Chapter 6
Proselytizing, Peacework, and Public Relations: Soka Gakkai's Commitment to Interreligious Harmony in Singapore

Juliana Finucane

When deluded, one is called an ordinary being, but when enlightened, one is called a Buddha. This is similar to a tarnished mirror that will shine like a jewel when polished. A mind now clouded by the illusions of the innate darkness of life is like a tarnished mirror, but when polished, it is sure to become like a clear mirror, reflecting the essential nature of phenomena and the true aspect of reality. Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Namu Myoho Renge Kyo.

Nichiren, "On Attaining Perfect Buddhahood," c.1256

The darkness of our world today, lacking a sound philosophy of life, is indeed deep. Our enthusiastic voices, sharing the great philosophy of the Daishonin's Buddhism spread golden waves of hope and revitalization throughout society.

Daisaku Ikeda in Daibyakurenge, February 2010

In December 2010, the new Buddhist religious group, the Singapore Soka Association (SSA) sent representatives to an interfaith gala dinner sponsored by the Inter-Religious Organisation and held at the Singapore Expo. The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) planned this first-of-its-kind event in order to "enhance mutual understanding" in light of recent highly public interreligious tensions, such as the disparaging comments made by pastors Rony Tan and Mark Ng about Taoism made public earlier in the year.[1] The IRO hosted more than 2,000 attendees, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself.

[1] See Daniel Goh's chapter for further context about these interreligious tensions in Singapore.

J. Finucane (✉)
Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: julianafinucane@gmail.com

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The story announcing this dinner was carried in the national broadsheet, *The Straits Times*, yet this was not where I first heard about the event. I was told the news by a member of the Singapore Soka Association during a walk to promote environmental awareness at West Coast Park. Longtime member Gek Noi was excited when she told me, and indeed, for SSA members, their inclusion in an IRO event is big news. The Inter-Religious Organisation consists of representatives from Singapore's major religions and is designed to promote peace through dialogue and mutual understanding across religious borders. The organization sends representatives from each major world religion to offer invocations at a great number of public events, including many state-sponsored events like the annual Racial Harmony Day dinner. [2] The stated goals of the IRO are drawn from the Singapore Declaration on Religious Harmony, issued in 2003. The Singapore Soka Association also embraces these same goals. Indeed, in the foyer of its Tampines headquarters, the group has prominently displayed the same declaration. And while SSA remains committed to the promotion of interreligious harmony in Singapore, the group has as yet failed to receive sufficient support from the IRO's Buddhist membership to join. Gek Noi said to me, "We would have a better chance if Muslims could support our application!" And though she was joking, there was an element of truth in what she said, as SSA has sustained strong relationships with many Muslims groups in Singapore. Not accidentally, Muslims constitute the only religious group that SSA members adamantly refuse to proselytize.

This chapter explores the Singapore Soka Association's efforts to promote interreligious harmony in Singapore in light of the group's broader project of propagating its faith. Though members no longer aggressively proselytize, this chapter argues that proselytizing is still a central practice. Instead of browbeating people by criticizing other religions, members instead embrace a "both/and" approach to proselytizing, in which they embrace pluralist values about religious tolerance while gently encouraging the conversion of others. Soka Gakkai members have seized on the circulatory power of values like "global citizenship" and "religious pluralism" as desirable global values, and have enthusiastically embraced a host of putatively universal humanist values about difference, while at the same time gently using these values as powerful tools for converting others in local contexts.[3] Members have further embraced the state's definition of the proper social location of religion, even as they push back against these boundaries by redefining national values in a

[2]On its website, the Inter-Religious Organisation lists the major world religions in order of how ancient each is. This is also the order in which representatives offer invocations at public events. These religions, in the order in which the IRO lists them, are: Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Baha'i Faith, http://www.iro.org.sg/website/home.html.

[3]The chapter in this volume by Rodney Sebastian, in particular, also points to this dynamic whereby the global is harnessed in local context to legitimize and thereby authorize the activities of actors in local contexts.

Buddhist light.[4] The group's simultaneous embrace of these global, national and local values *without contradiction* and its specific understanding of "dialogue" with non-members in a local context suggest both the possibilities and limits of existing models of proselytizing and religious pluralism. As Michael Feener has argued, any discussion of proselytizing and pluralism is driven by a similar tension, as the practice of proselytizing assumes—indeed, requires—a situation of diversity, while at the same time seeking to overcome it. In other words, it is, as Farish Noor has claimed in his contribution to this volume (Chap. 4), the frontier that *must* exist, but can never be reached.

I describe Singapore Soka Association's activities as "proselytizing," even though members themselves prefer to use words like "propagation" and "sharing." I follow legal scholar Tad Stahnke's definition of proselytizing as "expressive conduct taken with the purpose of trying to change the religious beliefs, affiliation, or identity of another" (Stahnke 1999). While proselytizing in many contexts has negative connotations (and surely these negative connotations are a reason SSA members avoid the term), Stahnke's definition attempts to define it more neutrally. The definition does not determine, in advance of empirical evidence, whether the proselytizing is "proper" or "improper." And the definition further emphasizes that proselytizing is "intentional conduct, undertaken with a particular goal in mind," which is true in the case of SSA. In following Stahnke's definition, I align myself with others who have similarly emphasized the *goals* of proselytizing rather than its *outcomes*, including (Chaps. 2 and 11) Melissa Crouch, Neena Mahadev, and other chapters in this volume.

Seeking out avenues for propagation is increasingly urgent for minority religious groups like SSA that struggle to make a place for themselves in the ever more crowded public religious spaces of global, multireligious cities like Singapore. As Hackett has argued, "The right to disseminate one's religion easily surpasses the freedom to believe and to practice one's religion as the most controversial aspect of religious freedom" (Hackett 2006). For SSA, proselytizing is a significant avenue by which members "go public" in urban Singapore and seek to cultivate positive public opinions about their group. As Patsy Rahn has argued about the activities of Falun Gong, the goal of proselytizing is often as much about encouraging the conversion of others as it is about changing public opinion of the group from negative to positive (Rahn 2008).

