

Soka Gakkai

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Brief History of Soka Gakkai

Soka Gakkai, a lay Buddhist movement, was founded in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), who was the first president from 1930 to 1944, and by Josei Toda (1900-1958), who was the second president from 1951 to 1958. Its original name was Soka Kyoiku Gakkai. Both were educators converted to Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

Makiguchi was originally an elementary school teacher. He was dissatisfied with school education in Japan at that time because it was too abstract and too elitist and it did not emphasise practical skills for ordinary people. Makiguchi also considered that apart from pedagogy, religion was important for the creation of values. He found that the teaching of Nichiren (1222-1282) was the best education method because it was mass-oriented. Nichiren studied various teachings of Buddhism and finally found that the essence of Buddhism is in Lotus Sutra, which reveals to all the people that they have potential for enlightenment without regard to individual distinctions. Nichiren advocated that following Lotus Sutra (Hokkekyo) leads everyone to happiness.

Makiguchi and Toda started to follow the teaching of Nichiren and established Soka Gakkai to develop an education project based on his theories.

In 1943, the leaders of the movement were sent to jail because they refused to pay tribute to Shinto, the state religion, and to support the war waged by Japan in Asia and against the United States. Makiguchi died in prison at the age of 73.

After the war, Toda rebuilt the movement. In 1946, he renamed it Soka Gakkai (Society for the creation of values). Soka Gakkai can now be defined as a worldwide movement for the promotion of peace, education and culture.

In 1951, Toda became the second president of Soka Gakkai. Hardly 3,000 households were Soka Gakkai members. Six years later, there were 750,000. "Criticize and convince" was the motto of the enthusiastic proselytism method advocated at that time (*shakubuku*) but Japan's military defeat in WW II and the subsequent moral collapse of Shinto, the Emperor's religion, also paved the way to the expansion of Soka Gakkai.

In 1952, Soka Gakkai was legally registered as a religious organisation, despite the opposition of the Nichiren Shoshu clergy.

In 1957 Toda issued a declaration calling upon the abolition of the use of nuclear and atomic weapons.

In 1960, Daisaku Ikeda (1928-) became the third president of Soka Gakkai. Ten years later, the number of members had increased to approximately 7,500,000 households in Japan. He tried to improve the relations between Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu monks. He made important donations to the main temple, Taiseki-ji. He had a large reading hall built (1958) as well as a reception hall and the definitive main temple.

He developed cultural activities, created museums, concert halls, schools (from kindergartens to universities), newspapers, etc.

Under Ikeda, the movement became international. He travelled to North and South America (1960), to South-East, India and Europe (1961). Local Japanese immigrants and business staff contributed to the expansion of the movement. In 1975, he founded Soka Gakkai International in Guam.

In Japan, Ikeda reaffirmed and extended the basic philosophy of Soka Gakkai: each individual must transform himself, and not only the structures of society, to achieve long-term peace and human happiness.

In 1964, Soka Gakkai founded a political party, *Komeito*.

In 1977-1979, the conflict between the lay movement and the monks flared up again after Ikeda's attempt to put both movements on the same footing. In 1979, Ikeda had to resign from his position of president. He was replaced by Hiroshi Hojo (1923-1981), a close collaborator. In 1981, he was succeeded by Einosuke Akiya. Ikeda was then restored in his position of honorary president. For forty years, he has always been the moral leader of Soka Gakkai.

In 1981, an "association culturelle" (legal entity working exclusively for worship-related purposes) was created in France. It was named SGI European Institute in 1991. The general assembly comprised representatives and observers from 14 European countries. Ikeda reaffirmed the general goals of Soka Gakkai: disarmament and ban on nuclear weapons. Soka Gakkai is a UNHCR-recognized NGO (1981) and was also registered with the ECOSOC (1983).

