STUDYING SOKA:
BUDDHIST CONVERSION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE
IN SINGAPORE

NEO YEOW ANN AARON
(B.Soc.Sci.(Hons). NUS)

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Department of Sociology

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Summary

This thesis seeks to show how religion, in this case Buddhism, successfully propagates in the context of the competitive religious field that is Singapore. This seeks to be an account of how Buddhism manages to compete with other religions by inhabiting and having elective affinity with certain market niches in the social body, using elements of Bourdieu's ideas of habitus applied to religion as a framework. Of additional interest to this dissertation are the nature and pattern of Buddhist conversion, the place of rationality and personal experience in conversion and the social nature of religious organization meeting needs for community in the context of Singapore.

1.1 Introduction: Propagating Buddhism and Religious Change

This dissertation came about as a result of looking at the materials written on the subject of religion and religious change over the last few decades in Singapore. On inspection, there was a plethora of material on Christianity, the expansion of the Charismatic movement in Singapore and so forth, but few recent dedicated studies of Buddhism in Singapore. A lack in the research pointed to the necessity of a study of some sort on the successful expansion of Buddhism in Singapore, in doing so also illuminating the general processes of religious conversion in Singapore by means of studying at least one concrete case, proffering a basis for comparison. Exacerbating this problem of a lack in the research was the evident shift of the statistics of religious affiliation in Singapore, showing a decrease in the rate of Christian expansion, with a concomitant continual rise in the number of religionists identifying themselves as Buddhists. By themselves the statistics could be speculatively interpreted in many ways, with the slow down in the rate of Christianity being dismissed as being normal after a pre-millennial surge in religious ascription, to Buddhist growth being considered as mere cannibalisation within the Chinese religions at the expense of its Taoist brethren. However, to answer these questions in any depth, it was necessary to lay out the nature of previous research and to properly conceptualise the nature and place of religion in Singapore before starting a research to answer such questions.

1.2 Review of the Literature

> What is conversion? Is it a mighty work of God? Or is it a human choice? Is it a dramatic emotional event in a person's life that fades as suddenly as it occurs? Or is it a gradual and growing conviction in one's minds that life's meaning and purpose lie in a particular direction?
>
> (Bryant & Lamb, 1999:1)

The study of religion and religious conversion in particular is one of the more exciting and complicated areas of study in sociology. Insights by many scholars have looked at conversion's dynamics (Gillespie, 1999), its importance and resolution as a narrative and performance (Stromberg, 1993), and even the general complexity of whether it applies equally to other religions as it does to Christianity (Dhalla, 1999; Dutton, 1999; Jakobsh 1999; Lamb, 1999; Mariner, 1999; Paper, 1999; Rao, 1999). The issue of non-conversion, when a religion fails to take root in a particular social cultural milieu, come up occasionally (Yengoyan, 1993) as do issues of how religion can sometimes be additive, rather than substitutive (Jordan, 1993; Paper, 1999) and even where religions seem to overlap 'awkward'-ly (Taylor, 1999) and perhaps uncomfortably with each other. Religion and conversion to it has also been seen more broadly in modern times as a desirable source of super-meaning (Frankl, 1984:122) or a part of a host of problematic-s that block a human's full development (Fromm, 2001:29). The latter fearful view, selectively projected on some religions and not others, has seen its full development in various responses to cults and new religious movements, well observed and discussed by scholars (Barker, 1984, 1989; Beckford, 1985, 1986, 1993). Additionally, a continuing set of problems also infests the study of religion, the issue of the division between religious theology and religious practices, the issue of the place of secular/personal conversions with regards to and vis-à-vis religious ones, and so forth. To these theoretical questions and issues, the study of religion in Singapore poses challenges and questions to theory, as much as its study has attempted to answer them in contributing to the study of religion.

Review of Singapore Studies in Religion

There has been a long and broad tradition to the study of religion in Singapore, both in terms of scholars, and of specific works. Of note to the study of major changes in the religious field in Singapore, with a focus on conversion, are works by Clammer (1978; 1990; 1991) and Tong (1989a). Many other scholars have also contributed to the understanding of Singaporean religiosity. Seminal works include Wee's (1975; 1977) insights into the complex relationship between Buddhism and the folk Chinese practice of religion that include and encompass Shenism. Shenism, itself, is most adequately covered in the classic study of spirit-medium cults by Alan J. A. Elliott (1955). This meeting point between Buddhism and folk beliefs focused on/seeking efficacy is an important trope in the study of religion in Singapore, balancing the leitmotif of increasing rationality (Tong, 1997) and freedom of expression by young religionists increasingly seeking that (Clammer, 1991). This kind of nexus with practicality and 'magic', can arguably be seen to also pop up in Yee's (1992) discussion of the place and increasing popularity of Thai monks (and their talismans) in the Singaporean religious environment, showing the durability of traditional religious expectations. Pushing further this thought further, the experiential nature of Charismatic experiences *may even be* the most significant change in Christianity that has occurred of late. This is a change that seems to fall in line with the logic of practicality and magic rather than not, especially considering the difficulty that early non-miraculous strains of Christianity had with garnering converts (Tong, 2002; Chan & Tong, 2003).

Outside the study of changes in religion in the majority ethnic Chinese of Singapore, high quality work as also been done on religious changes in the practice of Hinduism (Rajah, 1975; Sinha 1984; 1993) and Islam (Ali, 1989) in Singapore. Older studies by Hassan and Tamney (1987), as well as historical work on early Singapore (Tong, 2002; Chan & Tong, 2003), provide ballast to the alert scholar, helping one to theorise correctly that the inevitability of religious change in the directions seen today was not always so clear and self-evident.

Indeed, many valiant attempts to theorise *the nature of success* in the religious field followed, led by many young scholars. Some dealt with existentialism (Goh, 1997), others with organisation (Mathews, 1998) and most ambitiously with the issue of religious enchantment and focusing on the (Tan, 1999: iii) 'need for the Self to individuate its consciousness' against which the 'pervasive processes and social structures of formal and instrumental rationalisation, and their consequences within the local context are thus seen to exist in close tension with this quality of being'. While these approaches are worthy of study there also seemed to be space for at least one more theoretical framework and method of studying religion. Indeed, one that could account for the durability of religious forms, and at the same time theorise how success might occur in an environment with many religious options, many of whom offered *similar attractive existential, organisational and individuating solutions to the potential believer*.

In the context of the long history of Shenism, the recurrent leitmotif that I argue has been woven into many of the studies of religion in Singapore, in the religious behaviour of the Chinese of Southeast Asia (if not the Chinese in

general), the discussion of a durable religious set of expectations/forms, a religious habitus so to speak, seems almost to present itself. Religions then might be expected to 'prove' themselves by at least some of the standards of efficacy in the old religious form/habitus, sometimes even coming on top for some (Yee 1999). Additionally to theorising conversion, the use of the study of religious habitus would also entail laying out the theological and social habitus of a new successful religion, giving it as a source of study, ideally in comparison with other religious competitors in the environment to give a sense of its place in the religious field. From there, the habitus of a typical believer, complete with attendant attitudes are an important site of study. Of equal importance also, is the strain that such a religious frame imposes on the believer as he or she attempts to practical action, to live in the world so to speak. In some fortunate/unfortunate cases, non-conversion or out-conversion may also result and so the sense making of the individuals as they reject a religious habitus found unsuitable to their self becomes important.

Using Bourdieu: Religion as Habitus

Evidently, this now requires an expansion on the issue of Piere Bourdieu's concept of habitus. At the simplest level, the relation between objective and subjective structures, be they religion and religiosity or otherwise, is mediated by 'habitus'. The definition being, 'the systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action' that is 'inscribed in… bodies' by the social world and aligned towards the 'practical knowledge' (Bourdieu, 2000:138) needed to function in any particular set of social arrangements. Habitus is (Bourdieu, 1995:328) a 'structuring' structure. A person cognitively views the world through

habitus, and practices arise out of whatsoever makes up the cognitive schemata. Indeed, 'nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies', habitus creating 'a world of common sense', intimately related to the self, embedded in the very perceptions of the individual, but sharable and therefore both social and the basis of sociality.

By using habitus, a productive approach to the study of religion is provided, one that manages to circumvent some of the problems and issues in the study of religion. The study of theology becomes important, in as much as it provides and shapes the perception of the individual. Rationality becomes important in as much as it becomes an explanatory tool in a competitive environment where other paradigms of religion vie with each other. Religious habitus influences the individual by demanding a standard of action from the believer, generating visible faithful gestures as much as it induces strain that must be dealt with. Interacting with other habitus, ethnic (or even ethnic religious), class, linguistic and so forth, a richer picture of religion will come forth. With religion seen as habitus, competing with other habitus, this collapses the division between secular and religious conversions, between unproblematic and 'awkward' conversions and other problematic binaries.

This use of habitus by no means lessens religion, even is it may seem to be granted a less than exclusive place in the world. While we expect of the term religion to be a dominant habitus, above competition with other worldly claims, practically it exists as part of the world and is therefore in competition with competing claims: A situation well borne out by the study of history. However, this by no means diminishes the importance of religion to scholars. Where religion

is unique from all but a few phenomena, is that it acts very intimately on the self, inscribing new ideas in bodies, creating new relations to the world and indeed new beings by their action. By rewriting perceptions, by giving new language to describe and understand the world and human relations with it, religion and conversion are a linguistic habitus/act that mediated through the theology/paradigm of a particular ethos, reshapes an individual into something different from before. What the self is, why the self exists, where the self goes, are religious issues that touch deeper into the self than any other habitus is likely to. And, as the answer to those questions may be part of any major world religion as much as it is in Christianity, conversion as a change and acquisition of a particular habitus is certainly open to the study of other faiths. In Singapore, where class, linguistic capability and perhaps even personality can shape religious affiliation, a comparative study of conversion would seem productive as justified below.

Preliminary analysis of a Gap in Literature: Why Buddhist Conversion?

  As religious affiliation in Singapore slowly changed, scholars began to try to account for changes. Tong (1989a) studying the issue of religious conversion and revivalism in Singapore put forward the idea of a shift in religious norms due to the greater appeal of a comparatively more rational Christianity in a increasingly modernised Singapore. This rationalisation thesis began the break away towards an understanding of a more successful view of Christianity. It observed that Christianity was more suitable to the increasingly modern and educated populace was one of the first endeavours that sought to explain how and why major religious change was happening in Singapore. It is noted, among other things, for a quote whereby a believer declares that Christianity was the most

rational religion and that it provided the truth. While rightly capturing the sense of how the Chinese religions were faring at that time with the advent of serious competition from Christianity, the issue of rationality has somewhat since gone away as both Buddhism and Taoism have adapted to become increasingly theological and canonical. Therefore the lack of logically viable systematisation, seen as a major factor in their erosion, is perhaps no longer true of them. Yet, the question is then raised as to by what means is rationality an important factor when all religion does somewhat require a leap of faith into its own particular worldview. This picture is further complicated as other religious studies elsewhere, such as Wilson and Dobbelaere (1994:13) indeed noted conversely that some Buddhists have declared that 'Buddhism was realistic and compatible with scientific thinking; because its logic was inductive rather than, as in the case of Christianity, deductive'. As such, while the importance of perceived rationality has not gone away, it is important to move away from false binaries of the rationality of one religion over another, to ask what rational advantage the average practitioner sees in their religion, over their religious alternatives. That is, the sense making of the individual practitioner as he or she defines believability. With the increase in the number of educated persons taking up other religions, the association of rationality with Christianity as a causal factor in growth unavoidably becomes less of the full picture in an increasingly complicated religious landscape. Practically, in a study involved in the subject of conversion to Buddhism, the issue of rational appeal takes its natural place. This necessarily requires a sense of theology informing practices, which will be discussed at length so as to give a sense of logic-ality informing practice.

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A second approach taken was then the study of the individual appeal of a religion. Daniel Goh's thesis on the appeal of Charismatic Christianity to the existential self of the believer was one of the seminal works that began the interested study of such personal religiosity leading to conversion in Singapore. Goh's thesis was greatly concerned with the resolution of existential issues through the practice of religion, followed by the colonising of the lifeworld by believers as a means of continually resolving their existential doubt. Goh would further look into related issues of space and meaning, in a later working paper. Descriptively there, giving a snap shot of a neighbourhood charismatic fundamentalist church, Bethesda Cathedral, as it exists and looking into its concerns and practices as it sought to negotiate its identity in Singapore and achieve church growth and sustain membership. However by the time of the writing of that paper, Goh also began to demonstrate the limits of such existential expansion. In doing so, Goh incidentally touched on some demographic issues of class and age. With Bethesda situated in the 'lower-class' area of Chai Chee with an aged population, the charismatic approach of the church met with limited success despite a central focus on church growth. After limited success despite a number of 'prayer-walk' strategies in the area to 'bind the territorial spirits' holding the area from Christianity, the church later refocused on the entire Bedok region. To Goh, the 'configuration of class, language and worldview' differentiating Chai Chee from the rest of Bedok accounted for the 'U-turn' in strategy. With various factors against the expansion of the original target population, ironically attendance 'at the English services expanded quickly but the Chinese one grew very slowly', even as Bethesda began to see erosion of its

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membership to other churches who focused on a broader vision of national evangelism. Goh then concludes by speculating that the ability of Charismatic Fundamentalism to articulate 'an alternative communitarian identity' is a major factor in its success. Noting however that there seemed to be *a limit to which the expansion of such churches could continue*, Goh argued that the 'movement's success is limited by inherent weaknesses'. That being in part, the 'fragmented character of the movement, in part due to highly independent prophet-pastors competing for greater church growth amidst the soci-spatial configurations that they find themselves in'.

Following Daniel Goh, Mathew Mathews (1998) is also of significance in the study of religion success in Singapore, addressing exactly such issues touched on by Goh as church growth in a competitive environment. Mathews work is focused on the study of fast growing Independent Charismatic churches in Singapore. Observing that in the local context the majority of churches, Charismatic inclusive, were small in size and remaining stagnant, he sought to account for the increase of a church's membership through religious conversion and transfer of membership. While transfer of membership was a factor in a church's growth, a 'circulation of saints' similar to that described by other scholars, there was a concentration of growth within Pentecostal churches, *which while not the most rational form of Christianity* had a strong presence of *religious experiences that were conducive to growth*. Mathews notes that until recently in the writing of his thesis the Charismatic Churches that grew fastest where the Assemblies of God, before experiencing a substantial drop in the last few years leading up to 1998. Not every Independent Charismatic church, though offering

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similar religious experiences were growing at the same rate and reaching the same size, with 5% of Independent Charismatic churches apparently constituting 60% of total attendance in Independent Charismatic churches at the time. Matthews taking off from Goh, while noting that growth could be explained by their appeal to the existential self, argued that the majority of Churches shared in the activities that 'are held to address these needs.' Matthews therefore broadens his analysis to look at two factors ignored by Goh. One, that of a broader need fulfilment of particular groups of individuals within the environment and, two, that of effective mobilisation of members. On the second factor, Matthews further defined effectiveness as having loose but vertically co-ordinated organisational structure, dense but open networks, intensely pursued growth goals, a conductive ideology and a charismatic leader. Matthews then goes into specifics, explaining and explicating the nature of how the successful churches are so organised and specifying how they serve *certain and often very different needs depending on their niche and congregation*.

It is on the issue of need fulfilment that Vincent Chua's thesis (2000) then adds an additional dimension to the study of religion by studying the church as a site of stress and alienation. While Chua does not deny the church as a significant place of sanctuary or escape where needs are met and taken care of, he sets out to study the paradox of stress and alienation in ecclesiastical institutions. Chua observes that the majority of growth in Christianity has occurred in Charismatic 'megachurches', but closer investigation has shown what he sees as 'glitches' in the sense that growth has been continuing, but at a decreasing rate. Implicitly, in his view, local Christianity may be then reaching the saturation point in terms of

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growth, one where Christianity is nearing its absolute carrying capacity. Focusing

on the Chi Alpha campus ministry of Trinity Christian Centre, a major

demographic area of growth and recruitment as a youth and University based

outreach movement; Chua then outlines its organisation and the process of

becoming a cell leader. He additionally outlines the process of how charisma

becomes routinised in cell groups, reproducing successful leadership in an

institutional fashion through training courses. Through amalgamated ideal types as

examples of individuals, he observes how growth demands in terms of

prosetylisation impose stress on cell leaders, such as a sense of competition with

peers, multiple demands on their limited time and energy and a sense of over-

concentration on recruitment goals. Additionally, Chua takes the effort to address

the issue of newcomer alienation, a problematic state where high growth means

little time for certain new converts, leading to disillusionment and dropping out,

despite the newcomer's commitment to organisation goals. He further speculates

that *a mismatch between the newcomer's personality and the type of person

generally drawn to outreach churches may lead to a condition whereby

recognition and popularity is not forthcoming for certain people*, and that

churches may indeed actually draw people of a *particular type* into their fold.

Despite these problems, Chua notes that in the voluntary organisation that is a

church, people stay despite stress and alienation. Due to existing friendship and

social networks, the allegedly better social class status of Christianity, sense of

responsibility due to a member's sense of their centrality and therefore necessity in

social networks, personal concerns and convictions and a sense of lack of viable

alternatives, people stay as exit becomes an expensive and difficult option to take for the individual.

Taking up such issues of types and religion in further depth, a much earlier unpublished thesis by Lee Siew Peng (1988) sought to expand further the idea that Chinese Protestants were middle-class, and that such middle-classness encompassed value systems rather than just socio-economic status indicators. As such, for Lee (1988, vi), 'even individuals who may not be 'objectively middle-class' may hold middle-class values'. Taking churches as communities, she notes the ease with which 'middle-class individuals have few problems fitting into the middle-class church communities', whereas a working-class church is able to attract working-class members by a radically different method of getting into contact with non-believers. With, a very different kind of theology emphasised and a very different church culture from that of its middle-class brethren. Lee approached this by doing spot interviews with working-class individuals, participant observation as a factory worker to gain a sense of the lifeworld of a working-class individual, and observing the activities conducted by Care Corner, an interdenominational organisation seeking to evangelise Chinese-speaking blue-collar workers in Singapore. Initially focusing on socio-economic factors discouraging church involvement in the working class, due to lack of free time et cetera, Lee explains the reproduction of the middle-class church by personal outreach by middle-class individuals but argues that those seeking to aspire to the middle-class will seek affiliation nonetheless. Lee then usefully outlines the barriers to proselytising Christianity to working-class religionists who see it as western, in tension with traditional concepts of filial piety, problematic with

regards to ancestor worship, and a more accustomed informal sense of religion and membership. Ending with a discussion of Care Corner, she stresses how it *is a church middle-class Protestants would find uncomfortable*, characterised by singing of Mandarin and occasionally dialect hits, comedy skits, lucky draws and so forth, with the personally loaded claim that it did not carry 'the slightest hint that this was a Christian organisation'.[1] Its approach was also different in the sense that it stressed *practical teachings* such as those concerning 'the use and abuse of the tongue' and the teaching and the demonstration of love rather than what she perceived as 'middle-class' theologies of sin and salvation. In the Corner other differences dominated such as how, worship was designed with *carefully articulated cues so even visitors could easily take part* and the use of *personal touches* like phone calls and letters and so forth as common methods for reaching out to others. Lee then concludes that due to the working class being 'steeped in Chinese traditional religion', it makes it 'difficult to understand and accept certain teachings of the Protestant Church'.

By comparison, unlike the proselytisation attempts of Christianity as described by Lee, moving to the analysis of trends in Buddhism in the 1980s in Singapore Clammer (1991, 77) notes that in at least one case, Buddhism has had no difficulty 'expanding rapidly amongst both upper working class and white collar workers', in his opinion due to 'its simplicity, hierarchy, strong social element and its pragmatic ethics'. Overviewing a trend towards a 'protestant Buddhism', defined as 'simplified, refined, more rational, more linguistically accessible', Clammer observes that 'Buddhism in Singapore is reviving – the Mahayana School because it retained its roots in its traditional working class

Chinese membership which is mostly not attracted to other religions, the Theravada School because of its ability to modernise and Nichiren… because of its mass appeal and simplicity.' Clammer further notes that the formula for success in one of these new Buddhism revivals was due to its sense of being back to basic, its absolutist claims to truth and 'strong sense of community'. These factors made it attractive to lower middle class Chinese speakers, *precisely* the group 'neglected by Christianity and not attracted to traditional Chinese religion' in Clammer's opinion. As such, Clammer's opinion re-stresses the simple-practical (to add Lee's insight) approach as a strategy of success among the Chinese upper working class, lower middle class and white collar workers, and the necessity of a community component that Goh observes to characterise successful Charismatic expansion.

This review has not been deliberately exhaustive, but chosen to highlight a number of areas of interest in the social research. Chua and Lee's theses in particular are seldom discussed in most scholarship as they cover very specific interests in the study of religion, but the data they have collected in these minority foci raise certain points of interest that when integrated properly shed more light on the whole. As such, a number of different facts and general principles present themselves to us for analytical consideration, thanks to the contributions of Goh, Mathews, Chua and Lee. **Firstly**, religion is involved in the self and helps to resolve concerns in it in a manner useful to the individual, a factor in its success. **Secondly**, the successful expansion of a religion in a particular niche environment requires it to meet needs that exist in the social body, beyond what it may already do for the individual, and is additionally dependent on its method of mobilising its

faithful successful. **Thirdly**, the growth of a religion must be balanced by its ability to spiritually feed and fulfil its believers as they participate in the stressful work of volunteer service and propagation of the faith, even as some people through no fault of their own seem to lack an elective affinity with some religious organisations and therefore leave, even as they initially share their goals. **Fourthly**, people of various types tend to respond better to particular kinds of approaches rather than others, a major factor in engendering a sense of fit between a religious organisation and a particular niche in the social body, even as such approaches may be very different within the *same* religion and of such difference that mutual incompatibility is felt between members of the same faith but from different niches.

1.3 Rethinking Conversion: Towards the Study of Buddhist Expansion

While the above are not by any means earthshaking analytical distinctions, I feel that the study of religion in Singapore has generally skirted the larger integrated picture of religion in Singapore for niche analysis, not that that has been unproductive. As a result not much interplay between vastly different researches has been drawn out. A theory of religion attempting to be large enough to account for the place of religion in Singapore's social body, and to coherently understand and account for its various environmental niches, has yet to come forth. The overall tendency has been to look at the specifics of a particular case and assume the reality of a niche, class distinctions and so forth, without proper and exhaustive conceptual work. In light of this, I have chosen to attempt to theorise using Bourdieu's concept of habitus applied to religion, as discussed earlier. It is hoped that the study of religious change as a change of habitus will also contribute

to the little expanded area in Bourdieu's theoretical work of how change in habitus actually occurs, with a focus on the area of religious conversion. By discussing religious conversion in terms as habitus, whether class, ethnic, linguistic or as an interpenetrating mix of all three, the complex lifeworld of individuals as they confront and chose religious options, is forced to the fore of the discussion of conversion. These habitus, then analytically constitute the substance of the alleged environmental niches in the social body in Singapore that religions inhabit and compete over. For, under the rubric of concepts regarding expansion of Christianity in Singapore, the sense gained whether intentional or not, by the reading of the scholarship is inevitability in the eventual expansion of the faith in Singapore, at the expense of all others. However, it is easier to look at a successful case and assume causality arising from apparently strategic action, than to account for how various factors underlie such success, and therefore dictate what passes as effective strategy.

The idea of a shift to Christianity based on increasing rationality, existential appeal, superior need fulfilment and organisation and so forth was far from evident at the early days of social research. There are implicit questions in the study to religion. If regarding issues of rationality, then rational to whom and comparatively rational over what? If regarding existential appeal to the individual, then existentially appealing to whom and how so? If regarding social needs, who's needs, manifested as what kind, and how fulfilled? If regarding organisations, then what type of organisation? Various scholars, have explained convincingly their sociological understanding of the religious field, but these don't seem to manage to avoid giving a sense that there is an underlying assumption that only one model

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can account for, and is put forward to account for, all religious successes. Therefore, implicitly the reasons, patterns and explanations of conversion tend to be universal and take very similar forms. While this may indeed be true, it should not stand without some form of legitimate comparison, which is in part what this thesis seeks to supply. The study of Buddhist conversion thus rightly takes its place here in the scholarship of the religious landscape in Singapore at this point.

