



THE BENEFITS OF TRUSTING TRUST: THE CASE OF ITALIAN SOKA GAKKAI

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes trust issues among Italian members of the Japanese sect Soka Gakkai from an anthropological perspective. Trust among members and neophytes may be regarded as a key issue, since they do interact on a daily basis in an informal environment, with a high degree of intimacy and familiarity, which is seen as consisting in an instrumental, a moral, and an emotional element. This article addresses the way these components influence the lives of Soka Gakkai devotees regarding their relation to the religious experience, the organization as a whole, the fellow members, and themselves, assuming that the analysis of trust at different levels within a religious movement may help outlining the main elements of its ethos and the ways how complexity is reduced.

KEYWORDS

Trust. Soka Gakkai. Ethos. Religion. Anthropology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The case of the Buddhist sect Soka Gakkai (in Japanese, “Society for the creation of value”) is particularly interesting due to its great international expansion, especially in Italy, in recent years.

Data reported in this article were obtained during ethnological fieldwork in the Italian city of Monza, carried out between 2007 and 2008. The aim of my research was investigating the nature of relationships between Soka Gakkai members and identifying any ambiguity between discourses and practices, but also the importance attributed to the issue of trust between members. My main thesis is that Soka Gakkai provides an explicit definition of reality and the believer, in order to have his membership approved, should comply with it. Thus, he must engage in certain patterns of behavior that make sense only when the Buddhist doctrine is practiced within institutionalized modes and events, therefore, they may also be manipulated by actors to gain advantages in their own sphere of personal and informal action.

During the fieldwork period, I participated in many meetings, both at households and at *Kaikan* (the Buddhist center in Milan), when I had the opportunity to interview many members and neophytes. Quantitative data was collected through a survey.

From the theoretical viewpoint, I considered trust as an ongoing process of negotiation between the “internal” personal sphere and the “external” interpersonal sphere, which produces a reality continually (re)created through the interaction between people, in a context involving ambiguity and uncertainty, as the conversion to a new religion may be. With this in mind, I assumed that trust consists of three interrelated elements: instrumental, moral, and emotional, as proposed by Torsello (2004).

In this article, I analyze the three elements of trust in order to demonstrate how trust does influence Soka Gakkai members’ attitudes towards the organization, the Buddhist practice, and the religious experience as whole and creates a new ethos, with which the devotees should comply.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

Soka Gakkai International is a faith-based organization grounded in the teachings of the Buddhist Monk Nichiren Daishonin, who lived in Japan in the 13th century.

Since his earliest writings, Nichiren pointed out that his purpose was uniting under one “roof” the various interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine, thus he chose the symbolism of *Lotus Sutra*, i.e. cause-effect (according to him, by far the most important teaching of Buddha), as a unifying element. In fact, this extrapolation, to some extent arbitrary, of a single element of Buddhism did nothing but produced another sect (BABBIE, 1996, p. 103). When Nichiren died, in 1282, a large number of disputes arose between the followers of his school and many sects were formed, struggling for the recognition of the “true doctrine of Nichiren” (BABBIE, 1996).

In the 1920s, an elementary school teacher, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, in an attempt to find a new teaching method, came into contact with Nichiren Buddhism and started studying the scriptures.

The philosophical system of Makiguchi was primarily based on the appropriation of the Kantian notions of Good, Beautiful, and True, the latter, however, was replaced by the concept of Profit, Makiguchi thought it was less abstract and more present in human life (BABBIE, 1996, p. 105).

Makiguchi was impressed by the writings of Nichiren and he believed that the *Dai-Gohonzon* was the source of Good, Beautiful, and Profit. In the 1930s, Soka Gakkai (Society for Education and the creation of value, hereinafter referred to as SG), a small group dedicated to the study and discussion of Eastern and Western philosophy, was created in order to develop a new educational system for modern Japan. During the war years, though, religious freedom was abolished in Japan and SG was declared illegal. Makiguchi and his most promising disciple, Josei Toda, were imprisoned and the first did not survive the confinement period.