The SSA's commitment to interreligious harmony serves not only as a way of allowing it entry into Singapore's crowded public religious sphere, but also as a

[4]Francesca Tarocco's study in this volume (Chap. 12) also discusses the careful negotiation that one religious group—in this case, Chinese Buddhists—must undertake vis-à-vis the state's careful delimitation of the proper borders for religious groups. The Buddhists considered by Tarocco accept the limits to their activities imposed by the government, while at the same time gently attempting to redefine "religion" in a way that expands their appropriate realm of operations.

platform for individuals to re-understand their own religious beliefs. Engaging in outreach and "dialogue" with non-members highlights the reality that "conversion" for practitioners is not an experience that either practically or rhetorically mimics the paradigmatic Christian conversion experience of Paul on the road to Damascus. Instead, conversion involves a gradual reshaping of the backdrop against which choices are evaluated as being "rational" or "making sense." Members have seized upon "dialogue" as a descriptor of their means of engaging the world, with interreligious engagement as a significant platform for actualizing this dialogue. The example of Singapore Soka Association thus demonstrates that proselytizing blurs the lines that theory about secular democracy has drawn between tolerance and intolerance, public and private, and individual and collective action. Or, as Hackett has put it, proselytizing is "the thorn in the flesh of the secular state" (Hackett 2008).

Soka Gakkai and Interreligious Dialogue

Singapore Soka Association is a branch of Soka Gakkai International, a group that claims 12 million members in more than 190 countries and territories. Soka Gakkai, or the "Value-Creation Society," is a Buddhist movement founded in 1930s Japan. Formerly affiliated with the priestly Nichiren Shoshu sect in Japan, the group was excommunicated in 1991 and is currently a lay organization. The various national groups are taken care of by the international organization, which is an NGO recognized by the United Nations. Local groups are given enough flexibility to accommodate their own specific contexts, which they've done with great success. Soka Gakkai has its roots in the thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist saint and prophet Nichiren, who is known both for his anti-hierarchical claims that all people regardless of social status were equally able to achieve enlightenment, as well as his fierce intolerance of those who disagreed with him. Nichiren stressed that any person can become a Buddha through her/his own effort, if you "polish your mirror day and night," as he suggests in the epigraph to this article. But how does a person accomplish this clarity? "Only by chanting *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*" (underlining mine). This quote is often cited by members and points to the group's twofold main message. First, members are oriented toward promoting world peace and interreligious harmony through creating an inclusive global community of believers. And second, members claim the *only* way to achieve enlightenment—and, as a corollary, global peace—is through chanting the name of the Lotus Sutra, *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*.

Nichiren also pioneered a type of aggressive religious proselytizing known as *shakubuku*, or "break and subdue," which he saw as a compassionate way to enrich a morally impoverished public with his own Buddhist values. In its early years, Soka Gakkai was similarly confrontational in its attempts at "value-creation," especially in response to Japan's growing militarism. The group courted public controversy both because of its embrace of *shakubuku* proselytizing tactics and its public incursions into politics. In recent years, much of the group's global success

has resulted from distancing itself from its controversial past. Soka Gakkai has cultivated a global following in two ways. First, it has self-consciously adopted an ethos of global liberal pluralism that Richard Hughes Seager has referred to as "Buddhist humanism" (Seager 2006). And second, it has accommodated itself to various local and national settings. This "both/and" aspect of the group's globalization is mirrored in the way it describes its relationships with non-members in Singapore. While the Japanese-language word *shakubuku* continues to be widely used—both as a noun and as a verb—to describe the group's outreach activities, I have never heard anyone using its English-language correlate, "proselytizing." Instead members will describe their activities as outreach, education, "planting the seed," or propagation.

As Seager argues, a significant aspect of the group's harnessing of the global in local contexts is its embrace of global values about humanism, or what George Thomas has described in other contexts as "world cultural principles" (Thomas 2001). As Paul Freston has argued, a worldview governed by these principles is "inherently hostile to proselytizing [because] it depicts one religion as truer than all others" (Freston 2008). As such, Soka Gakkai members are careful to avoid activities that seem proselytic, with an eye not only to various legal and constitutional regulations, but also to these evolving global values. Rather than "proselytizing," Soka Gakkai members engage adherents of other religions via "dialogue." As part of their efforts to cultivate global citizenship and still lay claim to an exclusive religious truth, members have redefined proselytizing as a type of "dialogue" with others, and have placed themselves at the center of what it means to be "global."

In a Soka Gakkai worldview, members' use of dialogue operates simultaneously as a tool for proselytizing and for the promotion of peace. Members describe many types of communication and outreach as types of "dialogue" through which people come together freely, share thoughts openly, and through the process of conversation itself work out what each thinks. In this capacity, dialogue is understood as the foundation for peace, fellowship, and the promotion of global citizenship, and this is how members commonly describe it. Underpinning the impulse to engage in dialogue is the assumption that dialogue is itself a positive good, contingent on a spirit of openness to others. Dialogue is one answer—and the answer Soka Gakkai offers—to the question of how we can hold religious beliefs deeply and still get along with others. Soka Gakkai is not alone in offering this answer, as many scholars have argued for the importance of dialogue as a way to take difference seriously while still embracing democratic and secular values in an increasingly globalized world.[5] Craig Calhoun, for one, has argued that effective public discourse is "in and of itself a form of solidarity" (Calhoun 2002).

