

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 21 May 2018

## Soka Gakkai, Kōmeitō and the Religious Voices of Japan's Political Arena



Podcast with **Levi McLaughlin** (28 May 2018).

Interviewed by **Paulina Kolata**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/soka-gakkai-komeito-and-the-religious-voices-of-japans-political-arena/>

**Paulina Kolata (PK)**: *Throughout Japanese history religion has always coloured and influenced matters of state. Religious validation of imperialist aggression and Japan's war efforts in the first half of the twentieth century are just one example of this. Japanese religious institutions entered the post-war period with their ethically problematic baggage of war. But promulgation of Japan's post-war constitution – which introduced the legal separation of religion and the state, the militarisation of Japan, and freedom of religion – opened a new chapter of a supposedly pacifist and secular political system. Religion became the private matter of an individual. And yet we are still talking about religion and politics in Japan. So we are joined today by [Levi McLaughlin](#), who is an Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at North Carolina State University. He is a co-author and co-editor of [Kōmeitō: Politics and Religion in Japan](#), and has just completed a book entitled [Soka Gakkai's Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation](#). It only seems appropriate to invite him to talk to us about religion and politics in Japan. And his book is actually forthcoming from the University of Hawaii Press in late 2018. So, congratulations on that!*

**Levi McLaughlin (LM)**: Thank you.

**PK**: *So, hello! And welcome to the Religious Studies Project. So we are here, at the University of Manchester, ahead of your talk later on this afternoon, where you will be talking about the [Soka Gakkai](#), which is one of Japan's largest organisations, and also is often referred to as one of the most politically engaged and influential, I'll say, new religions in Japan today. So, why do you think we should continue talking about religion and politics in a country that has constitutional division of religion and state?*

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**LM:** Thank you. It's nice to be here, Paulina. Thanks for having me. There are other questions we have to think about, as well. For example, why are we talking about religion in a country where, in surveys that are given to ask about religious commitment – the wording of the survey is usually something along the lines of: do you have religious faith? And the majority of respondents in Japan will say, "No." Seventy percent plus will say, "I don't have a religious faith." And also, in the recent elections at national level, just over fifty percent of the population actually make the effort to go out and vote. Why talk about religion and politics in these conditions? Perhaps that would be another thing to add to that conundrum. The reason is that there are these organisations that are unmatched in their capacity to mobilise votes. Although they are minority players in the religion and politics fields on matters of policy, they may actually be the crucial elements in forthcoming upheavals in regards to Japan's constitution and its place in the geopolitical order. So let me speak a little bit more specifically. I'm talking about an organisation called *Soka Gakkai*. It translates literally as the "Value Creation Study Association".

**PK:** *What a great name!*

**LM:** Isn't it? Does it sound like a religion?

**PK:** *Not quite.*

**LM:** Right. Well, that's because it didn't begin as a religion. It began as an educational reform organisation in the 1930s, whose founders then switched into following a specific form of Medieval Japanese Buddhism, following a reformer named [Nichiren](#) from the thirteenth century, who held that only exclusive faith in a teaching known as the [Lotus Sutra](#), which is understood to be the Buddha's final teaching, will allow for salvation. All other forms of teaching, including other Buddhist teaching, are to be done away with. And so the organisation they ended up creating was a staunch defender of this particular form of Buddhism, which ran afoul of wartime religious regulations. The founders, [Makiguchi Tsunesaburō](#) and his disciple [Toda Jōsei](#), were imprisoned. Makiguchi died of malnutrition during the war – one of the very, very few people who was actually willing to confront and reject the authority of the wartime state.

**PK:** And opposed them.

**LM:** That's right. And opposed it for religious reasons. And so at the end of the Second World War, *Soka Gakkai* reformulates and grows from a few thousand members to millions of members, between

