

RELIGIOUS POLITICS, JAPANESE STYLE¹

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This spring [2006], Soka Gakkai, the largest “new religious movement” in Japan, made one of its occasional splashes in the Japanese news media.

On April 15 [2006], the major daily *Asahi Shinbun* ran a front page article describing an April 11 meeting at Soka Gakkai headquarters between Soka Gakkai President Akiya Einosuke and Ichiro Ozawa, the newly elected head of Japan’s main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). The *Asahi* speculated that Ozawa was seeking to get New Komeito—the Soka Gakkai-backed political party that is currently the junior party in the governing coalition—to switch allegiance to the DPJ.

Meanwhile, the *Asahi* rival *Yomiuri Shinbun* published a comprehensive eight-part series focusing on the Soka Gakkai/New Komeito relationship. The series made clear that while Soka Gakkai has not sought to use New Komeito to advance a narrowly religious agenda, the party pursues a set of policies that are generally aligned with Soka Gakkai principles. And although Soka Gakkai members are not the only citizens who vote for New Komeito, they constitute its activist base, providing advocacy and rounding up support at election time.

Religion as such is rarely covered by Japan’s mainstream media, but Soka Gakkai is something of an exception because it is a force to be reckoned with in Japanese politics. How, in a country that seems well protected from the winds of religious politics blowing elsewhere in the world, has it come to be so?

Soka Gakkai (literally “Society for the Creation of Value”) follows the form of Buddhism established by a 13th century Japanese monk named Nichiren. Adherents believe that through individual transformation, or “human revolution,” they can work to transform society by applying their religious beliefs to their activities in daily life. Under the three-fold banner of peace, culture, and education, the organization aims to promote harmony, tolerance, and mutual understanding of all peoples.

But if the members of Soka Gakkai resemble liberal Protestants in their socio-religious outlook, they are evangelical in their commitment to proselytizing and—though the parallel with American evangelicals is far from exact—in their readiness to see one political party as the repository of their values. (To be sure, they will support a candidate from another party when New Komeito does not field one in a particular district.)

Soka Gakkai was founded in 1930 by an educator named Tsunesaburo Makiguchi in order to promote social reform and what he called “value-creating education.” In the 1930s, militaristic nationalism and government-enforced Shinto ideology led to the persecution of dissenters, and Makiguchi and his disciple Josei Toda were arrested. Makiguchi died in prison in 1944 and today is held up by Soka Gakkai as a martyr who fought against repressive government authority.

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In the immediate postwar period, the Allied Occupation introduced new laws proscribing government interference in religious matters and establishing strict separation of religion and state in reaction to the prewar status quo. Many new religious movements flourished, and while some devoted themselves to helping ordinary people in the postwar chaos, others were simply fronts for business scams that tried to make use of tax breaks available for religions. Their rise was widely covered by the news media, which took a negative view of religion in general and new religious movements in particular.

After being released from prison in 1945, Toda struggled to rebuild Soka Gakkai, starting with a handful of former members. He shifted the emphasis away from Makiguchi's educational ideas to focus on the religious teachings of Nichiren (although Makiguchi's ideas remain to this day in the Soka educational system). From 1951, when he became the Soka Gakkai's second president, until his death in 1958, Toda spearheaded a major proselytizing campaign that saw its ranks swell to 750,000 households.

This was by far the most remarkable growth of any religious group in Japan in the postwar period, and while it solidified the foundations of the organization, widespread criticism in the media over its conversion methods—and over its supposed exclusivism and intolerance—contributed to the formation of negative opinion that to a certain extent still endures. Currently, the organization counts more than eight million members in Japan.

Article 20 of the postwar Constitution prohibits religious organizations from receiving special treatment from the state or exercising any political authority, and forbids requiring anyone to take part in a religious act, celebration, rite, or practice. But there is nothing to prevent a religious organization from participating in politics, and in fact some new religions began to involve themselves in politics shortly after the war, first supporting candidates singly, and then collectively, as part of the Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan (established in 1951).

Part of the reason for this political involvement was because by the late 1940s it was clear that the Occupation authorities, who had worked to protect religious freedom, were planning to withdraw from Japan. Reactionary political forces, including those who had been engaged in the push for prewar State Shinto, were gathering force and these new religious groups felt the need to use the political arena to protect themselves from potential attack.