However, religious freedom was resumed as a consequence of the Allied occupation, and Toda immediately tried to reestablish the movement. A decade later, in 1951, thanks to an ardent proselytism, the number of devotees had reached ~5,000 (BABBIE, 1996).

When Toda died, in 1958, he was succeeded by a disciple, Daisaku Ikeda, a person of great charisma. In 1965, Soka Gakkai International (hereinafter SGI) was officially created and Ikeda was its first president.

In addition to being particularly prolific in terms of publications, Ikeda immediately engaged in many activities to promote peace. In 1978, for instance, he submitted to the UN a motion for disarmament and for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

In 1978, following a quarrel between SGI and Nichiren Shoshu (created in the 13th century by Nikko, a disciple of Nichiren), who remained faithful to the original teachings, Ikeda was forced to resign as president and he was later on “excommunicated,” although he is still to date in office as Honorary Chairman.

Soka Gakkai began its expansion in Italy in the 1970s. The Italian Buddhist Institute of Soka Gakkai (IBISG) was created on March 27, 1998. The institute is affiliated to the SGI and it contributes to promoting the values of peace, culture, and education.

In 2014, SG had around 50.000 members in Italy (SO-KA GAKKAI, 2014a).

As a movement made up of believers, without requiring the presence of a clergy, the SG organization is the same in every part of the world.

At the base there is a local *group*, consisting of 10 to 15 members. It organizes discussion meetings, named *zadankai* – “association of sit down and talk” – which meet twice a month. At these meetings, members exchange experiences on the Buddhist practice applied to everyday life and mutually support each other. The older members encourage beginners to the correct practice of Nichiren’s teachings, which are studied together, but also encourage proselytizing – or *shakubuku*.

Various discussion groups make up the *sectors*, most sectors are grouped into *chapters*. Up to this level, all members participate in organizational activities. At every level – group, sector, chapter – tutors are appointed on the basis of seniority of belonging and commitment to SG or the amount of free time available. These tutors are responsible to coordinate the activities between and within the various levels and often serve as guides for new members (especially at the lower level, i.e. group).

There is also coordination at higher levels: the chapters are grouped into *centers*, and the latter into *regional centers* or *regions*. The regional centers form the Soka Gakkai of a nation.

Transversely to this structure, there are *divisions*. From 35 years of age, members become part of the *men* or *women's* division. Before, they belong to the *youth* divisions (men, women, students, boys, girls, etc.).

In addition to the meetings, members are required to actively engage in various side events, ranging from welcoming and embracing other members, who come from areas far from the main centers, to the preparation of food and small gifts in ceremonies, when the *Gohonzon* (a parchment that attests the official belonging to SGI) is given to new followers, as well as the maintenance and cleaning of the SG offices.

3. SOKA GAKKAI, A DOCTRINE IN PRACTICE

In order to understand the subsequent development of the doctrine derived from Nichiren's teachings, we must consider a key element of the latter, the Three Great Secret Laws. In short, they are the veneration of visual imagery of the Supreme Being, designed by Nichiren himself, the *Gohonzon*; the chanting of the sacred mantra – *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* –, and the repetition of *Daimoku* (consisting of the first two chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*); the *Kaidan*, or the Sanctuary of the True Teaching, the place of prayer.

Then this kind of Buddhism has to be regarded as a *practice* that needs to be observed in order to be effective. The focal point is that a correct practice will lead to a correct way of inhabiting one's world and everything that this thought involves: relations to other people, attitude towards difficulties, mindset, etc. Correct practice does not mean only the correct chanting of the mantra, but it also refers to body posture (such as how to sit, how to join hands, gaze direction and height): strive, day after day, to take a proper body position will lead to a proper attitude towards faith and life in general. We may say that through the complying a ritualized practice SG Buddhism becomes incorporated.

