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

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Soka Gakkai is regarded as the largest religious organization in Japan, claiming over eight million members (a figure that, as Levi McLaughlin indicates, is certainly overstated), with links to a political party that is a major player in the Japanese government. It is commonly classified among the "new religions" of Japan, a term the Gakkai dislikes, pointing to its historical roots in the Nichiren Buddhist tradition (93), but that nevertheless remains widely used in Japan. Despite its size, remarkably little academic analysis of the Gakkai has been done, perhaps because scholars have previously faced difficulties in gaining enough access to do academically detached fieldwork. However, now we have a significant volume that helps us understand this movement.

McLaughlin's book is the product of extensive fieldwork, based on numerous interviews with officials and ordinary members, observing daily practices and how members engage with their movement and its charismatic (yet, since 2010 unseen) leader, Ikeda Daisaku. McLaughlin provides rich vignettes that illustrate members' commitment—certainly a factor in its earlier rapid growth—and their reverential attitude to Ikeda, an attitude skillfully crafted by the organization. McLaughlin shows how the Gakkai has developed as an Ikeda-centric religion, with Ikeda superseding his mentor and the previous leader Toda Josei who, in his turn, had similarly superseded his mentor, Makiguchi Tsunesaburō. McLaughlin's study—reflected in stories of how he stayed for weeks at a time with different members, who incorporated him into their family lives—brings out not just the commitment they express but the tensions that this can produce within families; for example, McLaughlin introduces us to a mother who has dedicated much of her life to Gakkai activities, and to her son who angrily chides her for neglecting her family as a result.

The chapters trace the Gakkai's history from its foundation by Makiguchi as an education society combining Nichiren Buddhist teachings with modern education and humanistic values, to the roles of presidents Toda and Ikeda. He shows how the combination of Buddhist thought with humanistic ethics and concepts has intensified under Ikeda, whose dialogues with prominent Western figures are widely publicized by Soka Gakkai. One chapter outlines how, via Ikeda's series of novels (written by a collective of authors but, in line with its spiritual elevation of Ikeda, attributed to him alone) under the title *Ningen kakumei* (Human revolution), the Gakkai has constructed a "dramatic narrative" in fictional and readable form to enthuse devotees. Concepts of personal sacrifice run through *Ningen kakumei*, creating a model of behavior for followers who are thus encouraged to sacrifice themselves for the movement and its "truth," just as Ikeda has done. McLaughlin sees the *Ningen kakumei* series as providing a quasi-national literary tradition for the movement, in which figures such as Toda and Ikeda fight moral battles against the oppressive state (and evil—i.e., non-Gakkai—religions) on behalf of truth.

Members engage with the Gakkai's canon, as McLaughlin notes in chapter 4, by constantly reading the *Ningen kakumei* and encouraging others to do so as well, and they often deflected his questions by suggesting he read the *Human Revolution* series (88). Such comments will resonate with other researchers of new religions whose fol-

lowers respond to questions by encouraging researchers to read the words of their leader/founder.

McLaughlin discusses how the movement cultivates youth through educational practices and emphasizing study groups and examinations, through which members can acquire status and better advance the movement's cause. McLaughlin's description of studying with young Gakkai members for one examination shows how a feeling of convivial camaraderie is created that draws even recalcitrant followers into engaging with fellow members and organizational goals. A final chapter focuses on women in the Gakkai; as McLaughlin shows, they (notably the Married Women's Division) are the movement's real powerhouse via their dedication to proselytizing and volunteering. The emphasis on women (and through them, on traditional views of the family) remains central to the Gakkai, with women expected to be "good wives and wise mothers" dedicated to making their families into loyal Gakkai units. Yet women are absent from the Gakkai's seats of power; the movement has hundreds of vice-presidents, none female. Women, it appears, are expected to conform to older traditional notions of womanhood, and this, as McLaughlin indicates, is a problem that could weaken the movement in a society where more women work and concepts of gender inequality and notions of traditional familial structures are becoming increasingly outdated.

While Soka Gakkai, as McLaughlin notes, is clearly facing regression and retrenchment nowadays, it nonetheless remains the largest single religious organizational entity in Japan, a position it acquired during its period of extraordinary growth up to the 1960s. While other movements also grew in that era, the Gakkai outstripped them all, and a critical question is why it has managed to be so successful compared to rivals.