In 1990, it became obvious that the double structure of the movement was not working any more. The expansion of Soka Gakkai did not benefit the Nichiren Shoshu clergy and the influence of the monks in this expansion was only very marginal. The monks changed the rules of the representation of the Soka Gakkai laypeople in the Nichiren Shoshu Council to their detriment and in November 1991, they excommunicated Soka Gakkai. Two concrete and disturbing effects among others: Soka Gakkai members were excluded from the pilgrimages to the main temple and the patriarch stopped delivering certified copies of the *Gohonzon* (sacred parchment engraved by Nichiren and venerated in Nichiren Shoshu) to the new members. Soka Gakkai replaced this religious ceremony by the distribution of a membership certificate but the sacred dimension of the event fully lacked. On 7 September 1993, the leader of the monks of the temple of Joen-ji agreed to deliver a *Gohonzon* to the new members of Soka Gakkai. The reaction of the Nichiren Shoshu monks was very strong and soon came to a climax. The rupture between both movements became total and Soka Gakkai appointed its own clergy. In 1995, patriarch Nikken ordered the monks to destroy the large banquet hall and three years later the main temple, the two buildings erected under Ikeda's presidency with a donation of Soka Gakkai.

In 1994, *Komeito* and other political parties merged to form the Party of the New Frontier, *Shinshinto*, to thwart the influence of the Democratic Liberal Party, then in power. In December 1997, *Shinshinto* disintegrated. Two parties emerged from the ruins of *Shinshinto* but then merged into the *New Komeito*. Its political programme is based on disarmament, pacifism, welfare and religious freedom.

Soka Gakkai/ Japan publishes a daily newspaper, *Seikyo Shimbun*, (circulation: several million copies), a monthly and a quarterly magazine. The foreign branches also have periodical publications.

There are about 15-18 million Soka Gakkai members in the world. In 1995, the Office for Public Relations of the Soka Gakkai published the following statistics.

Japan: 8,120,000 households

North America: 338,000 individuals

Central America: 12,000 individuals

South America: 205,000 individuals

Asia: 779,000 individuals

Middle East and Africa: 7,000 individuals

Europe: 19,000 individuals

In October 2000, the Soka Gakkai membership in Europe numbered 39,980 (Secretariat of SGI-Europe) and was as follows:

Italy: 20,000

France: 8,800

Great-Britain: 6,200

Germany: 2,200

Spain: 600

The Netherlands: 500

Belgium*, Denmark, Switzerland: 300

Austria, Sweden: 250

Norway: 60

Finland, Portugal: 50

Eastern Europe: 120

** In Belgium, there are about 330 members in Belgium, representing 42 nationalities. In the past, the Japanese represented the highest percentage but now non-Japanese members are increasing. Especially, members from other EU Member States such as Italy are more and more numerous.*

Profile of Soka Gakkai

1. What is hierarchical structure of the movement?

Soka Gakkai / Japan

The Honorary President (Daisaku Ikeda) is the spiritual leader. There is a president (Einosuke Akiya), a general director (Kazuya Morita) and vice presidents. Decisions in the Soka Gakkai are made by consensus on various levels based on an interaction of national, regional and local perspectives. Because a Soka Gakkai branch is a national organization, its general administration and its local components are interdependent: the administration closely informs itself of local perspectives in formulating national policy guidelines; local organizational units meanwhile coordinate local needs with national guidelines in designing their activities.

The structures of the national branches are the same everywhere: local zads (discussion groups), districts, chapters, centres, general centres and regions.

The local group is composed of 10-20 people. These discussion groups (also called zadankai or zad) gather once or twice a month and accommodate outsiders who are interested in the movement. Several discussion groups constitute a district. At the district level, courses on the fundamental principles of Nichiren Buddhism are held once a month. In France, they are organized once every three months at the level of the centres. The chapter is the umbrella organization of several districts. Chapters are grouped together in centres. At the next levels, we have general centres and then regions.

Parallel to these structures, there are also several departments : youth, students, elderly people, homosexuals, nationalities, ethnic groups, etc. Members are encouraged to be volunteers in these departments.

In Japan, the organization's highest decision-making body is the Executive Council, which determines annual goals and projects, reviews and approves personnel matters and financial reports, and oversees other national organizational issues. The Central Conference is a body consisting of the president, all prefectural chiefs and other representatives of different divisions that decides policies and guidelines for activities. Delegates of the national membership represent both. Each regional and prefectural organization has its own administrative council to discuss and promote regional activities.

Soka Gakkai International

Soka Gakkai International (hereinafter SGI) is an umbrella organization that coordinates and controls the activities of the national branches which, however, enjoy some latitude in their objectives and agendas. SGI has its headquarters in Tokyo. SGI has a European centre in France.