Theories about religious pluralism also rely on assumptions about the central importance of free and open-ended public deliberation. Diana Eck, for example, describes pluralism—in this case American pluralism—as the promise to "come as you are, with all your differences, pledg[ing] only to the common civic demands of

[5] For example, see Niebuhr (2008), Bellah (1985), Nussbaum (2002), Taylor (1994), Gutmann (1994) and Appiah (2005).

citizenship. In other words, come and be yourselves" (Eck 2002). In this understanding, pluralism is an active project shaped by the encounter of and true engagement among many different religious groups. Diana Eck describes dialogue as "a two-way discourse that is essential to relationship, not domination. One might call it mutual witness… It is the language of mutuality, not of power" (Eck 1993). Eck's model articulates a way to use dialogue to respect difference by forging as many spaces as possible for communication, while never incorporating "others" into our "we." Yet underlying this respect for difference is an assumption that before participants can be seated at the table of pluralist discourse, they must agree to certain preconditions about civility and openness in service of the greater good of social harmony. Eck carves out a space for creating a greater sense of collectivity—what others might refer to as global civil society marked by George Thomas's "world cultural principles"—which would be "the crucial stage to which our interreligious dialogue must take us if we are to be up to the task of creating communication adequate for our interdependent world."[6] Yet we do not receive from Eck further guidance about the creation of this language of transnational cooperation and mutuality, and she sidesteps questions both about unequal power and about how to create a language that would be open to all.

Global Citizenship

In a public sense, Singapore Soka Association is sincere in its work towards promoting these humanistic values of global citizenship. The group's president and mentor Daisaku Ikeda—affectionately known as "Sensei" among members—has codified this package of humanist values under the broader category of "global citizenship," in which one's cultivation of Buddhist values is coterminous with becoming a good national citizen *and* a humanistic global citizen. Ikeda himself has served as the embodiment of this model of global citizenship, as he has engaged in interfaith and intercultural "dialogues" with many prominent figures throughout the world, from Wangari Maathai and Majid Tehranian, to Nelson Mandela and Linus Pauling, among many others. These conversations form the basis for one of the most commonly read type of book among members—and, with their professionally designed covers and high quality printing, certainly the nicest looking. On the one hand, the format seems uniquely suited for Ikeda's contemporary message of openness, religious pluralism, and world peace in the global era. At the same time, it is a format well worn by Nichiren, though retooled for the global era. Almost all of Nichiren's major writings took the form of dialogues between a protagonist who adopts Nichiren's position and an imagined adversary who is slowly won over. Dialogues are printed and disseminated among members in a way that promotes an impression of Ikeda not only as a conversation

[6] Ibid., 203.

partner with scholars, public figures, and activists, but also as a person centrally engaged in a global dialogue about the meaning and importance of a set of urgently needed global values.

These global values have Soka Gakkai counterparts, and members often talk of global humanistic values loosely, using phrases like human revolution, global value creation, and *kosen rufu* interchangeably.[7] Daisaku Ikeda defines the values of a global citizen in a sufficiently broad way so as to include non-members as well. In a lecture at Teacher's College of Columbia University, Ikeda claimed that global citizens share three main characteristics. First, global citizens share "the **wisdom** to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living." Global citizens also have "the **courage** not to fear or deny difference," and instead foster mutual respect and understanding among all peoples. Finally, global citizens have, "The **compassion** to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one's immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places" (boldface in original).[8]

In his address to the first graduating class of Soka University of America in 2005, Ikeda enumerated the qualities of a global citizen slightly differently, though in an equally open-ended fashion (Ikeda 2006). First, global citizens have a respect and reverence for life. They respect cultural difference, develop the capacity to respect other cultures, and share "the spirit of working for the common people, sharing their joys and sorrows."[9] They promote democracy, a point that Ikeda elucidated with references to John Dewey and Walt Whitman, before defining it more plainly as "a way of life whose purpose is to enable people to achieve spiritual autonomy, live in mutual respect and enjoy happiness."[10] Finally, global citizens share the spirit of mentor and disciple.

Ikeda frames global citizenship not as a religious pursuit but rather as a universal one, applicable to all people who strive to make the world a more harmonious and peaceful place, even as he is continually articulating these values in a language that deeply resonates with a Soka Gakkai moral worldview. In his address to the Soka University of America graduates, he stresses the importance of the relationship of mutual trust that should exist between teachers and students, but refers to this relationship using the language of "mentor and disciple," a language that even a casual member recognizes as a cornerstone of Soka Gakkai philosophy. Ikeda then stresses that, "Soka education does not purport to teach any religious doctrine," because it is rather based on "a solid and, I believe, universal worldview."[11] After claiming universality for this value, he then subtly shifts back to reasserting a familiar Buddhist image, as he explains that, "Just as a diamond can only be polished by another diamond, it is only through intense human interaction engaging the entire personality

[7]The term *kosen rufu* articulates the ideal of working together to move towards an age of peace and harmony through spreading the teachings of Nichiren about chanting the Lotus Sutra.

[8]*Seikyo Shimbun*, June 16, 1996, 2.

[9]Ibid., 137.

[10]Ibid., 139.

[11]Ibid., 140.

that people can forge themselves, raising themselves up to ever greater heights. It is the relationship between teacher and learner, between mentor and disciple, that makes this possible."[12] Careful listeners will pick up on the reference to the enlightened state of Buddhahood. Elsewhere, Ikeda is clearer about the significance of the diamond imagery: "It is by forging our lives under the intense pressure of difficulties and in the severe heat of hardships that we develop and crystallize, like a diamond, the steadfast *ichinen* or 'self' of Buddhahood in the depths of our lives. By experiencing hardships, our body and mind become indestructible entities of the Buddha… On the other hand, if ours is a safe and easy practice that is free from any real hardship, we will be unable to truly polish our lives. It is only by overcoming great hardships, by persevering in the midst of intense heat and pressure, that we can become 'kings of life' just as a diamond is the king of jewels" (Ikeda 1989). Ikeda then goes on to claim that embracing the *gohonzon* is the only way to polish the diamond of Buddhahood such that all people can "cultivate lives of indestructible brilliance and create a diamond crystal of happiness within yourselves, with your hearts beautiful and radiant."