Firstly, it will be one of the few studies in recent years against the backdrop of a very well studied Christianity, the relative gap in knowledge over time being a compelling reason alone by itself. Secondly, there is a sense in the various readings that Buddhist conversion where it exists is not very different from Christian conversion, or worse yet a result of certain lacks in individuals that would implicitly otherwise chose Christianity were they so gifted, be that a more 'rational' mind or an access to a more Christian-friendly linguistic universe. Lee and others imply that a lack of English is a factor in the inability of Christianity to make inroads in certain niches, almost as if English acquisition alone is a sufficient factor to ensure conversion. With the reasonable assumption that Buddhists become Buddhists for reasons comparatively different enough to chose it over the attractive personal and sociological reasons for chose-ing Christianity already laid out by other scholars, a sketch of a successful Buddhist organisation in Singapore is a necessity in the local scholarship, as a point of comparison if nothing else. In order to avoid some form of unasked for symbolic violence, a counterpoint study must be entered into the local scholarship. Thirdly, the shifts in the local statistics of religious affiliation demonstrate that in some sense, even if only temporary, a change in direction has occurred in the trends of religious

ascription that exist at this time. In order to catch a sense of the changes that may and are likely to exist, that a research is necessary.

The Buddhist organisation that is to be the basis of a proper comparison has therefore to be successful, well-organised, with a broad appeal and if possible a global outreach to match the complex inter-flow of the Christian movement in Singapore. The study of the Soka Gakkai therefore takes its significant place as an example of successful Buddhist expansion in Singapore. With numbers making them larger than the most successful of Charismatic churches in Singapore, they are at the same time geographically spread out across the island making them not comparable to any specific community church, and so provide a good example of generic Buddhist expansion that goes beyond explanations of narrow geographically focused community affinity. They have additionally demonstrated a particular organisational structure, similar in some aspects to the cell group structure of Charismatic Christianity but different enough, though equally successful in practical application (and therefore worth giving an account of). Clammer himself has repeatedly stressed the appeal of Nichiren Buddhism, it being actually that very example of a successfully expanding Buddhism mentioned above in the context of his work. Therefore, as Clammer points out, it is a form of Buddhism that is expanding successfully among the areas that Christianity traditionally has difficulty with, and yet managing to avoid the general and overall decline of the Chinese religions. Contrary to Lee's claims (Lee, 1988: 74-76), it is also in Clammer's view successful with the Chinese working class, people whom Lee believes would have little time, energy and interest in 'the demands of Protestant pursuits' in the Singaporean context. Therefore, the form and nature of

the religiosity that the Soka Gakkai offers, is thus very worthy of study and explication.

1.4 Potential Problems and Objections

This choice, nonetheless, is likely to be of some small controversy, despite my above given justifications and these objections shall be addressed as follows. Firstly, some scholars may disagree with the characterisation of Nichiren teachings as Buddhism proper due to radical theological innovations (described later in this thesis) and due to its relatively recent age. While the researcher is not entirely qualified to discuss such categories from a purely theological point of view, the issue to my mind is to avoid complex word games in sociological research. Therefore, Buddhism, for the purposes of this study, is taken on the grounds of self-ascription and a reasonable claim to practice and some broad stylistic similarity. To go beyond that would be to make sociological religious categories overly complex. Christianity, in a similar light, might therefore be defined as solely the purview of Eastern Orthodoxy due to certain similarities to the early church, the Catholic Church by dint of length of history and the Protestant by means of numbers. Likewise, in the local scene, a distinction must be made between the age of a tradition and the length of its presence in Singapore. The relative age of the Soka Gakkai in Singapore is much greater than that of many of the much studied new Charismatic churches claiming Christian lineage, and perhaps even the older Singaporean churches that often go no further back than the 1960s (Mathews, 1998: 15). Therefore, it should be accorded a similar respect to claims with regards to legitimacy on the same point, regardless of supposed youth. As mentioned, even if the Nichiren strain of Buddhism that is practiced by the

Soka Gakkai can claim only a lineage to the 1200s or even the post-World War II period as some may argue, it is already far older than most recently founded churches in Singapore and the flourishing Pentecostal influenced Charismatic movement in Singapore.

Additionally Buddhism as it exists historically, and as it is understood popularly, are two very separately distinct things. The pastiche form of Buddhism in the popular (and especially Singaporean) imagination tends to be Mahayana in the sense of the availability of enlightenment in all lifetimes, but with an expectation of an organised sangha, or body of monks. As such, just as it may be arguable that Christianity today has no similarity to that practised two millennia ago, Buddhism has had multiple interpretations and understandings that all seek to draw on that tradition that may seem in the light of history to be problematic. It is therefore necessary to skip such definitional problems by asserting again that Buddhism belongs to those who claim to be Buddhists and who have some *reasonable grounds* to that tradition by means of claim-making regarding specific texts, transmission and/or teachings. Further discussion in the theology section of this dissertation will outline where the researcher sees the place of the Nichiren School in Buddhism as legitimate.

Secondly, there is a tendency in most scholarship to see the Soka Gakkai in rather negative terms. A study in the equally interesting subject of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore (Kuah, 2003: 231) perceived the Soka Gakkai as a 'Foreign Buddhist Sect' having a 'rigid and highly bureaucratised structure, with a tightly controlled centralised management'. Additionally, allegations include the view that its 'central committee has full authority over the running of the

Singapore branch, but is responsible to the sect's head office in Japan.' At some level, the implication is that its conversion is somehow illegitimate or, as mentioned above, non-Buddhist in some way. Clammer avoids making such value-judgmental statements while more or less outlining the very same points in a more positive and attractive manner. If Kuah is to be believed, the Soka Gakkai succeeds due to 'aggressive proselytisation', the way it 'expounds its theology' and its 'social aspect'. The main question that is of interest, as placed previously in the context of changes in habitus and market niches, is again how exactly the Gakkai succeeds in the local context. What constitutes and underlies their committed focus on conversion, their particular form of theology and their social-organisational forms are exactly aspects of religion that should be studied, leaving value-judgements to the reader. 'Aggression' should also be discussed comparatively in the Singapore context, theology in the context of the Buddhist tradition and the social aspect in the context of the local environment. As such, in view of these objections as much as in spite of them, the study of the Soka Gakkai in Singapore takes much the same shape as that outlined and implied by the literature review of this dissertation.

1.5 Statement of Purpose: Studying Buddhism

Having discussed necessity, it comes now to the intent. There is a distinction between what a dissertation is and what it does. *Studying Soka* seeks to account for the Soka Gakkai in Singapore. It is ethnographic in the sense that it accounts for the historical growth, theology, practices and discusses the 'indigenisation' in Singapore of a globally expanding Buddhist religious movement. In order to analytically do so, it is necessary to go beyond the data and

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reconfigure it in new ways not readily evident by placing it in a conceptual frame that takes into account the historical and overall changes in the social body, above and beyond the religious field. Admittedly while there is no means to ascertain the causal nature of anything in the social environment, it is hoped that this dissertation will give further thought in this direction. For the record, the research seeks primarily to give a *descriptive account* of a case of a successfully expanding Buddhist sect in Singapore, *explicating on its theology and organisation as a means of offering an explanatory background for its success* and *highlighting the approaches taken by the organisation that show elective affinity to particular niches in the religious field*. Ideally this collection of data will illuminate the segment of religious change in the social body of Singapore that has been carrying on relatively unstudied and provide a means of comparison with other cases more studied that already inform this research.

1.6 Methodology

The driving force in the execution of the research is the belief in the use of grounded theory. By extensive contact with the field, over a lengthy period of time and in different places, the researcher comes up with a fairly definite sense of the phenomena in question. This is necessarily qualitative research and so representation is always questionable, as are analytical conclusions arising from the personal vision of the researcher-observer.

The course of the research of course requires mention, as do the research decisions made in the course of study. The Singapore Soka Association (SAA) is rumoured to be notoriously hard to do research on due to various urban legends about it circulating amongst local sociologists. As such, my entry point into the

SSA was somewhat unique as I had as a budding student of sociology in the University befriended a classmate who was a youth leader of some standing in the Soka Gakkai. Having attended a few of their events over the years in University, an interest to study them arose after looking at the gaps in the study of religion in Singapore that existed at the time of beginning the research.

Gaining Permission

In a fortunate move, I intuitively decided to ask him to ask if it would be alright to do a research on the SSA, rather than submit a formal letter of interest to the SSA HQ in Singapore, an approach that had lead to rejection in the recent past (Teng, 1996). The question was relayed up from leader to leader in the hierarchy until an answer was given from someone of sufficient rank (unknown to the researcher) to make a decision and then relayed back down to me.

The answer as that though I was not supported in the manner of an 'official SSA supported research' (meaning that official statistics, information and aid would be given to me), there was no objection to my doing research on the SSA. However, I was asked by the organisation to work under some limitations. This being, that due to the personal nature of the materials spoken of during meetings and the like, I was to respectfully refrain from using recording devices on SSA property, and without the permission of individual members. While increasingly regretting the limitation of the first as the research progressed, the second was a natural part of ethical research and no major problem to agree to. As soon as I agreed, I was free to pursue my research and was helped by my contact in his personal capacity to go to more meetings and activities in the SSA.

Initial Exposure: External Observation and its limits

For around six months from the beginning of the research, I aped the life of a highly mobile SSA leader, tagging along to a wide range of activities in various parts of the SSA's membership. This was marked by going to SSA meetings all around the island and seeing the range of their membership. I attended large events attended by many believers, to small events attended by few. Geographically, I travelled from Toa Payoh to Telok Blangah to Jurong to Bedok to Tampines and more. Linguistically, I attended meetings in English, in Chinese, heard smatterings of dialect at some and even lectures on theology in Japanese but translated into both English and Mandarin. At the rate of one to two, then almost three or four meetings/activities a week, I attended in total almost a total of 60 SSA events in this period.

In these six months, my attendance of meetings gave me slowly an insight into the basic theology of the SSA, but my contact with the organization and the practice of the faith were limited at best, even as I could increasingly see that the SSA was demographically quite uniform, with most practitioners being Chinese (with a few Indian members) and in appearance to be of the working and lower middle class, with many in skilled labour, mechanics, printers, hospital staff, working as professional hawkers, working in various small businesses, starting or owning various small businesses, beauticians, insurance and property agents and so forth. On the higher end were people in middle management, working as engineers, university science professors, a doctor-in-training and the like. The lingua franca was mostly (to my ear, accented) English, occasionally Mandarin, and most often English with occasional Mandarin and dialect phrases thrown in. Meetings being very open, attendees could be as young as toddlers or babes in

arms accompanied by parents, to old retirees but the mix was quite even at most meetings with about 20-30% being in their teens or 20s, around 50-60% between 30-49 and the remaining the very old or young.

From very early on, two religious modes seemed to overlap, older religionists who seemed most interested in talking about the intervention power of the practice and younger members for whom the scriptural and theological aspect of the faith was increasingly important. That these could actually co-exist was fascinating and, as I later found, made possible by the particular theology that the SSA held to understand religious proofs. Yet, no simple answer could be reached, young members mentioned miraculous religious experiences in conversion as much as the old, rationality seemed not to conflict with experience and somehow was reconciled in the mind of the believer. Attempts to explore this were difficult as members would explain their conversion in a closed loop, stressing the goodness of the faith rather than the process of the conversion.

Concurrently, around the fourth to fifth month of the research, I branched out into attending SSA Student Division activities, with regards to one of the polytechnics in Singapore. This was productive in also seeing the range of activities and projects undertaken by the SSA, and how it come to fruit through the effort and willingness to sacrifice personal time by their believers. Young members were as likely to be male as female in being willing to sacrifice time and effort, as well their likelihood to be in a leadership position. The time, effort and personal involvement of the average SSA leader started to come to my attention at this point. Yet, even as the organisational shape became evident, the issue of

Buddhist conversion was no closer to being investigated to my distress and consternation.

Becoming Buddhist: Adopting Habitus

By the end of this period I was feeling increasingly stressed and feeling first hand effect an SSA leader's level of commitment has on one's life. I had entered into full the strain of a leader's level of commitment from the onset, and yet most certainly with none of the religious justification and frame of mind that made the dedicated individual avoid burn out. Additionally, the leader's life, while helping me shape the factual sense of what the SSA looked like, gave me no deeper answers to religious questions. At this point fortune intervened and my first contact left the country and as a favour introduced me to a few other members and arranged to have me join a regular discussion meeting, the basic monthly meeting (and in fact grouping) in the SSA. So with some sense of worry, I walked into my first meeting unaccompanied by my leader friend to a small 3-room flat with a wide and brightly lit hall in Tampines. Approaching it, the now familiar sound of chanting could be heard and I was, by now, not surprised to see that the leader who owned the flat was engaged in personal devotions 15 minutes before everyone else arrived. Knocking on the door, I introduced myself as the researcher-friend of my first contact and was welcomed in with a smile and offered a drink, to which I picked Chinese tea (and which was remembered forevermore by that leader). After chatting for sometime, another early comer (the highest ranking leader to be attending that meeting I was later to find out) joined us. Not entirely sure about the position of the SSA on practicing non-believers, I asked the two if a non-believer (and explicitly declared so as it was) could practice

chanting. To some surprise, I was told that any human being was welcome to chant and that I need not be a member or believer to do so.

This marked the turning point in my research over the next two years. Now beginning to chant, I stood out less at meetings and people felt more comfortable with me, even though I tried to make it clear to as many people as possible that I was a researcher. In addition, I slowly started to fill roles in the SSA that a normal member in good standing would, helping out at funerals, joining in songs, performing dances for the district, doing hard labour by moving tables, props, and doing general set up for major events. This rounded out my research as well as put me into contact with believers in very informal settings, where they were very open and relaxed.

Appearing as a 'new friend', who was willing (even if only as a researcher) to try chanting, more conversion narratives were forthcoming. Working to my advantage in fact, once a believer saw that I was chanting myself and yet introduced myself as a researcher, they saw me a prime candidate to tell their conversion stories, but since I was not a member did not self-consciously coach it in heavy self-referential religious terminology. Furthermore, attending various meetings would generate two to three conversion narratives a month, as believers officially shared their coming into faith, as part of the very structure and programme of these events. Saturation came earlier than not, but skewed towards the power of intervention inherent to chanting. I talked to people running booths at SSA events, people at meetings so large that I never saw them again, people at SSA fun fairs and helping to run funfairs, polytechnic students, Student Division leaders, Zone leaders, grandmothers at funerals, helpers at funerals, family men,

housewives, ex-gangsters, people who had come from convents and mission schools, or who had otherwise flirted with Christianity. I listened to conversion narratives from people with family problems, suffering from cancer, accused of crimes, surviving bankruptcy, losing jobs, with spinal injuries, fighting divorce and break-ups and so on and so forth.

After about 30 or so such accounts, most were variations of the same theme with the few outstandingly powerful accounts covering the same ground but going deeper than the rest. Most were by reasonably young people, 20-45 years of age with older narratives garnered only in informal conversations. Gender differences only showed in areas of concern rather than reasons for conversion and even then they were largely centred on similar issues of sickness, work, family problems, et cetera.

In truth, the researcher heard more male accounts (in total) to every female account, though the division between young men and older men was more even and almost half. The SSA groups members by gender and age, and so opposite gender accounts were only available at larger events. Same gender groups tend to work closely in Singapore, so there was less differential there. In all cases, concern may differ but content did not. No noticeable differences between leaders and members could be discerned either for any concerns were more likely to be similar than different between them. As members were encouraged to share their narratives, the leadership was not as overly represented as might be thought.

Towards the end of the study, the focus was shifted to further explore the conversion narratives of people that in previous research would have been assumed to become Christian and people who had problems with the faith or never

converted to the faith despite being exposed to it. The former was supplied by accounts from people from convent/mission school, people who spoke excellent well-accented English and in all intents and purposes stuck out in the SSA. More effort was spent on asking why their choice was Buddhism and not Christianity, to capture the sense of perspective of these individuals. Interviewees for the latter concern were difficult to obtain and only two cases, one male and one female, both relatively young (32 and 27 respectively) could be obtained. In these cases, the difficulty in coming to faith and the reasons for that were explored.

Leaving the field

Disengagement from the SSA was less difficult than might be thought in the case of this research. While my eventual conversion was greatly hoped for, I had admitted to having difficulties with having any faith very early on in my research, when asked by some respondents. Deciding that a slow conviction was the way to deal with me, and that hard sell would go nowhere, I was encouraged to take up faith but was mainly treated thankfully for my presence alone. When time came to work seriously on submitting my thesis, I was left pretty much alone as any child would be during their school examination period.

1.7 Limitations of Study

As outlined from the above however, some examples have been removed as there have been requests for confidentiality as some of the personal struggles of the people involved in the religion are quite intimate, and unavoidably many of the accounts are recreated from the researcher's memory and in his voice rather than being drawn from explicit interviews. Out of respect for such requests, stronger examples have also been omitted in favour of weaker ones, a necessity the

researcher regrets but as far as possible, the overall sense of the dissertation is guided analytically by the omitted portions as much as those present. Moreover, while granted access and having made my way to being a person of fairly good standing in the community, due to the major drawback of the research being the request that the researcher not use any recording devices on the property of the SSA and during its meetings and various other functions, as such a fair amount of flavour has been lost as the richest conversion narratives are shared between believers and carry on for around 15-20 minutes. As a result, in the interest of accuracy, the researcher has tried as much as possible to rely on formal interviews of people taken in confidence, comfortable and receptive to the researcher, due to familiarity with him over an extended period of time, to illuminate particular areas of interest on subject of conversion. These hopefully replicate the sense of comfort and ease in sharing that characterised the utterances occurring in the natural state. Conversion narratives abound in the Soka Gakkai in Singapore and at least one to two is in discourse at each meeting by a designated volunteer. These appear in snippets of quotations and are recollections rather than direct quotes, as the nature of meetings are long and it is not possible to remove oneself from the field (or conductive to good research as post-meeting quotations are even richer) and so these are used more gingerly by the researcher. Additive-ly though, they speak with a fairly cohesive voice and as such it is this voice that the researcher seeks to reconstruct as he writes a dissertation. I mention these in the interest of reflexive sociology and as a means to assuage any claims of inaccuracy or unrepresentative-ness that may result from the unique analysis of the research. It is hoped the usefulness of this new frame of looking at the subject of religious phenomena in

Singapore will answer any objections over questions of its absolute accuracy or reliability.

Likewise, as in many researches, bits and pieces are always leftover that find no expression in ones analytical framework and yet are what gives a sense of the whole research. These include a grandmother proudly telling me how her grandson takes to chanting with ease, the sheer number and apparent fervour of people attending, helping out and chanting at SSA funerals, small incidents like leaders of some standing getting someone unfamiliar to a member to buy food from his famous hawker stall so as to avoid getting a free meal, to the attempts of leaders to remember members personal preferences in drinks and many other such incidents. It is hoped that the details of how the SSA runs itself, therefore are taken as grounded observations over a long period of time, as they are such.

1.8 Choosing Frameworks

The above should have given a preliminary sense of what contact with the field was like and so the nature of choosing frameworks was more problematic than previously expected in order to avoid shoehorning the data into an uncomfortable and unsuitable way of looking at it. In the context of the previous scholarship, there were a number of different frameworks that presented themselves to doing this thesis.

The existential approach, similar to Goh's, would have outlined the practices of Nichiren Buddhism in its resolution of the problems of self and its concomitant issue of 'bad faith'. Problematically, it was clearly evident by the end that while religion and bad faith seem to be naturally associated concepts, the (especially Nichiren) Buddhist approach stressed personal accountability as a

fundamental, for to seek Enlightenment outside the self and from another has been roundly condemned for at least 2500 years in Buddhism. It was possible to write in this frame by seeking bad faith beneath doctrinal condemnations of such, but as bad faith is already a problematic philosophical issue, to further seek it sociologically would be far too complicated. One is forced to assume that it is not only *possible* to lie to one's self (a major disputed point) but that it is possible to lie to one's self while professing something close to a profession of existentialist independence. Additionally, while this frame was seriously considered for a time, the conclusion made by the researcher was that the type of person attracted to Nichiren Buddhism was very different from that attracted to the charms of Charismatic Christianity. It followed then that an account of such a class persons would be productive and their reasons and views of converting that would be a useful counterpart to this approach, and therefore requiring an alternative approach.

The organisational approach was considered next and was an attractive one as it dealt with issue of environmental niches and how religious entities entered and successfully engaged in the religious field. However, the very distinct theological differences between Buddhism and Christianity would be swept under in such a thesis and pre-judged as being limited value and no significance. Moreover, contrary to some of Mathews's claims the expansion of Christianity with the advent of the Charismatic movement, the claim is not as easily accepted as might be expected. Some might argue that the major expansion of the faith conversely occurred before the Charismatic endeavour and resultantly, the use of small (cell) group structures and the personal experiential-ity of the faith (through

speaking in tongues), while important in their own way, are far from sufficient to explain the shift in religiosity. If the major changes occurred before the widespread application of the new mode, the causal nature of the new mode in bringing in new converts must be questioned, as it might be merely reaping what had been brought to fruit over the passage of many years. As such, while organisation is explained in the context of this dissertation, it is stressed in a way as to show its facilitating nature in aiding Buddhist conversion in the local context, rather than as a causal factor in and of itself. In fact, as shall be seen, the form of a successful Buddhist organisation has a very different organisational structure and culture than that of comparatively successful Christian groups. While they may share the general principles mentioned by Mathews, it is their differences that contribute to their acceptance in different market niches and are therefore worth mention.

The Re-enchantment approach (Tan, 1999) would look at how religion helped to reinvigorate a sacred cage. In a sense a parallel of the existentialism framework, this was also rejected as it would require a concerted searching of the imaginative, fanciful and miraculous aspects of religion while rejecting the materialist and real-politick concerns of organisation, community involvement and need-meeting and propagation so well outlined by the previous frame. As such, it was insufficient and likewise limiting. Additionally, it fails to make sense of the very real sense of necessity that devotees approached the gaining of 'magic' to meet their need and desires in the religious field in Singapore. Re-enchantment is well and good, but some form of demonstrability of power for *very practical concerns* seems necessary in the serious adoption of *any* religion, for many of the

faithful in Singapore. In theory, any imaginative exercise would be sufficient to enchant the modern world, but re-enchantment has quite often centred itself on the practice of religion. A more historical study of Singapore religion and its antecedents was seen as to be more useful than to seek the fanciful and miraculous amongst a religion, as Clammer argues, that is successful with the working class seemingly attributable to its 'simplicity' and 'practicality'.

Lastly, with regards to frameworks, it is also necessary to stress the avoidance of symbolic violence. In a way, to take unquestioned much of the utterances of previous research on Christianity is to start with viewing Buddhism as traditionalism, irrationality and lower class superstition. Much of Lee Siew Peng's work is limited because she goes through great lengths to point out how the inferior position of the working class in Singapore must be thoroughly self-evident to them and so impact their self-esteem. As such, she assumes that certain approaches by Care Corner, such as personally addressed letters to its working class membership are something that is appreciated by working class folk and not by wealthier middle-class ones who are supposedly inundated by 'personal' letters from institutions. Other problematic observations such as how it is difficult to be interested in religion living under the work conditions of a factory system, while data rich are analytically limited considering Clammer's observation that Nichiren Buddhism is evidently colonising exactly the people who are not supposed to have the time and energy to do so. That there is a very different *religious paradigm* at play here is of importance, and it deserves to be dealt with at some length. *Attractive by what means, how and to whom*, is exactly the very point and purpose of this dissertation. That being said, a discussion of the History and Theology of

the Soka Gakkai is a now good place to start the substantative portion of the thesis.

