

Sōka Gakkai, Kōmeitō, and the Separation of Religion and State in Japan

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AUGUST 1993 SAW THE formation of a coalition government in Japan, which ended thirty-eight years of continuous rule by the Liberal Democratic Party. This event also brought the Kōmeitō 公明党, founded and heavily supported by Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, into the government, leading to the resurfacing of old fears about Sōka Gakkai's political intentions. In recent months the popular press has run several articles replaying the controversy surrounding the birth of the Kōmeitō and the events that led to a clarification of its relationship with Sōka Gakkai in 1970. This, in turn, has raised once again questions about the proper relationship between religious bodies and government in modern Japanese society. In its December issue, the popular monthly *Gendai* 現代 summarized the results of a survey it conducted of fifty major religious groups and federations, focusing on Sōka Gakkai, the Kōmeitō, and opinions concerning the relationship of religious and political organizations. In response to the articles appearing in the popular press, the New Year's Day 1994 edition of the *Chūgai Nippō* 中外日報, a Buddhist-centered newspaper frequently associated with Sōka Gakkai, ran a lengthy interview with Akiya Einosuke 秋谷栄之助, the current president of Sōka Gakkai, presenting Sōka Gakkai's views on its own relationship with the Kōmeitō and the broader issue of religious influence on politics. Since this controversy is of interest not only as a development in the Japanese religious scene but also within the wider context of church-state relationships, this essay will provide a glimpse into the current discussion, primarily by means of a summary of the articles that appeared in *Gendai* and *Chūgai Nippō*. It will be helpful, however, to first review the history of Sōka Gakkai's involvement in politics and its relationship with the Kōmeitō.

Ōbutsumyōgō and the Kōmeitō

Already in the mid-1950s, under the leadership of its second president Toda

Jōsei 戸田城聖, Sōka Gakkai became directly involved in political campaigning, sponsoring more than 50 of its own candidates in the 1955 local elections. As the result of those polls 47 Sōka Gakkai members were elected to 2 prefectural assemblies and more than 20 city councils around the country. In the national Upper House elections held the following year, three of six candidates sponsored by Sōka Gakkai were successful in their bids, garnering more than one million votes nationwide. In 1959, a further six candidates were elected, followed by the reelection of the original three members plus an additional six in 1962, making the Sōka Gakkai councillors the third largest group in the Upper House. In 1964, a decision was made to sponsor candidates for the more powerful Lower House, and at the same time the Kōmeitō was formed. From its foundation the Kōmeitō was officially presented as an independent political party, but it has had, and continues to have, clear ties to Sōka Gakkai both in terms of personnel and ideology. The party constitution adopted at the time of its foundation, while calling for the establishment of world peace based on a “global nationalism” and “human socialism” as a way to resolve the conflict between capitalism and socialism, relied for its ideological foundations on the Nichiren Buddhist concept of *ōbutsumyōgō* 王仏冥合, or the fusion of politics and religion.

Prior to 1955, when Sōka Gakkai’s direct involvement in election campaigning began, Toda’s use of the word *ōbutsumyōgō* was restricted to connections with *kōsen rufu* 公宣流布. This term was understood to mean the propagation of Nichiren Buddhism, which would culminate in the establishment of a “National Hall of Worship” (*Kokuritsu Kaidan* 国立戒壇) at the foot of Mount Fuji, after such time as the nation had adopted the Nichiren faith as its own. The completion in 1972 of the Shōhondō 正本堂 in Fujinomiya, at the foot of Mount Fuji, was identified by Sōka Gakkai with the establishment of the National Hall of Worship. However, the fact that the nation had not yet been wholly converted to the Nichiren faith caused some criticism of Sōka Gakkai’s claim, and even led to a schism in Nichiren Shōshū 日蓮正宗, the former parent body of Sōka Gakkai (MÉTRAUX, 1980, 58–60).

Nevertheless, this identification of political goals with religious conversion to Nichiren Buddhism has been one of the continuing points of controversy concerning Sōka Gakkai’s, and, by extension, the Kōmeitō’s political activities. Critics of such activity maintain that *ōbutsumyōgō* and the related concept of the establishment of the National Hall of Worship in fact call for the establishment of a state religion. The concept of *ōbutsumyōgō* is, however, often interpreted more broadly as indicating that the principles used in leading society are to be the ideals of the Buddhist Dharma, which emphasize the moral influence of religion rather than the direct involve-

ment of a particular religious organization in governing the people. This interpretation can be found both in the *Nichiren Dictionary* (MIYAZAKI 1978, 27) and in the interview with Akiya we will be looking at later in this essay.