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the beginning of the 1950s until the end of the 1960s. Today, they claim an absolutely staggering number of followers in Japan – 8.27 million households – which is hugely exaggerated. The reality, though, is something like 3% of Japan self-identifies as *Soka Gakkai*, and that doesn't sound like a lot necessarily, right? But if you have 3% of the population, that's three out of a hundred people that you know, or are related to you, they are people you work with, or maybe you are one of these three percent. So, one of the reasons that *Soka Gakkai* has both grown so big and so prominent – and also terribly notorious within Japanese society – is the fact that electioneering on behalf of *Soka Gakkai's* affiliated political party, is a component of *Soka Gakkai* faith practices. So members chant the *Lotus Sutra*; they solicit membership; they are very well known for being proselytisers, for missionising; and every election, from the smallest town council up to Japan's national diet – the parliament – people in Japan will know they are going to get a phone call. They're going to get a knock on the door from their friends who are members of *Soka Gakkai* to ask them to vote for *Kōmeitō* – or to vote for *Kōmeitō's* political ally, which is the Liberal Democratic Party, the LDP, Japan's largest party. Japan, right now, is run by a coalition government, which is the LDP and *Kōmeitō*. So *Kōmeitō* has a seat at the table. And they may be a comparatively small organisation, but they wield a disproportionately large amount of power, both politically and religiously.

**PK:** *So who are Kōmeitō? What are their policies?*

**LM:** That's a really good question, and it's also a tough question. They are difficult to pigeon-hole politically, because they don't fall neatly into a right or left kind of distribution. Historically, they would have to be called extremely left-wing, because they were supporters of pacifism and they have always been . . . their central platforms have always been focussed on social welfare. They appeal to their primary constituency. Their primary constituency is homemakers: women in Japan, who make up the bedrock of *Soka Gakkai* and are the most active in terms of electioneering. So it's things like reducing taxation on household goods, promoting education, clean water, the environment – things of that nature – support for families with small children, low income households, you name it. But recently they've also been supportive of LDP moves to move toward greater freedom for Japan's military. Japan does not actually officially have a regular armed forces. They maintain what are called Japan's self-defence forces. They are hindered from militarising by a clause in the constitution – a notorious clause, called Article Nine, which prevents Japan from maintaining war materials or using war as a means of resolving international disputes. But in 2015 a series of new laws were passed through the diet, with *Kōmeitō's* support, that radically reinterpreted Article Nine to allow for what's called collective self-defence. This will allow Japan to go to the aid of its military allies, say the

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United States, and to enter armed conflict. So we have now this strange policy kind-of platform, and this odd connection between what are considered to be fairly hawkish right-wing approaches on a defence front, and really progressive social welfare-oriented policies as well.

**PK:** *That's really interesting, because it would mix the Tories with the Corbynists, in the UK context!*

**LM:** Potentially, yes. And actually, historically *Kōmeitō*'s greatest rivals were the [Japanese Communist Party](#).

**PK:** *Oh great! OK. Fantastic. So you talked about the 2015 changes in the law, but what about the most recent elections of 2017? What was the role of *Kōmeitō* in that?*

**LM:** So there was a snap election called by Prime Minister [Abe Shinzō](#), in October 2017, which was treated by a lot of people as a rather cynical move on the part of the LDP and its coalition allies to secure power, and to basically ensure that Prime Minister Abe remains in power, and to take advantage of an opposition that has been pretty much in pretty big disarray, right now, at the national level in Japan. Overall the government gained seats, the LDP gained seats. The only component of that was that *Kōmeitō* lost seats. It went from 34 to 29 seats. Why is that? And so, some of the questions they're difficult to say definitively. But recently, with the help of my colleague [Axel Klein](#) – who's a Professor of Political Science at the University of Duisburg-Essen, in Germany, who is an amazing scholar, who can compile all kinds of great election data – we worked together to look at *Gakkai* member attitudes in combination with his quantitative aspect of it. And we determined that, basically, the lesson that we have to learn here is that *Soka Gakkai* is not one unified block. And that is translating into an increasingly disaggregated voting situation. And so it had the lowest number of votes at the national level, for an election like this, since joining the LDP in coalition in 1999: under seven million. Seven million is treated as something of a magic number, and there's a psychological aspect to going below that. And losing all these seats, including some veteran . . . one veteran politician, in particular, who was kind of pushed out. What is going on? Well there are several constituencies we can now identify within *Soka Gakkai*. These are developing as a result of *Kōmeitō*'s policy shifts away from decades of supporting a pacifist attitude and defending Article Nine, towards being totally on board with collective self-defence. What you're starting to see are generational shifts, gender divisions and a kind of move toward concerns about what's going to happen to *Soka Gakkai* in the light of one very important thing. Because, right now, *Soka Gakkai* is headed by an honorary president named [Ikeda Daisaku](#), who is revered as an absolute authority within the organisation. He has not appeared to address a *Gakkai* meeting since May of 2010. He just turned 90 years old. And so,

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necessarily, the organisation is looking to a future after Ikeda Daisaku's lifetime. And there are members within the group – particularly second, third, fourth generation *Soka Gakkai*, and others who are younger – are starting to question why their practice must include unquestioning loyalty to a political party that has absolutely reversed what they consider to be Ikeda Daisaku's teachings on peace.

