

Sect-Bashing in the Guise of Scholarship: A Critical Appraisal of Select Studies of Soka Gakkai

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Read the **Concluding Remarks** as an "abstract".

The special promise of the study of religion is to nurture [our] resources of tolerance for difference, our capacity to learn from the other and to respect the other. (NEUSNER 1997, p. 21)

1) Introduction

Although the basic idea is not new, the notion that we inescapably bring certain presuppositions with us to the task of understanding--that our knowledge is not, and, indeed, cannot be, a mirror-like reflection of the world--has received widespread acceptance within the last few decades. It is not just that our biological-perceptual apparatus organizes incoming sensations in a certain way or that our mental apparatus transforms these perceptions, but also that the background of our history as individuals and as collectivities is inevitably brought to bear in each act of understanding. For the task of interpreting communities of people other than our own, what this means is that we tend to characterize others in terms of differences from ourselves--often focussing our analysis on those traits we perceive as exotic or threatening.

Responding to this general perception, in the later half of the 20th century many researchers have undertaken critical re-examinations of earlier periods of scholarship, particularly the scholarship of colonialist writers. As one might anticipate, such writings are thoroughly (though often subtly) shaped by imperialist ideology and concerns. Such bias is particularly clear in the area of religious scholarship, where earlier writers all-too-often compared the religions of other peoples with Christianity, to the detriment of the former.

Reacting to the excesses of the past, contemporary academic disciplines--especially religious studies--engage in a sustained effort to refrain from expressing judgmental opinions about the customs and beliefs of others. Instead, the thrust of modern religious scholarship is on understanding rather than judging religious communities. This attitude is the current norm for academia. When this norm is broken, we assume that the writer is expressing either personal opinion or the attitude of a particular faith community.

Given this situation, no contemporary mainstream scholar would seriously consider criticizing a

traditional religion, particularly in an academic publication. For example, when a conservative Christian undertakes a polemic against another religion, we all recognize that he or she is engaged in a partisan theological exercise, and not doing objective scholarship. However, while this may be taken for granted with respect to traditions that have persisted for centuries, it seems that the point is less obvious with respect to more recent new religions, particularly when such religions have been the subject of public controversy.

Since mid-century, Japan has been swept by several waves of religious innovation, leaving the country with one of the most lively and diverse spiritual landscapes in the world. For the most part, scholars of Japanese new religions have approached the subjects of their study appropriately, giving priority to the task of understanding the place of this phenomenon in modern society. There is, however, an unfortunate counter-tendency among some academics to pen less balanced studies of highly controversial religious groups.

For half a century, one of the most controversial new religions on the Japanese scene has been Soka Gakkai. (Like many other groups characterized as new religions, this organization is a revitalization of a traditional religion rather than a truly "new" religious form.) Although this group has matured into a responsible member of society, its ongoing connection with reformist political activity has served to keep it in the public eye. It also continues to have a high profile as the result of sensationalist and often irresponsible media coverage. Apparently as a direct consequence of the social consensus against this religion, some scholars have felt free to pen harsh critiques of Soka Gakkai--critiques in which the goal of promoting understanding has been eclipsed by the task of condemning Soka Gakkai as deluded, wrong and/or socially dangerous.

This body of "scholarship" is useful for the paradigmatic manner in which it exemplifies inappropriate approaches to the study of religious bodies. After briefly surveying Soka Gakkai and articulating an humanistic perspective on emergent religions, the present paper will undertake to analyze a selection of such publications, discussing the various ways in which these writings reveal as much or more about the prejudices of the authors than about the phenomena they propose to examine.

2) Overview of Soka Gakkai International

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a Japanese Buddhist group with a comparatively large following in the United States and other Western countries. Founded in the 1930s, Soka Gakkai has grown to become Japan's largest and most controversial new religion. Although classified as a new religion, SGI's roots lie in 13th century Japan.