Moreover, the Buddhist practice, in Nichiren's sense, has two aspects: it may be for oneself (chanting the mantra in front of the object of worship, which allows the achievement

of goals), but it may be for others, assuming that happiness cannot be purely individual. It is also in this scope that *shakubuku* (proselytizing) is practiced, it is seen as a means to improve one's own karma, as well as to provide others with tools to improve their quality of life. It is then a concerted effort towards a common goal, *Kosen-rufu*¹, which pushes practitioners to get closer and feel supported by others even at difficult times, when faith falters or they feel overwhelmed by events.

It is, therefore, a circular system, where the Buddhist practice provides the symbolic structure needed to explain human existence both in terms of the causes and the effect, i.e. it provides a scheme to read the events, as well as a way to change their course, and a reality model that surrounds us.

4. TRUST AND RELIGION: REDUCING COMPLEXITY

In SG, the practice provides a key to understanding reality, which allows the individual to deal with critical situations. The state of bewilderment that many people claim to have experienced in these cases may be explained through the Buddhist practice, i.e. through action. It represents a “path” to follow that helps the believer to get out of the uncertainty of infinite possibilities of existence to reach an ultimate goal, clear and specific: the absolute victory in every aspect of his lives.

Tamotsu Nakajima (2008, p. 3) addresses the relationship between faith, practice, and a reduced complexity in the future:

We know that life is a constant struggle, full of obstacles and difficulties. Sometimes we may feel hopeless or helpless in front of circumstances, but Nichiren Daishonin teaches us that everything starts with prayer and a prayer that is strong and full of conviction can transform everything, just like he wrote in the Goshō: “[...] it will never happen that the prayer of a devotee of the Lotus Sutra remains unanswered [...].”

¹ *Kosen-rufu* refers to the need of spreading Nichiren's Buddhism, with the ultimate purpose of reaching World's peace and harmony.

This means that, whatever the situation, a person who chants a vigorous daimoku for their own and others' happiness can turn poison into medicine and has nothing to fear.

The Buddhism of Nichiren turns lives from a "constant struggle" into a "path to success." For the practitioner, there are no uncertainties: chanting the *Lotus Sutra* and performing actions is the only possible path that leads to victory.

It is easy to understand how this kind of theoretical system is often a revelation, a cathartic moment after which life can no longer be the same. The moments of discouragement and concern about what *might* happen are left behind in favor of benefits that *will* come.

Diego Gambetta (2000) poses the problem of comparing trust to distrust in cooperation and he wonders on what depends the choice of whether to trust or not. May trust be seen as a cost-effective approach?

Based on the analysis of game theory, Gambetta (2000) comes to the conclusion that this choice depends on the way how the interaction begins in a situation of lack of information, and we have seen how, in the case of SG, the first encounters are usually influenced by a certain degree of informal "marketing strategy," which is aimed at overcoming the initial reluctance of a potential new practitioner by proposing an effective means (the mantra) to solve any problem.

The author shows how trust can emerge as a by-product of those moral and religious values that require honesty and mutual benefit. In the case of religious groups, personal ties and moral values can only serve as an encouragement to the attitude of trust if they are concepts on which it is widely believed. The motivations and beliefs are part of the individual's identity and on them depends the tendency to trust more those people with whom they have this kind of ties, rather than those who do not share them, even though both are complete strangers. This kind of trust, based on personal character, may be strengthened by high degrees of ritualization (GAMBETTA, 2000, p. 225).

In the case of SG, there emerges an important aspect in this regard, i.e. since all opportunities to meet and dialogue are structured in order to implement the bond of trust that assumingly must exist between members, therefore during these meetings a "spiral of trust" begins, which determines all subsequent behaviors.

During the meetings, participants are encouraged to talk about their experiences and share them with others, but not only this: they are expected to try solving their problems by means of an improved practice, more effort, a deeper faith. The group members put their expectations on the success of an individual in his path of personal growth, and, as a consequence, the latter is prompted to put trust on the trust of others, by doing so, he thinks it is easier to finally engage in actions that will ensure meeting those expectations.

