforce that helps to implement its vision.

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