

Ronan Pereira argues that a charismatic and strategically smart leadership is the key for a new religious movement to survive not just in its original society but elsewhere. His case in point is Daisaku Ikeda who, for good or bad, became the face of the neo-Buddhist NRM Soka Gakkai International, (SGI). He masterminded its transformation from a parochial, lay Buddhist organisation into a major international religious movement that doubles as a non-governmental organisation.

A Japanese new religion in the age of globalisation: *the role of leadership within the neo-Buddhist Soka Gakkai*

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The world witnessed a boom of new religious movements (NRMs) in the past 50 years. In countries with basic democratic liberties that facilitated the formation of a 'religious market'¹, NRMs compete not only with their national counterparts but also with a growing number of foreign groups from every religious stream. Therefore, after passing this first test and surviving in its original society, a NRM must possess certain features and conditions in order to survive elsewhere.

In truth, the fate of a religious group in an alien society is dependent on a plethora of elements such as the deregulation of religion² and demand for new religious alternatives in the host society, a choice between becoming an ethnic religion perpetuated by a minority group or a universal movement, and so on. However, for an NRM to become a global cultural system, a key role is played by its leadership. More than just engaging in prolific discourse and having the good intention to be successful, a leader must also be a good strategist and have that charismatic flame to invigorate his or her followers, giving them a sense of purpose, and enlisting them to dedicate themselves to the 'noble cause of spreading the good news'. Charismatic appeal, strategic vision, and managerial ability are just

some of the skills needed in the portfolio of the leader of a NRM aspiring to a global reach.

In the following section I will depict and discuss the case of one of the most controversial religious leaders of modern Japan, yet one whose accomplishments are unsurpassed among Japanese NRMs. Daisaku Ikeda (born 1928) is the president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a neo-Buddhist movement that claims to have a presence in some 190 countries and territories (although having only 82 registered constituent organisations), with more than 12 million members.

The ordeals of a rising movement

Since its foundation in the 1930s by the primary school teacher and educational philosopher, Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871-1944), it has been a long and turbulent road for Sōka Gakkai (SG) in terms of attaining success in the global scene. During World War Two, SG almost disappeared due to governmental repression and the imprisonment of its leaders, which led to Makiguchi's death while in prison. His disciple, Jōsei Toda (1900-1958) was initially reluctant, but took over the leading position to reorganise this lay organisation affiliated with Nichiren Shōshū ('Orthodox Sect of Nichiren Buddhism') by deemphasising study and education in favour of

the unconditional and exclusive practice of Nichiren's teachings. Thus, in less than a decade, the small study group became a truly mass movement with inroads into politics. Because of its aggressive conversion campaign, massive rallies and festivals, and an organisational structure inspired by the military, SG gained a very negative reputation as a cult-like, fundamentalist, fascist and violent group.

In 1960, Daisaku Ikeda became the third president of SG at the age of 32. Although he kept his mentor's policy of 'destroying the evil religious'³ and expanding the movement at any cost, eventually Ikeda faced the common dilemma of anti-establishment movements: it became clear that the movement could not succeed unless it compromised and accommodated to the surrounding society. Therefore, gradually he deemphasised SG's forceful conversion campaigns and expanded the movement's cultural and educational activities.

In 1991, Soka Gakkai members were excommunicated from Nichiren Shōshū. While this freed the organisation from a traditional and limiting priesthood, at the same time it provoked a crisis of legitimacy. Previously, the two organisations lived in a symbiotic relationship that was mutually beneficial: the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood claimed to be guardians of the



SGI meeting in Sao Paulo, Brazil.
Courtesy of Editora Brasil Seikyo.



Cultural convention of Brazil-SGI. Courtesy of Editora Brasil Seikyo.

doctrine and ritual orthodoxy taught by the 13th century monk Nichiren. While benefitting from the services of this authoritative and legitimating tradition, SGI members had sole responsibility for secular matters such as national and international conversion campaigns, fundraising to build temples, publications, cultural and political activities.