2.1 The History and Theology of Soka Gakkai: An Overview and Context

> 'The Soka Gakkai is a unique phenomenon in modern… history.
> No other modern religious organization has succeeded in creating
> such a widespread social movement on the foundation of Buddhist
> ideals. In forty years the movement has spread throughout Japan
> and to nearly one hundred other countries, and it claims a following
> of about ten million.'
>
> (Metraux, 1988:vii)

As Metraux claims, the spread of Soka Gakkai is a significant one, mirroring the global success of Charismatic Christianity from its humble Pentecostal roots, its closest comparative example in the Singapore context. It is also a religious phenomenon that has shown somewhat sustained development. Whereas other eastern religions have perhaps been more visible than successful in garnering converts in the opinions of some, the Soka Gakkai has steadily added to its ranks and is part of the rising phenomena of truly global religions. Unlike Charismatic Christianity, it is perhaps more organized than the ad hoc confederation of internationally inspired pastors bringing a new message/interpretation of style and scripture that characterizes that movement. Unlike Catholicism, it is less standardized in terms of the messages to be preached and does not depend on a dedicated cadre of professional priesthood to see to its spiritual needs. However, as Metraux rightly points out, Soka Gakkai has a message that appears universally relevant in many countries on a foundation of 'Buddhist ideals', and therefore it is important to look at these ideals and how they are interpreted and applied from their personal understanding of Buddhist theology. A history of the Soka Gakkai is also necessary, in-as-much as it seeks to illuminate the organization as a whole to explain its success globally, as well as in Singapore and its development there. We assume, following on the contents of the
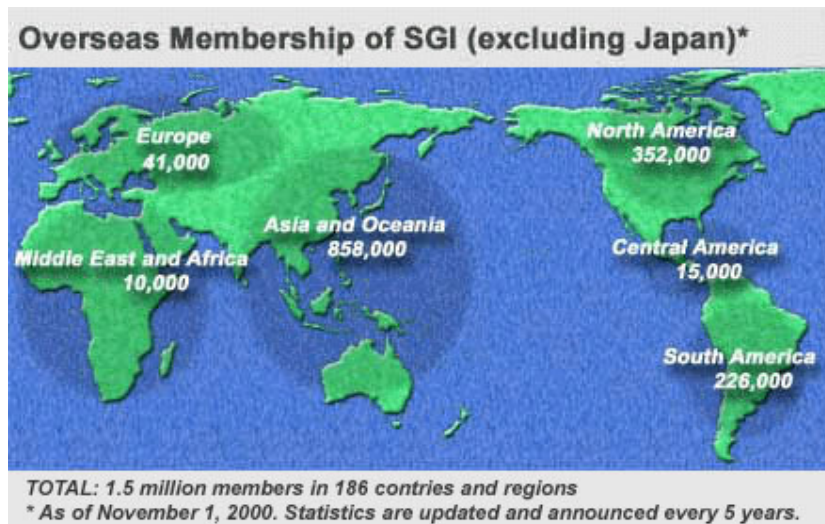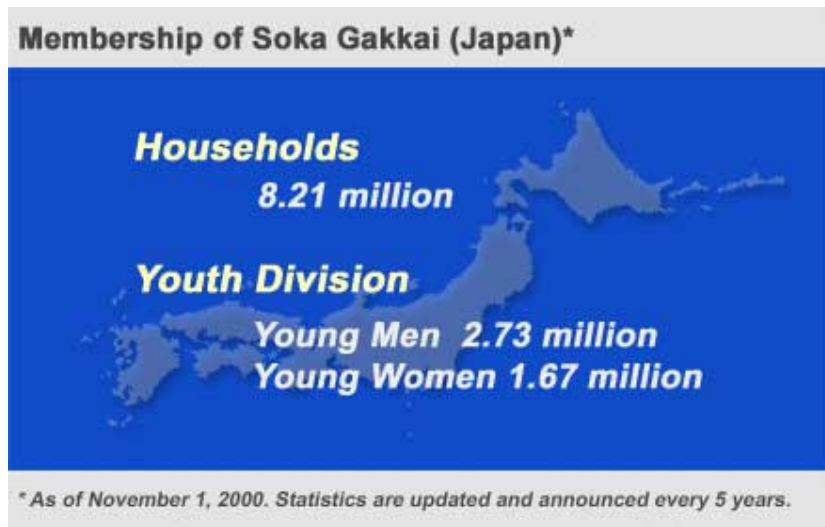
work of previous scholars, that theology somewhat more and more informs conversion in this modern era. As Singapore's populace becomes increasingly educated, a religion needs to hold its own intellectually against all other competitors with competing and compelling worldviews. Beginning with an overview of the extent of its expansion, we turn to the question of Buddhist success globally as represented by the Soka Gakkai.

2.2 Situating Soka: Soka Present in 2005

The present is perhaps an oddly apt place to start as it does not assume any pre-existing knowledge of the Soka Gakkai in the reader. The Soka Gakkai is a lay Buddhist association, originating geographically in Japan, which sees the Lotus Sutra as the penultimate of all Buddhist texts. They follow the interpretation of Nichiren Daishonin, a 13th century Buddhist monk, who they see as correctly interpreting the Buddhist scriptures for this current age.

According to the latest Soka Gakkai International estimate, the SGI has 'more than 12 million members in 188 countries and territories worldwide' and to whom the practice of Buddhism is significant as 'a practical philosophy of individual empowerment and inner transformation that enables people to develop themselves and take responsibility for their lives.' Even if we focus on a more conservative year 2000 estimate, Soka Gakkai claims to be practiced by at least 8.21 million *households* in Japan alone, with a sizeable youth membership of 4.4 million. Its global estimate of around 4 years back, places its number of global adherents to be 1.5 million members in 186 different countries. Of this global spread, the lion's share at that time came from Asia, with numbers reaching nearly a million holding to its beliefs and practices. Taken from an official SGI website,

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the figures given below are such:

Membership of Soka Gakkai (Japan)*

Households
8.21 million

Youth Division
Young Men 2.73 million
Young Women 1.67 million

* As of November 1, 2000. Statistics are updated and announced every 5 years.

Overseas Membership of SGI (excluding Japan)*

Europe 41,000
North America 352,000
Asia and Oceania 858,000
Middle East and Africa 10,000
Central America 15,000
South America 226,000

TOTAL: 1.5 million members in 186 contries and regions
* As of November 1, 2000. Statistics are updated and announced every 5 years.

(http://sokagakkai.info/html3/sg_today3/whats_sg3/whats_sg3.html)

In Singapore today, the actual membership of the Singapore Soka

Association (SSA) is currently estimated at around in excess of 25,000 households

(with the estimate of 40,000 believers occasionally mentioned) and it has

established a fair presence in the region in places such as Australia, Hong Kong,

Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The Soka Gakkai is also

very successful in terms of outreach and establishing various affiliates. In

Singapore, the SSA takes part in the National Day Parade practically every year and is locally associated with the Soka Kindergarten and the Buddhist Philosophy Research Centre. Globally, the Soka Gakkai is linked to diverse organizations such as the Soka Gakuen school system, Soka University, Soka University of America, Tokyo Soka schools, Kansai Soka schools, Toda Institute for Global Peace Policy and Research, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, Boston Research Centre for the 21st Century, the Min-On concert association and the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum. In Japan, it publishes the Seikyo Shimbun and was previously linked to the Komeito Party in the Japanese Diet, to occasional negative allegations of overt political influence. The Gakkai is also active in concert with the United Nations in areas of the environment, cultural exchange, education and nuclear disarmament, regularly coming up with Peace proposals on a yearly basis.

Not surprisingly then, the Soka Gakkai does not resemble what most Singaporeans conventionally expect of a Buddhist organization to look like. It greatly downplays the role of a priestly elect unlike other indigenized Japanese forms of religion. It does not possess the traditional monk-ly trapping of the Sangha as is common in Thai and Burmese interpretations of Theravada Buddhism. It is vastly different from the various directions that Tibetan lama-ism has taken, with a very different sense of style, aesthetic and iconography. It differs greatly in terms of meditative practice, both in purpose, technique and application from Zen/Chan. While humanistic, believing in reincarnation and valuing compassion, believers are not expected or encouraged to practice austerities such as avoiding the eating of meat or completely eschewing the drinking of alcohol. It is also exceedingly this-worldly and engaged in the moment rather than seeking

release from it in the manner that is often commonly associated with the popular

conception of Buddhist practice. Nonetheless, despite its intuitive difference from

what the layman expects from Buddhism as a religion, it has developed as such

and continues to look towards growing successfully in the near future. What this

means from the academic point of view, is that the study of the appeal of this

particular understanding is long overdue. In the Singapore case, where 'canonical'

Buddhism tends to be Sinhalese Theravada in origin and the 'common'

Mahayanan form of Buddhism being itself an originally Sini-fied and syncretic

practice that draws on many different traditions and with their own particular

doctrines, the question to ask then is how and at what level did this particular

Buddhist interpretation became acceptable and meaningful to the average

practitioner, especially in the context of many other religious alternatives and

choices (both Buddhist and otherwise).

2.3 Theology and Canon of Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism

Of necessity then is a brief understanding of the theology of the Soka

Gakkai as it affects practices. The distant roots of Soka Gakkai theology are in the

Chinese Tien-Tai school of Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra on which its doctrines

are based. It is Mahayana primarily in the sense that it begins with the assumption

that the ability to achieve enlightenment is the potential of all people. The Lotus

Sutra itself promises enlightenment to all beings, even those who were seen as

theoretically irredeemable or unable to attain Buddhahood in their lifetime by

other understandings of Buddhism, such as the incorrigibly evil, women and non-

humans beings. Therefore, in a number of points Mahayana Buddhism moves

away somewhat from the Theravada necessity of proper practice, austerities,

mindfulness and eventual incarnation as a monk in order to attain status of arhat (a person who attains enlightenment and is released from the cycles of karma and rebirth). These differences are not entirely unique to the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin alone, Mahayana Buddhism in general supports a vastly more accessible idea of Buddhist enlightenment, whether via the wordless transmission/transformation of the mind in Chan/Zen, the transfer of merit through the activity of Bodhisattvas such as Amitabha and so forth.

The Lotus Sutra itself is popularly believed to have been taught in the last 8 years of the Buddha's life. In it, previous teachings for 'voice hearers' (those who have heard the Buddha's word and follow it), 'cause-awakened ones' (the self-enlightened who perceive the truth of causality as understood in Buddhism) and bodhisattvas (those seeking enlightenment for all), these 'three vehicles' are dismissed as ends in themselves and instead relegated to only preparatory and 'expedient' means to making people ready for the supreme vehicle of Buddhahood that is the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni's ability to ensure enlightenment for all is justified in his revelation to have attained enlightenment in the infinite past, many kalpas (a lengthy measure of time in Buddhist cosmology, approximately 16,000,000 years) before, and in being part of an all-encompassing Buddha nature that seeks to enlighten all sentient beings. The Lotus Sutra, thereby not only rejects Theravada teachings as a limited precursor to the Mahayana school, but also places itself above other Mahayana sutras in claiming to be the final word on the Buddha's teachings. In the Expedient Means chapter, the Buddha is quoted as saying:

"A wonderful Law such as this is preached by the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones, at certain times. But like the blooming of the udumbara, such times come very seldom. Shariputra, you and the others must believe me. The words that the Buddhas preach are not empty or false……the Buddhas preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, but the meaning is difficult to understand. Why is this? Because we employ countless expedient means, discussing causes and conditions and using words of simile and parable to expound the teachings. This Law is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are Buddhas can understand it. …… the Thus Come Ones have only a single Buddha vehicle which they employ in order to preach the Law to living beings. They do not have any other vehicle a second one or a third one."

Instead,

"……when the age is impure and the times are chaotic, then the defilements of living beings are grave, they are greedy and jealous and put down roots that are not good. Because of this, the Buddhas, utilizing the power of expedient means, apply distinctions to the one Buddha vehicle and preach as though it were three."

In conclusion declaring such that,

"……if any of my disciples should claim to be an arhat or a pratyekabuddha and yet does not heed or understand that the Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones, simply teach and convert the bodhisattvas, then he is no disciple of mine, he is no arhat or pratyekabuddha……if there should be monks or nuns who claim that they already have attained the status of arhat, that this is their last incarnation, that they have reached the final nirvana, and that therefore they have no further intention of seeking anuttara-samyaksambodhi, then you should understand that such as these are all persons of overbearing arrogance. Why do I say this? Because if they are monks who have truly attained the status of arhat, then it would be unthinkable that they should fail to believe this Law. The only exception would be in a time after the Buddha had passed away, when there was no Buddha present in the world. Why is this? Because after the Buddha has passed away it will be difficult to find anyone who can embrace, recite, and understand the meaning of sutras such as this. But if persons at that time encounter another Buddha, then they will attain decisive understanding with regard to this Law."

However, what is most immediately unique to the Nichiren school branch

of Lotus Sutra based Buddhism is that it holds that the power and efficacy of the

Sutra itself is such that it is wholly sufficient to chant Shakyamuni's given title of the sutra to accrue the benefit of the whole. As such the **daimoku**, the chant of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra), is seen as capturing the essence of the Lotus Sutra itself, the penultimate teaching which represents the 'true entity of life', the 'fundamental mystic and ultimate law of life and the universe'. It thereby has the power to uplift and mitigate in and of itself, as the sum total of the Buddhist Law when practiced with faith in it. Under Nichiren school teachings, it thereby becomes promoted as a practice of chanting-prayer-meditation, through which people can seek to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime. By chanting and invoking the mystic law embodied in the sutra, the practitioner is thought to be able to fuse his or her life with this 'eternal and unchanging' ultimate truth of the universe, thereby raising his or her life condition to the state of Buddhahood and gaining the wisdom, compassion and courage inherent in that state. In doing so, it alleviates negative karma, creates good causes and can thereby bring benefits into the lives of the people who faithfully practice. While in the Gakkai's view from *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (NSIC: 1999, 71) 'no chapter of the Lotus Sutra is negligible', the 'Expedient means' and 'Life Span' chapters are seen as 'particularly outstanding' and are recited in practice of their daily prayers along with the chant of the daimoku (i.e. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo).

2.4 The Latter Day of the Law: From Lotus Sutra to Gosho

Due to the eschatological view held by the Soka Gakkai, The Latter Day of the Law (or mappo), is a central concept of this branch of Buddhism. Concurrent to the belief that the Lotus Sutra is most complete exegesis of Shakyamuni's

understanding, with the plethora of other Buddhist texts being in a sense only a means of preparation to bring people to the point whereby they could understand this heart of the Buddhist teachings, is the belief that the other scriptures of Shakyamuni will eventually lose their virtue after his death in the Latter Day of the Law. Mappo is the last of three periods of transmission of the Buddha's teachings, including the Former Day of the Law and Middle Day of the Law. Through these three periods, the teachings of the Buddha are taught with increasing inability to lead people to enlightenment. However, in Nichiren school doctrine the Lotus Sutra also interprets the Latter Day of the Law/mappo also as the time when it, as the Supreme Vehicle, will be propagated (Medicine King, 23rd Chapter). In this time the bodhisattva Jogyo, leading the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, will propagate the Sutra (15th) having received all of Shakyamuni's teachings as the true inheritor of his work (21st).

The authority of Nichiren Daishonin himself depends on the context of this particular Buddhist eschatological worldview. Born on the 16th of February in 1222 to the name Zennichimaro, Nichiren Daishonin struggled against what he felt were the wrongful Buddhist teachings of his day until his death in 1282 at the age of 61 in Ikegami, in a lifetime where many Buddhist scholars were interpreting as the arrival of mappo due to an era of upheaval in medieval Japan.[2] He admitted to be 'carrying out the work of Bodhisattva Jogyo' (NSIC: 1999, 320) in his own writings and subsequently after his death, he was seen by the followers of his disciple Nikko to have been the manifestation of the Bodhisattva Jogyo. To the Nichiren school, he is therefore seen as the prophesized and correct interpreter of Shakyamuni's teachings in this particular age. Additionally, in line with this

interpretation of the Lotus Sutra, Jogyo is in fact a manifestation the original

Buddha, a distinction and authority thereby shared by the Daishonin and raising

the importance of his writings, or gosho, to the level of legitimate scripture to the

Nichiren school of Buddhism. Practically speaking, practicing Soka Gakkai

members chant the daimoku and recite chapters of the Lotus Sutra in their twice

daily Buddhist prayer observance of gongyo, they turn to the gosho for inspiration

and guidance and not the Lotus Sutra. Monthly discussion group meetings, are

often focused on one of the many gosho written by the Daishonin and whereby the

significance and applicability of the particular gosho is discoursed on at length.[3]

The gosho are therefore seen as the appropriate Buddhist scripture for the Latter

Day of the Law, that is, the present time (Ikeda 2003, 1-16).

2.5 A Short Modern History of Soka Gakkai

However, the recent shape of the Soka Gakkai itself draws as much as on

the 12th century than it does on the period before World War II when it was

founded by their first President Makiguchi, and whose work was later carried on

by their second President Josei Toda. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi was a reform-

minded educator who arrived at a personal conviction that the ultimate goal of the

individual was happiness. After searching and being increasingly active with a sect

of the Nichiren school, the Nichiren Shoshu, he came to the conclusion that

religion was the 'fundamental teaching which regulates individual life' (Metraux

1988, 27) and found his solution to attaining happiness in the teachings of

Nichiren Daishonin, finding in the sect's philosophy a match with his own

thinking. Of particular importance, was a thread of ideas that linked individual

transformation as a means to transforming the whole, an approach resonant with

the earlier conceptualization of Soka as the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, originally a group dedicated to the goal social change through educational reform. Subsequently after founding in 1930, the Soka Kyoiku Gakkai gradually developed into a successful propagating Buddhist organization, claiming a following of 3000 members by 1943. That same year, Makaguchi and his protégé Toda were incarcerated by the militaristic Japanese government of the time, specifically for opposing their 1941 order to consolidate the group with other Nichiren lay groups which they somewhat saw as heretical. Dying in prison in 1944 at the age of 73, Makiguchi was survived by Toda who finally secured release in the 1945 occupation of Japan. Believed to have reached a personal breakthrough while in prison, with his release Toda began to reconstruct the collapsed Soka Kyoiku Gakkai and renamed it the Soka Gakkai By the time of his death in 1958, Toda had built an organization of nearly one million members and is believed to have laid the foundation for the spread of Nichiren Buddhism abroad. The third president, Daisaku Ikeda, then took over as Toda's most promising inheritor and continues in this position to this day. While the Soka Gakkai has formally separated from the Nichiren Shoshu it was originally affiliated with since 1992, following a disagreement with the priesthood, it has continued to expand successfully, as previously outlined, to this day.

**2.6 Structure and Organization of Soka Gakkai and the SSA**

The list of countries that hold constituent organizations linked to the SGI are divided into roughly 6 territories. North/Central America encompasses USA, Canada, Mexico, Panama, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Belize, Jamaica, Haiti, Republic of Dominica, Antigua & Barbuda,

Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, Puerto Rico. South America covers Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. Asia takes in Japan, Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Cambodia. Oceania includes Australia, New Zealand, the Federated States of Micronesia and New Caledonia. Africa accounts for Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Cote d' Ivoire, Togo, Angola, Liberia, Reunion and South Africa. While Europe is represented by France, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, Norway, Finland, Portugal, Ireland, Iceland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Greece. Of these, 9 countries house cultural centers capable of accommodating visitors, *Singapore* being one of them.

Organizationally, the Soka Gakkai does adapt locally but it generally follows a somewhat basic gender and age based demarcation structure. In Japan itself, the Soka Gakkai differentiates between its organizational structure and its administrative structure. As one of their official websites (http://sokagakkai.info/html3/sg_today3/organization3/organization_index3.html) explains:

The organization tends to be geographically based and divided up in terms of increasing size, with blocks forming districts, forming chapters all the way to regions. Other than the basic gender and age demarcations of Men's Division, Women's Division and Youth Division, in Japan the Gakkai admin structure includes the Seikyo Shimbun, auditor, study and culture departments and up to the President.
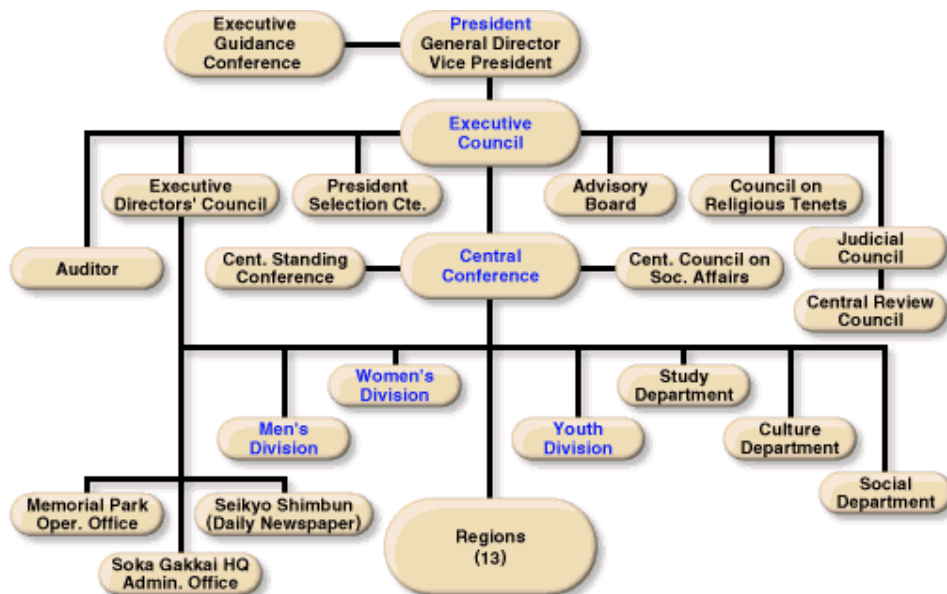
In the U.S.A., the three Divisions are augmented with a Boys and Girls Group (formed in 1993). In Singapore itself, it is common to talk of the 4D, that is the basic SSA membership structure that is 'streamlined along four main divisions namely, the Men Division (MD), Women Division (WD), Young Men Division(YMD) and Young Women Division(YWD)', of which the 'YMD and YWD collectively form the Youth Division' and 'student members are categorized into the Student Division (SD) comprising students from the tertiary institutions, and the Future Division (FD) comprising students from the primary through pre-university levels'. In practice, most small group meetings in Singapore have representatives of all the '4D' in attendance at their respective level, and a representative from any of the four representing chapter or zone as a guest.

2.7 Distinguishing marks and theological innovations

The Soka Gakkai understands itself today as part of a Mahayana form of Buddhism, based on the insight of the Lotus Sutra. It is Mahayana in the sense that it sees itself as emphasizing 'the bodhisattva practice as the means toward the enlightenment of both oneself and others, in contrast to teachings which aim only at personal salvation' (http://www.sgi.org/english/Buddhism/mahayana.htm) and in doing so distinguishes itself from what is assumable to be the perceived limitations of the Theravada tradition. That being said, enlightenment and the nature of Buddhahood are very loaded concepts, especially with regards to the teachings of the Nichiren school and need to be distinguished from other Mahayana interpretations and meaning.

In the Gakkai's own view the main conceptual importance of the Lotus Sutra is that it contained (ibid) 'a number of concepts that were revolutionary both

within the context of Buddhist teachings and within the broader social context of the time. Many of these are not stated explicitly but are implied or materialized in the dramatic and even fantastic-seeming events portrayed in the text'. The synthesis therefore can only be appreciated vis-à-vis other Buddhist traditions in their attempt to find solutions. This view can be explained as follows:

Buddhism classically is very focused on the question of the mind/mindfulness and the cultivation of wisdom, the seeing things 'as they really are' (Harvey, 1990: 244). For example, the Madhyamaka school in Mahayana philosophy, or the 'Emptiness Teaching' concludes that the path to Enlightenment is best approached by totally 'letting' go of conceptual crutches of what the world is and comprehend the true emptiness of all phenomena, undifferentiated except in mind. As such even Nirvana (enlightenment and therefore release from rebirth) and samsara (the endless cycle of birth, rebirth, suffering and death) 'are not two separate realities, but the field of emptiness'. As such the Bodhisattva 'need not seek to escape the mundane world or samsara to attain Nirvana' as 'Nirvana is something already present in samsara'. Therefore 'the task of beings, then, is not to 'attain' something that they do not already possess, but to uncover and know their Buddhaness' (ibid: 95-104).

By comparison the more meditative Yogacara school, the 'Consciousness Teaching', perceives the world as 'thought-only'. By this it means that no distinction can be made between things perceived/imagined in the mind and the 'real'. By moving beyond dualities, which is sees as 'constructed', and training the mind to realize the 'representation-only' nature of objects and reaching a transcendent knowledge of the universe. Karma, the result of the Buddhist law of

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cause and effect created by past actions (and previous lifetimes), is erased and nirvana reached by the personal transfiguration of samsara rather than by abolishing it. The attained bodhisattva then turns to the world of samsara to serve others in reaching release, working through a seemingly physical 'mind-made body'.

The Nichiren school by comparison resolves the problem of distinctions between the world of samsara and Nirvana by proposing a radical rereading of the understanding of the Buddha's life and the understanding of where and how Enlightenment is to be achieved. Just as other forms of Mahayana wrestled with the idea of where and what Nirvana was to be, locating it originally there but uncovered through 'emptiness' or by touched upon through correct non-dualistic shifts in consciousness, the Nichiren school trajectory postulates that the saha world and the world of Buddhahood are one and the same. The material/phenomenal world therefore is not empty or merely a projection of the mind but existent and yet despite this the only world in which Buddhahood is manifest and attained in. As such, retreat is possible but pointless.[4] In the place of other solutions, oneness of body and mind (and in other related teachings, of the environment and the self) is therefore seen as the correct resolution to the problem of dualism as encountered by other branches of Buddhism. Enlightenment is inherent in all people but not manifest often in the saha world and subject to influences that exist in it. By putting oneself in harmony with the Law, the inherent Buddha nature is made manifest and then transfigures the material/saha world which it is already inextricably part of.