According to Luhmann (2002, p. 28), when the relationships between fellow members are highly informal, the existence of trust (or distrust) between them is usually not perceived as relevant, as it happens for family members, where trust is taken for granted on the basis of family ties.

This was apparent in the answers to the questionnaire that I have applied to SG members in Monza, in 2008. One question was “how much do you trust the members of your group?” and one respondent (woman, 25 years) answered:

This question about trust does not make sense, I don't understand exactly what you want to know, trust related to what? It is like asking how much do you trust your relatives or your friends! (PEZZI, 2008, p. 73).

In my opinion, this shows how Luhmann's claims make sense in this circumstance, i.e. how trust may be regarded as a natural act, when it involves individuals considered as family: relatives, friends, and also fellow believers.

Gambetta (2000) argues that the most cost-effective attitudes involves having trust in trust and distrust in distrust, for two reasons: first, behaving as if your trust triggers a circle through which the social actor can always keep track of the interaction and check the accuracy of his impressions. Second, trust is not a commodity that deteriorates with use, but rather the more trust is put into play, the more we can expect to have in the future (GAMBETTA, 2000).

5. THE SURVEY

For the purposes of this study, a questionnaire with 33 questions was prepared and distributed to members of SGI in

Monza, Italy. The distribution was performed by some devotees who had offered to help me during the various meetings. As some people do not have the opportunity to consistently attend the meetings, I had some difficulties to collect the completed questionnaires. Attending all meetings was impossible for me (all of them were held on the same day and almost at the same time), and there were also many people who claimed to have lost their copy or forgot returning it more than once.

To facilitate the completion of questionnaires, I published a version on the Internet, accessible through a blog created *ad hoc*, which gave good results in terms of accessibility and the amount of collected data. The final sample of 50 people consisted of 31 women (62%) and 19 men (38%). All age groups were represented within a minimum of 17 years and a maximum of 61 years. The largest age group was between 20 and 50 years.

The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of open and closed questions. It had three sections: the first required personal data that could make it possible to draw the respondents' profile (age, educational level, whether and how long they were a member of Soka Gakkai). It was also asked to specify how the first contact with SGI happened, what kind of relationship existed between the respondent and the person who did *shakubuku* (proselytizing), and whether there was still some kind of relation to him at that time.

The second part was aimed at investigating the relationship between the members of a specific group, its size, how often they met, in which occasions; but also what kind of trust relationships members were willing to put in place within the group itself (requests for assistance or employment, financial aid, etc.). It was also sought to investigate the frequency and the characteristics of contacts between members.

The last part was mostly dedicated to the relationship between the SG practitioner and the institution to which he belongs, from the viewpoint of official publications – and how they are used in private life and during meetings – and that of institutional trust: respondents have been asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (min.) to 5 (max.) their degree of trust at the various levels of the Soka Gakkai organization: other members of their group, tutors, Soka Gakkai Italy, Soka Gakkai Interna-

tional; and in important figures of the movement, especially the contemporary ones: Daisaku Ikeda and Kaneda (the Italian President of the association at the time), in particular.

The results, as might be expected, were quite consistent and positive. The distinctly negative judgments against the association were almost entirely absent, while most respondents described the various fields in a substantially positive or very positive way.

6. TRUST IN PRACTICE

6.1 INSTRUMENTAL TRUST

A member of Soka Gakkai practices not only for himself, but also for the others. The benefits obtainable through the recitation of the mantra are not “gifts” received by an outer entity, but depend on the person’s ability to “create happiness.”

Consequently, by means of my survey, I intended to investigate the real nature of fiduciary relationship between members of the same group when it comes to material benefits. At the level of doctrine they are asked to rely on faith, to sustain themselves through the recitation of the *daimoku*, and to support each other. But what happens in case of an effective need?

