

OBSERVATIONS IN THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY NICHIREN BUDDHISM

By Alfred Bloom

As the result of a summer research grant from the University of Oregon, it was possible for me to study religious organizations of the Nichiren lineage. The reason for this study was current interest in the Sōka Gakkai. It appeared to me that, while Sōka Gakkai is very important, it is but an aspect of a very long tradition in Japan, and one of a myriad of organizations developing from that tradition. The directory of Buddhist denominations published by the International Institute for the Study of Religions in Japan lists some thirty-two Nichiren Buddhist denominations. The directory of New Religions of the Institute lists five groups which have Nichiren connection. In addition, five other groups appear in a survey presented in the Mainichi Graphic for January 7-14, 1962. There are thus some forty individual organizations deriving their doctrines and activities from the inspiration of Nichiren.

During my stay in Tokyo, I was able to visit Kokuchūkai, Risshōkōsei-kai, Kōdō Kyōdan, Myōchikai, Sōka Gakkai, Reiyūkai, and Nichiren-shū at Minobu. In addition, I was able to have interviews with professors of Risshō University, a monk of the Nipponzan Myōhōji, Dr. Shōbun Kubota, Vice-President of Risshō University, Mr. Shūten Ōishi of the New Religions Federation, Rev. Shimizutani, a Tendai scholar, and some Shintō scholars. Particularly I am indebted to the efforts of Rev. Senchū Murano

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As a result of these interviews and visits, I have some preliminary observations based on a series of questions which I proposed to each group. These standard questions can be compared and indicate the general connection between the concepts of these organizations.

From the methodological standpoint, it became apparent very quickly that such interviews cannot be the sole basis for determining the character of the teachings and outlook of any organization. There was discernible an identity of answer based on the aim of the respondent to give the most sophisticated answer. Such answers must be checked against the written material produced by an organization to propagate its teachings among the people. Many problems arise in the structuring of a question since the Westerner has a different perspective on the situation under discussion, and his questions may not be too meaningful to a Japanese. Problems of tact and diplomacy, as well as culture, make the interview method only partially suitable for detailed and penetrating analysis.

Nevertheless, through interviews with more than twenty-five people I have formed impressions which may guide further research in this area. I am presenting some of these here in a tentative way in the hope that they may be useful in further assessing the state of affairs in Japanese religion at present. It is at this point that one becomes sympathetic with the tourist who, though giving distortion, can also give something of the

highlights without getting involved in all the exceptions and qualifications that are necessary to a truly scholarly presentation. Here I should be considered a tourist in the hope that in the future more scholarly elaboration can be given to these points. I hope also that I shall not have grossly misrepresented those who have been so kind to me.

One of the deepest impressions I received in the many explanations of viewpoints and practices is the fact that any set of beliefs and actions can be easily rationalized, provided one accepts a certain number of basic assumptions. I found that all groups could defend their particular outlooks quite intelligently and cogently largely on the same basis. These assumptions were the belief in the superiority of spirit over matter, the need for ethical behavior in society, and the recognition of man's limitations and suffering in the world.

Employing these fundamental positions, each group maintained that its particular way ministered most adequately to modern man. Through the practice of reciting the *Namu Myōhō Rengekyō*, it is asserted that spiritual solace and salvation of various sorts, spiritual and material, may come to men. Why this phrase? Because in a mysterious way it embodies the essence of the Lotus Sutra (*Hokekyō*). It is the title of the sutra and is believed to express the eternal compassion of Buddha Shakyamuni who is revealed in the text. Hence, to identify with the title is to identify with the Buddha. Once conscious of this identity the problems of life are overcome.

At present the nature of this overcoming is much under dispute. For some groups it is entirely spiritual. By changing one's attitude toward life and one's fellowman through the

reciting of the phrase, benefits of all sorts are bound to follow. Others seem to set forth a more magical understanding in which the recitation will produce directly health, wealth and security. The dispute would appear to me to be a matter of emphasis, since in the interviews I could not detect essential differences in the explanation of these two standpoints. All clearly denied any magical use of the phrase, though inadvertent expressions and written materials sometimes revealed that the answer to the question was an attempt to put the best foot forward.