In the general election in 1967, the first held after the establishment of the Kōmeitō, the party won 25 seats in the Lower House, attracting almost two and one-half million votes. Two years later these totals were almost doubled to 47 seats and over five million votes. However, an attempt in that same year to stop the publication of a book critical of Sōka Gakkai and its political activities caused a controversy focusing on freedom of the press, and led Sōka Gakkai in May of 1970 to adopt the following resolutions:

1. Sōka Gakkai's aim of propagating Nichiren Buddhism is carried out through a variety of cultural activities which have their foundation in Buddhism. Its political activity can be seen as part of that process, but political activity itself is not the aim of Sōka Gakkai.
2. It is not the aim of Sōka Gakkai to establish a National Hall of Worship through parliamentary resolution, and Nichiren Shōshū denies having any ambition of becoming a national religion.
3. The Kōmeitō is an independent political party with the aim of promoting popular welfare, and is separate from the religious activity of Sōka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū.
4. In order to clarify the separation of the Kōmeitō and Sōka Gakkai, the Kōmeitō parliamentary members will resign from any official posts in Sōka Gakkai.
5. Although Sōka Gakkai supports the Kōmeitō and will continue to do so in election campaigns, the freedom of Sōka Gakkai members to support candidates of their choice is firmly maintained (in INOUE et. al., 1990, 566).

Although Kōmeitō seats in the Lower House fell to 29 following the 1972 general elections, the party has consistently polled more than five million votes in subsequent elections, and their seat count has generally remained in the mid-50's. Kōmeitō holds 52 seats in the current Lower House, making it the third largest party in the coalition government, following the Social Democratic Party of Japan with 76 seats, and the Shinseitō 新生党 (a splinter party from the Liberal Democratic Party), which holds 60 seats. Four Kōmeitō members serve in the present cabinet, holding the positions of Posts and Telecommunications Minister, Labor Minister, Management and Coordination Agency Director-General, and Environment Agency Director-General.

Survey of Religious Organizations

The survey distributed by *Gendai* to 50 religious organizations and federations consisted of the following eight questions.

1. What is your reaction to the fact that the Kōmeitō has entered the government?
2. How do you feel about the fact that the Kōmeitō has Sōka Gakkai as its main support, in the light of the principle of separation of religion and state?
3. In the light of democratic ideals, what do you think about Sōka Gakkai doctrines such as *ōbutsumyōgō* and its view of other religions as heretical and perverse?
4. Since the Kōmeitō has entered the government, do you foresee any changes in the Religious Corporations Law or in the tax system?
5. To what extent has your religious organization or federation participated in election campaigns in the past?
 - a. Through ordinary social activities, such as local consciousness-raising, practical activities, or study meetings.
 - b. By recommendation of candidates, support of candidates, the candidacy of believers, offering membership lists, financial support, offering of facilities, putting up posters, etc.
 - c. If you have presented your own candidates or recommended some candidates, please supply a list of their names.
6. What do you use as a standard for recommendation?
7. What level of recommendation do you make? For example, do you organize groups for the support of candidates or recommend joining a certain party?
8. What kind of response will you make if a combination of small electoral districts and proportional representation, presently being discussed in parliament, is adopted as the new electoral system? Will you support a particular political party, or only individuals?

Sense of Danger or Caution

Mizoguchi Atsushi 溝口 敦, the journalist who authored the article for *Gendai*, divides the responses to the survey into three categories:

1. those groups which clearly express a sense of danger or caution;
2. those groups which take a wait-and-see attitude; and
3. those groups which choose to have nothing to do with Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō, or choose to make no comment about their participation in government.

As examples of those in the first category Mizoguchi offers Reiyūkai 霊友会 and Jōdoshū 浄土宗.

Shizuta Nobuyuki 鎮田順行, the director of the Inner-trip Ideologue Research Center (IIC) associated with Reiyukai, is quoted as follows:

If you take a look at the percentage of votes garnered by the Kōmeitō you see that it usually hovers around ten percent of the electorate. The Nazis also attracted about ten percent of the vote in the beginning. Just as the Nazis suddenly one day swept over Germany, there is the danger that with the new system of small electoral districts Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō will increase their power and we'll end up with Ikeda* as our dictator.

