



Levi McLaughlin, *Soka Gakkai's Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. Contemporary Buddhism Series. 236 pages. Hardcover, \$68.00. ISBN 9780824875428.

SOKA GAKKAI is a religious organization that is at the center of modern Japanese society. Its political wing, Kōmeitō, forms part of the ruling coalition government with the Liberal Democratic Party, and while it claims a likely exaggerated membership of some 8.27 million households, the organization is large enough that “everyone in Japan is acquainted with a member, related to a member, or is a member” (3). Despite all this, little research has been conducted into the organization, partially due to lack of access to the group and partially due to the stigma that has surrounded the organization and its study as well as New Religious Movements in Japan more generally. Moreover, as McLaughlin notes, the research that has been conducted on the organization has tended to be textual, focusing on the religious elite at the expense of research into ordinary members, their lives, and their existence in Soka Gakkai (x, 33). With McLaughlin’s book, we receive a significant piece of scholarship grounded in extensive fieldwork and

situated within the context of a growing body of research focusing on the experience and practices of the ordinary adherents of Japanese religions that has come into vogue over the past few decades. Although the Gakkai's religious elite and textual canon form a key part of the book's discussion, as would be expected of any significant monograph on the topic, it is McLaughlin's move toward the periphery that makes his monograph stand out as a work of critical importance.

McLaughlin explores the history and development of Soka Gakkai as the product of "twin legacies": its Nichiren Buddhist tradition of self-cultivation on the one hand, and its modern humanist educational and philosophical legacy on the other (3). These twin legacies, McLaughlin illustrates, influenced at different times, to different degrees, and in different ways, not only the founder of Soka Gakkai's precursor (Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai), Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944), but also the movements' subsequent leaders. His history of the Gakkai is, therefore, biographical in approach, focusing on the movement under Makiguchi, Toda Jōsei (1900–1958), and Ikeda Daisaku (b. 1928). As the book moves to explore the Gakkai's textual corpus and its best-selling publication, the novel *Ningen kakumei* (The Human Revolution) in particular, McLaughlin demonstrates how these three figures were promoted as the direct successors of Nichiren (76–77). Like the history of the Gakkai itself, *Ningen kakumei* and the dramatic narratives of the Gakkai's canon are seen to encompass a combination of Buddhist and Western (in this case Romantic) ideals. Although previous studies have also focused on the Gakkai's Buddhist and Western influences, they have tended to view the religion primarily as a Nichiren Buddhist movement, which from the 1970s adopted Western ideals in order to accommodate to Western "culture" as it spread abroad (BOCKING 1994; DAWSON 2001). McLaughlin's work, on the other hand, shines light upon a much more complex and nuanced view of the religion's history in which intertwined Buddhist and Western influences have been present from the outset.

Soka Gakkai's twin legacies are, however, not the main focus of the book. McLaughlin primarily seeks to argue that Soka Gakkai can be understood as a "mimetic nation-state" (19). He ventures beyond "classical" explorations of the religion's interface with politics, which predominantly focus on Kōmeitō (PALMER 1971; FISHER-NIELSEN 2012; EHRHARDT et al. 2014), by describing the religion's state-like apparatus: its anthems, flag, territory, calendar, internal economy, education system, media, elections, currency, and canon. The aforementioned biographical histories of Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda also highlight the development of the organization's mimesis of the nation-state (39); *Ningen kakumei* is envisaged as the equivalent of a national literature (71–73), and the Gakkai's educational system is viewed as a mimetic of secular education (119). McLaughlin's use of this metaphor, which he argues "explains why Soka Gakkai looks and acts the way it does and why it has proven compelling to so many converts" (20) is quite successful, if not subject to some potential over-reliance.

Throughout my read I often found myself making comparisons to other religious movements, and McLaughlin himself seems to preempt the reader's comparisons by introducing some potential examples for future analysis in the first chapter (25–28). Indeed, the “mimetic nation-state” metaphor introduced in the book provides a model of potentially immense scope and makes the monograph a worthwhile read for those involved in the study of other religious movements and their structures.

The monograph also describes the ways in which adherents participate in the religion and its institutions. Furthermore, although it cannot be categorized as a study of conversion, the text speaks on occasion to the topic and addresses an important question often missing from conversion-oriented scholarship, namely why adherents remain converted. The Gakkai's mimesis of the state, the zealous proselytization of its members, and its involvement in the political world, the book argues, are all factors in its rapid expansion (49–58). However, the religion's mimesis of the nation-state also requires of its members participation in its institutions, and non-compliance with Gakkai authority may result in exclusion and exile. McLaughlin notes that institutional participation is understood by members as a professional or vocational duty fulfilled (sometimes to their detriment) in order to satisfy institutional demands (172–75). Adherents participate in the Gakkai's textual traditions. For McLaughlin, the Gakkai's texts provide a guide for adherents to interpret their lives in a way which links their goals with that of the organization (70). Furthermore, participation in Soka Gakkai's canon offers opportunities for adherents to immortalize themselves in its publications (91–92). Its education system, McLaughlin argues, seeks to instill lifelong commitment within the religion's members (119), and has evolved to reward the participation of younger members (134). Finally, the Married Women's Division, which garners extensive attention in the book's final chapter, participates disproportionately in the organization by undertaking the work of conversion, selling subscriptions to the Gakkai's publications, attending meetings, campaigning for Kōmeitō, and raising children (138). These women, McLaughlin skillfully illustrates, wrestle with the difficult combination of their private (family) and public (Soka Gakkai oriented) roles. Despite sections on rituals such as the *shakubuku*, chanting, *hōbōbarai*, and so on, the book primarily focuses on adherents' practice within the institutions that resulted from Soka Gakkai's mimesis of the state. I felt on occasion, therefore, that McLaughlin's analysis of Soka Gakkai's state-like elements was undertaken at the expense of a deeper exploration of its religious elements.

McLaughlin's book is not only an important contribution to scholarship on Soka Gakkai but is also well-written and accessible. In the preface, he makes the case that those he interviewed and interacted with during his fieldwork were his friends, rather than his informants (x–xi). Serving, perhaps unintentionally, to humanize the often dehumanized and othered “informant” of classical socio-

logical and ethnographic research, the sentiment of McLaughlin's statement is carried into the main text through the image-rich, anecdotal narratives and descriptions that intersperse it. Indeed, from the first page, the reader departs into a narrative world that is not only academically rigorous, but also highly personal and human. Most importantly, and unlike some other works in the field, this human element is well-balanced and does not intrude upon or detract from the text's overall quality and academic rigor. The material that McLaughlin collected during fieldwork indicates a turn towards the periphery, and as such the monograph highlights voices that are not usually heard, whether these are from the movement's women, youth, or rank-and-file bureaucrats. In my opinion, this turn to the periphery is not only refreshing, but highly significant, given the aforementioned focus on the religion's elite in other studies.

It would not be understating matters to say that this book is one of the most important contributions to the study of Soka Gakkai that has ever been written in the English language. Indeed, the aforementioned paucity of fieldwork-based research and a field that McLaughlin himself notes is polluted with hagiographical and polemical texts (32), makes this a book of no average accomplishment and one that may transmogrify the current scholastic epoch.

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