Like most other Japanese Buddhist groups, SGI belongs to the Mahayana school. One characteristic of many Mahayana Buddhist texts is that they extol the merit gained by reading, copying and otherwise propagating that particular scripture. Reading these claims, later generations of Buddhists were led to ask the question, Which text is the most potent? This question was the subject of debate in 13th century Japan, when the Buddhist reformer Nichiren concluded that the Saddharmapundarika (the Lotus of the True Law), better known simply as the Lotus Sutra, was the most important of all Buddhist sutras. Nichiren felt that the message contained in the Lotus Sutra was so profound that all one had to do was chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo (which can be translated in various ways, including "I dedicate myself to the Lotus Sutra") to develop wisdom and attain enlightenment as described in its pages.

Nichiren and his teachings gave rise to a monastic movement which eventually splintered into different sects. Soka Gakkai began as a movement of lay practitioners attached to the Nichiren Shoshu (Orthodox Nichiren Sect). The founder, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), was an educator who was arrested as a "thought criminal" in the pre-war period for rejecting the compulsory worship of the emperor and State Shinto as well as criticizing the Japanese militarist regime. He died in 1944, still imprisoned, having refused to compromise his ideals. After the war, Josei Toda (1900-1958) took over as president and built Soka Gakkai into a major religion. This period of rapid growth was accompanied by negative media attention. The group matured under the presidency of Daisaku Ikeda, who became the third president of Soka Gakkai after the passing of Toda.

Soka Gakkai also spread to the United States, where it attracted attention as a consequence of the intensive proselytizing activities that characterized the organization's early years. Although never as controversial as groups like the Hare Krishna Movement or the Unification Church, Soka Gakkai (which in the United States went under the name Nichiren Shoshu of America until recently) was not infrequently stereotyped as a brainwashing cult, particularly by anti-cult authors.

In recent years Soka Gakkai has been attacked in Japan because of its support of political activity that challenges the ruling coalition. Exploiting the distrust of organized religion that characterized the public reaction to AUM Shinrikyo--the Japanese religious group responsible for the 1995 poison gas attack in the Tokyo subway system--the LDP (the Liberal Democratic Party, which is the dominant party in the ruling coalition) attempted to weaken its principal political rival, the New Frontier Party, which Soka Gakkai supported. In particular, the LDP has engaged in a campaign to portray religion in general, and Soka Gakkai in particular, as being incompatible with the principles of democracy. Less than a year ago, however, the LDP did an abrupt about face, and is now allied with the New Komeito Party (the party supported by Soka Gakkai).

3) A Humanistic Evaluation of New Religions

One generally accepted observation about new religions is that periods of renewed spiritual activity occur in the wake of disruptive social and economic changes: The established vision of "how things work" no longer seems to apply, and people begin searching for new visions of meaning. Those of us who are happily adjusted to the social-cultural mainstream often have a difficult time understanding such intense religiosity. Academics have not been immune to this tendency. For instance, an earlier generation of sociologists of religion, seemingly obsessed with the issue of conversion to non-mainstream "sect" groups, gave excessive attention to explaining why individuals could become involved in such bizarre churches.

If, however, rather than dwelling on strange externals, we change our point of focus and attempt to really look at what might attract someone to an alternative religion, such involvement is not really difficult to understand. Is the attraction of transformational experiences, for example, really so hard to comprehend? What if we actually could let go of the burden of our past and be reborn as new people? Such transformation may or may not be attainable, but the attractiveness of the possibility is certainly understandable. Many non-mainstream religions hold out the promise of such life-changing experiences, and some people become involved in a religious group in the wake of a spiritual experience.

More generally, the community dimension of any religious group is the key element in initially attracting new members. We live in a society that would have been an alien world to our ancestors. Surrounded by masses of people, we rarely know the names of our closest neighbors. In traditional societies, by way of contrast, everyone in a particular village knew everyone else and took care of everyone else. Most alternative religions recreate this kind of community--a community comparable to an extended family.

The family metaphor is particularly apt. In modern society, our families are not the close emotional units they were in traditional societies. A small religious group recreates the sense of belonging to a family. If one has never experienced the closeness of a traditional family, it is easy to understand how the sense of belonging to such a social unit would be attractive, and even healing.