McLaughlin's analysis rests not just on the religious rewards (including worldly benefits) it claims to offer but on its nature as a "mimetic nation." He argues that it reflects the nature of a nation-state in multiple ways; it has its own flag, anthems and songs, newspaper, an internal economy based on donations and a "currency" of vouchers that members can use for services at shops and businesses around its headquarters, a yearly calendar of rituals, cemeteries, and a textual canon. Thus, the Gakkai makes itself intelligible and attractive by being a religion that "models itself on an idealized vision of the nation-state" (20). Soka Gakkai followers can live their whole lives within a Gakkai framework: they can have their entire education from pre-school to university at Gakkai institutions, read nothing but Gakkai newspapers and news outlets, engage in politics via and vote for a Gakkai-associated party, be buried in Gakkai cemeteries, and so on. At the same time McLaughlin says the Gakkai does not ascribe to full statehood, although critics might note that in its period of rapid growth it did appear to be intent on converting all of Japan and uniting state and religion under one banner. McLaughlin also indicates how the Gakkai uses its power to deal with dissidents, who can be thrown out of the movement and ostracized for making criticisms of the movement.

McLaughlin does not portray the Gakkai as unique, citing other religious groups around the world—from ISIS to the Mormons and Scientology, to Japan's new religions—where similar patterns of mimesis may be discerned. That in itself caused me to query the argument that the Gakkai's nature as a mimetic nation has been intrinsic to its success in outstripping all other religious organizations in Japan. After all, many new religions in Japan display similar "mimetic nation-state" attributes (one infamously even presented itself as an alternative state, with ministerial departments and its leader as a sacred emperor). McLaughlin does not really ask why Soka

Gakkai—apart from in scope, something that is surely more a result of success than a factor in it—is anything different from these groups. I felt the nation-state analogy was stretched too far at times (notably when McLaughlin suggests the emphasis on the *Ningen kakumei* series was about creating a form of "national literature") and that it actually impeded a fuller examination of the Gakkai's success. This is not to say that the nation-state analogy does not carry weight; it is a contribution to the field, but one that also has gaps. By focusing so much on the mimetic state analogy and using it as a constant frame of comparative reference, McLaughlin pays little attention to an obvious comparator group—the new movements that arose and flourished in the same era as the Gakkai. Such an approach would also have the value of looking at rivalries among new religions and asking why one has done better than another—something that surely would be apposite for the Gakkai, especially with other Nichiren and Lotus Sutra–oriented Buddhist groups. McLaughlin argues that the Gakkai has always been the exception in Japanese religious terms (177); in wartime Japan it was a rare case of willingly undergoing persecution in defense of religious principles, and in the postwar period it has become Japan's biggest religious group. Yet this stretched the notion of exceptionalism; other religious groups suffered persecution for their principles in the war, and while the Gakkai is Japan's largest group it is not the only one with millions of members. In many of the areas discussed by McLaughlin, I found myself thinking of similar examples in other modern (especially postwar) Japanese religious organizations, to the point where I found the exceptionalist argument unconvincing and contentious.

McLaughlin came closer to answering the question of success when discussing how the Gakkai sought to combine the practical efficacy of its chanting with Nichiren Buddhist teachings, romanticism, and modern humanistic values. These aspects appeared to provide people with mechanisms to be both "traditional" and adhere to a meaningful and efficacious faith and to engage with modern thoughts and ethics in a changing and globalizing world. That dynamic of fusing notions of tradition with modernity is one that operates widely among new movements in Japan but seems especially developed via Gakkai's incorporation of international humanistic and cultural concepts and practices.

McLaughlin also skirts around some of the movement's controversial aspects. Its aggressive proselytization along with its hostility to critics are mentioned but not in depth. One remains unsure why a movement so powerful appears so aggressively hostile to other groups; McLaughlin makes little critical comment, for instance, about the fact that—decades after its split with its former parent sect Nichiren Shōshū—the movement still encourages members to pray for the destruction of the former parent group. I would have liked to know more about the cult of leadership in the movement, accused by enemies of being an "Ikeda empire" (*Ikeda ōkoku*, 30). While McLaughlin discusses reverence for Ikeda among Gakkai devotees, who view him (even if they have not met him) as a personal friend and mentor, there is little discussion of charismatic leadership or evidence to show quite why—apart from obvious organizing abilities and a capacity to rise in the Gakkai and win out in the power struggles after Toda's death and thence to use the movement's machinery to bolster his status—Ikeda has become so seemingly charismatic. This, again, is an area where some comparative consideration of such issues in the new religions (where similar themes can be seen among other leaders) would have been useful.

As such, this book provides a valuable insight into the workings of Japan's most successful modern religion and is a significant contribution to the study of modern re-

ligions in Japan. At the same time, it leaves space for further analysis that could deepen our understanding further about one of the most striking features of the Japanese religious landscape.

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