Global Religion in a Local Context

Ikeda's equation of Soka Gakkai's values with universal values has been internalized by Singaporean members, as well, many of whom see their values as not uniquely Buddhist, but rather universally applicable. A longtime member in her mid-40s described celebrating the Chinese New Year with her students in the kindergarten where she used to teach: "We have this custom where we give these *ang pao*, um, little red packages to the children," she said. She wrote the Chinese characters in my notebook. "You usually put money in them, hmm, or chocolates sometimes, these kinds of things. But for my students, I also put guidances from Sensei [Ikeda], you know, without putting his name on them." I asked if she worried that distributing the words of a religious leader might violate norms about religious propagation in public places. "No, not at all. Because I didn't put Sensei's name on them, so they're not religious like that. The guidances themselves can be helpful for anyone, doesn't matter who you are."

In Singapore, masking the religious roots of such guidances is not merely a personal preference, but additionally is a matter of law, and members tend to see most of their public activities in secular Singapore as *cultural* rather than *religious*. In many ways, this dynamic is similar to Yiguan Dao's public identification of itself as not a religious group in Singapore, as Francis Lim argues in this volume (Chap. 9). The first adherents of Soka Gakkai in Singapore came in the mid- to late-1960s in the form of Japanese businessmen and investors who met to chant and study together in private homes. In 1972, the group of 100 members registered with the Registrar of

[12] Ibid.

Societies as the Singapore Nichiren Shoshū Association. The group's registration was followed by an intense *shakubuku* effort, resulting in a membership of more than 10,000 by 1980.[13] By the early 1980s, the group had already begun participating in patriotic festivals, including the National Day celebrations. By 1987, Soka Gakkai adherents were a highly visible presence at the celebrations, supplying around 2,000 volunteers to take part in a torch-lighting ceremony closing the celebrations, and an additional 200 volunteers to help train and organize participants in other ceremonies. In recent years, SSA has averaged more than a 1,000 volunteers and performers in each parade, usually contributing one or more of the event's many "cultural performances." This widely advertised and televised event continues to be one of Singapore Soka Association's most high-profile incursions into Singaporean public space, and one of the major feathers in its public relations cap.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Soka Gakkai began to attract a broader audience in Singapore, increasingly appealing to ethnic Chinese, especially young people and middle-aged women (Metraux 2001). Today the group claims around 30,000 members. Similar to local branches elsewhere, the vast majority of Singapore Soka Association's activities take place in private homes around the city, where citizens' private activities are only loosely monitored. In addition to this vast network of private homes, the group also boasts seven centers and a kindergarten, and is currently seeking to acquire land to build a multistory headquarters modeled after the Wisma Kebudayaan Soka headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

As noted above, in addition to embracing global cultural values, Singapore Soka Association also must reckon with a state that aggressively maintains religious harmony. The government establishes the terrain on which religious groups operate, both through establishing limits to permissible activities and speech among religious adherents, as well as through defining "religion" itself.[14] Singapore's rapid industrialization, modernization, and economic development over the past 30 years has had profound effects on the social, cultural, and religious life of this global city-state, largely because of direct state management of these "non-state" realms. The social space slotted for religion in Singapore is precise, and thus the possibilities for a religious group engaging in public outreach or proselytizing, which necessarily implies exploring the boundaries of that space, are strictly circumscribed.

As a multireligious, multiethnic country, Singapore aggressively maintains harmony among the disparate groups within its borders. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore has promoted a variable policy regarding both multiculturalism and religious difference over the years since independence. The PAP initially promoted a policy of secularization in which both religious and ethnic identities were

[13] Tong (2008, 142). While I agree with Tong that membership numbers are somewhat unreliable because we must count on the group's self-reporting, I do not similarly agree with that this imprecision results from the group's being "weary of outsiders," as I found both leaders and ordinary members consistently open and accommodating.

[14] See Michael Feener's chapter for a more comprehensive discussion of the various ways in which states establish limits and manage religious difference in Asia broadly and Southeast Asia in particular.

secondary to the interest of promoting national unity. The PAP focused on creating a meritocratic and "ethnically undifferentiated citizenship" (Hefner 2001). As the leaders of a reluctantly independent nation with scant natural resources, the PAP attempted to mobilize the population under what Chua Beng Huat has described as an "ideology of survival" (Chua 2002). This emphasis that the nation was in crisis both allowed the government to create a coherent understanding of "nation," as well as to justify the many policy decisions on the part of a state that was increasingly restricting personal liberties. The logic of the PAP at this time was understood and embraced by the general population, who rallied communally to deal with the hardships of becoming an independent nation.

During this time, religion was encouraged as long as it promoted national goals and did not seek to participate in political debate. Widespread coverage of religion in the nationally-run Singapore *Straits Times* newspaper demonstrates the strong hold the government had—and continues to have—on public narratives about religion, as stories about religion's role in promoting social harmony significantly outnumber stories about religious conflict.[15] Those marginal groups that were considered to threaten social stability through aggressive or misleading proselytizing were immediately labeled "cults" or worse, and criticized in the newspaper.[16]

Throughout the 1970s, however, Singaporeans grew increasingly wealthy and the "ideology of survival" no longer made as much sense as a strategy of legitimation on the part of the government, which instead shifted to promoting communal values. In 1979, it introduced a government program into schools in order to teach "religious knowledge" and moral values, which would ostensibly cultivate values of good citizenship in students. An unexpected result of introducing the Religious Knowledge curricula in the schools was the mobilization of some religious groups, including Muslim and Christian minorities, against what they perceived as an alliance between the state and the majority population. Instead of promoting greater communal harmony, the Religious Knowledge program "did not so much provide an antidote to Western individualism as bring religious difference back into the public square."[17]

By the late 1980s, the government backpedaled on the Religious Knowledge program, acknowledging that it had not only contributed to conflicts among students in schools, but might also have more detrimental effects for interreligious and

[15] Articles in the *Straits Times* like the following are representative of this trend: "Religious Tolerance will Ensure our Survival," May 27, 1964; "Vital to keep up with each other's customs," August 28, 1988; "Religious harmony as a Reality," September 16, 1987; "Live and Let Pray," December 17, 1988; "Swami's plans for more friendly world," March 16, 1970; and "Help government promote stability, religious groups told," May 28, 1972.