In defending the concept that religion brings profit in this life, various groups contended that unless religion was relevant to our daily lives, it would have no purpose for existing. While there is belief in life after death, the greater emphasis in most groups was the condition of this life. It should be noted in this connection that Nichiren himself was a type of social reformer. Consequently his followers have been particularly interested in conditions of social life. Emphasis runs from consideration of the whole society, perhaps represented in the outlooks of the Nipponzan Myōhōji organization and the Koku-chūkai with its national outlook to those groups with more individualistic character as Myōchikai and Risshōkōseikai. Though possessing an otherworldly context preaching salvation and stressing ancestor cult, these religions share the Japanese trait of this-worldliness.

The problem of the profit of religion in this life has been brought to the fore through the activities of the Sōka Gakkai. This organization has made extraordinary promises of wealth and health in order to gain adherents. They have been accused by other groups of making the recitation of the *daimoku*

pure magic. Sōka Gakkai, on its side, denies such an emphasis, yet it is not difficult to find such ideas in its literature. The fact of the matter is that this is a theme with a long history in Japanese religion. From the very beginning, Buddhism has employed various methods to assure healing, wealth or security to its followers. It was introduced into Japan on this basis. Japanese religion in its Shintō basis is largely a pragmatic religion, and various shrines are noted for the special benefits which they may confer on those who make pilgrimage there or give donations. Prayers tied to trees and the sale of fortunes at various shrines are not at all rare. The Japanese look on religion generally as an instrument for the attainment of individual or group goals.

Only in a few instances has there been any significant denial of this aspect of Japanese religion. Perhaps Zen in its highest dimensions has dispensed with such benefits. Notably Jōdo Shin-shū, following the teaching of Shinran, has been free from such emphasis. Kokuchūkai among the Nichiren organizations seems to be very strong in its denial of the principle and as a result its numbers are very small. Most of the contemporary New Religions have attained their wide popularity because of this teaching.

The problem arises with Sōka Gakkai, not because of essential disagreement over principle, but because of the very effective way in which Sōka Gakkai has appealed to lower class groups who have little hope, and by the ability to turn this following into a politically significant force. It is the intolerance and political aspects of Sōka Gakkai which have turned attention to the nature of their appeals. Such a situation is very dif-

ficult for other Buddhist groups because the denial of this principle of benefit threatens the basis of much of traditional activity. However, as the pressure mounts leaders of all groups are attempting to rethink the nature of religion and Buddhism to meet this challenge. Perhaps one result of this ferment will be to establish a new outlook on religion which will make it a truly positive and creative social force in Japan. The elevation of religious insight and understanding through the use of sociological and psychological studies may regain intellectual leadership for the traditional religions.

The political aspect of Sōka Gakkai has attracted attention in Japan and America with an apparent sense of chagrin. Articles in newspapers and magazines give the impression that this is a totally unheard of phenomenon. Sōka Gakkai representatives indicated that religious political parties are not new in the world. In Europe they point to the various Christian parties. They admit it may be new for Japan, but no more a threat to religious liberty than one finds on the European scene. This, of course, remains to be seen.

There are a few examples even in Japan of religious political parties. The Tenrikyō religion at one time had individuals elected, and in 1923, following upon the great earthquake in Japan, Chigaku Tanaka, founder of the Kokuchūkai Nichiren organization, announced his aspirations to put Nichiren's principles into practice in the political sphere. He set forth the principles of an ideal election. The movement did not materialize on a grand scale, however. From that time Tanaka did not attempt to implement his religious principles in political action.

Whatever the nature of Sōka Gakkai political activities, they grow out of certain tendencies of Nichiren teaching in which the nation is made a focal point of devotion and the life of the people is to be brought into consonance with Buddhist ideals as interpreted by Nichiren. Perhaps the significance of Sōka Gakkai activity lies not in its novelty, but in the conditions which enable it to grow rapidly and be effective. The nationalism of Chigaku Tanaka was a more highly sophisticated outlook and appealed to persons in the upper strata of society. Sōka Gakkai has as its base the lower strata of society and consequently a greater base of power.

It is significant also in connection with the developing political influence of Sōka Gakkai that other Buddhists are trying to unite as a political force. Thus there has been formed the *Bukkyō seiji dōmei* which addresses itself to the political problems of the age. It has opposed the revival of Yasukuni Shrine and the Sōka Gakkai. It has begun to publish a newspaper to disseminate its views. The first issue appeared August 1, 1964. From indications in the initial issue, as well as other papers, it appears that the movement has considerable support.

While the injection of religious issues into politics has many hazards and may perhaps be a situation which should be avoided so far as this reflects an attempt to come to grips with specific issues in the society on the part of Buddhism, which is frequently portrayed as lethargic and lacking intellectual leadership, we may expect some positive benefit from such activity. It is clear in modern times that the rapidity with which movements grow and the power they can command, opinion can never remain inchoate without risking repression.