Instead of highlighting asceticism therefore, the view of Soka Gakkai

Buddhism is that 'earthly desires are enlightenment', that while desires can be controlling, it is impossible to eliminate them completely since they are in and of themselves part of the singular continuity of life, even vital and necessary to it. It is through transforming them from self-focused ones to broadly based ones resting on compassion, that desire therefore become spiritual. As they note, while 'all of Shakyamuni's teachings were expounded for the sole purpose of solving the universal sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death, as well as to seek a way to transcend them':

> 'the solution to these four sufferings does not mean the denial of the impermanence of life. It is an awakening to the reality of the eternal and essential life, which underlies and governs the constant universal cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death. As long as one clings only to the affairs of one's daily existence in this world one cannot grasp that reality. For this reason, the Buddha taught people to transcend their daily lives, which are uncertain and fleeting, in order to overcome these sufferings. However, to realize the essential life which continues eternally, transcending both birth and death, means to establish the solid foundation of human existence within the harsh realities of this world. One's awakening to the reality of this truth must be reflected in one's daily living. In other words, it manifests itself in such phenomena as the fulfillment of material desires and physical well being. In this sense, *a promise of worldly happiness is also a part of the Buddhist teachings*.'
>
> (http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/introtobuddhism.html)

As such, the life of the Buddha himself is seen as an exemplar of this view for (ibid), 'Shakyamuni Buddha himself grew old and passed away. He was in no way entirely free of sickness, as is indicated by the statement in the Lotus Sutra, "[The Thus Come One is well and happy,] with few ills and few worries."' Instead, further stressing the issue of this-worldly-ness, it is stressed of the Lotus Sutra that (ibid):

> 'A core theme of the sutra is the idea that all people equally and

without exception possess "Buddha nature." The message of the Lotus Sutra is to encourage people's faith in their own Buddha nature, their own inherent capacity for wisdom, courage and compassion…… Shakyamuni demonstrates that he actually attained enlightenment in the infinite past, not in his current lifetime as had been assumed by his followers. This illustrates, through the concrete example of his own life, *that attaining enlightenment does not mean to change into or become something one is not. Rather, it means to reveal the inherent, "natural" state that already exists within*.'[5]

However, as 'all people are inextricably interlinked in their quest for enlightenment' the basis of personal happiness means 'that if we desire happiness ourselves, it is imperative that we work for the happiness of others'. Rather than a state of release then attaining Buddhahood is therefore a personal transformation into a more effective state of being that carries an obligation to perpetrate it out of compassion for others, which in a sense is compassion for the self since self and others are somewhat not distinguished. As such, with regards to Soka Gakkai, the Lotus Sutra is seen ultimately a teaching of empowerment. One, that teaches that the inner determination of an individual can transform everything and by doing so giving expression to the infinite potential and dignity inherent in each human life.

A catchphrase used by the Gakkai, often noted by some, makes sense only if this is understood. 'Buddhism is daily life' *because* there is no other place or state that one may find Buddhism in Nichiren Daishonin doctrine. Rejecting the idea that Buddhahood is an enlightened state approached after death, or a concurrently existing world that may be entered at some point, the saha world is the perfected world of Buddhist manifestation in itself. The this-worldliness of the Soka Gakkai is therefore ultimately supported by this worldview. Engagement is not only necessary and unavoidable but the means through which the saha world

and its desires are lived and transformed ideally to a higher state of being, through being lived positively. To accuse Nichiren doctrine of being materialist or this-worldly is to apply a value-judgment to a theological conclusion. The concern with the material world (refer to Conversion Chapter) is a major and compelling reason for belief in a religion for quite a few people, as a demonstration of efficacy and validity underlying a faith's claim to truth.

Basic Teachings

In addition to these theological peculiarities, there are also a number of basic teachings commonly referred to in the Gakkai. These precepts were historically outlined by the Chinese founder of the T'ien-t'ai sect, Chih-I in his work that was translated in Japanese as *Maka Shikan*. These concepts require some work at explanation, as they are fairly complex to those without some sense of Buddhist philosophy and thought. Of these the most important are the Ten Realms, the Ten Factors and Three Worlds, known collectively as *ichinen sanzen*.

The Ten Realms (*Jikkai*)

An inheritor of the T'ien-t'ai school of Buddhist philosophy, the Gakkai psychologises these worlds into human states. Thus a human can live his life submitting to the strong and preying on the weak and never move out of the world of animality as his dominant life state, human though his incarnation may be. An angry man will constantly manifest the world of anger/*shura* and a temporarily happy man will reach the world of heaven/rapture fleetingly in his life state. In the theology of this branch of Buddhism, this is known as *ichinen sansen*, literally three thousand in a single thought moment. The specific classification outlined by the advanced form of the theology I omit in this dissertation, but the basic ten

realms of existence as understood and explicated by the Gakkai are hell, hunger/rapacity, animality, anger/shura, humanity, heaven/rapture, learning, absorption/realization, bodhisattva, buddhahood. These are among the easiest concepts to grasp in Gakkai theology and are expounded as:

1) Hell: Life under the most painful circumstances of intolerable suffering whereby the living being is in a condition offering no escape or hope of joy, pleasure, or progress
2) Rapacity: Realm where one is dominated by desire, completely controlled by material desires for wealth, fame, or other unspiritual gains
3) Animality: Realm where one is dominated by the instincts, the human being reduced to the condition of an animal, abandoning reason and ethics for the law of the jungle
4) Anger: Realm where one is dominated by the competitive spirit, where the mind is warped by preoccupation with competition and the individual is continually driven by desire to surpass others
5) Humanity: The ordinary state of life, the individual spending life quietly occupied with everyday affairs and with memories of the past
6) Rapture: The state that results from the satisfaction of a desire or a wish
7) Learning: Realm of appreciating the joy of knowledge
8) Absorption: Realm of appreciating the joy of creation
9) Bodhisattva: Realm of desiring happiness for others
10) Buddhahood: Latent but highest state attainable by man, whereby the individual has awakened to the true nature of the universe, possesses wisdom to elucidate all universal laws, can create the highest values through his endeavors, has an unbounding life force that can alleviate all suffering and is completely enlightened about all worldly affairs

The ten realms are interpenetrating and are so called the *jikkai gogu*. As such, each of the ten realms contains all ten realms within it. Since 'each realm contains all of the ten realms within itself', the implication is 'one hundred realms.' As such, with regards to ichinen sanzen, the figure of three thousand is

reached, as all things are also believed to have ten essential factors characterizing

them, and that there are three worlds/environments that each living being can

relate to.

These ten factors, the *junyoze*, are recited three times in the reading of the

Liturgy of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin during the twice-daily prayers

known as *gongyo*. With regards to the Gakkai, these can be understood as (Ikeda,

1976):

1) Nyozeso: Form, the surface forms of all things; such as the outward expressions of the various 10 realms
2) Nyozesho: Nature, as in the inner nature, including the spirit, mind, and wisdom; again with regards to the 10 realms
3) Nyozetai: Substance, in the sense of the whole resulting from the combination of form and the inner nature; illustrated by the whole living being's form and spiritual makeup/inner nature
4) Nyozeriki: Power, the essence of inherent power/strength, both physical and nonphysical; existing only in life in motion and not in static things
5) Nyozesa: Activity, the result of inherent power, either physical or spiritual, actualized and made manifest through activity, which can result in either positive values or negative antivalues
6) Nyozein: Inherent causes, part of the causative factors that result in phenomenon; inherent causes are present in life, they cannot be known physically and are part of life in the present moment and not a thing of the past
7) Nyoze-en: External causes which supplement and so to an extent condition the effect of the inherent causes, as an external cause can activate an inherent cause; Every activity of life occurs as a consequence of contact with an external cause, differing causes can produce similar effects and the same inherent cause can produce differing effects depending on the nature of the external cause
8) Nyoze-ka: Inherent/latent effects that are linked to the inherent causes mentioned above, it is the effect produced in the living being as an outcome of the combination of inherent and external causes
9) Nyozeho: The manifest effect, that results from sequence of the inherent cause being activated by an external

cause producing the inherent effect that therefore produces the said manifest effect

10)   Nyoze-hommatsukukyoto: The synthesis of the other nine factors whereby this factor   represents the true nature of the living being in which all   other nine factors exist separately, yet are interrelated to form an integrated whole

As such, while the first three factors of form, nature and substance are concerned with describing the physical and spiritual realities of life, the remaining seven are somewhat advanced theoretical extrapolations, and are concerned with the fundamental laws that explain how life operates according to this typology and its relations of causality. As such, while the ten worlds (ibid) 'describe the conditions that life experiences', the ten factors 'are an analysis of the workings of life and the laws governing its workings in the ten realms.'

Furthermore, the three comprehensive areas in which this worldview sees 'life is manifest' are the *san-seken* or three worlds. Specifically they include:

1)   Go-on Seken: World of Aggregates, composing of all the physical and spiritual elements in the phenomenal world, such as form, perception, mental conceptions/ideas, volition and consciousness of mind

2)   Shujo Seken: World of Living Beings, where the five aggregates have temporarily come together in living beings

3)   Kokudo Seken:World of environment, with each entity having its own distinct environment, for though many entities live together in what would appear to be the same setting, the difference in relating implies an essentially different environment

Ichinen sanzen is a fundamental teaching in Nichiren Buddhism and is used informally to discuss a person's lifestate and the changes it may undergo, as well as the way in which environmental and individual causes may interact, with a view of karma. As such, it forms the basic conceptual language that the Soka Gakki uses to describe, understand and comprehend human nature, and cause and

effect. The concept above underlie a range of practices, such as the explanation of why chanting is seen as efficacious (as it raises the life condition of the individual to the world of Buddhahood) and so forth. While there are many other theological concepts of importance, *ichinen sanzen* is the most basic, despite its apparent complexity.

Extra Canonical Literature

As can be seen, even basic theology and teachings in the Gakkai are significantly dense and difficult to understand. As such, just as there has been a development of a plethora of religious writings, materials and indeed bookshops in other successfully expanding religions, the Gakkai also draws on elegant simplifications and derivations of its fundamental views in perpetrating its point of view. Both the Lotus Sutra, Tendai philosophy and the gosho have to be somewhat simplified and interpreted to be made accessible to the average lay believer. In this vein, the teachings of the Nichiren school have certain derived conclusions attached to them that have coincidentally been made by its first two Presidents, in interaction and interpretation with Nichiren theology.

Makiguchi's own thought decided that the two crucial elements to understanding life and the external world were cognition (truth) and evaluation (value), one empirical the other judgmental. Instead of placing truth above evaluation, Makiguchi came to the conclusion that the two concepts should be understood and respected equally. With happiness as the measure of personal evaluative value, happiness is important in and of itself to human beings. The quest of happiness therefore is as concurrently valuable as the quest for truth. This conclusion has resonance to the acceptance of worldly happiness in Nichiren

school doctrine and is yet very much simpler to understand and makes its way to the Gakkai's focus on living a 'value-creative' life.

Likewise, Toda's concept of Human Revolution, carried on by his inheritor Ikeda, is concerned with societal reform. Essentially, it lays onus of the problems of society, and locates the source of change, in the individual. Perhaps the flip side of the non-duality of self and environment, just as the environment is seen as a pressure/influence on the human being, conversely under human revolution, Toda's view are that (http://www.sgi.org/english/Buddhism/humanrev.htm) 'regardless of how external factors are changed, society will not fundamentally improve as long as people--the foundation of everything--fail to transform the inherent negative and destructive tendencies of their own lives.' In light of this philosophy, the strength of the single individual is therefore such that 'A great revolution of character in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a society, and further, will enable a change in the destiny of humankind'. In Soka Gakkai brochures therefore, human revolution is promoted as a 'core philisophy' and is understood as the means by which social change can occur. In a sense a derivative of the teaching of ichinen sanzen, by raising one's life-state consistently to the level of Buddhahood, the individual in overcoming the self attains the ability to change the environment regardless of circumstances.

It is these concepts, expounded on at length by various Soka writings, that make the religion somewhat more accessible to those unfamiliar with and at times ignorant of the difficult theological thinking of Nichiren Buddhism. Additionally, the various and prolific writings of the current SGI President Daisaku Ikeda on humanism (1996), youth (1998), human revolution (1998, 1999) theology (2003),

and so forth are often the first material that a would be believer comes into contact

with. In conjunction with the various SGI and SSA publications, they simplify and

explicate the life of a believer in a way that is more comprehensible and

immediately applicable than abstract theology, even as there is an apparent

theological basis for it.[6] These serve as commentaries and appendixes to the lay

believer and help in giving an idea of the overall thrust of Soka Gakkai beliefs and

practices.

Belief and Sacredness: Practicing Buddhist Prayer

From theology we then turn to the basic issue of religious practices. The

true-object-of-worship for the practicing Gakkai Buddhist is therefore the Dai

Gohonzon (the mandala personally inscribed by the Daishonin) and by extension

the gohonzon enshrined in the individual believer's home.[7] It is however a curious

relationship as while all attempts are taken to 'enshrine' the object of worship in

the conventional reverential sense, it somewhat takes second fiddle to the primary

practice of chanting and is seen as only an aid to achieving that practice.

'Offerings' of fruit, evergreen and incense are made to the gohonzon but it is

somewhat seen only to be a 'mirror' in aiding the practitioner to symbolically

work on him/herself through meditatively chanting. As such, the gohonzon can be

somewhat be dismissed as 'only a piece of paper', despite its centrality as a

mandala.[8] Faith in the gohonzon and the mystic law is necessary for practice, but a

part of the correct frame of mind, a concern with mind that is common with and

essential to the practice of most Buddhism. In this case though, the correct

observation of the mind is one where the individual observes 'one's own mind'

and finds 'the Ten Worlds within it' (as outlined earlier), thereby perceiving 'the

ultimate reality inherent in one's life'. The gohonzon thereby is the symbolic

representation of the three thousand realms in a single moment of life that Tien

Tai doctrine speaks of. As such, chanting and 'embracing' the Gohonzon, is a

form of mind observation leading to enlightenment. The dynamics are very

specific. As the official SGI website observes:

> SGI members direct their prayer to the Gohonzon, or object of
> veneration. This is a mandala, a symbolic representation of the
> ideal state of Buddhahood, or enlightenment, in which all the
> tendencies and impulses of life--from the most debased to the most
> noble--function in harmony toward happiness and creativity. The
> Gohonzon is not an "idol" or "god" to be supplicated or appeased
> but a means for reflection and a catalyst for inner change.
>   http://www.sgi.org/english/Buddhism/more/more05.htm

In practice of this, members are exhorted to 'make their prayers specific,

concrete and focused on the real-life problems, hopes and concerns they confront.'

As previously pointed out and highlighted again here, praying for fulfillment of a

wish is not contrary to the practice of this form of Buddhism as 'Nichiren

Buddhism stresses the inseparability of "earthly desires" and enlightenment.'

Indeed, for the Gakkai,

> Most fundamentally, prayer is the process of bringing forth the
> supreme state of life referred to as our "Buddha nature." A potential
> possessed equally by all people, the Buddha nature is the
> fundamental, compassionate life force inherent in the cosmos.
> Prayer is the process of realigning our individual lives (the lesser
> self, with all its impulses and desires) with the rhythm of the living
> cosmos (the greater self). In doing this we unleash previously
> untapped sources of self-knowledge, wisdom, vitality and
> perseverance. And because, in Buddhist philosophy, there is no
> separation between the internal world of human beings and their
> environment, changes that occur in our inner life are reflected in
> our external circumstances. The experience of having one's prayers
> "answered" is the manifest result of this process.
>   (ibid)

As such, in line with the Buddhistic perspectives discussed earlier, changes

in perspective and mind leading to integration with the way things truly are, lead

to changes in the material environment, from which there is in essence no real

applicable distinction. As such, the gohonzon is an environmental aid, since:

> 'Our inner life-condition changes constantly as we come into
> contact with different external stimuli…... In order to bring out our
> highest potential condition of life, our Buddhahood, we also need a
> stimulus. Nichiren's enlightenment to the law of life enabled him to
> create a stimulus that would be able to activate the life-condition of
> Buddhahood within us.'

> (ibid)

This thus somewhat provides a religious framework that is

amenable to both the practitioner who is more comfortable with religious

ritual and performance and at the same time provides a philosophical way

out for those who are uncomfortable with anything that seems irrational or

smacking of blind and meaningless practice.[9]

Theological and Practical Dissimilarities to other forms of Buddhism

Buddhism in Singapore is generally practiced under the rubric of the

Chinese Religions historically. Only of late, with the rise of more theologically

well though out activities and organizations, ranging from the Buddhist Library to

camps and classes by various Buddhist groups organized at the tertiary level, has

there been a more conscious shift from the practice of Buddhism as part of

Chinese traditional belief (ref. Vivian) to a more rationalized form of religion

similar to Christianity. However, as any cursory check would display, the majority

of Buddhist practices in Singapore are non-Nichiren school Mahayana in nature

and theology. As such, they are generally quite distinct from the Soka Gakkai in

beliefs and approach. While all share the assumption that there are universal truths

that are radical in their understanding of life and not immediately evident for those

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not awakened and taught their truths, with realization guiding subsequent action is fundamental to the quest for happiness and spiritual liberation, it is these fundamental assumptions that differ between what is traditionally understood as Buddhism and the Nichiren school leading to very practical differences.

Foremost among these differences therefore is the belief in collective weal/woe that underlies the fact that the Soka Gakkai is unavoidably a propagating religion. Buddhism in Singapore generally does not seek out converts until very recently, and even now their approach is far from aggressive. Following the trajectory of most Theravada and Mahayana thought, implicitly enlightenment must be sought rather than 'imposed' and so if the consciousness of the individual is not yet ready to seek Enlightenment; it is pointless to convince the mind of the individual otherwise. Moreover, in the framework of reincarnation, the decision to choose Buddhism has comparatively little urgency in adoption as there is in theory anyway, always another life. This is a view that can be seen to apply on the very place of conversion in Buddhism, with the traditional view to be an arena whereby personal choice was to be exclusively exercised. However, for the Soka Gakkai, the theological understanding of the unity of self and others implies the possibility of practice for self and for others, and since there are no intervening bohisattvas save manifest through the activity of real and materially incarnate people, the onus of those holding to the proper perspective *is* propagation. Without recourse to external transcendental intervention, bound in a situation whereby the worldview is collective weal or woe, the transmission of the correct perspective takes on the nature of a near necessity. While the urgency with which propagation is to be achieved is perhaps not as great as that of a Christian belief entailing the certainty

of hellfire for the un-baptized would demand, it is suffice to say that Soka Gakkai is a propagating form of Buddhism seeking converts to its view with a moral force and urgency that is unconventional to those unfamiliar with its theologically form of Buddhism. The Daishonin himself implies that that there are at least two approaches: soju and shakubuku. The former is more conventionally Buddhist to the layman as it is relatively more gentle and persuasion orientated. Shakubuku is more aggressive, and occasionally garners the Gakkai bad press when applied poorly by overzealous followers. As the Rev. Piyasilo (1988: 162-165) points out, the approach of aggressive proselytizing is to be frowned upon, whether Christian or Buddhist, by the local Buddhist community. This is a philosophical disagreement as much as a one keyed by comparatively aggressive and successful prosletization by the groups in question. This dispute can be highly unpleasant when the views and concepts of lovingkindness (metta) and compassion (karuna) are stressed by local practicing Buddhists of other schools. The Nichiren school approaches of shakubuku would this be seen as unsound and erroneous practices to those dedicated to the Dhammapada, or those familiar and approving of the approaches arising from it and other sutras similar to it. It is this theological difference affecting religious habitus that keys the dislike and friction between Soka Gakkai Buddhism and the various other strains of Buddhism in Singapore and expresses itself in negative commentary by local Buddhists in scholarly theses such as the previously mentioned work by Kuah (2003) on Reformist Buddhism in Singapore.

Similarly, unlike some interpretations of Buddhism that stress the possibility of many paths and teachings leading to Enlighntenment, the theology of

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the Gakkai as mentioned earlier, outlines a hierarchical progression of sutras and teachings that find their ultimate expression in the Lotus Sutra. 'The Law' thus becomes an unquestionable truth and misunderstanding and disparaging the truth of it has direct and real consequences for both the believer and the disbeliever alike. The slander of the Law therefore becomes a great problematic for the believer who wishes to practice this Buddhism as by implication, since there is no distinction between the interdependent self and the other and the interdependent self and the environment, error is never a personal problem and has collective implications for all. Interestingly enough though, the slanderer is not completely theologically condemned however, as while the Lotus Sutra predicts slanderers will 'destroy all seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world', Nichiren states that 'Those who put their faith in it [The Lotus Sutra] will surely attain Buddhahood, while those who slander it will establish a 'poison-drum' relationship with it and will likewise attain Buddhahood' (SGDOB, 619). In a sense then, all propagation is good propagation as the choice to either to adopt or oppose lead equally to salvation. Hell and suffering, where they exist in the Nichiren Buddhist universe, is therefore a temporary position leading to release in the however distant future. This is a curious tension as therefore, the religion is at once both ultimately inclusive but remaining highly capable of being temporally confrontational and able to definitely reject what they see as error in the here and now, depending on what is stressed. However, in terms of beliefs in absolutism the Nichiren school is much closer to the Protestant insistence in the sureness of a singular, exclusive and unquestionable revealed truth, then the multivalent belief system of local strands of Buddhism.

Lastly, it must be remembered that in terms of form, the SSA is a lay organization rather than a religious organization that is fronted by religious specialists. While the SSA employs a number of full-time staff to work at the local headquarters, practically most of its needs require to be seen to by volunteers. While this is not a problem with most religious organizations, there are a number of unique differences. In terms of religious solemnization of marriages and funerals among other social needs in the membership, lay practitioners conduct and carry out the appropriate rituals and observances. This is quite different from the expectations and practices of most other Buddhist groups and while the SSA does have the aid of their resident monk Rev. Wantanabe, his role seems largely symbolic and limited to occasional discussion of scripture with the aid of a lay practitioner translating his Japanese into Mandarin or English as appropriate. Commenting on local conditions, Mertaux notes that it is fortunate that the Reverend fits into the local conception of what a monk should be (Japanese monks being allowed to marry) and is single and abstinent to the approving eyes of older practitioners more familiar and comfortable with the idea of Theravada and Mahayana forms of monkhood. The SSA by and large is therefore more demanding of the time, effort and support of its laity than may be expected of other comparable Buddhist groups.

2.8 Soka Gakkai in Singapore: Growth, Spaces and Organization

With regards to the SSA and its spiritual and physical expansion within the nation-state of Singapore, locally the Soka Gakkai (according to oral accounts) is believed to have arrived in the 1960s with Japanese expatriates who brought the religion with them and returning Singaporeans who had been converted in Japan.

It was officially registered in 1972 and sees itself in its own publicly available flyers as 'a Buddhist society that aims to promote the understanding and practice of Nichiren Buddhism', and to whom 'Buddhism is a religion of self-empowerment' whereby 'The Buddhist practitioner cultivates innate potential and power, expressed in one's enhanced wisdom and spirituality to change life and environment towards positive growth', with a 'principle of value-creation' as 'the principle of action' and 'upheld by SGI members worldwide'.

The first SSA centre was opened in Geylang Lorong 18 in the early 1970s, apparently with the help of some personal donation by the SGI's President Ikeda, and the SSA has added steadily to that over the years. Telok Blangah Soka Centre was erected in 1984, the Pasir Panjang Soka Centre in 1987 (converted to the Soka Kindergarten from 1993 till 1998, then changed to the Soka Youth Centre in 2001) followed by the SSA HQ Building in 1993, Tampines Soka Centre in the East of Singapore and the Soka Cultural Centre in the West in 1998, and Senja Soka Centre in 2002. It has also in this time added to the range of services available to its members, with the SSA's Anle temple opened in 1997, the provision of a columbarium with the completion of the last structure in 2002, the opening of the previously mentioned Youth and Cultural Centres, a library, two bookshops and a kindergarten. Its main prayer halls have the capacity to sit a maximum of 300, 400, 500, 600, 700 and 800 depending on the venue chosen and it has moved steadily from its first arguably backwater property to strategically placed buildings seeing to the central , east, west and north of Singapore in that exact sequence. As illustrated by the placement of its various centers, the SSA generally divides itself geographically, much like its other sister organizations

around the world. In Singapore, this constitutes of Region (North, South, East and West), Zone, Chapter, District and the now defunct Group. Over time, the last was abolished with a general improvement in expansion and conversional success.[10] As such, the average SSA member therefore belongs instantly to one group based on age/gender (e.g. YMD, YWD) and another based on geographical area (e.g. District 4, Bedok Reservoir Chapter, Eunos East Zone, East Region). Depending on schooling status, either SD (e.g. Nee Ann Polytechnic SD, NPSD), FD, or none at all may apply.