[16] Articles in the *Straits Times* like the following are representative of this trend: "Beware the Subversives Trying to Use Religion as Tool: Othman," December 1, 1976; "Moonies Banned: 'Movement Prejudicial to Public Welfare and Good Order'," April 3, 1982; "Call to Watch Out for False Prophets," June 4, 1985; "Look Out for Conman with 'Holy Ash'," February 8, 1985; and "The Curse of the Cults: At Least 15 S'poreans Lured into Cults While Studying or Holidaying Abroad."

[17] Hefner, "Introduction," 39.

interethnic harmony in the long term. Instead, it more clearly articulated a public policy for delineating and "registering" religious groups. The government exercised tighter control over voluntary associations, making it illegal to convene publicly unless a group first registered with the state and giving the state final authority to deny a group registration for any reason. For example, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness has yet to be recognized by the state as a legitimate religious group, though a number of practitioners of Krishna Consciousness do live in Singapore.[18] Shortly after the PAP phased out the Religious Knowledge program, it introduced in 1990 the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill, which prohibited religious leaders from commenting on social and political issues (Clammer 1998). A year after the passage of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill, the state issued the Shared Values White Paper, which more clearly articulated a set of national shared values that included interreligious harmony and service to the state.[19]

Dialogue as Exchange? Or Dialogue as Proselytizing?

Singapore Soka Association members have navigated this complicated sociopolitical landscape with skill, and unlike members of some other new religious and minority movements, tend to see themselves as enjoying a great deal of religious freedom to propagate their religion. Perhaps one of the greatest reasons that SSA members see themselves as having a great deal of religious freedom is that their group has operated largely free of public and government suspicion as a result of their carefully cultivated public image and their close relationship with the government. SSA does not challenge national goals, but rather has long led the way in celebrating them, and this embrace has been one of the group's main ways of making incursions into the public realm. For example, in spite of the government's diligent efforts to resist religious favoritism, the Soka Gakkai is the *only* religious group that participates in the National Day Parade. SSA has also participated in the Chingay Chinese New Year celebrations, Racial Harmony Month walks, charity road races, interfaith colloquia, and many other government-sponsored events. Lim Ah Yook, Assistant Director in the Lifeskills and Lifestyles Division of the government-run People's Association, has worked with SSA on many events since the mid-1980s and said that one reason the government is so fond of SSA is the group's willingness to take on tasks with energy and good cheer, and thus serve as

[18] Adherents have gotten around these restrictions by forming another group called the Krishna Mandir.

[19] The Shared Values White Paper outlined five basic values that while not tagged as Confucian, were deeply influenced by it, as Hill and Lian argue. These values include nation before community and society before the self, the primacy of the family as the basic unit of society, "regard and community support for the individual," consensus over difference, and racial and religious harmony (Hill and Lian 1995).

a "shining example" to other Singaporeans.[20] "I know I can call them with any opportunity and they will do a better job with higher spirits than anyone else," she said. Tay Boon Khai, the Singaporean Army colonel in charge of organizing the National Day Parade in 2008, put it more bluntly: "They just have an amazing ability to organize huge groups of people."

SSA's embrace of national values is borne out in the news coverage of the group, which has been largely either neutral or favorable. Unlike more photogenic groups whose rituals and festivals lend themselves to colorful news stories, Singapore Soka Association has relied on its participation in public events to garner its coverage by the press including through its recent participation in the inaugural Youth Olympic Games. It has also received positive press for visits made by government officials to the centers. For example, Prime Minister Goh helped SSA inaugurate its new headquarters in 1993, and President Nathan has also visited. The Youth Division was awarded the Singapore Youth Award for Community and Youth Services in 2005. Furthermore, educational initiatives at the group's kindergarten at Tampines have also received complimentary media coverage.

Yet while the group enthusiastically promotes interreligious harmony via these types of civic events and refuses to engage in outwardly proselytic activities, its private and semi-private activities tell a more complicated story, not least because of the group's claims to a religious truth that is fundamentally exclusive. Though the group is sincere in its refusal to encourage the conversion of Muslims, and members rarely voice negative opinions about other religious groups in public, tensions with other religious groups exist. These tensions are often manifested when members talk about their own choices to convert. For many converts, to be Buddhist does not represent a significant break with an existing religious milieu. While SSA practices are markedly different from the dominant type of Chinese Buddhist/Taoist religious traditions that many Singaporeans have grown up with, some of the language is familiar across these traditions, including concepts such as enlightenment, karma, and Buddha nature.[21] SSA members tend to look at these traditional Chinese practices as the counterpoint to what they describe as the more *rational* aspects of Soka Gakkai that had initially attracted them.[22] Tong argues

[20] The People's Association is a vast network of community organizations intended to bring citizens' concerns to the government, and communicate governmental messages to citizens. According to the state-run organization's website, the People's Association "brings people together to take ownership of and contribute to community well-being. We connect the people and the government for consultation and feedback. We leverage on these relationships to strengthen racial harmony and social cohesion, to ensure a united and resilient Singapore," http://www.pa.gov.sg.

[21] Fifty-one percent of Chinese Singaporeans are Buddhist or Taoist, and sometimes the line between these two religions is quite fluid. Thus, "Chinese religiosity" in Singapore often refers collectively to both traditions, along with Confucianism, ancestor worship, and folk religion. As Tham observes, "Chinese attitude to religion is quite ambiguous." (Tham 2008). Yet Tong's research demonstrates that as part of the "process of rationalization" in Singapore, greater differentiation between Buddhism and Taoism is currently underway (Tong 2007).

[22] Daniel Goh similarly notes the ambivalence with which many Singaporean Chinese approach the more "superstitious" or "magical" Chinese folk practices.

that the draw of "rational" religion underlies a broader social trend in Singapore of conversion away from traditional Chinese religions. For Tong, the "rationalization" of religion signals a

> shift in orientation and a 'search for a meaning system' where the informants find a greater isomorphic fit to their worldview. They move from religious systems that emphasize the idea of magic to one which they regard as a systematization of ideas and ethical images of the world, a search for meaning rather than unconditional acceptance of traditional beliefs.[23]

Though there exists a strain of members who understand the workings of the Lotus Sutra as more "magical," members tend to confirm Tong's observation in the sense that they understand *why* they chant the *daimoku* and see their own actions as able to directly change their karma, even as *how* the Lotus Sutra specifically works in their lives retains a significant element of mystery. For example, a small group of members was recently invited to celebrate Vesak Day at the Tibetan Buddhist center in Geylang. As they narrated the visit to me, their story was punctuated by baffled laughter about the ritual practices and comments like, "I have no idea what it meant."