The reaction of other religious groups in confronting Sōka Gakkai is an indication that Sōka Gakkai may become self-defeating in its representation of itself as the only true Buddhism and sole source of salvation for the Japanese.

Discussion of the political and social significance of Sōka Gakkai invariably leads to mention of the term *shakubuku*. The explanation of the use of this term is also interesting since it is commonly thought that the word is primarily employed by the Sōka Gakkai and is interpreted as forced conversion. However, one will find that the term derives from Nichiren's own teaching and is hence a part of that general tradition used by many of present Nichiren sects. The explanation of various groups of its use is very similar.

In actuality there are two terms which go together and represent two types of approach to winning converts. *Shakubuku* and *shōju* are two modes of exhorting. *Shakubuku* in its Japanese characters has the sense of bend and cause to submit. Hence it is translated as forced conversion. However, the meaning ascribed to this term generally is the kind of forceful urging as in the case where a child may be about to fall off a precipice or into a river. At that point one does not worry about niceties, but out of zeal to save the individual one puts all his force into his appeal and literally commands. Although *shakubuku* has a strong implication of forcefulness, it is maintained that the force is not political or social, but spiritual as evil ideas are overcome with truth.

Shōju, on the other hand, has the characters for "gather" and "receive". It means to receive people with a tolerant spirit and not to be repulsive. It is to cultivate people with

compassion.

It is explained that in times of crisis when the issues are sharp and there is danger, it is time for a clarion call for people to turn to the true teaching. Nichiren followers maintain that this is what Nichiren was doing himself even when he condemned other sects. He was making it clear what Buddhism stood for in order to meet the crisis of that age. There is here to be noted a prophetic note in Nichiren preaching, in the founder himself and many of the groups stemming from him. That the prophetism was not kept to the fore in past times was due to political and social conditions affecting Buddhism, particularly in the Tokugawa period. Now it is claimed, the teaching of Nichiren must be proclaimed anew and with truth in order to meet the crisis of this age.

There are many problems undoubtedly in the use of the term *shakubuku* by Sōka Gakkai, but it must be remembered that it is a traditional word. It belongs to Nichiren tradition, and others also use it. More detailed study of its use and practice could be beneficial in clarifying in what way Sōka Gakkai is supposed to distort the meaning of it.

In relation to the question of ethical behavior in society, I found many sects stressing ancestor worship. Most notable are the Kōdō Kyōdan which has filial piety as a part of its name, Kokuchūkai, which makes the thought central, and Rei-yūkai which is based on such conceptions. While speculation concerning the actual state of the ancestors and just what use such reverence has for them, or what they can do in return, appears to be of little interest to these groups, they all maintain that it is part of Japanese tradition to think this way despite

its apparent contradiction to the Buddhist theory of non-soul. Here one quickly becomes aware of the infinite possibility of the religious mind to embrace contradictory sets of ideas in the same mind without conflict. On the sophisticated level, belief in ancestor worship is regarded as the guarantee of social morality and individual ethical behavior. The basic theme that ran through all explanations was the sense of interdependence and gratitude.

Ancestor worship is conceived as the recognition that we are not self made, but that all benefits which we receive from our first breath of air come through the efforts of others. Through the exercises of filial piety one recognizes one's parents as the source of life. In ancestor worship one recognizes the solidarity of the family and the social foundation of one's life. Through reverence of the Imperial spirit one recognizes the nation which gives protection and meaning to social behavior. These recognitions inspire gratitude in the individual and arouse devotion and resolution to carry on the traditions of the society for those who follow. There is exhibited here the concept of nexus which Dr. Hajime Nakamura has analysed thoroughly in his study of Oriental ways of thinking.

Setting aside philosophical considerations as secondary, the practical aspects of ancestor worship are brought to the fore. Ceremonies are performed with great solemnity and respect. Whether the beliefs are rational or not, they can be employed with great success in the rational guidance of people who have not been trained to analyse their beliefs objectively. One of the stimulating sources for the attraction of ancestor worship for contemporary Japanese can be found in the constant complaint

concerning the lack of morality and purpose among the youth. It is also clear that in great measure Western modes of behavior and the ground of that behavior in the ideal of freedom have not been understood and accepted by many Japanese. In the world of ferment they have come to the conclusion that the only safe basis for Japanese ethics is in Japanese tradition. The recent government sponsorship of a memorial to the war dead at Yasukuni Shrine may point in that direction. Yasukuni Shrine symbolizes reverence for those individuals who laid the basis of Japanese tradition and who should be the guide for Japanese life. It should also be added here that this emphasis is within a context of a developing national emphasis, or attempts at it, in Japanese society. I became aware very soon during my short stay of a new self-respect growing in the Japanese as they are becoming aware of the value of their own traditions and also observe the limitations in others.