This is a generally flexible system with activities happening at various levels at all times, allowing for cross-cutting socialization at all geographical levels. In the course of an average month of activities, a practitioner may go to a Regional meeting of his or her youth section, attend a Zone prayer meeting, spend a fair amount of time helping out at the district level for discussion meeting, helping out at weddings, attending funerals and going for a SD activity as appropriate to the educational level. At an even more informal level, there are invitations to support friends and fellow practitioners for various other activities/cultural events organized by other regions, zones and districts, bring a friend to a friendship meeting in order to introduce the person to the practice or socialize over a meal with the immediate people pertinent to oneself, 'seniors' and contemporaries in the organization. Additionally, occupational (e.g. medical group), age-gender specific roles may present themselves for the practitioner (e.g. Gym core, Yong Lions and Gachukai for YMD, Orchid and Lily groups for WD, handicraft and modern dance YWD, Junior chorus for FD) or general interest (choir, brass band).[11] This breadth is arguably a function of size as the SSA is a

single large religious body, as opposed to the trend of small non-denominated churches in Charismatic Christianity.

Non-believers who join any SSA activity are immediately designated as 'new friends' (literally in Mandarin, xin peng you). Believers are also distinguished from members who are officially registered with the society, which means that they have taken the additional step of enshrining the Soka Gakkai's object of devotion (Gohozon) in their home. The household-based tally system active in Japan does apply in Singapore, though for members here enshrining does not require the conversion of the entire family, but merely parental consent. The hardest figures rely on the number of gohonzons enshrined, but more informal estimates of numbers count individuals apart from the possession of a mandala but via association in their various groups as a self-declared believer. Nonetheless, even a conservative estimate would still imply that the SSA has a greater appeal than the numbers show as the numbering of believers is less accurate than that of members. The yearly National Day Parade participation by the SSA (e.g. 2001 youths in 2001) recruits beyond its own given membership and the SSA is very active in the various polytechnics and in other forms and areas of outreach.

2.9 Controversy and the Soka Gakkai: Final Notes

As a large organization of considerable resources, the Soka Gakkai is generally seen in some quarters as an organization of considerable controversy as I have indicated in my first chapter. Lewis (2000) notes, and that previous scholarship that lumps it as an New Religious Movement, whereas it is arguably a new twist to a 'traditional religion rather than a truly "new" religious form' per se according to him. While I have nothing to add to what I have already outlined in

my earlier sections, the point remains that some scholarship tends to be critical (White) of the Gakkai (or conversely pro-Gakkai for some).[12] To continue in Lewis's attempt to not perpetrate sect-bashing in the guise of scholarship, this study is focused on ethnographic knowledge of individual meaningfulness to a particular religion in a specific geo-historical climate in a very real context of religious competition. However in the interest of completeness in a history section, it is still necessary to outline some of the scholarly concerns about the Soka Gakkai in passing.

The Soka Gakkai is noted for having very close links with its spiritual head, their third President Daisaku Ikeda. This 'mentor-disciple' relationship, as this Gakkai practice is called, is fairly problematic to those who see in it some strands of hero worship or an example of mass phenomenon (White, 1970). The Soka Gakkai tends to see its leadership as inspirational and has a somewhat elevated view of its Presidents, including its current leadership. Officially though, the SGI states that 'the proper way to view our relationship with SGI President Ikeda' is one that highlights that, 'In Buddhism, every single person has the potential for enlightenment and is therefore equal. While the mentor-disciple relationship may conjure up ideas of gurus or putting another human being on a pedestal to be worshipped,' officially it is stressed that 'there is no place for that in Nichiren Buddhism.' However, the mentor-disciple relationship itself is certainly not taboo, as:

> 'The mentor-disciple relationship in Buddhism is one in which the
> mentor, having realized and put into practice the ultimate principle
> of Buddhism, devotes his or her life to passing this profound
> wisdom on to all people. Buddhism spreads person to person, and it
> is in this life-to-life exchange, one person igniting a flame in the

heart of another, where the great philosophy and wisdom of Buddhism is contained. The truth of Buddhism can be found nowhere but in the lives of ordinary people who put these teachings into practice.'

(http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/faqs/growingtogetherasequals.htm)

While the Soka Gakkai discourages worship, it freely admits to

believing very well of its living President, for to them:

> In the current era, it is none other than SGI President Ikeda who has led the way in fulfilling Nichiren Daishonin's mandate, achieving the widespread propagation of the Daishonin's philosophy of human transformation to millions of people throughout the world - an unprecedented achievement in the history of Buddhism. By virtue of his putting the Daishonin's teachings into practice with his very life and proving their validity through his selfless actions for the Law, the happiness of all people and world peace, we are able to witness in President Ikeda a mentor of truly brilliant humanity.'

(ibid)

The idea of a mentor is therefore seen as 'natural' (Ikeda having one in

Toda 'as well') and after all that 'as practitioners and followers of Nichiren

Buddhism', believers 'should study and engrave in our lives the spirit of our

original teacher and mentor, Nichiren Daishonin' in 'whose teachings form the

eternal basis of our kosen-rufu movement.' However, drawing on the various

philosophies of oneness that underlie Nichiren school teachings, believers are

exhorted to remember that 'each of our lives is a unique expression of the oneness

of life and the universe' and so 'each equally invaluable' and therefore 'Based on

the Buddhist perspective of the precious dignity of life, we should not view

ourselves in our relationship with President Ikeda as subordinate.' (SGI- USA

Study Department, August 23, 2002, World Tribune: http://www.sgi-

usa.org/buddhism/faqs/growingtogetherasequals.htm). Those more skeptical to

this tend to see their view as mere cant, and worry about some form of cult of

personality. Concerns in this light tend to mirror those of a 1995 TIME magazine (November, volume 146, No.21) expose on the Soka Gakkai which also raises the issue of undue political influence, another bugbear with regards to the Soka Gakkai.

Like the Christian Right in the U.S. and Catholicism in the Philippines and Latin America, because of the rising number of adherents in its home country of Japan concerns about the division of church and state manifest themselves occasionally with regard to the Soka Gakkai. As previously mentioned, the Soka Gakkai is associated with the Komeito Party which was formed in 1964 and met with a fair amount of electoral success. Therefore, concern is that the Komeito's appeal in elections centre on religious grounds and to its allegedly unofficial associations with the Soka Gakkai, though admittedly the party also has a broad appeal to those (http://countrystudies.us/japan/126.htm) 'outside the privileged labor union and "salarymen" circles of lifetime employment in large enterprises' as its electoral niche. Fortunately allegations of this kind are generally local to Japan, where legislation provides broad freedom to religious groups, including no taxation on religious activities.

In Singapore, where the authorities in the form of the People's Action Party government are considerably stricter at policing religious interference (Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act) with the State, the SSA has managed to avoid controversy and avoids a mention in the report on Religious Harmony conducted in the 1980s. Where it is mentioned, such as in writings on Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew's thoughts and ideas, the Soka Gakkai is seen in his opinion (and by extension, perhaps the Government's) part as a Buddhist reaction

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to aggressive Christian expansion (Han, Fernandez, Tan: 1998, 190) rather than a religious group with a local agenda. Politically therefore, it is of interest only in the context of overall religious change and expansion, which is already the main focus of the dissertation. As such, we now turn to a more in-depth descriptive account of the SSA in Singapore, as a lived organizational experience.

3.1 Buddhist Religion and Community in Singapore: SSA Singapore

The bread and butter of the SSA's work is in their grassroots outreach. Foremost of these will be the work of the smallest current grouping, the District.[13] Monthly district meetings are the corner stone of membership and the closest equivalent to anything resembling a regular religious practice. Members from the four divisions will meet up for the district meeting at the home of one of the leaders and efforts will be made by the leaders to remind others of the date and time nearing the meeting. Meetings begin with a short half-hour of chanting led by a leader acting as doshi (the leader leading the chanting) before starting with a song (or skit as may be the case) before covering the topic of the month. Various members will chip in, either to present an article they found meaningful and share it with the district in the context of Buddhism, others will be asked to talk of their experiences in practicing and problems they have overcome. Some of these contributions are formal and members are asked to prepare before the meeting, while others are informal and based on the prompting leader's personal knowledge of the member and seeing a relevant context to expound on. Meetings are therefore very structured but also maintain a great amount of flexibility in their running, giving as sense of naturalness to most people. Each speaker will address the district by greeting them with a resounding 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon' conventionally responded to by a loud collective return greeting.

At the end of an hour plus of such activity, including repeated exhortations to ask questions so as to clarify any doubts on theology and practice, meetings usually end with a senior leader giving guidance based on personal experience and from the point of view of a mature faith. Breaking afterwards, homely refreshment

is usually offered in the form of packet drinks, brewed tea, homemade dessert soups and the like, at the expense of the host leader or, occasionally during big events, with the various leaders who are in attendance chipping in. The tone of such meetings is therefore quite inclusive and comforting, with personal touches and attention to detail so as to make members feel welcome and valued.[14] Members break into small groups to chat or ask questions and leave in their own time after san sho (mandarin, san chan): chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo thrice to the gohonzon before leaving.

The experience of the SSA is therefore of a pseudo-familia, an organization conventionally structured to resemble a micro-family at all levels of involvement. The 4D working in concert require a young and old representative from each gender group, ensuring a simplified if fairly well divided demographic representation of its faithful. In terms of role relegation, the young tend to take on or are 'tasked' with more physically strenuous duties such as leading in cheers, singing, giving dance performances or laying on skits. Theological guidance and other more staid activities tend to be discoursed upon at length by the MD or WD in attendance. Sharing of life experiences in testifying to the practice of faith is across the board, people being asked to share rather informally with a broad range of experiences preferred over that of the same people over and over again. By and large, the concerns raised tend to be fairly conventional, reflecting SSA's slight demographic tendency of MDs to be breadwinners and WDs to be homemakers. MDs tend to speak of career difficulties and overcoming personal blocks, WDs tend to speak about family problems and emotional work. However, testimonies of illness are remarkably evenly spread. Members speak of their concerns from their

very real backgrounds and so a certain sense of depth and color tends to mark their narratives. When approaching the ideal, demography is evenly split from district to district and so cover a broad range of life conditions that can be related to by those in attendance. Some districts do have a disproportionate spread along age or gender lines, but the presence of 4-D members is a given in all meetings.

Chapter prayer meetings, which are the next level up, are not much different and resemble monthly discussion meetings writ large and therefore held in medium sized rooms any of the geographically appropriate Soka Gakkai buildings (called kaikan) around Singapore. They follow the same rough structure, beginning with a longer hour-long gongyo then followed by some form of performance again, be it a song, dance or skit. A member who has had a particular harrowing set of difficulties, overcome through chanting and human revolution, will share that life experience with the whole Chapter. Vigorous clapping to encourage the speaker is common, especially when describing how difficulties were overcome or in response to the member's asking rhetorical questions about the power of chanting, the need to never give up struggling and other such self-evident beliefs held by the average member in the SSA. Additionally, the Chapter Leader (mandarin: ben bu zhang) will then speak on some issue of Buddhist faith/theology, begin providing a commentary building on the member's experience shared earlier, share a guidance on their own experience of faith, or any of the 3 in combination or conjunction. Meetings are again ended with again with chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo thrice (san sho) and announcements to members may be given just before the end. Often, leaders may be asked to stay behind later for an update on the organization of upcoming activities, or to aid in

dividing up work that needs to be done in such activities. The next level of activity in terms of size are Zone-level World Peace Gongyos. These tend to be similar as well, though talks will be more focused on the issue of peace and the timeframe is shorter with the necessity of fitting the next Zone in the kaikan for their chanting session. Comparatively more sedate, the focus is more on chanting and so chanting sessions of in excess of an hour are quite common. As these are Zone events, they are held in the major prayer halls of the kai kan. World Peace Gongyos are characteristically filled to overflowing with members packed knee to knee inside the prayer halls beyond its normal seating capacity. Very often the doors at the back of the prayer hall flung open to accommodate standing members in the foyer at the back of the crowd being able to get a glimpse of the gohonzon, so as to direct their prayer.

YMD and SD meeting run on much the same lines, though marked by the organization identities expected of them by the SSA. SD also organize events such as a Gandhi, King and Ikeda (GKI) exhibition run by the SSA at their Tampines HQ building and so a lot of preparatory time may be spent doing background research and looking for materials. The YMD tend to be focused more on engendering a never-say die spirit in members, but in both, the concept of youth promoted is that of being 'the change they want to see' is stressed. YWD activities are said to be quite different and perhaps more sedate, while MD and WD meetings also have their own culture based on the needs and expectations of their respective demographic.

3.2 Living Nichiren Buddhism: Faith, Study and Practice

When faced with difficulties, we chant daimoku to solve our

problems. When sad, we take our sadness to the Gohonzon. When happy, we chant with a profound sense of appreciation. As we do so, we continue moving forward, gazing down on our troubles from the vantage of a lofty state of life. When we pray to the Gohonzon, it is as though we are surveying the entire universe, allowing us to impassively observe the sufferings that exist in our own life.

Quote by Daisaku Ikeda, mentioned at a SSA meeting

As seen from the above, the fundamental practice of faith in the SSA takes the form of chanting. Chanting as explained in the theology of the Nichiren Buddhism is the fundamental practice to attain Buddhahood. By and large, this is taken with great seriousness. Chanting is formally expected of each and every member and takes place at least twice a day with basic morning Gongyo and evening Gongyo.

In this light, most SSA activities in the early half of the day will begin with morning gongyo and those in the latter half will perform evening gongyo. This can vary in length from occasion to occasion but usually takes up a full one third of the time in any activity. Most activities run for two to three hours and chanting is minimally half an hour and often a 'standard' full hour of solid unremitting chanting. This can take proportions that seem ridiculous to non-believers; some leaders coming up to an hour before events to start chanting before the event's own chanting session even begins.[15] Even dance performance practices can start with a long chanting session, which may from a non-religious point of view seem better perhaps spent in the practice, itself.[16]

These practices of chanting are taken seriously as leaders constantly stress the centrality of chanting as the fundamental basis of practice, a so called 'Strategy of the Lotus Sutra'. This meaning that whatever the problem that besets the

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believer is, the first thing should be done is to take it to the gohonzon and pray over it. It is expected that the workings of the mystic law are more efficacious than any other conventional and secular strategy and so the way to deal with any problem starts properly with earnest prayer over it. This does not mean that secular strategies are frowned upon, as one common belief of the efficacy of chanting is seen as the manifestation of Buddha wisdom. This meaning that during or after chanting, the practitioner realizes what is the correct step/approach to take with regards to whatever troubles them. These are mundane methods, but the point is to not to look for them from the onset, but rather to deal with problems through the fundamental practice of faith.

Study in the SSA takes a number of forms. There are a plethora of study material available at any SSA bookshop that range from heavy-going theological books on Nichiren Buddhist theology to small books filled with SGI President Ikeda Sensei's guidance. Monthly discussion meetings can often cover Nichiren school concepts like the 10 worlds of Buddhism as much as serve as a basis to cover the 'Gosho of the Month' that is covered in the SSA's *Creative Life* publication. Other more formal accreditation also takes place, such as in the Student's Division or district level, where members may sit for an exam that covers basic concepts and historical dates important to the SSA. Study sessions are organized for people sitting for such exams and leaders will take the time to present the concepts and explain them in terms comprehensible by the membership. By and large though, the study aspect is a personal endeavor and pursued by individuals in their own time and at their own pace. This does not mean lack of depth, as more cerebral members are apt to have books covering

advanced resources of Nichiren school theology and be quite familiar with them.

Practice invariably means involvement in SSA activities. Seen as a natural extension arising from faith and study, the range of practice is a very broad one. While the monthly discussion meeting is the basic level of involvement, it is far from the only one. The average member looking for meaningful involvement can be whisked to any of the formally announced activities given mention on the activity list during district meetings, informally a private range of activities are available to those looking to do more. The SSA is always on the lookout for potential leaders to see to the needs of the faith and activities are a useful testing ground to training and sifting for potential leaders. Members are encouraged to engage in activities as a practical application of their faith, cementing their involvement, helping to fund the volunteerism that feeds the demands of the SSA's membership, and functioning as a crucible for growth and a means of discerning potential leaders. By and large then, the SSA provides a fairly exhaustive framework for its faithful to busy themselves with. The minimally active member may go for monthly discussion meeting, chapter prayer meeting and World Peace Gongyo chanting sessions. Those helping out and on the way to being a leader may go to the very same meetings but from the side of the organizers. Students have SD activities and initiatives to busy themselves with, as much as the informal socialization that occurs with it. Therefore, there is a broad range of areas for the potential convert to involve themselves in, whether their preference if for the grassroots work of the districts, youth in the various school divisions or other efforts.

3.3 Supporting Structures, Community and Outreach

The main macro supporting structures for the micro-level of small group leadership that characterizes the SSA are the publications of *Creative Life* and *SSA Times*. As mentioned, they are the main organs for disseminating material that end up in the monthly district discussion meeting and chapter meetings. The publications give material theologically edited to be accurate, so that leaders may be sure that they are on the right footing. Also, by following the lead of the CL articles, the SSA coordinates it such that all districts have the exact same articles and topics at the same time. The Buddhist Research Center as well as the Annual Daisaku Ikeda talks mentioned previously allow a stream of events that the SSA co-promotes and in doing so aids in their exposure. Other theological matters and exams are assisted by the Study Department. The voluminous publications of the SGI serve the same resource purpose as the additive content of Christian writings and publications that are readily available through the growing network of Christian bookstores in Singapore, material expanding on the faith and justifying and adapting it to various streams of though and consciousness.[17] The study department also takes charge of the necessity of spreading the understanding of the faith by holding the yearly doctrinal exams for the membership. These exams are divided into 3 grades, entry, basic and intermediate. Study materials are published and sold and cover basic historical and theological points in the Soka Gakkai belief system.

Other than the above mentioned district, chapter, zone and divisional activities, the SSA also organizes larger events such as formal member studies and Family Days. In the latter case, events put on include a plethora of food and games stalls, Children's Art Competitions, handicraft workshop and sales, films on Ikeda

Sensei and daimoku chanting. These are well attended and will find the broad

range of the membership turning up, helping out and generally enjoying

themselves.[18] In a broader sense, the SSA also runs the Day Education and

Activity (DEA) Programme for Senior Citizens, opened in 1998 with the purpose

of 'empowering the elderly with skills and knowledge to sustain their emotional

and social independence'. It has also been active in raising funds for the Society

for the Physically Disabled, for the Kidney Dialysis Foundation and the

Community Chest. Internationally, the SSA has supported international relief

efforts such as for flood victims in China, Turkey earthquake victims and so forth,

made to the Singapore Red Cross society. In addition, overseas trips to Myanmar

and other countries in Southeast Asia are also supported by the SSA.

Locally however, the National Day Parade is the most visible event that the

SSA involves itself in. For the SSA, the NDP seems to function as a potential

contact point for 'new friends' to encounter the organization in a non-religious

setting, as well as a place for their members to challenge themselves through the

meeting of the difficulties arising from the weeks of commitment to the Parade. It

is primarily an outreach effort, but one that no doubt leaves it on good terms with

the State. It is however a source of real pride in the SSA. The yearly National Day

Parade is time and resource consuming in terms of man-hours and volunteer

efforts, but on the few occasions whereby the SSA has thought of pulling out for a

rest, they have been apparently personally approached by the Parade Organizer to

take part and relented. At the most basis level, members promote involvement in

the National Day Parade as an espirit-de-corps building exercise par excellence.

Also, the very fact that the NDP experience is difficult and requires sacrifices is

seen as a major way for a practitioner to challenge himself/herself and attain

breakthrough and growth in their life.[19] Members are encouraged to take part,

encourage new friends to take part and, especially, take part together with their

new friends.

3.4 Funding

> Your dedicated efforts & sincere contributions have made possible
> the great development of kosen-rufu in the last 35 years. The next
> 35 years of kosen-rufu advancement will again be determined by
> your sincere contributions.
> Nichiren Daishonin highlights the great good cause of contributing
> to the noble cause of kosen-rufu by stating "Those who make
> offerings to the Lotus Sutra will receive the same benefits as they
> would by making offerings to all Buddhas & boddhisattvas in the
> ten directions…
> We deeply appreciate the donations of our members, believers &
> friends which will go a long way in supporting our various
> activities of kosen-rufu.

<div align="center">Excerpt from a September Discussion Meeting</div>

Unlike most conventional religious organizations, the SSA officially funds

itself with a yearly collection of donations from believers (Zaimu), in the month of

September. While donations are certainly not turned away, there is no equivalent

of the practice of tithing. Exhortations worded in much the same way yearly may

be heard during September, but the rest of the year then goes by without any

mention of donations. Special zaimu collections may be made when seeking to

build a new SSA building or kaikan but these are comparatively rare. Shares are

made out to members, one share costing a small fixed amount of slightly more

than S$20 and paid for by the head of the household on behalf of all the members

of the family. More than one share may be bought per person, and free offerings

by non-members are accepted in any amount given. Leaders at district meetings

issue temporary receipts and give a formal one the following district meeting. Collections are brought to the SSA HQ building in Tampines, where the cash is consolidated and put under lock and key. Funding as outlined in the above excerpt is therefore seen as a form of aid to kosen-rufu and an offering to the Lotus Sutra itself. As such, it is an albeit more passive method of accumulating good causes and thereby benefits for the believer. As such, out of faith, gratitude or a desire to accumulate merit, most believers are likely to give generously. Despite the fact that collection is yearly, the SSA seems to have more than sufficient to see to the upkeep of all its buildings and activities, with the main sacrifice of its membership being time and effort rather than money.[20]

3.5 Propagation and Retention

The shape of SSA propagation, in the light of the above, is not surprisingly along familial and friendship lines, a feature not uncommon in religion (Sng & Yao, 1980, 5-8). In terms of Nichiren Daishonin's typology, while the SSA is fond of using the term 'shakubuku' (the aggressive refutation of views in expounding Buddhism), its propagative practices are closer to 'soju' (leading others to the correct Buddhist teaching gradually/gently). As the ones' being 'shakubuku'-ed tend to be significant others, and occasionally even one's parents, there is little recourse or likelihood that any confrontational declamation of the rightness of Soka Gakkai doctrine happens, nor is that indeed likely to be successful. While members seldom use terms such as 'expedient means', most conversion accounts of successful shakubuku include an account of how the practitioner had to practice in private by chanting to the East, putting the gohonzon in their own room or having to enshrine their gohonzon a little away from the family's altar/gods.

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Therefore despite being absolutist in its claims, the SSA in the period of my research seems to promote a gentler approach in converting along familial lines, especially with regards to parents belonging to another faith. Believers are somewhat allowed to practice in private, without insisting that parents have to discard their traditional objects of worship. Some leaders counsel younger converts to let parents pray to the Gohonzon even if they keep their other gods, in the belief that the efficacy of chanting will certainly win out and told things to the effect that they are welcome to 'qi kua mai, boh bun tuai ae' (Hokkien: It is ok to let them try it out). Nonetheless, most SSA members make an effort to convert their families, in part due to the fact that membership is only granted on grounds of permission given by parents for people still living under their family's roof. Most members speak approvingly of the approach and note that sooner or later the 'actual proof' of the practice will manifest itself, and the disposal of other religious objects follows very often with the enshrining of a gohonzon, once parental figures realize the superiority of the faith.

Less ideal conditions for familial conversion also find their way to conversion narratives, that have a different but slightly similar form to the less problematic ones. Most conversion accounts accompanying admissions of poor family relations include an account of human revolution (again, often not explicit or conscious) in the life of the successful convert and propagator. Generally this takes the form of attempting to heal familial rifts by becoming a 'better' person with regards those estranged to the self. The primary means of demonstrating both genuine faith and the efficacy of religion then occur in changes to the self for the better in these cases. On witnessing the 'actual proof' in the life of the would-be

proselytizer, family members are described as becoming convinced of the validity of the faith and convert themselves. These changes range from learning to control one's hot temper, to giving up smoking, to leaving bad company, to becoming productive and reliable in the family unit. Again, efficacy is a major factor but in the case of successful conversion, the changes in the individual self towards what is seen as ideal by Gakkai standards play a major role in bringing about the conversion of others, above and beyond their own experimental knowledge of the religion. In cases such as this, the efficacy of faith is demonstrated by the actual proof of alteration of behavior in the practitioner, visible to themselves and evident to significant others.

Alongside conversion, retention is an important aspect of the faith as seen by the SSA, even if it is not explicitly emphasized. Leaders do a lot of what passes as maintenance work. Home visits are part of the scope of a leader's activities, as are seeing to funerals of members and their loved ones, occasional weddings, chanting sessions for the sick or destitute, those beset by problems and so forth. Concomitant with its local way of propagation, the issue of 'sincerity' is seen as essential to the propagation and retention of the faith. To successful shakubuku, one is ideally expected have a deep faith that is founded upon the personal experience of the faith.[21] Chanting for clearly defined goals is encouraged so that believers may 'put the gohonzon to the test' and be certain of the personal efficacy of the faith. Not surprisingly, a fair number of leaders tend to have had significant religious experiences, interpreted as miraculous. Sincerity follows from this as does the commitment required to seeing to the needs of converts facing problems. While the pattern of conversion tends to be most attractive to those having

exhausted all other avenues of succor, it does not account for the sheer amount of work necessary to bring a covert from dabbling in the faith to actually overcoming the problems arrayed, an essential step in the ideal Gakkai conversion. In light of this, leaders often have an endless series of Gakkai activities to see to and a large range of people to see, visit, dialogue with and chant together for, in order to bring them to the faith.