A similar point can be made about worldviews. In a traditional society, beliefs about the ultimate nature of the universe are largely taken for granted. In contemporary society, by way of contrast, nothing can be taken for granted except death and taxes. We are taught to be "nice" by our school system, but this moral teaching is not grounded in an ultimate source of value. We are also instructed in the basic skills necessary to operate in society, but public school teachers are quiet about the greater questions of death, purpose, and the meaning of life.

We may place a positive or a negative evaluation on this relativistic education, but in either case we have to acknowledge that modern culture's ambiguous approach to socialization departs radically from the socialization strategies of earlier societies. Our choices are always varying shades of grey rather than black and white/good and bad. The results of this ambiguity may be liberating to some people, but to others it is confusing. Without some kind of ultimate grounding this is necessarily the case.

Non-traditional religions are often criticized for offering their followers the "easy" answers that come with black-and-white thinking. However, to many of the people who belong to such religions, the seeming narrowness of such thinking can be a liberating experience: Once one has stable criteria for what is good and true, this clarity and stability can then free one to go about the business of working, loving, and living life without debilitating anxieties about meaning and value. This is not, of course, to advocate a highly-defined belief system, but rather to point out why such a system is attractive without depreciating adherents as being somehow weak or pathological.

4) Secularist Critiques

A 1976 article, "Rise and Decline of Sokagakkai Japan and the United States," by Hideo Hashimoto and William McPherson, examines the slowdown in growth Soka Gakkai was beginning to experience by the Seventies. This is a mixed piece: The authors are clearly interested in documenting and understanding an empirical phenomenon. At the same time, it is evident that they find the group distasteful, as reflected in a number of judgmental statements found at various junctures in their discussion. These statements contribute nothing to the authors' overall analysis, and only serve to make Soka Gakkai members appear defective and Soka Gakkai itself socially undesirable.

We can capture the flavor of their discourse by isolating a series of adjectives and other characterizations that they apply to the group. In Hashimoto and McPherson's view, Soka Gakkai is: simplistic, a crutch, escapist, one among many religious fads, and willing to "take advantage of the dislocations and inequities of post-war Japan" in order to gain new converts. Taken together, these items of superfluous rhetoric allow us to infer that--whatever personal faith commitments they may or may not hold--the authors are judging Soka Gakkai as "bad" in terms of a marked secularist bias, making this a useful piece to examine in terms of how secularist value-judgements interfere with the task of understanding.

The appropriate question to begin with is, Is secularism the appropriate criterion against which to judge the world of a religious community? Is it really so evident that secularism's offspring, modern mass society, should be regarded as the paragon of human possibilities, and any other social arrangement defective? To the contrary, more than a few observers would assert that, for the great majority of people, the advent of the modern world has not been an unmixed blessing. In fact, with the exception of the benefits conferred by technology, humanity as a whole was probably happier and otherwise better off living in traditional, pre-modern societies.

In spite of empirical evidence calling their assumptions into question, prior generations of scholars used adaptation to modern, secular society as the standard for judging rationality and mental health because of an implicit evolutionary paradigm that influenced them to view contemporary society as an evolutionary stage beyond traditional societies, and secularism as a step above religion. It was assumed that traditional society and religion represented an earlier, child-like stage of development and that the contemporaneous secular social order embodied humanity's emergence into mature adulthood. Any movement contrary to this hypothetical evolutionary current, such as an individual's conversion from a secular to a religious world view, was thus judged as regressive--a retreat from

maturity to childhood. As the twentieth century draws to a close, these assumptions of our "academic ancestors" now strike us as quaint and naive, but their formulations continue to influence us in subtle ways.

In many ways (as we discussed earlier), new religions partially re-establish the world of traditional communities--arguably the "natural" environment for human beings. What this means for the present discussion is that, far from being symptomatic of social pathology, perhaps the emergence of new religious movements represent a healthy (or at least a health-seeking) response to the "dislocations and inequities" of modern secular society. From this more humanistic perspective, let us re-examine a few items from Hashimoto and McPherson's rhetorical dismissal of Soka Gakkai.