The Nichiren groups are not the only ones concerned with the ethical problem, nor are they the only ones stressing filial piety or ancestral reverence as the basis for ethics. There appears to be a general popular resurgence in this direction.

With respect to specific distinctions between the various groups which I contacted, it was very difficult to find clear ideological grounds for comparison. In general they all subscribed to the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy in its interpretation given by Nichiren. All groups believe Nichiren to be a manifestation of Jōgyō Bosatsu depicted in the Lotus Sutra as appearing in the age of the decline of Buddhist teaching. Sōka Gakkai appears to diverge here in claiming that Nichiren is an incarnation of the eternal Buddha. This gives him a more absolute status for

reverence. Practically speaking, however, reverence verging on belief in divinity is directed to Nichiren in other groups. His image appears on altars before the *mandala*, said to be composed by him as the object of worship.

Apart from this subtle theological point, the ideological differences do not account for the proliferation of such groups. It appears that either traditional or personal reasons must be given. Tradition refers to the fact that some groups began their histories for one reason or another years before. Nichiren Shōshū claims to be from a direct disciple of Nichiren named Nikkō, while the traditional Nichiren sect claims Nikō from among the six major direct disciples of Nichiren. Also Koku-chūkai derives its teaching from Chigaku Tanaka who tried to reform Nichirenism in the Meiji period. Risshōkōseikai, Myōchikai and Busshogonenkai are divisions from Reiyūkai for what appear to be more personal reasons among the leadership.

Differences are more matters of emphasis or degree, and there is a continuum from Nipponzan Myōhōji on the left and Kokuchūkai on the right. There are those with more social as against more individualistic interest. Nipponzan Myōhōji on the left is especially active in nuclear affairs and seems more interested in politics than in religion itself, though it is a religious organization. Opinions concerning it are varied. In the last summer it was a leader in a World Religionists' Peace Conference which was portrayed by many as a Communist front organization. Kokuchūkai is the opposite being very nationalistic and is active in a movement for altering the constitution to make the Emperor a stronger political force in the nation. Sōka Gakkai has been variously described as fascist and non-

Buddhist, but its actual program is not clearly defined. In voting in the Diet its members largely vote with the Liberal Democratic Party. It stresses fair play and clean government, but there are allegations of the use of force and coercion in holding adherents. Since "Fascist" and "Communist" are general terms of disapproval, it is very difficult to assess the real meaning of these terms as applied here.

Another problem arises in trying to depict the character of thought in these organizations. Frequently ideas which are thought to be distinctive to a particular group may actually be expressions of tendencies in Japanese thought itself. In this connection the value creation theory of Tsunesaburō Makiguchi, founder of Sōka Gakkai, could be studied in terms of its relation to traditional Japanese thought which has always stressed pragmatic approaches to religion and truth rather than insisting on absoluteness. It is probable that there are a number of latent tendencies in Japanese thought which gain concrete expression at some given time. Nichiren's intolerance which is thought to reflect Japanese tribalism or nativism in reaction against foreignisms may be one such tendency. In times of crisis these tendencies manifest themselves. It is possible that the flourishing of the host of Nichiren organizations which are exclusivistic may reflect the general anxiety of the Japanese facing the many world problems. It may be a reflection of the rising surge of national self-respect, the national image, or purpose for which the Japanese appear to be searching.

From a broad perspective we can suggest that in the search for a new identity, the Japanese have generally rejected the Shintō basis for understanding their national destiny, although there

have been, and are, movements to give Shintō a more secure institutional relationship with the government. With the rejection and decline of Shintō, the Nichiren Buddhist sects present a new alternative, a Buddhist nationalism. It is not really new, but it has never been fully developed. At Minobu-san there is a monument summing up Nichiren's basic philosophy: *Chihō-shikoku*. This means that when one knows the Buddhist *dharma*, he thinks of the country. There was a direct connection in his thought between adherence to the Buddhist teaching and the state of the nation. In his time Nichiren held that the Mongol threat and the various internal crises that had confronted the nation were the result of not following the true Buddhist teaching. He wished a reform to take place according to his direction which meant the abolition of all other sects. However, it is important to note that part of his vision was a concept of Japan as the beginning of the establishment of the Buddha's kingdom which should eventually become universal for all men. Thus Japan was to lead the world in devotion to the Buddha. Something of this idealism can be detected in the Nichiren sects, and it may be a source of attraction for young people seeking a positive mission in the world.