After the split between Nichiren Shōshū and SG, both groups entered into a legal battle over assets and into competition for members. The dispute also exposed the opposing leaders to accusations of sexual deviation, tax evasion, greed for money and power and so on. If Nichiren Shōshū lost most of its adepts to its lay organisation, SG ended up with a major problem: the source of its sacred object (i.e., the *gohonzon* or mandala inscribed by Nichiren) was in the safekeeping of Nichiren Shōshū. Therefore, for a while new SG members had no way of obtaining a copy of Nichiren's mandala. The solution came two years later, in 1993, when the chief reverend of a former Nichiren Shōshū temple started offering SG members a copy of an alternative mandala transcribed by the 26th High Priest, Nichikan Shōnin.

Cohesion around Master Ikeda

In the period following the conflict with the priesthood, Ikeda added to his status of president of the organisation that of teacher and spiritual master for Soka Gakkai members⁴. In order to guarantee internal cohesion under the leadership of Ikeda, some ideological principles and slogans were reinforced, such as *shitei-funi* (unity of master and disciple) and *itai-dōshin* (different bodies united in mind and faith). In his writings and speeches, Ikeda frequently affirms that SG members need to conduct the master-disciple relationship in the same way as between Nichiren and his disciples, and more recently between the founder, Makiguchi and his successor, Toda, than between Toda and Ikeda himself. Ikeda endeavours to nurture this relationship in many ways. For instance, there is no SG event, inauguration, anniversary of a group, or New Year's publication without a note from Master Ikeda written especially for that special event. Thus, in contrast to the opinion of the sceptical Japanese media and critical, rival religious leaders, a member or a sympathiser sees Ikeda as a great leader and mentor who is tireless in spreading the teachings of Nichiren and advancing the cause of world peace.

There is no doubt that Ikeda constitutes a classic case of a charismatic leader who invigorates his followers and inspires them to dedicate themselves enthusiastically to the common cause. In doing so he plays a similar role to that of business leaders in managing their organisations through appeals to their corporate cultures. Among other qualities, a good business leader is expected to be a good team-builder, to get the best from his/her human capital and be a good motivator, to create a positive working environment. In these matters, Ikeda is an expert.

Ikeda: organiser and strategist

In order to sustain his leadership as a visionary with a higher purpose, Ikeda launched in 1958 the project 'Seven Bells' as a working plan for Soka Gakkai in the following 21 years, divided into three periods of seven years. This project was followed by two similar ones, similarly divided into cycles and aimed at developing and propagating the movement. These cycles included specific goals such as achieving a certain number of conversions and the inauguration of branches and culture centres within a designated

period of time. They served as motivational drives that kept the movement focused and enlisted the militant energy of members.

Another high-profile initiative of Ikeda was the formation of the political party *Kōmeitō* (Clean Government Party) which has become one of the main political forces in Japan. While maintaining his role as a great strategist and organiser, he also created a full-scale education system from kindergarten to university, art museums, and a host of other cultural, educational, and environmental institutions. In 1975, Ikeda established the 'Soka Gakkai International' (SGI) to oversee SG's affiliated chapters all over the world. In the following decade, SGI became a non-governmental organisation (NGO) member of the United Nations.

Ikeda has also been a prolific writer with more than one hundred works, ranging from Buddhist philosophy to dialogue with outstanding personalities, poetry, children's stories and photographic collections. His works have been translated and published in more than 30 languages, by the organisation and commercially. Furthermore, Ikeda has been awarded over 200 academic honours and has received the title of honorary citizen from more than 500 cities and countries around the world.