To begin with a citation from the latter part of the "Rise and Decline of Sokagakkai," the authors quote, with apparent disdain, a passage from a Soka Gakkai publication which asserts that religion will "rescue (them) from the complexities of the world." (HIDEO and MCPHERSON 1976, p. 91) It is clear Hashimoto and McPherson view this assertion as advice to retreat from mature engagement with the modern world. However, to people confused by a complex, rapidly changing social environment--forced to make morally ambiguous choices in a world without ultimate meaning--it is not so self-evident that becoming an alienated cog in mass society is the most life-affirming option. Rather, it is the simplification introduced by conversion to a new religious movement that provides the context for individuals to engage in moral self-affirmation--a self-affirmation that might otherwise be stymied by the "complexities of the world."

The authors also stigmatize Soka Gakkai as "escapist." This particular characterization is interesting because of the manner in which the evaluative freight being carried by the term "escape" can be inverted when viewed from the perspective of a well-known allegory found in the third chapter of Soka Gakkai's primary scripture, the Lotus of the True Law. The relevant image is that of a burning house. The lesson of the parable revolves around the dilemma of an adult who must determine a way of helping a group of children escape from the house before they are killed in the fire. The burning building, the Lotus Sutra suggests, is like the world--it will destroy you unless you withdraw from it. In this example, it is clear that "escape" is a positive act which preserves the integrity of the individual from an impossible situation. Perhaps, then, "escaping" into a religion like Soka Gakkai could also be viewed as a positive, life-affirming act.

Escapism is also one of the charges leveled (in a less dismissive way) in H. Neill McFarland's *The Rush Hour of the Gods*, one of the first English-language books on Japanese new religions. *Rush Hour* was composed during the latter part of the middle period of Soka Gakkai's institutional life, when it was still expanding rapidly and, in the eyes of some observers, appeared on the verge of taking over Japan. During this period a number of different authors penned books that raised the specter of a country run by Soka Gakkai. These ranged from hysterical to more balanced treatments, frequently motivated by the desire to warn people that this movement was a political threat, particularly dangerous to the survival of democracy. Most of these works have since been forgotten.

Rush Hour, however, has persisted because it deals with a number of religions other than Soka Gakkai. *Rush Hour* has also persisted as a standard reference on the subject for lack of more adequate, up-to-date substitutes. While in many ways McFarland echoes the concerns of other

writers from the late Fifties and early Sixties, he also makes a concerted effort to balance his critical remarks with a more humane attempt to understand Soka Gakkai and the world of Soka Gakkai members. Despite this effort, McFarland falls back on certain stereotyped, judgmental characterizations of mass movements and their participants formulated by such analysts as Eric Hoffer.

Hoffer, for instance, describes the traits of members of social movements (including religious movements) with such terms and expressions as "a facility for make-believe," "a proneness to hate," "credulity," etc. These are presented as objective characteristics rather than as the disparaging judgments they actually represent. If one accepts this kind of discourse as normative, any participant in a mass movement must, by definition, be a flawed, weak human being. Though personally far less prejudiced, McFarland's dependence on Hoffer as his theoretical touchstone causes him to attribute the success of Soka Gakkai to "its ability to reach a person who feels that he is nobody and to impart to him new hope and purpose by showing him a fellowship and a cause within which he can find both acceptance and refuge." (MCFARLAND 1967, p. 212) Hence what the convert is offered is,

Not real freedom but fraternity and uniformity, signifying deliverance from the frustrations of independent, individual existence. . . . (p. 213)

This kind of rhetoric may have been tolerable when McFarland wrote *Rush Hour*, but is clearly inappropriate to the contemporary academic norm of viewing social movement participants humanely rather than as sociopaths.

Elsewhere, and without fully realizing the extent of his insight, McFarland notes that what many converts find in Soka Gakkai is a validation for "the rather primitive reliance upon magic and relic worship that is part of their folk-religious heritage." (p. 204) This is essentially the same point--though expressed in a partial and prejudiced manner--that was advanced in the preceding section of this paper, namely that modern new religions represent an attempt to re-establish the traditional world that is the "natural environment" of the human species.