Soka Gakkai started fielding its own candidates in local elections in 1955, and in national elections the following year. (The organization is active in many other countries, but has stated categorically that it will not become involved in politics outside Japan.)

In the wake of public backlash against revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty in 1960, the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) began looking for support from new religions other than Soka Gakkai, which formed a powerful voting bloc in its own right. In 1964, Soka Gakkai established the Komeito ("Clean Government Party"), and by 1967 it had become the third largest opposition party.

In 1969, Soka Gakkai came under fire for attempting to obstruct publication of a highly critical academic study that claimed the organization pulled the Komeito's strings. The book was published, a media furor over freedom of the press and freedom of speech ensued, and Soka Gakkai's then President, Daisaku Ikeda, issued a public apology.

The following year, Soka Gakkai declared itself financially and administratively separate from Komeito, and from then until November 1998, according to the *Yomiuri Shinbun* series, officials of the organization avoided attending Komeito meetings.

In 1993, after years in opposition, the Komeito joined other opposition parties in the short-lived ruling coalition that ended the unbroken succession of LDP-led governments since the end of World War II. The result was a new flurry of concern over Soka Gakkai's political power—raised in part by those LDP members who enjoyed the support of members of other new religious movements.

Then, in March of 1995, Japanese society was thrown into turmoil by the gassing of the Tokyo subway system by the Aum Shinrikyo religious group. As the extent of Aum's crimes over a number of years became apparent, the Japanese media produced a steady stream of stories not only about Aum, but also about the role of religion generally in Japanese politics.

With the LDP back in power, some LDP politicians now seized the opportunity to intensely criticize Soka Gakkai, which was then supporting the opposition New Frontier Party (NFP). That they themselves were receiving support from other new religions suggests that the danger posed by politically active religious groups to parliamentary democracy was not their foremost concern.

Soka Gakkai's President Akiya eventually appeared in parliament to answer questions concerning the organization's political position. In the subsequent political jostling that occurred, the New Frontier Party dissolved, and in 1998 a "New Komeito" was established. Since that time, according to the *Yomiuri Shinbun* series, senior officials of the Soka Gakkai have attended periodic meetings with New Komeito representatives to discuss the political situation.

Meanwhile, in 1999, LDP Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi brought the New Komeito into the ruling coalition. It has been an uneasy alliance.

With its concerns for education, welfare, peace, and health issues, New Komeito might thus pass for the new religious left that is struggling to be born in the U.S. Within the governing coalition, it has thus far sought to counteract the increasingly right-wing tendencies of the LDP.

Yomiuri Shinbun quoted Soka Gakkai representative Koji Harada as saying that the organization uses its influence to get New Komeito to "step on the accelerator" and "apply the brakes" in terms of government policy. Thus, New Komeito has managed to increase the welfare budget while holding up proposals to elevate the Defense Agency to a fully fledged government ministry and to include a passage on "patriotism" in the Fundamental Law on Education.

But it is in the matter of the Yasukuni Shrine that New Komeito's braking ability will be most interesting to watch. The shrine is a private religious institution dedicated to the spirits of the war dead, including a number of Class A war criminals. Since 2001, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has paid repeated visits to Yasukuni in the face of strong foreign opposition, particularly from China.

Soka Gakkai has long fostered cultural and educational ties with China, and continued visits to Yasukuni by Koizumi and other politicians will only widen the rift between New Komeito and the LDP.

Asahi Shinbun's April 15 article stated that some New Komeito members were unable to "hide their displeasure" with the party's continued participation in the ruling coalition. On May 17, *Yomiuri Shinbun* reported that some party officials were saying that New Komeito had paid too high a price for its participation:

"Over the past five years, the party has endorsed the dispatch of Maritime Self-Defense Force personnel to the Indian Ocean and Air and Ground SDF personnel to Iraq, causing concerns among Soka Gakkai members, saying that the nature of 'the party of peace' had changed."

When the popular Koizumi leaves office in September [2006], New Komeito may have the occasion it needs to switch alliances. As the religious right in America has discovered, when you're in power, the course of "values politics" rarely runs smooth.