2. How does the movement recruit new members?

Nichiren said that talking on a one-to-one basis is the starting point. Soka Gakkai follows the teaching of Nichiren. Soka Gakkai Belgium holds several discussion sessions (Zadankai) every month and new people come to such sessions. If a non-member is

interested, a member can sponsor him or her and exchange ideas with him or her. This method is part of the soft proselytism method called *shoju* which consists in attracting potential new members through one's own behaviour and moral qualities.

3. Joining the movement

In Belgium, an applicant for membership must go through a minimum six-month probation period during which he or she must carry out worshipping activities (read the teachings of Nichiren and chant "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" meaning respect for Lotus Sutra) in the morning and at night, read the publications of Soka Gakkai, take part in monthly discussion meetings (Zadankai) and promote Soka Gakkai among his or her friends and colleagues. After six months or more, the members of the Executive Council examine the application and make a decision.

4. Adherence to the movement and to another religion

Soka Gakkai does not compel anybody to abandon his/her affiliation to another religion.

5. Financial obligations of members

All financial contributions are voluntary.

6. Voluntary leaving of movement

In Belgium, voluntary leaving of Soka Gakkai can be done by a simple letter addressed to Soka Gakkai without any sanction.

7. Procedure of exclusion of an adherent, a member of hierarchy, or the supreme leader

In Belgium, there is no exclusion procedure because they are rare.

8. Social and domestic relations

Members of the movement fully live in civil society. They can get married to non-members. Their children go to public or state-recognized schools. Soka Gakkai does not interfere with family matters, sexual life or homosexuality.

In Japan, there is a Soka Gakkai University. Former students work in the state administration, in embassies, in the judiciary, in the economic sector, in the media where they promote the philosophy of Soka Gakkai. There is also a Soka University in America and in France. Creating schools is an important activity of that movement founded by a teacher. Soka Gakkai has also renovated a number of historic derelict buildings to use them as cultural centres in Great-Britain (Taplow Court), Italy (Firenze) and Germany (Bingen): volunteers have contributed to these projects. Concerts, paintings exhibitions and other events have been organised.

In Japan, Soka Gakkai has had a political party since 1964. However, the movement does not have its own banks, trade unions, hospitals, psychiatric hospitals or homes for elderly people.

9. The movement and medicine

If a member is sick, no teaching forbids him or her to go and see a doctor and to follow a medical treatment.

10. Informing members about the financial management of the movement

In Belgium, an external accountant controls the accountability. If a member requests information on financial management, the boards will give it to him or her. Soka Gakkai Belgium's account statement satisfies the criteria required by Belgian law.

11. Religious activities

Reading the teachings of Nichiren and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (Daimoku in Japanese) twice a day, once in the morning and once at night. But there are no rules as to exactly what time of the day members should do so or how long they should have such activities.

12. Life in community

There is no monastic life and there is no ashram. Members of Soka Gakkai are fully integrated in society.

13. List of allegations concerning the dangerous nature of the movement

In Belgium: No allegations.

In France: The following allegations are made by the parliamentary report Gest-Guyard and "anti-cult" activists:

1. Buying land near nuclear facilities for the purpose of espionage activities.
2. Mental manipulation.

In Japan: the following allegations are made by political parties opposing the Komeito and "anti-cult" activists:

1. Creating a political party (Komeito) which is against Article 20 of Japanese Constitution (separation of church and state).
2. Wiretapping the house of the leader of the Communist Party, Kenji Miyamoto. In 1970 Miyamoto's telephone line was wiretapped by members of Soka Gakkai for over a month.

3. Tax evasion on sale of a Renoir painting . In 1989, Renoir's painting was bought by Fuji Museum run by Soka Gakkai. In the transaction involving Soka Gakkai and Mitsubishi Shoji, Soka Gakkai allegedly received unreported money of 1.5 billion yen.
4. Breaking into Taisekiji the main temple of Nichiren-Shoshu. Soka Gakkai used to be under the authority of Nichiren-Shoshu but the two became separate in 1993. Since then their relationship has been extremely bad.
5. Defamation against Nikken, Head of Nichiren-Shoshu
6. Murdering a member of Higashi-Murayama City Parliament, who criticised Soka Gakkai in 1995.
7. Forcing members to buy its publications and make contributions beyond financial possibilities.
8. Raping female members of Soka Gakkai (allegation against Daisaku Ikeda, Honorary President).