In general, though, this criticism is mostly muted, only slightly keener than some of the dismissive comments I have heard about evangelical Christianity. Because religious diversity in Singapore is inextricably bound up with racial diversity, assessing why members feel comfortable being critical of some "others" and not other "others" is complicated. Observationally, I noticed that Chinese members were generally unwilling to make negative or critical comments about Muslims or Hindus, which are traditions in Singapore that are neatly aligned with ethnic categories of Malays and Indians, respectively.[24] They were more willing to offer less charitable reflections on Singaporean Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, which is predominantly ethnically Chinese. But they were most willing to be critical of Buddhism and other traditional Chinese religions, which is simultaneously ethnically Chinese and share a similar religious lineage. The vast majority of SSA's converts are drawn from this pool.

Members reserve a special animosity, however, for those members of the orthodox priesthood who excommunicated the lay Soka Gakkai in 1991. Singapore Soka Association members see these members of the orthodoxy as not only having chosen the *most* wrong path, but as having betrayed Soka Gakkai in the process. This animosity is not specific to Singapore, as President Ikeda retains some of Nichiren's combative spirit when he urges members to be wary of those who would slander the Lotus Sutra and persecute Soka Gakkai. As Nichiren saw his own persecution as evidence of the righteousness of his mission, Ikeda similarly sees Soka Gakkai's "persecution" by Nichirenist priests as evidence that the Lotus Sutra is unfolding in

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[23] Tong, *Rationalizing Religion*, 114–115.

[24] Tham notes that almost all Malays are Muslim, and two-thirds of Indians practice Hinduism (Tham 2008, 18). Hinduism is a notoriously slippery category even in Singapore where the government is heavily involved in outlining religious boundaries. Additionally, many newer guru-centered Hindu-based movements are increasingly appealing to ethnic Chinese, as suggested by Rodney Sebastian in his contribution to this volume in Chap. 8.

history. A central part of the preparation to receive the *gohonzon* in Singapore is that members must be comprehensively educated about the "priesthood issue." Being well versed in Soka Gakkai's version of the split is necessary both because a historical view of the organization is in general important for members, but also so that members can speak cogently about the issue to non-members and potential members.

This hostility remains palpable even though the Nichirenist contingent in Singapore is not a threat to SSA in any obvious material ways. Yet while Nichirenist orthodoxy in Singapore does not seem to be competing for membership or public attention, it still offers Singapore Soka Association members a potent, if somewhat imagined, counterpoint that expresses what they are *not*. SSA General Director Ong speaks of this difference often. "We have our own priest here," he said, referring to Reverend Yuhan Watanabe, the former Japanese Nichiren Shoshū priest who left the orthodoxy and joined SSA in 1995. Reverend Watanabe helped SSA open its first temple, a small room for chanting and rituals called An-Le, which is located at the Senja Culture Centre.[25] The original intent of the temple was for the "reformist priest" to lead chanting sessions and preside over rituals like weddings and funerals, though today the fact that the room is a temple seems rather more symbolic than functional.[26] "[W]hen [members] saw Reverend performing services, people started requesting that he do their weddings and other things too. Sort of, these old habits are hard to break. People see a priest doing rituals and think that makes the ritual better or more effective. But Reverend Watanabe is just an employee! Like I am an employee too. He's a priest, but I'm still his boss. [laughter]. So we started a roster system and now we just go in that order. Nobody can choose; you just get whoever is next on the list." Mr. Ong does not think it is inconsistent that his lay organization employs a priest in a priestly role because of the group's consummately "rational" interpretation of his role. "It's important for members to see that our priest is just like anyone else. They learn from seeing that there isn't anything Reverend does that regular members can't do as well. So it's like an educational experience for our members to see this." The only time I have seen Reverend Watanabe dressed in robes was in a video of a meeting in Japan.

The tense relationship between SSA and other Singaporean Buddhist groups bears out in its continued exclusion from the IRO. SSA has at least twice submitted applications to join the Inter-Religious Organisation, but has not yet received necessary support from other Buddhist groups who don't consider the group "Buddhist enough." The Education Director of SSA explained that, "People don't see us doing

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[25] An-Le means "Temple of Peace and Happiness." It was first opened in the Tampines Soka Centre in 1997, and then moved to Senja in 2002.

[26] An SGI-USA website devoted to "Soka Spirit," or clarifying the priesthood issue, refers to this temple as a "so-called temple." Along with a small one in Ghana that opened after An-Le, only two such temples exist. Ted Morino, "What About…? What Are the Reformist Priests Doing?" Soka Gakkai International-USA, February 5, 1999, http://www.sokaspirit.org/resource/world-tribune/what-about…-what-are-the-reformist-priests-doing.

things that they understand as Buddhist, like celebrating Vesak Day.[27] Many of these groups, their members don't do much *other* than celebrate Vesak Day anyways, so what could we do as a part of the IRO that we cannot do already?" She pointed to the government's support of SSA's participation in the National Day Parade and Chingay as evidence that the group did not need the public legitimation that comes along with being a member of a "mainstream" and publicly recognizable religion as outlined in the Inter-Religious Organisation. I cannot help but note that the prospect of SSA becoming a member of the IRO highlights a cognitive disjuncture; while other member religious groups send their representatives in elaborate dress typical of their tradition to recite prayers, SSA has no parallel practice. The one time I saw General Director Ong participate in a similarly inspired event, he looked, in his ordinary street clothes and armed not with a prayer but with a "guidance" from president Ikeda, hopelessly out of place.