To wind up the present section, let us consider one more item from Hashimoto and McPherson's rhetorical arsenal, namely the notion that religion is a "crutch." This particular characterization has often been leveled against religions by secularists, and religionists have sometimes heatedly denied the accusation. Let us, however, let go of the usual connotations of this criticism and instead ask, What does a crutch actually do? Are crutches necessarily bad things? To the contrary, crutches are devices that enable a person who cannot otherwise walk to exercise the power of movement. Correspondingly, many religions portray the human condition as being primarily a state of brokenness. To use the terminology of Buddha's day, human existence is *dukkha*--"out of joint." Thus the fundamental human condition is one of "crippledness," and religion is the crutch that allows us to walk through life.

The point being made here is not that religion is good while secularism is bad (or vice versa, for that matter), but, rather, that it is not self-evident that secularism should be the standard by which

religion is evaluated. Hence, instead of dismissing religion because it does not live up to secularist criteria of health and well-being, a humanistic methodology--one that tries to understand rather than judge the religions of others--should attempt to describe religionists as acting out of reasonable, life-affirming motives rather than from errors of judgment or psychopathology. While we may still disagree with them, the goal should be to avoid portraying others as weird or defective.

5) Crypto-"Theological" Critiques

Another kind of critique that academics have leveled against Soka Gakkai is that some aspect of its ideology is wrong or self-contradictory. Ted Solomon's "Soka Gakkai on the Alleged Compatibility between Nichiren Buddhism and Modern Science," for instance, examines Soka Gakkai's claims that Buddhism is scientific and that Buddhist cosmology and metaphysics are compatible with modern physics. These views are expressed in Daisaku Ikeda's writings on science and religion (IKEDA 1968), as well as in Ikeda's recorded conversation with the late Arnold Toynbee (IKEDA 1977). The goal of Solomon's critique is to demonstrate that Ikeda, the third president of Soka Gakkai, is wrong. In other words, that not only is Buddhism not scientific, but also that Ikeda is mistaken about the parallels to physics.

On the face of it, the thrust of this paper may not strike one as being unusual or as outside the pale of academic norms. There is, however, something very peculiar about a scholar--while acting in the role of a mainstream academic--developing a theological critique of a religious leader. The highly unusual nature of this approach might be more evident if we changed the context and examined a few comparable examples of this kind of argument.

Yogis sometimes claim, for instance, that the physical body is interpenetrated by a "subtle" energy body or "sheath," and that the principal structures in this parapsychical body are seven centers (chakras) lying along the spine. This subtle anatomy is the basis for certain yoga techniques, and most yogis would assert that the subtle energy sheath is "real" in a literal, non-figurative sense. Imagine, then, if a scholar of religion wrote an article contesting this claim because science is unable to demonstrate the existence of this "body" (i.e., asserting that yogis are wrong)?

Or, to take another example, imagine someone who has researched Jewish and Christian eschatology--particularly the notion of the resurrection. The same scholar has a background in the biological sciences. What then if he or she authored an academic publication in which he or she critiqued eschatological notions on the basis that resurrection was scientifically impossible, hence both Jews and Christians are deluded?

In both cases, colleagues would question the appropriateness of such criticisms. The aim of mainstream religious scholarship is not to dispute the truth of other people's religious claims, even when participants in a particular religious tradition believe such claims to be "true" in a literal, scientific sense. Rather, the goal of mainstream academic analyses with respect to religious belief systems is to determine what others believe, why they believe what they do, and what consequences holding such beliefs have for participants.

In the case at hand, it would have been more appropriate for Solomon to have questioned what led

Ikeda to explore this topic, and what advantages are gained for Soka Gakkai if the third president can convincingly demonstrate a strong compatibility between Buddhism and modern science. Instead, Solomon apparently fears that letting Ikeda's argument stand might give Soka Gakkai some legitimacy, and so feels compelled to dispute it. Such concerns are, however, theological, and hence inappropriate for a mainstream scholar.