In light of this, and perhaps because of the work involved, conversion expectations tend to be surprisingly moderate for a proselytizing religion. Targets when they are set are yearly ones and range from 40 'Gohonzon applicants' for an entire Division, to a much more humble 1 or 2 for a district.[22] There is no sense that these expectations are additive, that a believer is expected to produce different individuals for each of the different goals. Conversely, a new member at a division is likely to end up filling a space in a district, and meeting the goals in both. Members are encouraged to be productive but the SSA does not place any more stress on conversion anymore than their own altruism and desire to accumulate benefit will dictate. Similarly, while the Soka Gakkai may be comparatively hierarchical to other faiths, there is considerable mobility. To eventually become a leader is almost an expectation after a period of growth, rather than a privilege reserved for a few. Members are encouraged to become more involved, so as to build them up slowly for leadership roles which see to the many needs of the membership. Most members who attend activities regularly to help out are proffered leadership roles, roles that they are likely to decline the first time round out of worries of time commitment or living up to the role.

3.6 Conversion In, Conversion To, and Conversion Out

This chapter has sought to give a sense of the practice of Nichiren school of Buddhism as represented by the SSA in Singapore, in the context of its global expansion and with a sense of how local practices of the faith are carried out. To my mind, the central issue is how a religion finds its environmental niche in a competitive environment. This of necessity implies that there must be suitability to preexisting conditions and a rational for adoption over other forms. The fact that Buddhist expansion has occurred concurrently with the more studied and much vaunted success of Christianity only begs the question of how the expansion could occur considering the impediments to its success and the possibility and available choice of equally attractive religious alternatives. The rest of this dissertation shall therefore deal with the issue of how people come to be converted to this form of Buddhism, how it impacts their lives and alters their beliefs and habit, and finally, the cases of people who in a similar fashion chose other religious alternatives in the light of the pull and retention factors that the first two parts will highlight. In doing so, a complete dynamic will hopefully be studied and explained in an interesting and useful manner.

4.1 Conversion to Buddhism: A Choice among Alternatives

'To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing
is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its
plausibility'

(Peter Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality*)

As Berger points out, in an era with many alternatives and possibilities the very problem is that more than one alternative is plausible to the individual. Or rather, of more interest to a sociologist, that some alternatives are plausible for *some* people and that other very different alternatives are more plausible to *other* people. In the study of Singapore religion, the earliest general, and perhaps not unfounded, perspective is that the rise of formalized Western style rational education has eroded the market share of the traditional Chinese religions. Therefore, implicitly, as modernization was to proceed apace, the rationalization of religion would be a clear expectation with the preliminary expectation of the growth and domination of Christianity. In this light, the changes in the religious landscape of Singapore from the 1950s to the 1980s have somewhat borne out these expectations. Thereafter, academic research was increasingly focused on the nature of the segment of Christianity that saw growth and the factors pertaining to that expansion. In this, the language of organizational factors began to dominate and focus was on how various, at times very different, churches successfully expanded their market share in particular niches (Refer to Chapter 1).

However, as mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the study of religious expansion cannot ignore the issue of how and why particular niches exist in a certain fixed environment. While the recourse has to be indirectly reached through historical sociology and comparative work, it is insufficient to deal with

conversion in a social context and then ignore the very local difficulties and limitations that require religious work in the first place by missionaries in the field. As such, any slow down or growth in religious expansion must be considered carefully from all angles.[23] It is in view of proposing an alternative angle/hypothesis that this chapter is written.

4.2 A Context to Conversion: Needs, Plausibility and Plausible Needs

While rationality has been the major factor discussed thus far, as Berger (1969: 46) notes, ultimately the challenge of 'the physical sciences'' to theology 'have been relatively mild.' Rationalization while certainly having an impact on religiosity, has far from eradicated it. Instead, the real problem for any one religion today in the researcher's view is as Berger puts it the 'pluralization of socially available worlds', where the comfort of existing in a community that shares only one's religious beliefs is no longer plausible or even possible. The case of Singapore certainly does not reflect Berger's context of overall erosion of religious faith, but it is clearly still relevant that religious faiths must deal with a situation that does not entail a captive market and a lack of competition.

The religious field in Singapore, to use Bourdieu's term, is therefore endemic of this competitive situation. With a world of alternatives so great in number as to make a person hesitate to commit to just one, conversion is more and more so a choice in this day and age characterized by voluntary association and inherent freedom of mobility by believers. Various social pressures and agendas may exist, but the level of free association today is arguably greater than any other time in human history, in Singapore as much as most parts of the free world. As such, religious competition entails the increasingly conscious choice of why one

religion is chosen over another in the minds of believers. Rather than being born and raised in a particular religion as a given for affiliation, even the decision to stay implies a choice. As such, one pertinent question that must be asked is how and why any successful religion becomes relevant and accepted by its converts, who these converts are and to what in them does the religion appeal. To reiterate from Chapter 1, *attractive by what means, how and to whom*, are the very questions that need to be answered.

Religions fulfill many needs and for the purpose of the study of religion in Singapore, various trajectories have been discussed in the scholarship. As mentioned earlier in the first chapter of this thesis, some argue for an existential approach (Goh), re-enchantment (Kevin's thesis) and ecological theories of voluntary affiliation (Mathews). By and large, these skip the issue of what conditions key into specific needs and from whence they arise. Also, since needs are very broadly defined, in certain cases they are all things to all people, without grounding itself in large social groupings and historically observable trajectories. Conversion in a successful organization, while fulfilling a niche in the social body, often must deal with very different demands on its resources and theology if it is to be successful. Most religious conversion in Singapore, like the success of the Soka Gakkai, can be simplified to being seen as, for now, limited to the ethnic Chinese community in Singapore. The much studied success of Charismatic Christianity itself having being largely justified on its inroads solely into that community. What this indicates, is that there must be a reason for the appeal of these very different forms of religiosity and to my mind, some strands of similarity should of necessity present itself. Furthermore, a casual study of the Soka Gakkai

in Singapore will indicate that with the exception of a fair number of Indian

brethren, the Gakkai's membership is mostly Chinese and its various activities,

take this into account.[24] As such, it behooves us to ask first ask questions about

the nature of religious conversion among the Chinese.

4.3 Chinese Conversion

Jordan (1993: 285-303) while studying voluntary religious conversion in

Taiwan, an island ethnically similar to Singapore in terms of the predominance of

ethnic Chinese (and indeed the Hokkien dialect group), observed that 'Chinese

conversion' there entailed a certain 'conditionality of belief upon other beliefs, the

additive character of conversion, and the tendency to equate new beliefs

isomorphically with earlier ones'.[25] In essence, he observes how religion is

evaluated in the light of pre-existing beliefs and justified/domesticated in those

contexts so as to resolve ambivalence about such foreignness – essentially, how a

religious habitus changes and alters itself through various tactics and claim

making. Specifically, the subject of Jordan's work was how Taiwanese Christian

converts demonstrate that 'Chinese characters contain Christian symbolism and

that Christianity is therefore a public manifestation of the same cosmological view

esoterically enshrined in Chinese characters by the sages of antiquity.' Thus the

breaching into a new religion is defined by a bridge from a more familiar logic of

practice. More importantly, as Jordan rightly argues,

> 'Conversion is not a new phenomenon in China, which has always
> been a country of religious sectarianism. Within different traditions
> the disciples of different masters have constituted themselves
> competing sects…… And adherents of one or another cult have
> always competed with each other in claims of efficacy'

> And rather than conversion being a movement from a traditional to a

rationalized religion, Jordan challenges us to reconsider and broaden our conception to include a form of conversion where 'Conversion instead (or in addition) might include moving from seeking to cure one's arthritis by praying to Mazu to seeking to cure one's arthritis by buying a charm from a newly arrived "Taoist"'.

As such, rather than simplify this to the supposed practicality of the Chinese people, the efficacy of supernatural intervention, what Karen Armstrong (1993:17) calls the transmission of 'mana' was 'a self-evident fact of life' in the ancient world and historically 'a god proved his worth if he could transmit this effectively'. As such 'pragmatism' is always a factor, whereby people 'adopt a particular conception of the divine because it worked for them' and 'not because it was scientifically or philosophically sound', a point that is very much in line with Berger. In this light, locally the practice of Shenism in Singapore, therefore while being a very specific trajectory of Chinese folk religiosity, takes the logic of spiritual efficacy to its logical conclusion. While its practices are syncretic, this is only from a limited outside point of view. Rather, the Shenist in fact *successfully integrates* various faiths into their practices based solely on their claims to efficacy, taking over deities of other religions and treating them as shen according to these claims of efficacy (Wee, 1976:173). As such it makes no difference if the Shen is a sinified and feminized South Asian bohisattva such as Avalokitesvara (better known as Kuan Yin), a literary figure imagined by a scholar such as the Monkey God, the Image of Our Lady of Perpetual Succor in Novena Church in Singapore or a roadside shrine inhabited by a local terrestrial power be it jinn, kami or elemental spirit. This 'most typical, although rather extreme,

manifestation of the major religious orientation of the overseas Chinese' has a worldview of competing powers but for the individual believer, faith is based on the *individual efficacy of that deity to the person in question*. In shenist spirit mediumship, 'a spiritual being of vast and undefined powers possesses the body of a human medium and enables him to inflict injury upon himself without feeling pain, and to speak with divine wisdom, giving advice to worshippers and curing their illnesses'. As such, efficacy is demonstrated through supernatural displays of prowess and practical concerns/outlets of dispensing advice and healings. It is perhaps no surprise then that some manner of these aspects can be found in successful religious inheritors such as Charismatic Christianity *and* Nichiren Buddhism, both of which leverage on signs and wonders to the faithful to demonstrate their power. Efficacy is demonstrated through timely advice through acts of randomly flipping the bible or moments of illumination when reading sutras, remission of disease via prayer rallies or interventionist chanting and so forth.[26]

The successful religions among the Chinese, therefore demonstrate their efficacy by very practical means and manifestations of power. Consultation of yarrow sticks, protection, blessing and remission of sickness are religious expectations that while not necessarily limited to Singapore, form a clearly defined religious habitus that all contenders must deal with. While scholars have commented on the rise of experiential religion in Singapore, it is a loaded sociological concept as experience is interpretative and therefore subject to contestation.[27] Rather, beliefs in the efficacy of various forms of experience tend to manifest in various forms that coincide with religious expectations. However,

this is not to assume that there is traditionalist experience of religion on one hand and a rational experience on another. Ironically enough, in a competitive situation personal experience is the only factual knowledge that a would-be believer can be certain of. As Matthews (1998) points out, experiential knowledge, productive of conversion, goes hand in hand with the rational appeal of religion. However, to take advantage of the former, a religion must explicitly make personal experience a central practice of its faith. The SSA in Singapore manages to cater to that fine balance, as its theological conception makes the expectation of fulfillment of prayer, in a fairly direct way, a major expectation of the faith. This is to the extent that, one proof of religion (alongside the rational) is the demonstration of efficacy.

As such, in a competitive religious environment, the pragmatic believer falls back on what works and the rational believer while having a *plausible and competitive explanation*, can only be sure of *directly personal experiences*. These are of course not mutually exclusive to each other, as argued just above. As such, personal manifestations, rather than falling off with rationalization are, in line with Berger's ideas, conversely the last bastion of religious faith in a competitive environment. In this light, Mandelbaum (American Anthropologist, vol. 68, no.5) rightly argues that the Transcendental and Pragmatic aspects of religion are necessarily intertwined. In this part of Asia at least, the successful intertwining of these two aspect has tended to make for successful religious expansion rather than not as is the case of Mandelbaum.

As such, expanding successfully in Singapore requires a number of factors. One: Demonstration of supernatural efficacy to those still in the mind set of shenism (or more simply demonstrability/practicality) as a departure point to adopt

faith in one particular religion. Two: A *competitive* rational framework for people who are more rational to accept as a logically possible worldview, in light of the competing views available to potential convert.[28] Three: A sense of the market niche that it inhabits and the potential for growth in it projected into the future. To these three, only then may be added the scope of organizational empowerment and lay involvement, of which as mentioned much scholarly work has already been done. That being said, let us turn to the discussion of community.

4.4 Expanding Religion, Faith to Community

In the Singapore case, as Hinton (1985) has argued since the 1980s most of the recent Christian growth in Singapore from the 1970s to the 1980s was Protestant. From twice as many Catholics as Protestants, the Protestants caught up as (ibid: 109), 'due to their sacramental approach', Catholics were 'not so free to use laity and house churches in the way that Protestants do.' Other than the fact that most growth has been facilitated by lay involvement and activity (ibid: 27), the church in Hinton's view was successfully on the path to growth when it had a good community life (ibid :188, 154) in a city 'so hungry' for it. As such, Hinton clearly notes the ability to expand, via the use of laity in terms of resource or involvement seems to be a structural fixture, but it is in the context of the production of a good community life in an urban context that the meaningfulness of church/religious ascription comes to the fore. The Gakkai is similarly successful, freed from much of a theological need for priesthood and being in essence a lay Buddhist organization. In fact, the rise of lay involvement is arguably one of the defining factors of growth of religion in Singapore. While early Chinese religion was characterized by (Chan & Tong, 2003: 204) 'close

alignment between temple construction and dialect affiliation', with state language/education policies and the CMIO ethnic categories, among the Chinese the pull of sub-ethnic dialect groupings has eroded with the perpetration of Mandarin and other State policies in that light. With the gradual erosion of other forms of affiliation, such as atomization of the extended family with the necessity of urbanization and housing policies, the increasing meaningless-ness of sub-ethnic dialect markers with the State sponsored notion of an undifferentiated Chinese identity (as well as increasing intermarriage between Cantonese, Hakkas, Hokkiens, Teochews, e.t.c.), the limpid development of a depoliticized civil society, religion has arguably become the main outlet of community, affiliation and meaningful interaction with a larger world for most people. As Kwok (1994) also notes, the Chinese Singaporeans also faced a large social transformation as a result of various policy changes, the closing of Nan Da and the end of Chinese education. For those closer to the English and therefore 'rational' linguistic universe, the choice and community of Christian religion presents itself (reference needed on the guy who said God speaks in English). This however still leaves unaccounted for the majority of the Chinese who are more rooted in their ethnic language, norms and conventions, a segment of the population to whom a modernized Buddhism would arguably be most likely to appeal too.

Additionally, the main point to be made is that though a grave concern of the State, religion is also at the same time oddly an arena whereby the State generally leaves be. Understood as a highly personal and therefore an emotive issue, religion is actively engaged by the State and policed only where it contravenes what is seen as national interests and where it moves to being

politically divisive. In contrast, government ministers regularly attend religious observances, events, festivals, opening ceremonies of new buildings and so forth, engaging and encouraging religious initiatives in building community and in volunteerism for the provision of certain social services. In some ways therefore, religion where it does not explicitly function as a divider, fits into the old *civic society* model that the Singapore Government used to strongly envision as a model template for social engagement of its citizenry. Religion therefore is a kind of *hidden public sphere*, a realm of greater community whereby the individual reaches out and contacts a larger world. It is not a full public sphere as it does not consistently reach out to a greater world, except-ing volunteer and conversion work, but tending to be inward and tending to its own. Nonetheless, arguably religion increasingly provides community space and involvement among the Chinese in the context of political disenfranchisement and the erosion of previous forms of community. Lay involvement, due to the sense of responsibility actors feel in their networks, as pointed out by Chua (2000), is actually a factor in keeping members in a particular faith, even as it places demands, stress and even alienation on individuals. Putting it together, this need for community (Hinton, 1985) and having needs (Matthews, 1998) met, and indeed involvement itself are all factors for the growth for religion in Singapore.

Therefore, alongside expectations of efficacy and demonstratability on one hand, and of rationality and logicality on the other, the would-be convert can expect in religion a community of believers that will suit him or herself to greater and lesser degrees. A conjunction of these three expectations, meeting the culture of each competing religious group then leads to the decision to convert or not to

convert. From this point, with this background fully in mind, only then might one now discuss the issue of conversion into a religion, and from there later, as to how the strategy/approach of a particular religion makes itself attractive to a range of believers who can easily choose other equally attractive need-fulfilling and community-providing competitors.

4.5 Conversion In: Becoming A Soka Gakkai Buddhist

The theology of Soka Gakkai is seldom presented in as succinct a form as discussed in the previous theological Chapter of this dissertation and a discussion of flyers and theology alone will fail to give a picture of the SSA in its entirety, from the point of view of the process of conversion. For most members, their first exposure to Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism is likely to come in the form of an invitation from a friend or acquaintance to one of the many activities organized by the SSA. These range from talks by the Buddhist Philosophy Research Centre on the nature of Buddhism for the cerebral, to more humble invitations to a local 'han' for the monthly discussion meeting previously described, to performances by the SSA's various cultural groups, to straight forward 'friendship meetings' that introduce the faith to 'new friends' (literally 'xin1 peng3 you3) and perhaps even a seat at the yearly Daisaku Ikeda Discussion series. Such invitations are likely to come from an earnest, neat and pleasantly mannered acquaintance or colleague extending an invitation to a Gakkai organized event. Brushing it off, as many are wont to do, they will find the person extending the invitation to be phenomenally persistent and patient though admittedly inoffensive, as is characteristic of their approach. Eventually after such gentle pressure, one might commit an evening or a weekend and attend an event. Most Gakkai events will outline basic teachings that

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while perhaps are not unique to Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism, are popularly associated with it. Events such as these will often explain basic SGI beliefs such as the importance of human revolution, ideas of cause and effect, the Ten Worlds, oneness of Life and Environment, the strategy of the Lotus Sutra and the meaning of Kosen Rufu, in the context of illustrative plays and personal accounts.[29]

As stressed before, SSA works by lines of familiarity and as such most invitations come from one's respectively correct gender and age group, or educational background. These factors and approaches at the organizational level thus see to the comfort of members who will therefore be surrounded by people who in many ways demographically resemble them. On top of this, the rational aspects of the faith are then explained by such peer groups in a language of understanding that hopefully connects to the would-be believer in a way comprehensible to that person's lifeworld. As such, rather than attempting to blow away and impress the would-be convert, by openness, fervor, and arguably, show and spectacle (an equally legitimate strategy as pointed out by Clammer (1991: 45-68) in his discussion of the new style of Charismatic Christianity), the comfort and ease of the potential believer in the first meetings is of high importance. Introductory meetings, as outlined in an earlier chapter additionally align the potential believer such that their intellectual concerns may be answered, by introduction to basic doctrine. The Soka Gakkai stresses that its faith is supported by three kinds of proof, literal proof (proof through textual sources), theoretical proof (proof through the logicality and reasonableness of doctrine) and actual proof (experiential proof in the life of the individual).[30] Having proffered the first two and giving an account of the third in the life of another individual, at the

goings on of the average meeting, the potential convert is encouraged to try chanting and experience for themselves the truth of the doctrine. Demonstration by direct experience is the norm, in doing so the potential convert goes straight to personal experience as a source of data and so managing and addressing the issue of rationality effectively and efficiently.[31] Thereby allowing for personal efficacy as a source of proof and circumventing the issue of rationality through demonstrability. For some then, the pattern of conversion might be seen as following a classic Shenist pattern. As a fundamental belief of Buddhist practice in the Soka Gakkai *is* indeed in the interventionist power of chanting, through the invocation of the mystic Law, the place of miraculous conversions must take a place in the scheme of things. As has been noted, one driver for conversion is miraculous healing, an inheritance that arguably draws upon the spirit-medium cult beliefs that intertwine with what is defined as shenism in Southeast Asia outlined earlier. In the context of Karen Armstrong's typology, the shenist belief system is basically concerned with the efficacy of the elohim/shen as a means by which aid and succor can be obtained by the believer in the practical context of their daily lives, *regardless of the theological delivery system.*

Not surprisingly then, the sick or those concerned about the sick enter into faith through receiving of a miraculous healing. In the case of one particular account shared by a WD at a monthly discussion meeting, a fundamentally shenist approach to dealing with her daughter's illness brought her from deity to deity, temple to temple, to no avail until she 'tried chanting'. (A common pattern even from SSA International accounts but successfully localized to Singapore's context). The turnaround in her daughter's condition then resulted in her

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conversion and eventually her immediate family. Other believers also recount of

how they tried chanting various other sutras and religions looking for help and

succor, only to have found it when they turned to 'chanting'. As argued earlier, the

demonstability of mana, the presence of actual proof remains an important factor

in the minds of many believers, even the more rational and cerebral ones. Healing

and other benefits of practice are seen as, 'one of those so called 'actual proofs'

spoken about in Gakkai belief, without which it would, to the more rational, be

'just a bunch of mumbo jumbo', even by those who have never had an earth-

shattering religious experience. This view was echoed by many believers, with one

of the more eloquent and well-spoken MDs I was acquainted with even stressing

that actual proof (both that of others and personally experienced by himself) alone

was what convinced him to seriously take up faith. With the dearth of conversion

experiences, formalized to some extent by the structure of most meetings,

conversion by proxy as is perhaps a factor in the Gakkai. While the average

believer may or may not have a life changing experience, the availability of such

narratives is always there. Having established efficacy, the believer then moves

towards a more exclusive relationship with Nichiren Buddhism as time passes,

slowly learning its concepts and theology, and gradually forswearing all other

religious alternatives. In a sense this is the converse of Christian conversion as

faith comes from demonstrability, rather than before demonstrability. In a sense,

there is therefore an easier fit for conversion from those from a Shenist mindset, as

fewer alterations to religious expectations and habitus are expected from the onset

of conversion. Unlike the would-be Christian convert, *no act of rejection of*

current religious forms is required of a potential believer, other than a

willingness to chant and test the goodness of the doctrine for him or herself.

Therefore, the SSA is compatible with very much the same market niches in the religious field in Singapore as has been successfully colonized currently by traditional Chinese religious beliefs and forms, even more so of the Shenist worship of budhisattvas that is common in the folk practice of Buddhism, with its limited understanding of Buddhist history and theology. Other than the loose understanding of efficacy available through the admirable compassion of various Buddhas, this stream of religious devotionalism is therefore ripe to be replaced by a more thought out and systematic form of Buddhism that likewise allows and encourages the belief and expectation of supernatural intervention, but at the same time has a rational appeal to those unmoved by the appeal of this form of religious understanding. Therefore, this by no means makes the religion more inaccessible to the more rational, as while claims of miracles may seem credulous at the beginning, the more rational believer can and does starts to speak in terms of laws and Buddhist laws when rationalizing the place of miracles and thus forges a sense of a systemic regularity within an arguably scientific trope.[32] As such, the theology and approach of the SSA aids its breaching into a new religious form, based on pre-existing forms such as Shenism, while strategies of personal efficacy and Buddhist theology adequately deal with the rational convert coming from a modernist habitus in a competitive religious field. Going into the issue of conversion proper though, a range of conversion narratives proved to be interesting in demonstrating the unique appeal of religion and the kind of appeal it proffered. As mentioned, the Buddhist conversion should be somewhat different from that of other religions, in conceptualization as much as entry, which we will

now discuss.

4.6 Conversion In: Differing Patterns and Fundamentals

It may seem to be redundant to stress this by now, but people choose to become Buddhists for radically different reasons than those who choose to be Christian. For 'Sam', a YMD leader of good standing, conversion occurred at a low point in his life. Sitting at the top of his block of flats three nights in a row drinking, wanting to jump but not having the courage to, he was approached and 'shakubukued' by his brother. Taking up the faith, he became highly involved in activities, taking part in a number of National Day Parades. After conversion, he eventually set up a small shrine in his house for his practice, co-existing with the family altar for a while. When first explaining his conversion to me, he asked if I had seen Ying1 Xiong2 Ben3 Se4 Er4 (*For a Better Tomorrow 2*, an influential Chinese popular culture movie staring Chou Yuen Fat,) and grasping for an appropriate analogy to explain his position, smiled broadly when I nodded yes and then quite seriously said 'Li mian you yi ju hua. She me shi shen? Nen zhang wo zhi zi de shen ming, na jiu shi shen.' (Literally: There was a saying in there. What is a God? One who can encompass his life with his own hands. That is a God.) For Sam, that grasping was founded through his experience in activities, in particular his position as a base man in human pyramids during one of the many SSA's national day parades involvement. Again, the appeal seems to be a very different understanding of religiosity than might otherwise be expected. Thereby, the ability of a practitioner to encompasses his life and existence as a vital and dynamic being is a major appeal of the practice of the faith.