Redescribing Dialogue, Talking Conversion

The line between that which is "religious" and that which is merely cultural in this sense is something members cannot often articulate easily, as "culture" in this worldview has a religious value. Members are encouraged not only to see their own Soka Gakkai values as universally relevant, but further to see their own ordinary lives as permeated with a deeply religious sensibility. This impression is heightened by the circulation among members of Ikeda's "daily encouragements," which are short—often only a sentence or two—aphorisms intended to be inspirational and encouraging, both in practice and in daily life. These encouragements include, for example, "Knowing that to give up is to be defeated by oneself, continue single-mindedly to take small but significant steps in the shaping of your destiny," and "To the extent that we love others, we will be loved. To the extent that we work for others' happiness, we will enjoy protection and support. This is the law of cause and effect." The vast majority of these encouragements do not explicitly refer to Buddhism, yet for those members who have most completely internalized the Soka Gakkai ethos and moral worldview—or, in a Durkheimian sense, have most completely had the conscience collective stamped onto their selves—indications that these encouragements promote a Soka Gakkai moral worldview are everywhere.

For example, a non-member might not see anything particularly "religious" about defining the "law of cause and effect" in the way Ikeda does above. Yet many Soka Gakkai members do not hear "law of cause and effect" in a casual way, as the "law of cause and effect" is synonymous with the idea of karma, a central belief for

[27] Vesak Day is often referred to in shorthand as the Buddha's Birth Day, but more broadly refers to a celebration of many notable aspects of his life, including his birth, enlightenment, and death. In Singapore, Vesak Day is commemorated by chanting and meditation in temples, making offerings, engaging in acts of generosity such as almsgiving, and processing with robed monks through the streets by candlelight.

members who believe that karma can be changed and thus we are in control of our own causes and effects on a daily basis. Members use this Buddhist language to put forth a compelling reality that is suffused by a Soka Gakkai worldview. The infusion of Ikeda's language into everyday conversation among members and, especially, between members and non-members, suggests a way of imagining the world in which even everyday interactions can be understood according to a Soka Gakkai moral logic. In this deepest sense, attempts to understand Soka Gakkai as a merely confessional religion break down, as the moral logic of the group imbricates itself into individuals most effectively through permeating the everyday with words and creating a moral order—a worldview—that is experienced as real and irrefutable.

One measure of how effectively this worldview "stamps" itself onto a person in a Durkheimian sense is how naturally this language comes to so many members. For example, like Ikeda, members often talk about personal successes as "achieving victories," which were made possible by their "indomitable" or "undefeated" spirit. The language of victory and defeat in religion is not new in this Buddhist tradition, as Nichiren also framed his own many struggles in this language. Members constantly talk about doing things with sincerity and of being able to evaluate other people on the basis of their sincerity and earnestness. And members are constantly encouraged to participate in events with non-members and to be active participants in "sharing" about their own traditions in a non-aggressive way.

As a researcher and non-member "other," I saw firsthand this refusal to engage in outwardly proselytic activities, in spite of my initial worries that studying a group known for its past proselytizing would put me in some uncomfortable situations. Instead, only a small number have encouraged me to start chanting or have even asked me if I am a member. And when they have, their comments have been mostly lighthearted rather than exhortatory. "It's like eating chicken rice," one Singaporean member told me. "You can look at the chicken rice and see that it looks delicious. You can smell it, mmm, and it smells so good. You can see other people eating it and listen to them talk about it. But you will never really *know* the chicken rice until you taste it." We both laughed at his analogy, but he didn't pursue the subject.

Instead, members constantly engage me in a kind of "dialogue" that often involves their "sharing experiences" with me. One member described the significance to members of "sharing experiences" in the following way: "A lot of what we do is about planting the seed in others who have never heard of Soka or *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*" she said. "It doesn't matter if they start chanting today. Or tomorrow. Or the next day. But someday, maybe in a month or a year or 10 years, that person I told about *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo* will experience some sort of struggle or will need some sort of help. And then they will remember that I told them about *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo*, and think, you know, maybe now I should try this." Planting the seed through "sharing experiences" serves two ends. First, it is an important way of encouraging others to convert. And second, "sharing experiences" is a central way members learn to understand their own lives in a Soka Gakkai interpretive framework in which even the smallest events can be understood as the workings of the Lotus Sutra. Through the act of repeatedly narrating their own stories to others, members learn to speak a particular shared Soka Gakkai language, thus solidifying their sense of membership in the community.

Members' dialogues are subjected to both direct and indirect disciplinary processes that shape them into intelligible and remarkably consistent narratives. The same experiences are shared so often that speakers learn—consciously or unconsciously—to adapt the telling to highlight those moments that will resonate most with listeners. Some members' experiences are also disciplined in more formal ways. For example, leaders have "practice" sessions to help members refine their narratives. At one such session before a large meeting in Tampines, a leader reminded one of her members to include a few guidances from Ikeda that she had found helpful. Interspersing one's own comments with comments from President Ikeda is another common way of disciplining individual experiences into exempla of a single universal experience of conversion and the subsequent reaffirmations of their faith. The more a person is incorporated into the group, the better she is at understanding all these experiences according to a Soka Gakkai Buddhist metalanguage.[28]

As members steep themselves in a Soka Gakkai worldview, they emulate discursive models they have become familiar with, while at the same time, making them their own. Susan Harding has described a similar process in her discussion of fundamentalist Baptist acts of witnessing. "Witnessing aims to separate novice listeners from their prior, given reality, to constitute a new, previously unperceived or indistinct reality, and to impress that reality upon them, make it felt, heard, seen, known undeniably real," Harding argues. "The reality, or *truth*, constituted in witnessing is, in part, a linguistic one: the supernatural manifests itself as God's voice and his spirit is communicated and experienced through words" (Harding 2000). Witnessing appears to the "novice listener" as a conversation, but it is no mere dialogue, as it is a process by which the saved impresses upon the unsaved listener what Ruth Borker describes as a "compelling religious reality completely at variance with [the listener's] experience."[29] Soka Gakkai members' relationship to the religious quality of words is similar. The *words* of and about the Lotus Sutra are the plainest and most direct expression of the core religious belief and practice; chanting the Lotus Sutra is efficacious in and of itself. Communication about the Lotus Sutra or intended to impress the truth of the Lotus Sutra on others is a religious act of compassion in the truest sense. Like the Baptists' strategy for converting others, Soka Gakkai's strategy also hinges on "one person insinuating his or her mode of interpretation in the mind of another."[30]

The most compelling experiences are those that narrate how members took up the practice—or, conversion stories. Many of these stories begin during a time of struggle in their lives. During these moments of struggle, people experience a turning point when they unexpectedly meet a Soka Gakkai practitioner face-to-face.