In the first draft of the survey, there was the question “would you seek a member of your group in case of need?”, where the word “need” was used without further specification. Submitted to a test sample, all respondents emphasized the fact that they had not understood what kind of “need” the question was referring to: was it “need as we mean it?” The supposed existence of a different kind of need has prompted me to phrase the question differently, distinguishing between the need for “financial aid,” “material support,” and “spiritual help.”

Granting financial aid it is a strongly discouraged practice and on the Italian website of SG there is a section titled “Rules for the members of the Institute,” where a whole section is dedicated to this matter (SOKA GAKKAI, 2014b).

Borrowing money from other members – even in the case of serious economic problems – is considered as a lack of

respect towards faith itself: practitioners should engage only in those activities that have to do with religion, and the exchange of money may not be among them. However, to the question “would you seek a member of your group in case of need for financial aid?” 14% respondents answered “yes” and 26% “maybe” (accounting for 40%), something which contrasts with the rules of SG (PEZZI, 2008, p. 55).

Within SG, doing business with people belonging to the association is also strongly discouraged, as well as requesting and providing specific services for a fee. In this case, however, the responses to the questionnaire regarding “material support” show a much more nuanced viewpoint: 26% said they would be prepared to seek members, 22% answered “no,” and 52% claimed that it depends on the circumstances (PEZZI, 2008). As for my personal experience with members of SG, in fact, the practice of seeking other members in case of need for work, assistance, problem solving that require a specialist in the field are quite common and, in these cases, the boundary between trust and distrust seems very subtle: on the one hand, it is pointed out that granting full trust to people is not a desirable attitude, regardless of their belonging to SG or not. A bit of “healthy distrust” allows social actors to control their own choices at times of uncertainty or lack of information. However, to a certain extent, the member of SG is rather inclined to trust other members based on the trust that they will not be let down: considering that often the competence to fulfill a certain task is taken for granted, it is thought that the individual, however, will do his very best on the basis of the existing relationship. In my opinion, a vital role is played by the expectation that members have towards their fellow devotees, which is based on the sharing of certain moral and religious values, thanks to which trust justifies certain choices. This is evidenced by the responses to the questionnaire. The members who responded “yes” to the previously cited question were asked if and how this had already happened, and most respondents (32%) answered they have sought help from members, few have sought family members (6%), and 30% pointed out other behaviors (PEZZI, 2008).

The third part of the questionnaire, concerning the “spiritual needs,” provided some unexpected results: while

74% of respondents said they would seek a member, 8% would not do it, and 18% were not sure.

According to those who answered they would not have sought a group member in case of need, it was asked to specify why: most of them (26%) would try to solve the problem by themselves, 12% would ask for help from a specialist in the field. This is connected to what was said above concerning economic issues and reflects the practitioners' wish to keep the relations to members based only on faith and practice.

The existence of a kind of instrumental trust between SG practitioners is undeniable, but despite the fact that this apparent level is denied, indeed, there is a discrepancy between discourse and actual practice. There is a high degree of reciprocity between people from the same group, definitely thanks to the fact that those are usually small to medium sized, favoring closer ties and more frequent contacts.

6.2 MORAL TRUST AND RELIGIOUS ETHOS

According to Luhmann (2002), sharing values and moral principles legitimates trust.

Moreover, Torsello (2004, p. 90) claims that values may be defined as “the desirable concepts that influence the selection between the available modes, means and objectives of action. [...] Values determine, therefore by definition, behaviours.”

In the case of Soka Gakkai in Italy, I have often wondered if the fact of having accepted *in toto* the formal structure of an organization created in Japan led to problems in terms of trust. The Japanese society is strongly based on social hierarchy (HENDRY, 2003): the cohesion among fellows is a cornerstone of the society, as well as the recognition of status and gender differences within social groups. Respect and trust towards superiors (from pupils of the more advanced classes to the boss, from the older brother to the parents) are often taken for granted and their decisions virtually indisputable, therefore, it is easy to understand how the very hierarchic structure of SG has originated in the Japanese context. Although in Italy the concept of seniority may be compared, to some extent,

to that of hierarchy in the Japanese sense, and that gender differences are quite strongly perceived, social structures are certainly less rigid, since it is usually accepted to break with behavior patterns in order to adjust them to the contingent needs, without implying a total rejection of social values.