Very early in the research another Gakkai member commented to me that

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'I prefer being Buddhist as I don't like the idea of anything controlling my life and directing it'. For this ex-RJC-ian, the freedom from subservience to a higher-being made Buddhism attractive to his point of view. This view was echoed by quite a few individuals, saying that they did not like the idea of dependency or conversely that the ideas of Buddhism were attractive because good or bad karma were all the results of past actions and so the life an individual was in their hands alone and not affected by anything other than themselves.

While it should not have been surprising to the researcher, it eventually surfaced that numerous Gakkai Buddhists had had significant contact with other religions prior to Buddhism and considered them even though they would eventually stay Buddhists. This did not mean that the attractiveness of Christianity was completely without appeal in the journey of conversion. As one young member recalls:

> My first exposure to this Buddhism is from my family members. In the early 80s they were one of the first few families to be introduced to Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism. But, like I said: When you are young, you blindly follow your parents and you have no idea whatsoever what you are doing. Because everyone is doing it. You just feel that you should do it.
> I guess the thing only came to me when I began to question, 'Why am I doing this? Is there scientific proof behind this?' And that is the time that I decided, not to be so active in it. So call like, take a backseat, explore other religions. At the same time, I've told you before, I was from a missionary school (St. Anthony's Boys) and the concept of Christianity… Catholicism actually, appeals to me. Because it's like.. you have, someone who is supreme… to look after you.

In a similar light, another MD admitted,

> It was definitely an option, to go the way of Christianity… Well, I'd already been exposed to Christianity through (mentions a prestigious mission school). And actually, during that time you know, as a teenager, I felt it was more to go to the church because

of peer pressure… Fortunately I didn't. I stayed away, I did not want to take up any religion. There was no need to. But then, it was only when I was 17, 18, that I began to take a greater interest. One of the so called (Gakkai) leaders from my mum's group came over to the house, paid her a visit to see how she was doing, you know. Nice, pleasant, non-pushy, but you know 'Give it a try, young people should be adventurous. Give it a try and see for yourself'

In the final analysis, after a period of soul searching and thinking about religion, the Buddhist convert decides between attractive options for surprisingly similar reasons. As the YMD interviewed mused in the end,

> I guess when you are deciding on which religion to choose, many things come into my mind. And, one of them was that in Christianity you… do not have the ability to choose what you want. Everything that is given to you is… so called: God gave you, you can't choose. Whereas what really appeals to me is that in Buddhism, you actually create your own happiness, your own destiny. If it is something bad, it is actually you are the one who have done it in previous existence, so now you are only responsible for what you have done. If you think it this way, its amazing isn't it? So if I want to enjoy a good life, I should start doing good things now. So that really appeals to me.

For another believer, having explored a number of religious options, he ultimately maintained that,

> Why I can embrace this religion is because I find that it is more logical, in the way that we are anserwrable, we ourselves overcome our karma by practicilg this Buddhism. Don't have to go through someone else lah. We ourselves, we in this religion, I should say we are responsible for our own life, or whatever happens to us……After practicing, I realized I had gained a lot. I had become a wiser person and I don't panic when things happen.

Similarly, for yet another member, his final conclusion was in favor of Buddhism was similar enough, such that he concluded rhetorically:

> What is the purpose of life?… If you subscribe to this way of living (Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism), you will be able to create all the necessary causes for your own well-being and basically what they are saying is that you are the architect of your life. And that made it even more practical and appealing. It is the fact that knowing that

there is uncertainty before you, but what is important is, what makes the religion practical is that they are saying: Ok, in spite of all the uncertainty ok, you CAN do something about it, and it's up to you! You can do something about it, and in doing so you can face your future with confidence, with courage.

Thus whereas certain studies like Clammer (1991: 45-68) argue that in terms of style preferences, the younger generation seeking a more emotionally expressive worship style would increasingly convert to Christianity, this may indeed be only a best case scenario with the truth more complicated than it would appear. While certainly a legitimate analysis, it ignores the converse case whereby the new form is less than comforting to the potential convert. In cases such as this, as Chua (2000) and Lee (1988) suggest, the better fit between persons within Buddhism over that of Christianity can be a final factor for quite a number of people. As yet another interviewee recounted, an early trip to a Charismatic rally was a major push factor for not converting to Christianity, rather than for. As he almost laughingly recalled of the incident:

I was invited and I just so called went along… Maybe because we were friends so a friend asked you to go. Maybe the friendship was more important than the religion lah…
…Seems like a very… emotion packed rally lor. Of course, not… not inside me lah, during the rally the only emotion inside me is fear lah (chuckles). Fear as in ah 'What if you don't do what they are doing.'…
…ya lor, so in the end I never follow what they were… exhorting.. everyone else to do… There was faith healing and all this, but in the end I think they were asking people to so call take faith lah. To let Jesus into their lives. Of course I did not do it…

Resultantly, instead of being moved and becoming desirous to a change of faith, the internal dialogue of the individual potential convert can be a lot less positive. Such that some, such as this particular eventual Buddhist, might find it somewhat alienating enough to say that,

To me it was just like a phenomena. Being 'touched by God'…… I mean, I never asked for all these things anyway, I was just invited and just here to see what's happening. I never asked for… needed something to come into my life or something.

Additionally, even views on rationality may differ. For the potential Buddhist, certain aspects of Christian belief may seem credulous and insufficiently dealt with, especially if the view is fundamentalist. As one MD recalls, of his first exposure to Christianity as a free thinker:

I did pose a few questions onto those people who tried to convert me and I felt that some of them could not give me a satisfactory answer. In fact I did ask them, if Adam and Eve 'created' us, how to multiply? Not only could they not answer me, they felt offended. So I thought, let's not go further than that lah. Because, I believe that in any religion if you want to convert a person, you got to clear their doubts and listen with an open mind. If you can't, then I think you don't waste their time.

As such, the nature of conversion is culture specific and requires sensitivity to the appeal of a particular approach to the cultural milieu of the would-be convert. In the case of most Nichiren Buddhists, the fit with certain forms of Christianity would seem less than perfect. Even so, to be fair the process of conversion to Buddhism itself is also admittedly far from perfect as the would-be convert balances the demands of rationality, with that of faith. In the case of a new believer, as mentioned the narratives of miraculous interventions can be as confusing as attractive, due to perceived illogicality. As R recalls what was hardest for him to deal with when first starting out, he maintains:

What was hard to believe was that just by simply chanting the phrase ' Nam myo horengekyo' I can actually so called transform all the 'bad things' into 'good things', to put it in very simple terms. That was very difficult for me to accept because (laughs)... for me I feel that there should be some input before there should be output. And, the input that I put in is… so little. And the output that you get at the end of the so called chanting session is so much

larger. So it doesn't really make sense to me. But the only turning point came when you personally try it, and you see actual proof for yourself, and you can really feel it. That is the real turning point. I have to agree if your gona ask me, 'So is it a leap of faith', yes I have to say yes it is a leap of faith. (But) because the people before me have done it, and they've shown it me that it is possible. From (mentions a YMD leader), from testimonials that we have read, we have heard.

In such cases, the use of leaders close to the template of the would-be convert helps immensely. As R goes on to admit, that one major aid to his conversion was the intervention was a leader from the Gakkai similar to himself, in this case with regards to rationality and education. As such he recalls,

It was actually PS. PS is a guy who is educated, but what really intrigues me is that: 'How is it possible that this person is so educated , at the same time he is so into this religion that 'cannot be proved' lah. That was the thing that really made me want to find out more. It was actually through the interaction between the two of us, that I guess I understand more about the religion and eventually my faith grew in this religion, and now I'm an active member.

Even then, the place of personal experiential experience is essential to cement the faith of the new believer. As R commented about his slow and eventual coming into faith:

I remember I was in terrible shape when I was in NS. So, I was in and out of hospital many times. Prior to that actually, PS has already introduced to me this Buddhism, but like I told you: I was a bit skeptical about it. But he was very determined to share with me this Buddhism and he kept emphasizing that the road to happiness lies none other than in my own life. And only through tapping the power of this Buddhism, I can transform my own life. Like I said, I was skeptical, but I was desperate. I needed something. So I tried. And, yah, things start to change for the better. And gradually, my faith strengthened. I guess sometimes faith is a very difficult thing. When you talk about dimensions, you can see the length, you can measure the length. Whereas faith, there is no way that you can measure.

Thus the conversion-in process, for a Nichiren Buddhist is a mix of a

number of factors. A fundamentally different solution from Christianity is chosen for very different reasons, even as it maintains an attraction to some even if only at a bare theological and emotional level. At the same time a form of religiosity is rejected for another that is seen as more attractive if not simply less frightening and extreme. Rationality comes up as a barrier, but is dealt with through a mix of mentoring and personal experience in the truth of the doctrine. When other options are available, personal understanding become important as a way to explain practice.

For the older member or the member who is nominally folk Buddhist, the issue of rationality is perhaps less well developed than with those who wait on a more rational standpoint, but it still requires to be dealt with. With regard to the issue of conversion from one school Buddhism to another Buddhism denomination, intrafaith conversion, the place of theology and the lack of it becomes a major factor in such forms of conversion-in. Gakkai members can and do often come from nominally Buddhist households, but as one observed of his mother prior to conversion, 'She was practicing Buddhism, but then like a lot of other Buddhists, they just followed what their parents did and in many sense don't really understand what they are doing'. As such while transmitted to some extent, this is problematic as time goes on as. As he explains 'as kids you know, you follow, things like that, do what she tells us. You know, only for that short period… But then after a little while, you've got a mind of our own and all that, that was when you stopped doing some of these activities'. For others, seeking for 'Something more than offering three joss sticks', the theological component of the SSA helps make leaving traditional forms easier.

Theology thus additionally becomes important to study, not just for its effect on attracting some and driving away others (e.g. Shenist habitus in Chinese religionists), the transformations in consciousness it engenders when adopted (e.g. the religious habitus within a religion) but because it needs to be coherent in order to resist questioning by another viable alternative. The 'reasonability' of Christianity is not historically inherent but based on centuries of adapting its message across different contexts, cultural and temporal, the result of necessity rather than an inherent property. Likewise, once conversions became the norm locally, some forms of Buddhism adapted better, some worse. With the development of Tiendai theology behind them, the SSA where it avails itself to the claim making power of the theology is ahead of the learning curve in this aspect. Conversion from Buddhism to Buddhism is unavoidable in the study of the Soka Gakkai and is inextricvable from its appeal to the Lotus Sutra as documentary proof of superoritry. As one intra-faith convert put it,

> I don't call it ND Buddhism. I just call it Buddhism. There are different phases in Buddhism. There is this phase called the Former Day of the Law. Which we talk about. The Former Day of the Law, how Buddhism started. Then there is the second phase, the Middle Day of the Law, meaning how Buddhism was transmitted after the Buddha's passing. So, the next phase, the third phase, what we call the Latter Day of the Law. If we make effort to study, you come to understand that what we are practicing is an evolution of buddhism, as it has evolved through the ages, 3000 years ago. What we are practicing right now, is for want of a better word the highest form of Buddhism, a form that has evolved to suit to the people of this age. Gone are the day when you can… there is no way in the present age that the masses can practice, can go about the Buddhist practice that was practiced thousands of years ago. Can't live off the land…… We respect their belief, but Buddhist practice I think is more than going into a retreat…… I think we must understand is that Buddhism talks about life itself… practice must be part of your daily life… that's only my personal point of view

Most converts fall back on experiential feelings to, mentioning a sense of personal well-being and of course the interpretation of received benefit in their lives. This is a curious juxtaposition as on one hand competition has demanded that religions become more and more well thought out and that their paradigms become more comprehensive. On the other hand, the very nature of the availability of options does mean that claims of intervention and succor can only be personally interpreted and so in a way, limited to what work for oneself.

At the same time, the concept of Buddhism in Nichiren Buddhism, especially in the Soka Gakkai is a highly collectivist one, allowing for a very social religion. As a lay Buddhist movement it is constantly involved in many activities and communal work, of which it draws on its significant membership. This communal involvement is important, for as one leader recalls,

> I think… like a lot of young people, I'd be wondering what to do
> with myself. Possibly leading a nocturnal lifestyle. Not to say that
> is wrong though, everyone has their own idea of what it means to
> get into heaven (laughs). The organization allowed us to spend my
> time more meaningfully.

Therefore social meaningfulness is an important part of the process of conversion, as many converts volunteer significant amounts of their time to SSA activities, serve as leaders at various levels and attend endless streams of meetings. The task of a leader is also somewhat thankless, involving endless streams of meetings and preparations, occasionally having a dialogue with new friends or new members, conducting home visits, attending funerals of members and their relatives, calling on the sick, chanting for the ill and troubled, leading hour long gongyo sessions at events, putting together weddings and so forth. Yet, the very nature of such obligations define meaningful and personal importance in

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a web of social relationships, the very thing that has been eroding in recent years

in the believed to be highly communal and hierarchical Chinese community. This

component of the faith, of meaningful social involvement in religion, is seen by

many as a form and a way of 'creating value' in their lives and in the context of

the religious organization.

At the same time, issues of community are a major attraction of the

group's appeal. As R shared of his stint of hospital sickness, the leadership in the

SSA takes evidently takes its communal responsibility seriously. As he recalls of

his immediate leader,

> Every time I went to the hospital he was there. When I was
> admitted, he was there at least once, to see how am I doing.
> Primarily just him, because I was not introduced to the rest of the
> people, subsequently there were more people. My first contact was
> him.

What he remembers most of his period of neediness is that,

> What really touched me is that during his lunch break he actually
> traveled down from his company in Chua Chu Kang. And, I was in
> Alexandra hospital. So it was quite a bit of a distance he had to
> travel.

When asked as to whether he was touched by this display, he answered

with a shrug and a 'Definitely, who wouldn't be?' Now moving into a leadership

position himself, he mused that, from his own experiences that,

> Actually there should be no distinction between a leader and a
> member, doing shakubuku, doing chanting, even at funeral wakes
> you are supposed to help out. Everybody can do it, you don't need a
> leader. What happens is that, BUT who is going to rally all the
> people doing all these things? You have to have, like a coordinator,
> to put it this way. Or, at the same time, when these people are
> down, someone has to be there to encourage them. You see? So
> this will be the role of the leader. Just… additional duties, if you
> like it.

As such, the leadership model of the Soka Gakkai replicates itself at the microlevel. Additionally, the religion not only manages to recruit volunteers to meet its demands but in fact these demands are in part what makes them attractive for they provide a sense of self-worth/empowerment and community, factors relevant to conversion as discussed by Matthews (1998).

4.7 Managing Strain: Keeping the Faith

In between conversion in and the adoption of a particular habitus that defines conversion, is the issue of strain and the managing of strain. Just as religion articulates a sense of being that can appeal to many people, the nature of its belief system also bears the cost of whatever claims that it puts out. In the case of Nichiren Buddhism's stress on actual proof, the believer is encouraged to employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra (i.e. chant over problems) with the general expectation that it can and will be resolved. Like all religious strategies in this light however, the problem is therefore managing expectations when miracles fail to manifest. In the case of death and the failure of practice to achieve a remission of illness, this can be a major problem for the SSA. While members more mature in their faith may reflect that birth, old age, sickness and death are ultimately inescapable as outlined by Shakyamuni, those young in the faith may not be able to make the fine distinction between the intervening power of chanting the daimuku and essential inevitabilities.[33]

Also, for the SSA, the strain on leadership should also not be underestimated. In terms of conversion out and non-conversion, there is a possibility that the SSA's 'party line' may seem as mere cant to the casual outsider. Other than being constatntly sincere, having to demonstrate a unshakable

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and indestructible state of happiness, the workload of the average Gakkai member

is rather extreme, much less that of leaders. When asked about the regular rate of

activities they were involved in, a young leader commented,

> What do we guys do? Firstly we have monthly prayer daimokukai.
> And it depends on where you are coming from, you could be from
> the adult's division or from the youth's division. Let's say you are
> from the youth's division, you might have your youth activities,
> could be in the Student division and you have their activities, or
> you could be in the YMD, you have to be there to prepare the thing
> and when the meeting ends, you have to be there to clean up the
> thing. A lot of work… (Then) Study meetings, home visits, funeral
> wakes, (et cetera). Technically, one week is almost like two to three
> times, three nights a week. Technically we should end at 9.30 that
> is the Golden rule, but somehow or rather… it goes on

Other accounts bear this out, another leader giving the estimate that,

> Well, as to the question of how many meetings the "average"
> member (I assume you mean non-leader) attends...let me see...the
> "average" member attends the discussion meeting, the study
> meeting, World Peace Gongyo, YMD (or equivalent)
> meetings, each of which is about once a month. So, I guess it would
> be a reasonable estimate to say that an "average" member attends
> one or two meetings per week.

Even those not considering leaving were frank about the pressures of

membership and leadership. Once noticing a young leader looking under the

weather and asking if things were tough, he sighed in response and said, 'This

week of course siong. Virtually every day except for one do home visit. What do

you think? Up till 11 o'clock-midnight dialogue with them, listen to their

problems and see what we can do.'

The consequences of not managing strain successfully is of course quite

straightforward, as another leader openly admitted, burnout can be a very real

possibility, for:

Actually, there have been leaders who were very active for some time, and everyone, including myself, looked up to them as "model leaders". However, when things got really tough, and they forgot this spirit of self-reflection, then they also lost the joy of the Buddhist practice. So, I think that, ultimately, it is not so much a matter of "balancing", nor is it a matter of blindly "sacrificing" all our work, study or family commitments in order to be a "super on" Gakkai man. It is, rather, a matter of how deeply we understand our cause; the Buddhist wisdom derived from our deep understanding will enable us to, in times of "conflict" between our personal life and Gakkai commitments, make the appropriate decision quite naturally.

At the same time, the dedicated culture of the Gakkai occasionally meets changes in expectations and desires of newer members and their ways of thinking. One leader laughingly mentioned to another over dinner once that 'Now the way you treat members must be very different. Last time when we do a mistake, the leader will tell you off for your own good and you try not to make the mistake again. Now, you just give them a bit of constructive criticism and they tell you: So I make a mistake, is it a crime to make mistakes, make mistake cannot meh! Aiyah, just not like last time lah.' Strain may thus multiply over time as expectations and environmental demands change.

In a sense the SSA's stress on the individual enjoying the task of religious work and leadership is as much a necessity as a philosophy. Considering the demands placed on the individual, unless a strong sense of dedication, mission and personal satisfaction arise from the involvement with said activities, a breaking point is sure to be reached. As a leader stressed to me, and often repeated,

I guess that's the most important thing--enjoy it. If you don't enjoy it, and just "push" yourself to go, it'll only be a matter of time before you burn out. Then, your personal life is gonna suffer. If you enjoy these activities, and really learn something from them, then the energy will well forth quite naturally. This is what we hope our members and friends will feel.

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4.8 Conversion Out: Leaving Faith

However, not all conversions are as smooth or uncomplicated by doubts

and problems in practice. While the SSA, like most religions, works hard to see to

the needs of its membership, there are limitations. As 'Eugene', a member who

struggled with his faith, remembers of his conversion experience, despite the

efforts and help of other believers, there was an experience perhaps unavoidable

doubts of validity in a new system of belief,

> I tried to ask questions last time. I realize that these are not very
> practical questions. I didn't feel very proud to be asking these
> questions anyway… I did most of my soul searching alone. I did
> bug some people lah, I bug them until I feel pai sei and then I stop
> bugging them.

Thus, even in the presence of social support and help the conversion

process is in fact fraught with hick-ups and problems. 'Eugene' likewise

remembers his early resistance to conversion and then meeting problems after

taking faith honestly as a mix of starts and stops,

> I was introduced in 1986… 1 2 3 years very much against it, very
> negative about it. After the beginning, the beginning part was very
> like… the honeymoon… really very pure faith, see things
> happening, very pleased, then you start to question, hey, better be
> sure you know, and you question and yourself having no
> foundation and when you yourself was troubled ah so there is
> nothing to hold on to, all the more it gets unmanageable. Screwed
> up my 'A's, most of my NS was also screwed up.

Yet despite these barriers, conversion occurred in the individual

eventually. Over time and exposure to the appropriate theological texts, a shift in

consciousness can occur. As 'Eugene' mused in retrospect,

> I don't think anyone can really help me in the sense that, the mind
> is really too too, the human mind is just too complex, too many
> funny permutations that we may only be too lucky if someone can

so call… may be you can only hope that you can straighten it out yourself lah. So in the end, the idea of faith and self realization is actually this idea of chanting and knowing yourself, like in the gosho talk about chanting and realizing the truth in yourself. I think ah yah, you actually have to straighten out and work on yourself yourself.

Eventually, the individual can come to a place where the practice is personally comprehensible to the believer, with or without the aid of external social encouragement in bringing it to that point, helpful though it may be in many cases. Meaningful practice is sought and applied even in the absence of external encouragement. The believer sees the external belief system's 'usefulness' and adopts it to resolve internally perceived problems and tendencies. As 'Eugene' notes,

> If your life tends to be negative, all these thoughts, by reading more constantly you try to fight this negative tendency in yourself… But of course it is still very much external lah, but I think through all these efforts eventually you'll implant some stronghold in your life… I realize that any kind of victory in the depths of my life, comes slowly lah… in work or whatever… Someday you finally realize, 'Hey… this is how I feel or do something.'… Maybe when you really feel, this is how I really think I should be doing, you feel so different, so empowered ah.

Even so, what this illustrates is that concomitant to the process of conversion in is the issue of conversion out. While 'Eugene' managed to resolve issues of faith, not all do and just as the reasons and rhetoric for conversion in were systematically studied, the issue of conversion out must be too.[34] Unlike his case, as Berger (1969) mentions, rationality and personal comprehension are not major barriers to a religion. Instead the form of a more regular conversion out takes a slightly different form. While not entirely evident from the above excerpts, the biography of Eugene is of some interest. Suffering what perhaps could only be

described as some existential doubt in the faith, the problem with Eugene was not so much the unavailability of religious narratives and theology for solution to his problem with the SSA but the inability of religionists converting largely on the basis of actual proof in the shenist sense from understanding the nature and direction of the question asked by the then young believer. The questions asked by Eugene then, of which he was embarrassed were non-practical ones that centered around existential doubts about validity and the possibility of the religious claims being completely true. Just as its religious fit with local religious habitus has aided the SSA in its expansion, the very same bias that makes it suitable for and competitive in certain market niches also makes it vulnerable to having difficulty in evolving its approach to people who have a very different standpoint and demands when deciding to convert, a segment which Chridtianity is arguably more successfully exploiting.

In the case of 'J', her parents are both practicing SSA members but she herself never made the leap into Nichiren Buddhism. As she recalls of her family's conversion,

> My whole extended family converted themselves from Goddess of Mercy to Soka. That happened in the 1980s. That was when Soka began to make their presence felt in Singapore, as well, I'm not too sure… but suddenly my whole extended family converted, almost my whole extended family. It started with my granduncle, than my grandma, then my grandma and… my gran has 6 kids, four of her kids… Last two, one of my uncles…my uncle's Christian. I think my Auntie is Catholic. So ah, the two youngest ones, they did not convert.

Yet for J, the fine balance between rationality, personal experience and sociality was never successfully made. As she remembers having doubts,

> For me, a major factor that.. one of the factors also why I didn't

convert was that it never made sense to me to pray to a scroll… It didn't make sense to me somehow. My mom has brought me to meetings and all that, you know the meetings that they have, district meetings and whatever. I stopped going after secondary school, I went out with my friends on weekend and all that.

In her case, much like Eugene's, an overemphasis on the experiential aspect of religion also ment that her major recollection of the time was that 'All we had to do was CHANT'. When trying to account for her non-conversion, she mused that,

> Buddhism… maybe because Buddhism, I was exposed to the religion and not the teachings. Yah, so for me I would have to see the value in the teachings, some kinda, some form of teachings lah.

Conversely, in the absence of a rational framework to support faith, and attendant social involvement, with regards to religious experiences a lack of causality was seen. When asked about her experiences with chanting, she commented that, 'I chanted before lah. Like as a kid, probably I did. Nothing happened for me.' Instead, competitively, as she put it,

> Put it this way, at home I had like Buddhist rituals, at school I had Catholic rituals. The difference is that, at least for the Christian faith, the Catholic faith, whatever, at least I had some kind of basis, some sort of teaching, values were imparted. Whereas the meetings were like once a month, once in two month. So maybe there was not enough the socialization, the indoctrination, whatever you call it. In a Catholic school, everyday it is reinforced. Mass, prayers…

As such, Christianity became more of a draw comparatively due to the work done in rationalization to the individual, then allowing for other more social factors to come in and take their place, as such in the absence of engagement coming out of her birth religion, for Jenny other social factors began to pull her in another direction. As such,

> So I think that that, from age 10 onwards. One of my close friends

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was Christian, so from the age of 10 onwards, I was exposed to Christianity… But before that there was my Catholic school education. The real factor was 10 years in a Catholic school, but the catalyst was being introduced to the Christian faith.