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[28] I follow Roland Barthes' understanding of a "metalanguage" as a type of discourse on discourse. Barthes has described a metalanguage as "myth itself… [I]t is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first." In this context, I understand the Soka Gakkai metalanguage to be a second-order reflection on difference, in which all differences are understood in light of a broader Buddhist logic that organizes difference and sameness according to their significance (Barthes 1972).

[29] Ruth Borker, "The Presentation of the Gospel in Everyday Life," unpublished manuscript cited in Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*, 36–37.

[30] Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, 37.

The member introduces the practice and shares her/his own experiences and those of others, sometimes in the form of reading material. Many experiences relate a person's initial reluctance to practice and others' skepticism about their practice once they decide to take it up. Conversion stories do not stop at one's own conversion, but typically follow through to include one's efforts to convert family and loved ones. Thus, it is in the moment of *speaking* the truth of the Lotus Sutra to others that a person's conversion becomes complete. As Bahktin has argued,

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention… Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral language…, but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (Bahktin 1982).

Conclusion

SSA members' understanding of dialogue as a type of communication that is both the means and end of its religious practice testifies to the limits of contemporary models of religious pluralism. While I may not *feel* as though I am being proselytized to, that is exactly the point. The fact that SSA members have chosen to proselytize in this way highlights their awareness that the group is operating in a larger global civil arena marked by certain values about tolerance and its limits. The group tacitly acknowledges the cosmopolitan discomfort with strongly proselytic activities in its choice to promote its exclusive message by embracing dominant cultural values and by cultivating an ethic of global citizenship in which other religions are respected. The group promotes itself as a thoroughly cosmopolitan religious organization open to anyone, and at the same time, uses this ethos as a powerful tool for persuading others of its correctness. The group's understanding of dialogue as a fundamentally *religious* project supports the many theoretical critiques of models of civil society that do not fully account for the reality that participants in public conversations never speak neutral languages, but instead always articulate their concerns in specific moral vocabularies.[31]

Perhaps a better model for thinking about SSA's proselytizing would be to think about the communication that takes place as a type of redescription rather than either a type of dialogue or a type of persuasion. Richard Rorty, for one, argues that *redescription* involves creative new uses of language to make my truth more compelling to a listener, which is different from argumentation, or trying to show another person that my truth more closely corresponds to the truth "out there." While Rorty is describing the way social change occurs, his method for change through redescription applies to Soka Gakkai's proselytizing as well. His method is "to

[31] See for example, Kenneth Baynes on moral vocabularies and the difficulty of agreeing on what constitutes "reasonable" public arguments (Baynes 2002).

redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior… [This sort of philosophy] says things like 'try thinking of it this way'—or more specifically, 'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions'" (Rorty 1989). Not only do members redescribe ordinary events as meaningful, they are also actively engaged in taking publicly shared values—including religious pluralism and global citizenship—and redescribing them in a Buddhist light. Members do not try to put forth *new* values or argue that other values are the most important, but instead aim to redescribe the significance of those values *already* central to the ethos of global civil society. Eventually, against the backdrop of these redescriptions, certain things begin "to just make sense" in new ways.

Embracing redescription as an effective method of proselytizing that does not seem like proselytizing, Soka Gakkai is able to promote itself as a thoroughly modern, cosmopolitan, and global religious group whose values are in keeping with the values of secular democracy. The group's public embrace of these values in different contexts not only suggests that the group acknowledges their circulatory power as markers of a tolerant, liberal, and open-minded religious group, it further allows the group to use this identity to attract potential converts who similarly believe that religion *should be* tolerant, liberal and open-minded. In proselytizing in this way, Soka Gakkai members follow the biases of many scholars who presuppose a certain understanding of modernity in which "only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal discourse are being commended" (Asad 2003). Even as Soka Gakkai does not publicly push back against the limits of religious tolerance, its understanding of the role of communications both as a carrier of information *and* as a religious project challenges notions that Soka Gakkai as an institution embraces wholeheartedly these liberal values. Because *all* communications about Soka Gakkai can, in effect, be seen as a type of "planting the seed," the line between what is properly public and what is properly private becomes blurry. For a group of people for whom "speaking is believing," as Susan Harding argued of Baptist fundamentalists, models of civil society that are premised on carving out a space for non-coercive, deliberative dialogue seem somewhat limited. For Soka Gakkai members, dialogue is not unproblematically a means of free and open conversation because there is little question about what the outcome of the dialogue will be. In spite of his countless "dialogues" with others, I have seen no evidence that Ikeda has either changed his mind or expressed doubt about anything. Dialogue is instead an opportunity for spreading the truth of the Lotus Sutra—for proselytizing.

In understanding the religious importance of communications in this way, Soka Gakkai members assert the group's public importance and claim for themselves a great degree of religious freedom. Members accept the limits on free speech in the public sphere in order to press back against them through redescription. The choices members have made in "going public" suggest their tacit acknowledgment that public spaces are governed by unequal power dynamics, not the least of which is that certain habits of discourse among both speakers and listeners exist and govern any

party's ability to speak or be heard at that moment. By learning to speak the language of dominant cultural values in this local context, as well as the language of global civil society, SSA has gained entry into public spaces, and thus carves out a space to exercise the most basic religious freedom to speak and be heard—and to proselytize—even as members pursue these projects under the guise of liberal values of tolerance and religious pluralism.

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