An “emergency resolution” adopted by the IIC on September 23, 1993 is also quoted by Mizoguchi. While more tempered than the comparison used in the above quote, it further serves to indicate a high level of alarm at the inclusion of the Kōmeitō in the government. The resolution, sent to local branches of Reiyukai nationwide, says in part:

As a result of the recent elections, the Liberal Democratic Party lost control of the government for the first time in 38 years, and the Socialist Party, the largest opposition party, also suffered a stunning defeat....Prime Minister Hosokawa has called for political reform, and under the banner of “responsible reform” the seven party coalition government has been launched.... One cannot avoid a feeling of apprehension towards a coalition government composed of political parties that advocate fundamentally different policies. What causes the most concern, however, is the fact that one of the parties in the coalition government is the offspring of a religious organization that is exclusivistic and self-righteous. We must keep careful watch to see how they intend to fulfill their ambitions in the government.

Narita Yūkō 成田有恒, the head of Jōdoshū, is quoted as making comparisons with the period that saw the rise of Japanese fascism, instead of Nazis, as in Shizuta's response. According to Narita, that period was marked by corruption scandals that led to a loss of faith in the government and a series of attempted military coups. Narita continues as follows:

The participants in these incidents were, for the most part, Nichiren Buddhist believers who professed absolute faith in the Lotus Sutra, just as Sōka Gakkai does today. As a means to control them the whole nation was whipped up to unite in spirit under the divinized emperor with the aim of annihilating the Americans and British. I am very apprehensive that the

* Ikeda Daisaku 池田大作 resigned as president of Soka Gakkai in 1979. However, as Honorary President of Soka Gakkai and President of Soka Gakkai International he maintains a strong influence over the organization.

same kind of situation might develop today; that as Sōka Gakkai becomes a kind of worship of Ikeda the nation might head towards fascism.

In order to provide background for such strong feelings of apprehension about the intentions of Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō, Mizoguchi reviews some of the scandals that have been associated with these groups, and offers comments taken from a variety of sources within Sōka Gakkai that indicate an ambition to “conquer the whole country.” For example, a long quote is taken from an article published in May of 1965 in the *Seikyō Shinbun* 聖教新聞, the official newspaper of Sōka Gakkai, where Ikeda proposes 1990 as the target year for the proselytization of half the population of Japan, as a result of which the Kōmeitō will be able to take over the reigns of government. Mizoguchi also mentions that the Posts and Telecommunications Minister in the present cabinet, a member of the Kōmeitō, was implicated in a wiretapping case in the 1970s. His involvement in that case continues to be a point of controversy, since it has been brought up in the parliament by members of the Liberal Democratic Party, who find themselves in the unaccustomed position of being in the opposition. Finally, Mizoguchi describes a policy of “general revolution,” under which Sōka Gakkai members are actively encouraged to become professionals in various fields, with the aim of having members active in key roles in business, government, and administration. Nichiren Shōshū, which recently has been party to a very public separation from Sōka Gakkai, makes reference to this policy in its response to *Gendai*'s survey.

Sōka Gakkai aims at cultivating and placing talented people in government, administration, finance, and other fields, who will be prepared to take control, so that it will be able to take over and rule the country.

The Kokuchūkai 国柱会, a lay organization within Nichiren Shōshū, echoes the apprehensions of its parent organization and calls for the media's help in “unmasking” Sōka Gakkai.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that their fundamental motivation and intention is one-party rule. In light of democratic ideals, the mass media should be thorough in their criticism of the irrationality of their doctrine, their self-righteousness, and their closed attitude.

Wait and See

Risshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会, which, following Sōka Gakkai, is perhaps the second largest new religious movement in Japan, falls into Mizoguchi's second

category, namely those groups that take a wait-and-see attitude towards Kōmeitō's entrance into government. For example, in answer to the question concerning the Kōmeitō and the separation of religion and state, Risshō Kōseikai's response was as follows:

Whether the Kōmeitō or Sōka Gakkai is conforming to the separation of religion and state is a problem which both groups will have to answer for themselves. We can only express the desire that both groups stick strictly to principles in their understanding of themselves as a public political party and as a religious organization.