14. Official position of Soka Gakkai to these allegations

In Belgium: Not applicable because there are no allegations.

In France: The answer is as follows.

1. / 2. Soka Gakkai/ France claims that it does not commit any kind of dangerous or criminal activities.

In Japan: The answer is as follows.

1. Soka Gakkai claims that creating Komeito is not against Article 20 of Japanese Constitution. It bases its position on the following statement by the Japanese government in 1970:

“Concerning the latter half of Clause 1 of Article 20 of the Constitution, that the provision of this Clause 'does not mean a direct prohibition against political activities' of religious organizations, and that 'the provision prohibits use of political power in the official sense of the terms, which means that it is given by the state.'We, as the Government, still hold this interpretation unchanged. In other words, we state that the present Government interprets the constitutional principle of the separation of religion and politics to mean that this principle prohibits the state and its agencies from intervening or participating in religion on any occasion of using the power of the state, and that this prohibition is meant to substantiate the guarantee of freedom of religion provided in the first half of Clause 1 of Article 20 of the Constitution. We do not think that this prohibition goes beyond what is stated above to include prohibition against political activities that are carried out by religious organizations or other organizations virtually controlled by religions organizations.”

In Japan, groups, such as commercial corporations, unions and even religious movements, endorse particular political parties as normal practice. Soka Gakkai claims that what it is doing is within the range of such practice.

2. Tokyo District Court and Tokyo High Court gave a judgment against five members of Soka Gakkai in a civil action on the wiretapping of the house of Communist Party's leader, Kenji Miyamoto. Yet, these courts did not find that Soka Gakkai, as an organisation, took part in the wiretapping.
3. Tax Evasion: Out of 1.5 billion yen, 1.2 billion yen went to five people, including the dealer of the paintings, all of whom are not members of Soka Gakkai. The police and the prosecutors investigated where the rest of the money went. However, they found no evidence that Soka Gakkai received a portion of unreported money.
4. Breaking into Taiseikiji: It is true that Soka Gakkai used to be under Nichiren-Shoshu but Nichiren-Shoshu excommunicated Soka Gakkai in 1992. Since then the relationship between the two has deteriorated. However, Soka Gakkai, as an organization, claims that it has never attempted such attacks, although it may be possible that some overzealous members broke into the temple because of anger at being denied the right to worship there.

5. Defamation against Nikken: It is true that criticism against Nikken is sometimes intense. However, Nichiren-Shoshu's criticism against Soka Gakkai is equally intense. Considering their bad relationship, both sides may go too far.
6. The member of Higashi-Murayama City Parliament committed suicide. Soka Gakkai claims that it has nothing to do with her death. The police investigated but found nothing that suggested any relationship between her death and Soka Gakkai. Newspapers which blamed Soka Gakkai have been found guilty of libel.
7. It is true that Soka Gakkai needs a lot of money for administration, considering its size. But there is no teaching that compels the followers to donate more money than they can, including through purchase of the publications of the movement.
8. There is no evidence that Honorary President Ikeda committed rape. Nobuko Nobuhira, a former member of Soka Gakkai, brought a lawsuit, alleging that he raped her. She lost because the statute of limitations had run out (without determining whether he committed a rape). Yet, in the lawsuit brought by her husband, the court dismissed the case because he abused a right to access to the court by not bringing sufficient evidence of rape and continually altering the dates and circumstances of the alleged incidents. The court determined that Ikeda did not commit a rape. Additionally, Soka Gakkai denies any other rape allegation.

15. Lawsuits against the movement or against members of the clergy in European francophone countries on the basis of one of the allegations from point 13. Sentences.

In Belgium: No lawsuits.

In France: Soka Gakkai France denies any lawsuits against Soka Gakkai France or against its leaders.

16. Lawsuits against the movement or against members of the clergy in other countries (including in Japan) on the basis of one of the allegations from point 13. Sentences.

In Japan: there are dozens of lawsuits. Following are recent major lawsuits:

1. Taisekiji (Nichiren Shoshu) sued Soka Gakkai and Daisaku Ikeda for libel, alleging that Soka Gakkai and Ikeda made up a fake photo of Nikken with a bunch of geishas. The district found Soka Gakkai and Ikeda liable and ordered Soka Gakkai to pay \$20,000 and Ikeda to pay \$10,000. Tokyo High Court reversed the judgement of the lower court and denied the recovery by Taisekiji.