One finds similar problems with Christina Naylor's "Nichiren, Imperialism, and the Peace Movement." This article, published less than a decade ago, is a strident polemic denouncing Soka Gakkai's involvement in the world peace movement as hypocritical. The primary basis for Naylor's denunciation is the "unpeaceful" sentiments expressed in the writings of Nichiren, the thirteenth century prophet to whom Soka Gakkai looks as the inspiration for their movement. Stripped of the apparatus of scholarly discourse, footnotes and citations, her heavy-handed critique is little more than an overheated warning to her readers that Soka Gakkai is a wolf in sheep's clothing--a message more appropriate for a journalistic venue than for an academic journal.

One wonders what could possibly have motivated Naylor to invest such passion into her article. Could it be that she is an adherent of some form of Christianity, engaged in the enterprise of attacking pagans? This seems like a reasonable guess, given the two biblical allusions she makes in order to contrast the justice and peacefulness of Western religion with Nichiren Buddhism:

There is no call for justice, mercy, love for enemies and neighbors, honest work, or a simple lifestyle such as we find in Biblical writers. (NAYLOR 1991, p. 70)

By contrast, the ideal of shalom--a just peace in which people's needs are so adequately and fairly met that they dance for joy--has inspired untold numbers of people motivated by the love of God, to pioneer or cooperate in peace programs. (p. 75)

Whether or not Naylor's theological diatribe arises out of a personal faith commitment, her mention of the Bible provides us with a perfect example with which to compare and contrast her analysis of Nichiren. Specifically, one does not have to be a devoted student of Western scriptures to know that the Bible is not exactly a blueprint for a society based on peace and love. To the contrary, the God of the Judeo-Christian scriptures is often a violent divinity who hates His enemies to the extent that He either orders His followers to destroy them, or else destroys them directly with His own power.

On the basis of these parts of the Bible, would we be justified in saying that any Christians participating in the peace movement were therefore insincere and cynical? The answer here has to be "Yes," if we judge Western religions by the same criteria to which Naylor subjects Soka Gakkai. To drive home this point, we can take one of her statements and make the appropriate substitutions so that it applies to the Western religious tradition. For instance, the last sentence in Naylor's article reads:

The claim that the inspiration for Soka Gakkai's peace programs comes from Nichiren is hard to justify. (p. 75)

Substituting Christianity for Soka Gakkai and the Bible for Nichiren, we get the following statement:

The claim that the inspiration for Christianity's peace programs comes from the Bible is hard to justify.

With these substitutions, the statement is at least as accurate as--if not more accurate than--the original.

The point here is neither to criticize Christianity nor to defend Soka Gakkai, but, rather, to demonstrate the inappropriateness of Naylor's critique: We easily recognize the unscholarly nature of such an attack when leveled against a traditional religion, but are blind-sided when the religious group in question is a highly stigmatized organization like Soka Gakkai. Yet academics must never allow themselves to be swayed by popular prejudice and lower the standards of what passes the test of sound scholarship. In the case at hand--to reiterate a point made earlier--the concerns expressed in "Nichiren, Imperialism, and the Peace Movement" are primarily theological, and hence inappropriate for mainstream scholarship.

6) Concluding Remarks

We began by noting that, although certain kinds of analyses of religion have been rejected by the academic mainstream, older patterns of prejudicial scholarship have tended to persist in the subfield of new religious movements. While there is no sound reason for continuing to permit writers to articulate judgmental points of view in this subfield, popular prejudice against minority religions has served to make many scholars "tone-deaf" to an author's biases against such religious groups.

The task the present paper set for itself was to argue against this double standard. The argument was built around an analysis of select scholarship on Soka Gakkai International, an organization chosen because it has been highly controversial and because a reasonable quantity of articles and books had been composed about the group. It was also argued that the scholar's primary goal should always be to articulate a humanly meaningful understanding of a given religion--both an understanding of the world of the participants as well as an understanding of what such religions mean for society as a whole.

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