Since 1960, Ikeda has travelled to every continent to propagate Soka Gakkai and has established national and international institutions that have enhanced the movement's visibility and demonstrate its aim to exert influence over both local societies and matters of global concern. He meets continuously with internationally acclaimed writers, artists, politicians, scholars, scientists and others. Such intense activity in Japan as well in the global scene can be interpreted as a way of changing his former image of a fundamentalist militant and ambitious political-religious leader into that of a Buddhist thinker, spiritual master for humanity, peace builder, and educator.

From 'human revolution' to world peace

Similarly to some other religious groups in the Nichiren tradition, SGI claims to be the sole heir of their original patron, Nichiren, from whom it acquired its self-assertiveness, fighting spirit, determination, and active militancy. Its leadership depicts the organisation as 'a lay movement among ordinary people', destined to transform the world. The key to reaching this goal is the catch-phrase and 'philosophy of self-reform' created by Jōsei Toda called 'human revolution' (*ningen kakumei*). This stands for the psychological and cultural reform of a person's life or way of life that bears the potential to transform communities and institutional structures, and eventually change the entire world for the better. In other words, 'human revolution' is the equivalent of the traditional Buddhist concept of enlightenment (*satori*). SGI members are encouraged to make an effort to improve their own lives and reveal their human potential through the chanting of the mantra *Nam-myōhō-rengekyō* ('Devotion to the mystic law of the Lotus Sutra'). Thus, the degree of success of the human revolution of SGI members is expected to decide the future of the movement and, ultimately, of Nichiren Buddhism. From their perspective, world peace and even the future of humankind depends on the global expansion of the SGI movement and its social activism, or at least the concerted effort of SGI and like-minded people and institutions. Then the ideal future of planetary society will be conducted by the United Nations but guided by the principles of SGI's version of Nichiren Buddhism. This

is SGI's recipe for reaching the utopia of the 'Third Civilization' through 'human revolution'.

SGI is an exemplary movement of 'inner-worldly asceticism'. Its philosophy is to be present in society and try to change it from within. There is no code for dressing, diet or particular lifestyle for members. From the outside, members look like regular members of their societies but privately they keep their practice of recitation of the mantra and faith in the *gohonzon*. SGI changes members' participation in their culture of birth and unites them around the world, in a global SGI cultural system in a more invisible way - in the way people think and understand reality in terms of karma, of the mystical relationship with the *gohonzon*, Nichiren and Ikeda. SGI members tend to understand the tragedies in the world (such as wars, terrorism, the tsunami) in terms of the concept of *mappo* (the final days when the practice of the Dharma (law) degenerates). Their praxis is also oriented by its characteristic as an NGO dedicated to education, peace, environment, culture; whenever they participate in society or promote a public event, these events tend to be framed by a focus on these four areas.

The case of SGI not only illustrates the role of leadership in transforming a NRM into a global cultural system, but also reveals some changes in the nature of religion in the contemporary world. For instance, it illuminates the struggle of religion to survive in the era of globalisation in which new rival movements are being proliferated, just as the traditional roles of religion have been appropriated by governmental agencies, NGOs, and liberal professionals, particularly therapists. In this regard, SGI has been successful as it maintains the structures and practices of a religious institution while displaying the dynamics of a NGO. This means that it sustains a strategy of dual speech, internally emphasising its ritual practice and its religious mission while externally focusing on its secular or 'secularised religious' performance.

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Notes:

- 1 A situation where there is no state-run or monopolistic-church which controls religious affairs and people can freely choose which faith to follow and practice. In other words, a 'religious market' is one in which different religious traditions or denominations compete to each other for membership.
- 2 The change or suspension of laws and legal hindrances that make it difficult if not impossible for all religions to exist in a specific society.
- 3 Based on Nichiren's philosophy that all religions different from his own were 'evil' and heretic.
- 4 Before the excommunication in 1991, Ikeda was officially the president of SG. The priesthood held the mystical aura of bearers of tradition, of legitimacy, the mystical link between the members and the *gohonzon*. After the split, Ikeda kept the bureaucratic title, while enlarged his role as spiritual master and guide for SG members.