Mizoguchi clearly expected a more volatile response from Risshō Kōseikai, since he leads into their response by reviewing some of the incidents that have caused animosity between the two groups in the past. Belying such expectations, however, and at the same time giving credence to the cautious attitude expressed in the above response, recent newspaper reports have revealed that a meeting took place between executives of Sōka Gakkai and Risshō Kōseikai on 16 December of last year. According to a report published on February 28, 1994 in the *Asahi Shinbun* 朝日新聞, it was Sōka Gakkai which asked for the meeting, with the aim of promoting a reconciliation between the two groups. Among the participants were a Vice President of Sōka Gakkai and a member of the board of directors of Risshō Kōseikai, and the hour-long meeting ended in an agreement to continue an honest exchange of views, in order to avoid the misunderstandings that may arise by relying on second-hand information.

The Federation of New Japanese Religions, a group that includes over 40 of the Japanese new religious movements, likewise takes a circumspect attitude towards *Gendai*'s questions. In an interview separate from the survey, a question was asked about the entrance into governance of the Kōmeitō, "which has a relationship of absolute unity with Sōka Gakkai." The response of the political committee of the federation was:

Since you mention "absolute unity" in your question, we'll have to ask you for some concrete proof that this is indeed the case. Then we will be happy to think about your question.

No Comment

Finally, in the third category of those groups that are unrelated to Sōka Gakkai or the Kōmeitō and who wish to avoid any comment are such groups as Nipponzan Myōhōji 日本山妙法寺, Seichō no Ie 生長の家, Shinnyoen 真如苑, Agonshū 阿含宗, and Ōmotokyō 大本教. A member of Nipponzan Myōhōji, a

Nichiren Buddhist group active in the peace movement around the world, responds as follows to *Gendai*'s survey:

Up until now we have not had any joint activities with Sōka Gakkai. While we do feel some uneasiness (about Sōka Gakkai's involvement in politics), if you become concerned about matters such as that you just waste time that could be spent on peace activities.

While Shinnyoen voices the same general sense of concern but likewise chooses to avoid comment on the issue, other groups are even stronger in their decision not to become involved in this particular controversy. For example, Ōmotokyō gives this response to the survey.

To answer the questions in your survey would, in the final analysis, involve interfering in the affairs of political parties and other religious groups, and would itself constitute a violation of the principle of separation of religion and state. We believe that this is not a matter for quick resolution, but rather something about which the nation should gradually come to a conclusion.

As has no doubt already become evident, Mizoguchi's writing is of the confrontational style that seems to be the hallmark of much of journalism. To be true to this style, and to the overall thrust of the article published in *Gendai*, it would not be fair to conclude our summary with the above remarks. Rather, mention should be made of the prediction of a "religious war" with which the article itself concludes. Mizoguchi proclaims that the passage of political reform laws, which establish a combination of single-member districts and proportional representation for elections of the Lower House of Parliament, in connection with the realignment and possible merging of political parties, will lead to the "realization of the ambition of Ikeda's Sōka Gakkai to conquer the nation." This is because the Kōmeitō can concentrate on winning proportional representation seats—where the large body of Sōka Gakkai members' votes "cast loyally for whichever candidate the leaders direct" can have the greatest effect—while other parties aligned with the Kōmeitō can concentrate on winning local single-member district seats. As a result of this situation

The cry has already arisen even from some religious people that it is time to give up on the wait-and-see attitude and to rise up and fight....It is now a question of who, from which religious organization, will take the leadership and continue the movement (against Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō). Whether one likes it or not, a religious war is inevitable.

Sōka Gakkai's Response

The introduction to the interview with current Sōka Gakkai president Akiya Einosuke, carried in the January 1, 1994 issue of *Chūgai Nippō*, makes specific mention of the articles appearing in the popular press (such as the one introduced above) that have been fanning the flames of controversy concerning the Kōmeitō's participation in the coalition government. Such articles are described as the work of "those who find no reason for existence in a time of peace, and therefore need some kind of conflict." The introduction goes on to claim that the Kōmeitō's entrance into government has given such people a golden opportunity to fulfil their desire for controversy. More to the point, concerning the involvement of religious organizations in political activities and the principle of separation of religion and state, the introduction offers the following views.