Another factor of sociological interest in the development of these sects is their economic basis. One feature which is almost universal is the regularization of giving by a monthly fee ranging from 50 to 100 yen per month. This regular giving has permitted the sect leadership to be able to count on a steady income. As a result they can engage in extensive social works and also erect impressive buildings which symbolize to the ordinary believer's mind the greatness of his community.

Another important aspect coming from the regularizing of giving is that no other charges are made for such things as memorial services for the dead, etc. Of course donations are welcome, but a great burden is taken away apparently in being able to count on the ministrations of the group without extra charge.

Attention should also be called to the fact that the new forms of organization are largely lay oriented (*zaike-bukkyō*). Thus there is simplicity in the ceremonies and teachings. More efforts are made to teach followers the essentials of the sect. Great publication activities are the basis of the attempt to reach the general public.

The patterns of organization vary to some extent. Sōka Gakkai relates itself to the Nichiren Shō-shū, and Kōdō Kyōdan has established connections with the Tendai sect. They assert a traditional connection in older Buddhism. Most other groups remain completely independent and to some extent critical of older Buddhist sects. Further the leadership may be provided by men or women. Myōchikai is led by a woman; Risshō-kōseikai was founded by a man with a woman as co-foundress. Membership is generally figured in terms of families, though much emphasis is made in the teachings of individual needs. Although these are lay religions, the respect given to leaders is not dissimilar from the patterns of authority in more priestly sects.

These random reflections concerning the Nichiren Buddhist sects in contemporary Japan suggest that a deeper sociological analysis of the new sects is needed in order to place such groups as the Sōka Gakkai into perspective. There has been a tendency to look upon it as altogether exceptional in the Japanese re-

ligious world. However, it is part of a broader context in Japanese society, fed by ancient springs as well as benefitting from modern conditions.

A broader study might open up some aspects of creativity in the thought of some of these groups. In this connection we might make mention of the use of *gasshō* (bowing with clasped hands) toward individuals and the concept of the tomb in the Kokuchūkai organization. The interpretation of Buddha nature in Mahayana thought is made the basis of making *gasshō* to all individuals in acknowledgement of their potential Buddha nature. This practice in other sects is usually only carried out in recognizing priests. The extension to all persons has something of a democratic flavor.

In connection with the tomb, we find in Kokuchūkai a common tomb in which all members are buried. Sociologically this has the effect to cut down the use of grave monuments as the basis of social ostentation. Economically it does not require individuals to spend great resources for a grave monument. Also it compacts a cemetery into a very small space, a feature important in Japan where space is at a premium. This form of burial may actually enhance filial connections as it stresses the solidarity of the group even in death.

The Japanese religious world is in ferment. Freedom makes experimenting possible. Whatever the future may hold for the Japanese, it is clear that it will largely depend on the quality and character of thought which is being generated in the multitude of religious organizations now very active.

Kanji Glossary

- Bukkyō seiji dōmei* 仏教政治同盟
Busshogonenkai 仏所護念会
chihō-shikoku 知法思国
daimoku 題目
gasshō 合掌
Hokekyō 法華經
Jōdo Shin-shū 浄土真宗
𠄎 *Jōgyō Bosatsu* 上行菩薩
𠄎 *Kōdō Kyōdan* 孝道教団
Kokuchūkai 国柱会
Kubota, Shōbun 久保田正文
Makiguchi, Tsunesaburō 牧口常三郎
Meiji 明治
Murano, Senchū 村野宣忠
Myōchikai 妙智会
Nakamura, Hajime 中村 元
Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō
南無妙法蓮華經
- Nichiren-shū* 日蓮宗
Nichiren Shō-shū 日蓮正宗
Nikkō 日興
Nipponzan Myōhōji 日本山妙法寺
Ōishi, Shūten 大石秀典
Reiyūkai 靈友会
Risshōkōseikai 立正佼成会
shakubuku 折伏
Shintō 神道
shōju 撰受
Sōka Gakkai 創価学会
Tanaka, Chigaku 田中智学
Tanaka, Kōho 田中香浦
Tenrikyō 天理教
Yasukuni 靖国
za'ke-bukkyō 在家仏教