**PK:** *So that's becoming quite challenging, in that sense. But the usual association is, how did Kōmeitō emerge originally? And how does it now refer to what Soka Gakkai is? Does it define itself as a Buddhist party, or . . . ?*

**LM:** Well this is one of the conundra – one of the difficult things that people who are interested in politics have to deal with. And one of the reasons I love talking about this is because *Kōmeitō* forces political scientists to actually take religion seriously. *Kōmeitō* was founded for religious reasons. It was founded very specifically for [Nichiren Buddhist](#) reasons. And this makes a lot of politics people uncomfortable. They like to think that there should be, as you mentioned earlier, a division between religion and government – especially in Japan, where the 1947 constitution guarantees that there will be a clear split between religion and government. In 1964, *Kōmeitō* was founded and there had been, previously . . . *Soka Gakkai* started running candidates for office from 1954, and then in 1955 they started being elected. From the outset *Soka Gakkai* entered politics in order to bring about a specific vision of constructing a temple complex that would mark the conversion of the populace of Japan to complete reverence, sole exclusive reverence for the *Lotus Sutra*. And what this really meant, of course, was that they would convert to *Soka Gakkai*. And it was . . . it comes from the Nichiren teachings. After his lifetime it comes to be known as the [Three Great Secret Dharmas](#). They consist of the title of the Lotus, [Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō](#); the second one is the [calligraphic mandala](#) that he inscribed, in 1279, for the salvation of Japan; and the third one was supposed to be what was called an ordination platform, *kaidan* in Japanese, that was understood for centuries to be this kind of far-flung distant vision, only to be achieved upon this majestic goal being realised. When *Soka Gakkai* started to grow from a few thousand to millions of followers, that distant goal started to become something of a concrete objective. And so one of the components of realising this *kaidan*, this ordination platform, this temple complex, was that it had to be promulgated by the government. And so during Nichiren's time, of course, that meant something quite different. But, by the time you reach the 20th century, that means Japan's parliament. And so how do you do that? You have to actually have a place in Japan's parliament. And so this, actually, was the motivation for *Soka Gakkai* entering politics. In 1964, *Kōmeitō* is the name of the party. It included a lot of different platforms, actually, mostly focussed on

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very utopian ideals of world peace and social welfare. And this at the time there was this concept of Buddhist democracy, as well, that was not clearly defined but it was very idealistic. But it was a religious objective. In 1969 there were a series of scandals that erupted, as a result, basically, of *Kōmeitō* politicians attempting to intervene to forestall the publication of one book, in particular, that was extremely negative about *Soka Gakkai*. And that precipitated an official division between *Kōmeitō* and its founding religion *Soka Gakkai*. And, since 1970, the two have maintained an official split. Of course, members of *Soka Gakkai* still campaign on behalf of *Kōmeitō* – and it's a little unclear, actually, about some of the other aspects that bind the two organisations together. Nonetheless what you have seen, though, is *Kōmeitō* become what you have to call an “ordinary” political party. As I say, it does not focus on this eschatological religious goal any more. It focuses on really concrete political objectives. And one of the things you can prove, about it no longer actually focusing on that is: it's been in government since 1999, and there's been no evidence whatsoever that they are trying to get any sort of favour on religious grounds for this religion, or any religion.

**PK:** *So they should be treated seriously.*

**LM:** They absolutely should be treated seriously. And also treated as another political party. Which, because they are . . . Because of their specific history, and because of their connection to a religion that has gained a reputation for being an aggressive proselytiser, they are often saddled with the stigma of not being a serious political party, but instead being a sort of arm of a religious organisation. Whereas, in every analysis, they should actually be . . . they look much more just like another party.

**PK:** *Which kind-of throws an interesting element into the mix of Japanese politics at the moment.*

**LM:** The other aspect to think about as well – especially in light of the fact that it's been a supporter of the LDP – it's not just *Kōmeitō* politicians but Liberal Democratic Party politicians that rely upon *Soka Gakkai* voters to be elected.

**PK:** *That's wonderful! Thank you very much for that, Levi. I'm afraid that this is all we have time for, but it has been a real pleasure talking to you. And thank you for sharing all your knowledge.*

**LM:** Thanks so much, Paulina.

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