(The constitutional separation of religion and state), does not forbid political activity on the part of religious organizations or members of such organizations. People who maintain that it is all right for labor unions, corporations, agricultural cooperatives and other organizations to participate in election campaigns and other political activities, but on the other hand say it is wrong for religious organizations to participate in such activities, or that their participation should be limited, are exhibiting a discriminatory attitude towards religion. They are looking down on religion, they have a negative attitude towards religion, and that kind of position is itself against the constitution, because the constitution respects the value of religion. If other religious groups harbor doubts about the Kōmeitō or Sōka Gakkai, they shouldn't bark from a distance but should be straightforward and meet with representatives of Sōka Gakkai or the Kōmeitō. They should question what needs to be questioned, give their opinions frankly, and listen to what Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō have to say.

In the interview itself, Akiya quotes a constitutional scholar to make a similar point, which is that any movement to limit the involvement of Sōka Gakkai members in political activities would itself be unconstitutional. In addition, Akiya warns that the controversy surrounding "the fusion of religion and politics" should not be regarded as aimed at Sōka Gakkai only, but in a broader sense constitutes a "serious invasion of the freedom of religious organizations in regard to political activities."

In reply to a question concerning Sōka Gakkai's motivation in founding the Kōmeitō in the first place, Akiya denies any ambition towards the establishment of a state religion, and maintains rather that the intention was to offer a populist alternative to the confrontation between the Liberal

Democratic Party on the right and the Social Democratic Party of Japan (known at the time as the Japan Socialist Party) on the left. Akiya further states that the concept of *ōbutsumyōgō* represents a positive contribution by religion to the political process, not the establishment of any particular religion. As a result of such misunderstandings concerning the meaning of *ōbutsumyōgō*, Sōka Gakkai and the Kōmeitō have decided to refrain from using the term, but Akiya explains what he sees as religion's positive contribution to politics in the following way:

Religion offers a universal world view, a view of the human being, and it is only natural that this kind of philosophical ideal exert some influence on all human enterprises. Especially in Nichiren Buddhism there is a movement towards not stopping at the inner conversion of the individual but also being aware of the social mission of people of religion.

Concerning the National Hall of Worship, the concept often cited as evidence of Sōka Gakkai's ambitions to establish itself as a state religion, Akiya offers this rebuttal.

The term "National Hall of Worship" is an expression which came into use among followers of Nichiren Buddhism during the Meiji era, under the influence of the nationalism developing at that time. There was a time when both Nichiren Shōshū and Sōka Gakkai also used the term. However, it is not an expression that Nichiren himself used, and, as a matter of fact, it is contrary to the democratic Buddhist spirit of Nichiren. Furthermore, since this expression is used as evidence to back up the misunderstanding that we seek the establishment of a state religion, we made clear our rejection of the use of the term in our 1970 resolutions. We have no intention of changing course on this matter in the future.

When questioned about the relationship of Sōka Gakkai to the Kōmeitō, particularly the input of Sōka Gakkai in the selection of Kōmeitō candidates, Akiya does admit that Sōka Gakkai is routinely consulted on such matters, but insists that the final decision is made by the Kōmeitō itself. He does recognize the need to make the consultation between the two groups more open and public, and states, "I would like to think about that matter as something for future consideration." Akiya is likewise noncommittal in his response to a question as to whether Sōka Gakkai will sponsor or support candidates of other parties under the new election system, saying only that they will have to wait and see how the situation develops.

The Future of Religious and Political Relationships in Japan

It is clear that the birth of a coalition government and the enactment of election reforms laws have changed the political and religious landscape of Japan. Not only are the political parties scrambling to form new alliances and prevent further internal splintering, but various religious organizations are faced with the question of how to respond to the new realities. Militant proselytization techniques used in the past and a fierce independence—contributing perhaps to the recent definitive split with Nichiren Shōshū—have left Sōka Gakkai with few friends within the Japanese religious world. Although some of the apprehension over the Kōmeitō's current and possible future role in the government is no doubt sincere, one has to wonder—given how shrill the debate becomes at times—how much of it results from the adverse sentiment harbored towards Sōka Gakkai.

Although journalistic aims may be served by calling the present controversy a “religious war,” such comments tend only to further cloud the issues. Inasmuch as the debate concerning the proper relationship of religion and state in Japan is furthered by the current controversy, however, one can find reason for hope that it will produce some positive results. The fact that there is a continuing stream of court cases concerning the issue of state sponsorship of and participation in religious activities, both on a national and local level, indicates that this area is still very much an open question and in need of further thought and exploration. Given the particular historical situation of Japan, this relationship will no doubt exhibit some differences from those in other nations. However, the situation here might also help to shed light on an issue that continues to be of universal concern.

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