Tokyo High Court pointed out that Soka Gakkai went too far in criticising Nikken. However, it concluded that the conduct against Nikken does not constitute libel against Taiseikiji because Nikken and Taiseikiji are different characters.

2. Taiseikiji (Nichiren Shoshu) sued Soka Gakkai and Daisaku Ikeda for libel, alleging that Soka Gakkai reported that Nikken engaged in sexual activity with a prostitute and had trouble with her for payment in Seattle in 1963. Nikken denied such conduct. Tokyo District Court found Soka Gakkai and Ikeda not liable on the ground that what Soka Gakkai reported actually did happen in 1963. Taiseikiji appealed and now the case is at Tokyo High Court.
3. As mentioned in point 14-8, Nobuko Nobuhira sued Daisaku Ikeda for damages, alleging that he raped her. The court dismissed the claim because of the statute of limitations. Her husband brought another lawsuit against Ikeda, suing for intentional infliction of mental distress. The court dismissed his claim because of abuse of right to the court, which means the failure to produce sufficient evidence to prove the fact of rape. High Court affirmed the dismissal.

17. Complaints from members of the movement concerning intolerance, discrimination on the basis of their convictions and hindrances to the exercise of their liberties before the publication of parliamentary reports on cults in Europe?

Belgium: No complaints according to Soka Gakkai Belgium.

France: Failed to answer this question.

18. Complaints from members of the movement concerning intolerance, discrimination on the basis of their convictions and hindrances to the exercise of their liberties after the publication of parliamentary reports on cults in Europe?

Belgium: No complaints after the publication. There has been no change.

France: SGI/ France failed to answer this question.

19. Lawsuits started by the movement. Results.

Belgium: No lawsuits.

France: Soka Gakkai France states that civil lawsuit is one of the options to deal with defamation against Soka Gakkai. However, it failed to refer to a specific example.

Japan: There are a couple of lawsuits as follows.

1. Soka Gakkai filed a lawsuit against Kodansha and Naoko Asaki for libel over the coverage of the death of the member of Higashi-Murayama City Parliament (Naoko Asaki is her daughter) in a magazine published by Kodansha. In July 1999, Tokyo District Court found that Kodansha committed libel and ordered to publish a retraction and apology in the weekly and pay \$18,000 in damages to Soka Gakkai. On the other hand, the court found Asaki not liable.

2. Soka Gakkai filed a lawsuit against Asaki and Hozumi Yano, both of whom publishes Higashi-Murayama Shimin Shinbun, for libel over the coverage of the death of the member of Higashi-Murayama City Parliament in Higashi-Murayama Shimin Shinbun. In February 2001, Tokyo District Court found them liable and ordered them to put an apology in the paper and pay \$18,000 in damages to Soka Gakkai.
3. A member of Soka Gakkai filed a lawsuit against Shinchosha for libel. Shinchosha's weekly magazine had published an article alleging that the member is a murderer. A member of the Diet (the Japanese Parliament) asked a question on this coverage. The court found that Shinchosha committed libel and ordered to publish a retraction and apology in the weekly magazine and pay \$10,000 in damages to Soka Gakkai.
4. 24 members of Soka Gakkai filed a lawsuit against Taiseikiji for the failure to obtain permission to use land as cemetery. The plaintiffs' family use the cemetery. Supreme Court of Japan denied the recovery in February 2001.

20. The movement and human rights?

Soka Gakkai promotes democracy, the respect of human rights and of the child's rights, non-discrimination, ecology, nuclear disarmament. This role has been recognized by the United Nations. In 1981, Soka Gakkai became a UNHCR-recognized NGO and in 1983, it was also registered with the ECOSOC. Soka Gakkai sponsors artistic events, concerts, theatre performances, exhibitions, etc.

Special Note: The Belgian leadership of SGI explained that the activities of the Belgian branch have always been informal. The Belgian office gets financial support from Tokyo headquarters.

01.09.2001

This profile will be updated as far as new pertinent elements will be brought to the attention of and will be controlled by "*Human Rights Without Frontiers.*"

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Suggested Readings

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