As such, J's non-conversion was a collection of failures at dealing with the rational and social aspects of religion in a competitive environment. Musing about what might have been, she observed that,

> Perhaps if I had more exposure to it, maybe… I had no other friend who was from Soka… Not many of my age-peers around (at district meetrings). The thing is that my mom didn't use to bring materials home that much. So maybe they were not as systematic previously. Like now they have the newsletters, 'youth ministry', the the the whatever... Last time no, there was just one centre at Geylang. I've been to the very first centre, very simple, all they had was chanting. I don't remember they had any reading materials, they had books but they were like books you know, not newsletter form.

In the absence of simple and accessible literature, in the changing social environment of Singapore, Christian ideas were also more exposed to a general audience. Ultimately, for her, these were more familiar as:

> Things like Noah's Ark, Adam and Eve… They are not part of popular culture but we hear a lot about them even if we are not Christian. But Soka no. We don't know.

As such, Buddhism's competitive advantage to certain segments of the social milleu in Singapore does not evidently extend to all segments. As time passes, the better exposure of Christianity and the changing demands of conversion among the young will require the SSA to go beyond its successes and expand beyond its comfort zone if it is to continue to expand. It is these future trajectories and other miscellaneous comparative work that we now turn to in conclusion.

5.1 Religiosity in Singapore: Projections and Conclusions of an Ethnography

To recap, this dissertation has set out to explore the dimensions of a Buddhist faith, the Soka Gakkai in Singapore with a sense of how conversion occurs in a specific environment, appealing and converting to a number of segments in the social body, the rationale and standpoint under which conversion occurs and justifies itself.

Towards the end of my writing, a respected scholar of Singapore religion commented to me that the growth in Christianity of the recent years has actually been surprisingly among the old and that various churches have been adapting to the linguistic needs of this previously ignored group and had also adapted its teachings to deal with issues such as spirits that were more at home to the worldview of these folk. As such, while I have historically argued for a simplification in the sense that Christianity has relied on linguistic policies and mission schools to slowly gain a membership, a colonial policy that has evidently bourne fruit, the direction of Singaporean religiosity (of whichever religion) then will require an eye to management and mismanagement of the various market niches in the social body by the relevant religious groups. The simplest preliminary analysis is that as Christianity reaches its upper-limit as Chua implies and Buddhism likewise completes its expansion among the conventionally less religiously active groups in a manner that meets their needs and satisfies their sense of what a religion should look like, the only direction of expansion is into each others territories.

It may be that Christianity is in a stronger situation as even if the social distinctions may never change, what Lee terms 'middle class' values (habitus)

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spread through diverse avenues such as the mass media and mission schools. Other factors may turn this either way, from Singapore's increasing cosmopolitan makeup, to perhaps a new Chinese language policy that may change language alienation positively among some. Nonetheless, these are factors worth considering.

Strategically, Buddhism as much as the Soka Gakkai's future success will depend on whether or not they are able to compete successfully on the English ground. It is possible, as illustrated in the in-roads Buddhism has made in other conventionally Christian countries, and will organisationally depend on how successfully the various groups tap the small number of English speakers that already exist within them, members with a different habitus from the traditional Gakkai convert and therefore understanding how to reach out to others of their kind. Their work now, will determine the state of religious success in the next 10-20 years. Interestingly enough, as may have been mentioned, Christianity was in the converse position in the early days of its work in Singapore, and so Buddhism will have to see if it can successfully do the same turn around that its nominal rival did. There is indication that breaching is possible, for as one apparently successful youthful SSA prosetylser in the context of a Christian girl's school observed:

> 'The first time I chanted they (her friends) asked. What is it you are doing hah? Are you like casting a spell? Are you a witch? Then I told them, no no I'm just chanting Nam myo horenge kyo. Then they like asked, why hor, what is the purpose of this. I said to be happy and they said, I so want to be happy, never mind give it a try'

Future recommendations for research in the light of this thesis are: the study of Chinese-speaking Churches in Singapore, the comparative study of political, community and religious involvement, and the study of religious

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involvement proper. These are elements in the study of religion in Singapore which are currently lacking and which require work to be done in.

5.2 Comparing the SSA, Habitus and International Religion

The study of the SSA necessarily begs the question of how the SSA is different from other branches of the SGI. As outlined, the SSA's beliefs and practices are very close to what is followed by the SGI worldwide, and its materials and writings are often derived or borrowed by the body of work already existing and released in other languages. Among the academic studies carried out upon the Soka Gakkai the most relevant comparisons to this work are those carried out on the organization in Japan (Murata, 1969) and in the United States of America (Snow, 1993). The experience of the SGI in Japan outlines successful expansion among a populace with a broad exposure to Buddhist ideas and an Asian value set, while the U.S.A case mirrors a steady growing faith in a foreign context.

The Singapore case has somewhat meandered between these two experiences. Perhaps due to the State's intense interest and scrutiny of the institutions of religion, nothing vaguely resembling the Komeito has come to the fore in local politics. The SSA itself, mirroring the conventional accommodative strategy the occurs in Snow's thesis tends to actually come close to the Government's past articulation of the ideal of civic society. While active in its own affairs, such as Youth events, the SSA involves itself yearly in the above mentioned National Day Parades, volunteer initiatives overseas and other community programs that are politically odorless. Despite its size and potential influence, it escapes mention in the white paper on religious harmony. In fact,

White's (1970) very dismissal of the Soka Gakkai as a form of mass society emphasizes what may pass for a commutarian value set when seen from another angle, a point I feel comes up repeatedly for view and explains its success in the local context where it is valued by some.

Likewise, the shape of religious controversy is very different in Singapore. Whereas the Soka Gakkai in America has arguably found a misfit between the organizational culture of the SGI-USA and that of habitus of the host country, the SSA has adapted well to Singapore. The limits of the market niche for the SGI-USA seems to have solidified around the executive nature of leadership there. Not including disputes with the Nichiren Shoshu in America, there is at least one website set up by Nichiren Buddhists that seems to take offense to the more hierarchical nature of the organization versus their more consultative expectations. This Victorious America (victoriousamerica.com) declares itself to 'Establishing Justice, Empowering the People, Defeating Authoritarianism'. While seeing itself as also 'a vessel to fight against Nikken' and therefore against the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, it rejects what it considers 'Misconceptions of Unity and Faith in the Absence of Accountability' and scripturally supporting a system of democratic process by quoting Nichiren Daishonin at stating that 'Not even the treasures of the entire universe can equal the value of a single human life'. The idea for VA is reform minded and seeking to address alleged abuse issue in the SGI-USA, coached in the language of American democratic rhetoric.[35]

In Singapore where even democratic Opposition Parties can share a party cadre structure that resembles that of the ruling PAP, the issue of executive privilege seems logically less of an issue. While the SSA is not without

disgruntled ex-members, its disputes are more theological than democratic. The breakaway from Nichiren Shoshu seems to have lost some members to the other fold. Arguably the possession of the Dai Gohonzon, temple grounds, an ordained priesthood and, perhaps more importantly, new gohonzons are strong factors for those worried about the efficacy of their benefits or more comfortable with the conventional trappings of religion.[36] As Mertaux was quoted earlier, order was somewhat restored with the arrival of Yuhan Wantanabe to serve as the first Soka priest resident in Singapore. Given a cursory analysis, the SSA seems to have held its own very well and should have limited repercussions to its membership as time goes on from the falling out. Nonetheless, the theological challenge was taken very seriously and a slew of books regarding the theological and moral dispute between the SGI and the Nikken Priesthood have been published and released by the SSA study department. Nonetheless, in terms of breakaways, the SSA appears to have held its own very well against the other factions that have plagued the SGI worldwide.

Whereas the growth of the Soka Gakkai was due to post-war liberalism coupled with focused proselytizing in Japan and the American branch of the SGI was in response to a populace of Japanese war brides, clearly willed by top leadership and the in fact the first formally formed branch of the Soka Gakkai worldwide, the growth the Singapore was slightly different. Early propagative efforts centered around visiting Japanese expatriates planting the faith and to which the SSA grew from the first amount of seed money donated personally by President Ikeda to pay for the first humble kaikan in Geylang. The first district was formed in August 1963, with Mr Koh Kian Boon (later first General Director

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of the SSA) appointed district chief in June 1967 and the Singapore Chapter established in August 1969. The first chapter chief and women's division chief were Toshio and Haruko Oshiro, a married pair of Japanese expats brought to Singapore by Toshiro's work and leaving in 1970 and continuing on the Gakkai work in Hachioji, Tokyo. By January 1970, there were an estimated 324 member households in Singapore and the SSA was finally officially incorporated in January 1972.

The SSA's experience is therefore most far removed from the experience of Soka Gakkai in Britain (Wilson & Dobbelaere, 1994). Whereas conversion there was reactive to a pre-existing set of issues to the dominant Christianity of the United Kingdom, the SSA convert in Singapore while not being convinced by Christianity, has few if any pent up objections and issues with it. The practical aspect and appeal of the faith there however, shows that the supposed Shenist mindset of the Singapore case is not limited to the Chinese and that practicality is always one aspect of religious faith.

5.3 The Meaning of Conversion, a Re-discussion

As such, successful religions in Singapore adapt to their niches and then expand beyond them. In the case of conversion in Singapore, this has largely be characterized by a dual conversion, one characterized by a logically coherent theology that can hold its own against other more well-thought out competitors, and one that is directly experiential and therefore beyond the ken of logic and rationality. The weakness of most pervious scholarship is to ignore making explicit the centrality of the pre-existing religious forms, in Singapore's case such as Shenism, in keying the way new religious habitus must be measured by

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potential believers. Only after a suitable entry point can be found can a new

religious sect set their terms. Organizationally, successful forms of religion tend to

be heavily invested in laity. This not only makes for more flexibility in the

performance of religion, but is the very basis of civil association and community

in the wake of the erosion of ethnic, clan, the kampong and other such forms of

local community. As such, religions that fill the gap and allow for a sense of

community, fill a niche in the body politic that the State observes but generally

does not interfere with and in fact seeks to purposely engage. Successful religions

are expansionist and seek converts as growth feeds on itself: More laity to

activate, wider community, et cetera. The rise of para-church organizations, Soka

Gakkai divisions, and so forth are important in as much as they provide a social

and communal outlet in a condition of a little civil or civic society outlets for the

average person to have recourse to.

5.4 Concluding Points

  As can be seen in the context of the SSA's concept of Buddhism as

outlined at the beginning of the chapter, the SSA sees a communal reality whereby

the efforts of the individual are seen as working in expanding concentric circles to

encompass the family, then community and then from there to the wider world.

While this is not unique to it, its activities and practices of conversion tend to

mirror concern with and a non-confrontational approach with these institutions.

This has paid off in terms of an expanding membership and good relations with

the Nation-State and the ruling Party. While not necessarily applicable evenly

worldwide, the SSA articulates an idea and approach that genuinely suited to the

religious field of Singapore, especially among the Chinese. While this necessarily

means the individual must sacrifice some level of autonomy and freedom of action for the collective, the principle is generally one that is well understood and accepted in the populace.

While this has stood the SSA in good stead in its theological battles with local splinters after its break from the Nichiren priesthood, the SSA main concern in terms of expansion the near future will be its ability to successfully explain its position in a way attractive and comprehensible to the growing English speaking populace in the religious field in Singapore.

Thus in a sense, strategy can only be considered with an understanding of the fit between a religion and the religious field and the range of potential converts. The approach of a successful Chinese church is very different from that of a middle-class (implicitly English-speaking) Protestant church as Lee points out. And, depending on the appeal of a particular religious configuration in the social body, player may indeed find that the collective weight of their theology, culture and approach may mean that a redirection may be in line when what is believed to be a productive market niche turns out resistant to conversion as the case discussed by Goh (1999) illustrates. No doubt cases of conversion such as 'Sam' and other converts might easily be filled by competing religions in terms of absolute need met. What is to be stressed is not so much what is superior in Buddhism but what people who have converted say and believe of their faith and what constitutes its initial attraction to them. Just as Buddhist ideas can appeal in a Christian school setting by appealing to 'happiness' as a strategy, Buddhists are equally vulnerable by the appeal of a Christianity that has the theological flexibility and takes the effort to fit better into the pre-existing habitus available in

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the religious populace. This is an aspect of our shared humanity and contradictions, at once desiring self-determination and desiring succor, at once desiring community and free-expression. It would be over simplistic to assume religious habitus is any less dynamic and based in free will than habitus of any kind, but its solidity and usefulness as a concept is hopefully sufficient as a new way to consider the study of religion.

ENDNOTES

[1] Immediately after she then discusses the various ways Christian teachings are taken and applied in the Care Corner, and so the claim of lack of Christian-ness must be taken with a pinch of salt and relegated to personal discomfort over a difference in style. It is important however, as it illustrates the point both she and Chua are stressing, that some types of people find certain forms of religion more attractive.

[2] More to be more accurate, Nichiren was born on the 16th day of the 2nd month, with his death occurring on the 13th day of the 10th month. It is likely to be following a lunar calendar reckoning but in practice, most Gakkai texts give the date in terms of the solar calendar.

[3] At one discussion meeting the presiding MD while explaining the significance of the gosho to a new visitor said 'The Christians have the Bible, we have the gosho'. It may seem odd but the Lotus Sutra and the selectivity with which it is approached is similar to the position of the Old Testament in the Bible. What is stressed to the believer is the points that imply the coming of a new knowledge and while occasionally read (at least a third of the respondents have at one time or another read the Lotus Sutra on their own) it is not that important in a way, compared to the 'New Testament' of the writings of the Daishonin's gosho.

[4] This is very similar in a way to the Protestant assertion that God is to be found in engagement with the world rather than in contemplative retreat from it. The Nichiren school, or rather Soka Gakkai, has been accused of being protestant Buddhism by Clammer. The insight is perhaps accurate in intent though greatly reductionist. I have therefore striven to give a context of Buddhist thought to point out that the various solutions to the problem of the profane world that Buddhism has come up with, of which the Nichiren approach is a successful one. If nothing else, the Christian no matter how involved in the world eventually expect to leave the material existence for a superior one, the Nichiren Buddhist does not expect this at all as it would run counter to its collapsing of mind-body duality.

[5] Very similar to Zen solutions of essential Buddha nature coming forth once the mind has been properly stilled.

[6] In many ways, this resembles the various simplified flyers and booklets that are popularly used by Christian groups. Generally, these SGI and SSA publications are slightly denser and more heavy going than comparable material from Christian groups but less dense than writings by writers such as C.S. Lewis and Moody, except in certain exceptions. As the SGI is more organized and centralized, most writings either originate from President Daisaku Ikeda or the relevant study department.

[7] The Dai Gohonzon was inscribed by the Daishonin to bring enlightenment to the world. It is currently under the possession of the disenfranchised priesthood.

[8] Comments to this point have been made a number of times in front of the researcher. The loose tendency is for such statements to be made by younger, more theologically inclined members. The lack of superstition implicit in such a statement is expressed with evident satisfaction.

[9] Christianity in Singapore is stylistically divided between the more ritual approach and the more rationalistic one of stressing theological knowledge and personal experience. Christians uncomfortable with the implications of religion as an unthinking system of practice tend to stress that they have a 'relationship with God' rather than a 'religion'. The Soka Gakkai has the advantage in the ritual-bound environment of Singaporean Buddhism by being able to provide older members a form they can understand, accept and be comfortable with and younger more skeptical practitioners with a philosophical explanation that is rationally amendable to them.

[10] Due to growth and reorganization, there is now the additional regions of HQ1, HQ2 and HQ3, and some Zones have been split into East and West.

[11] To explain the more obscure SSA groupings, Gachukai look after the various kaikan in Singapore, Young Lions direct traffic, while the Orchid and Lily groups are for married YWD and WD respectively.

[12] A possible parallel to the difficulty of situating this research would be if every study of Catholic religiosity in the present had to be framed in context of alleged secret agendas and actual historical debacles such as the Crusades and the Inquisition, or even current allegation with regards to the Opus Dei movement. It would make fieldwork minimally unpleasant, if not impossible, and greatly reduce the chances of getting decent answers to equally important questions of belief and practices.

[13] The 'group' has been abolished as the average size of member ship changed towards larger numbers. Districts of 10-20 are common enough to go around.

[14] The MD in the district where I did most of my fieldwork constantly remembered that I drank Chinese tea at meetings and always offered me a glass when I arrived without even having me to remind him of my preferred choice.

[15] One SD leader I had followed around once went a full hour before an event to chant with me in tow. After an hour of daimuku, he welcomed the SD members who had slowly streamed in to arrive for the event and who had started chanting along with him as and when they arrived, and conducted gongyo followed by chanting for more than an hour and a half. This near 3 hours of unremitting chanting is the longest I have personally witnessed, though I have been told that people chanting for the remission of illness may go on endlessly.

[16] This was my experience of a Chapter meeting dance practice. Each of the times the group met in the kaikan to practice, the researcher inclusive, a long chanting session dominated. One WD giving us guidance stressed that chanting was fundamental and that it was not an add-on to the successful practice of the performance.

[17] In essence serving as apologists. At other times as ways and means of practical application.

[18] The researcher was personally involved in and ran a games stall and went around with the games group people from my zone to source for prizes among party accessory wholesalers as well as general stall design and set up.

[19] Needless to say, in the framework of Nichiren Buddhism this would lead to expatriation of karma. Folk narratives abound of how the NDP helped members overcome their personal difficulties and problems, through the experience. More traditionally, there are of course accounts of how taking part in the NDP smoothes away problems (stomach ulcers, difficulties, e.t.c.) that had been troubling the participants before the event. The common understanding is that NDP often requires human revolution and at the same time due to its national visibility is a great contribution kosenrufu, both excellent ways of attaining good causes leading to good benefits in the SSA's view.

[20] The very last zaimu collection I attended had a questionnaire distributed to people asking if they would like to give yearly, monthly or quarterly. As such the format of zaimu may change in the near future. Frankly, the monthly collection may be too demanding in terms of manpower needed to consolidate zaimu and keep it on a regular basis as the monthly discussion meetings are held in private homes and not on SSA property.

[21] It is a strange tension that for a religion that stresses not doubting the efficacy of the practice, the main worry by a number of older members and leaders is that the younger generation is not 'testing the gohonzon' enough by bringing prayers, problems and wants before it. While it is true that the best possible interpretation may be taken by believers to read the existence of actual proof from their lives, it is worrisome to many that the efficacy of the religion is not given a chance to be tested by goal-less and undirected chanting.

[22] Assuming that the SSA is evenly divided among the 4 Divisions, YMD should number around 5000. Even if that was a Region level goal, the increase would be around 40 for every 1000 plus YMD. About less than 4% per year.

[23] For example, the growth then tapering off of Christian religious success can be explained by the churches going into a consolidation stage, and being in a late stage of growth. This is a plausible explanation but the nature of terms like late stage of growth and consolidation are imprecise terms that vary from circumstance to circumstance. The fact that colonization of the religious sphere meets the late stage of growth and consolidation after a certain period, begs the question that the growing market niche that had not been aggressively exploited by the less soul winning churches now seems to reach some sense of limits. A very ready harvest would very likely generate the likelihood of more religious entrepreneurs entering the field, encouraged/heartened by constant success to go back in with more conviction and sense of mission and time. Therefore, the question of how and why a market niche exists, and how and why it changes must be part of the explanatory paradigm, no matter how primitive the attempt at explanation may be, rather than taking success for granted as inevitable and self-evident.

[24] Such as English and Chinese speaking han and the presence of dialect theology talks. Tamil is also used and embraced, but not at the same level, simply due the practical reality of the number of such speakers in the membership.

[25] He does not limit the conditionality to the Chinese, a position that I share. Habitus in conversion is a constant and does not limit itself to any particular ethnic group.

[26] On the issue of efficacy are many oral accounts of how dang ki have been on occasion unable to perform in the presence of a man of God or in some form of difficulty in his presence. For whatever reason, as a result the Shenist high ground has been ceded on its own terms to what seems to be a greater power in such narratives. Whether these are urban legends particular to Singapore and of Christian origin, we will never know but they are popularly mentioned and believed in. As such, the existence of such stories are a good estabilisher of the pedigree of the Christian 'shen' and coincidentally fits into its theology of demons and spirits who are ultimately subject to the power of one Almighty God.

[27] Matthews (1998) accounts one occasion when an attendee at City Harvest asks if spiritual manifestations might just be the workings of the person's psychology and was dismissed as being 'cheem'. It is an excellent strategy as the terms carries implication that the questioner is over-intellectualizing (and therefore having a questionable grasp of reality) while completely side-stepping a fruitless argument between two very different interpretative understandings of experience that in public would do no good to the cause of conversion.

[28] What is meant here is some level of internal logic is attained. Various attempts to explain gaps away should also be seen to by the religion. Usually various believers fill this need over time, in trying to make sense of their faith and often producing religious literature/musings in doing so. Admittedly it is difficult to determine this with great accuracy, especially when original literature (e.g. the Bible/Lotus Sutra) and derived theological conclusions (e.g. God as Trinity/Existence of an Eternal Buddha) get hard to differentiate from each other by anyone other than specialist scholars. The point is not that religions must make sense, for they are after all sense-making, but that in a competitive environment, people will reject religions that make less sense to them and follow those that make more. More explanations are better than less.

[29] The 2002 YMD Formation Day meeting that I attended for my district, had a play illustrating the issue of religion in the context of a number of people waiting at a bus stop and waiting for the bus to come. As the bus never came, some people took the initiative of walking or otherwise getting out of the predicament by themselves, while the vast majority waited and waited out of a spirit of dependency to no point. The self-sufficiency and active change ideas in the SSA are obviously reflected in the point of the play. Having got the attention of the audience, a powerpoint slide was used to great effect to illustrate the mentality and theology implicitly underlying the play and to draw the link to the philosophy of the SSA. The last segment was a sharing of a life experience by a member who was fighting cancer and finding meaning in his faith despite difficulties. This is endemic of most Gakkai meetings where member who overcome difficulties are asked to share their stories. These narratives are often delivered in colloquial language, brimming with daily and mundane concerns and as such tend to give a sense of genuineness and speaking from the heart. The researcher suspects that it can also be quite carthartic for the one giving the narrative, as generally it is to my knowledge that such personal information is rarely shared to a community in general. This intimate sharing seems to have two effects, encouragement of people facing difficulties and therefore undergoing stress with regards to their beliefs that they can overcome through the strategy of the Lotus Sutra and the sense of a shared community by articulating experiences to one's contemporaries and adding such narratives to a communal store of knowledge.

[30] Therefore, that the faith has a historical basis, that it makes sense and that it works! The weakness of Shenism in Singapore is the lack of the first two aspects. While that does not prevent the workability of a faith from retaining followers, people are unlikely to turn to a faith that fails the first two requirements when more reasonable alternatives exist. In a sense, perhaps what is perceived to be reasonable is more likely to be workable.

[31] I was promised a particular motivational poster by one of the YMD in my acquaintance, that said something to the point that Buddhism was like a good fluoride toothpaste. The proof, and the benefit, is in using it regularly.

[32] A number of younger believers come to the conclusion that science simply has not come up with a way to quantify and make provable the universal laws of Buddhism. In a sense Buddhism is not so much un-falsifiable but un-testable beyond hypothetical conclusions. As Buddhism stresses laws of cause and effect and the Tendai theology inhereited by the Soka Gakkai is highly sophisticated,

having absorbed influences from various schools of Buddhist thought, the logicality of the language approaches that of the soft and human sciences. It is thus quite sufficient for many to see it as reasonable, if not passably scientific.

[33] An example was the passing away of a young YMD from cancer, after initial remission of his illness. An interesting aspect to this is the idea that his life had been extended beyond his allotted span, as well as another that he had completed his 'mission'. On one hand the former belief is in-line with the idea of intervention and the second is close to the Gakkai's idea of value creation as the measure of the meaningfulness of one's life. Members longer in the faith were also more laissre faire, comforting themselves that 'he will be reborn in a better body' and taking the reincarnation tenet of Buddhism and the inevitability of rebirth seriously.

[34] I have deliberately not explored the issue of conversion out to splinter groups in Nichiren Buddhism as it becomes politicized and the interviewer is not confident of gaining reliable data that is not polemic. Conversion out and non conversion round out this dissertation in a way that looking at the above will not.

[35] The site has now evolved into a purely secular one and all references to its previous origins in the Soka Gakkai are now gone.

[36] The tone of anti-Soka Gakkai sites tend to take this view, emphasizing the paucity of not possessing the Dai Gohonzon and doubting the efficacy of the gohonzons issued by the SGI. The SGI seems to respond to this legitimacy battle in similar terms, stressing that their accouterments are scriptural-ly sound and capable of bringing benefit.

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