The problem, in my opinion, was to understand how the association is subjectively perceived by people living in Italy: does the fact that SG was created in Japan, in some way, change the way how members feel about it?

Undoubtedly, the awareness of a “debt” to the Japanese society is clear. References to President Ikeda’s activities in Japan are continued: his figure is very present in all activities organized in Italy, if not in person, due to his advanced age, by sending letters and video messages in Japanese, which are then translated.

A question of the survey was devoted to investigate whether the membership to SGI had pushed practitioners to be interested in the Japanese culture and the activities of SGI in Japan.

In the first case, 56% answered yes, many people, though not a large majority, had been affected by the contact to Japanese culture. In the second case, 74% of respondents reported having been somehow involved in the activities of SGI in Japan.

The leaders of SGI do not have a great value only in the “founding myth” of the religious sect itself, but they also have a great value as representatives of the principles of the association. Respondents were asked to indicate how they perceived the figures of the four presidents. As for Ikeda, 80% answered that they thought of his figure in a very positive way, 20% of them felt quite positive, while the negative answers were completely absent. As for the others, it is worth noticing that the levels of appreciation were directly proportional to the distance from the respondent. Kaneda was perceived in a positive way on average, while Makiguchi and Toda’s appreciation rates were very high (78.13% and 84.38%, respectively).

The last question of the survey asked the members to express their degree of trust at different structural levels of SGI. What is worth noticing in this regard is a sort of reverse movement in relation to the previous question, i.e. the closest elements deserved the highest degree of trust: “the members of

your group” were those considered as most worthy of trust (48%), followed by SGI in general (46%), “your tutor” (44%), and the Italian Soka Gakkai (42%). From these data, there emerges the way how tutors of the Italian SG were those having most of the average scores.

This is partly explained by the fact that tutors are responsible for the first contact between the individual member and the structure of Soka Gakkai, therefore, some behavior that embodies the values of the Buddhism of Nichiren is often expected from them, but these expectations are not always met. The duty of tutorship is not only granted to those who have chanted for more time, or those who are more experienced, it is often assigned to those members who are expected to use this opportunity for their inner growth: it is supposed to provide the practitioner with new motivation, by committing to others she/he will obtain benefits in his/her life. On the other hand, as many people have emphasized, the success or failure of the individual should not affect the validity of the doctrine: we cannot trust tutors and still practice in a correct way. In fact, in the interviews and messages respondents often pointed out that “*one should not follow people, but the mystic law*” (PEZZI, 2008, p. 82).

Soka Gakkai practitioners are constantly engaged in a choosing process between trust and distrust when determining their actions: on the one hand, an almost a-problematic trust on the basis of shared values which are consistent with the Italian social structure; on the other hand, a distrust needed to overcome the difference between the “here” of the Italian SG and the “elsewhere” of SG in Japan, home to the great masters, whose value is universally recognized by believers.

Shared values constitute the common ground on which a well-known reality, such as that closest to the believer, and a necessarily idealized one, as the Japanese, can communicate: total trust is given only to the *Gohonzon*.

6.3 EMOTIONAL TRUST: THE ONENESS OF MASTER AND DISCIPLE (*ITAI DOSHIN*)

The unity of *itai doshin* – the uniqueness of the relationship between master and disciple – is one of the most heartfelt principles of the Buddhist practice.

Nichiren himself was the first to emphasize the importance of this relationship and often wrote about the subject: “If master and disciple do not have the same mind, they will not achieve anything”; “those who call themselves my disciples should all practice as me” (IKEDA, 2008, p. 10).

Engaging in faith with the same spirit of the master is crucial to attain Buddhahood and to follow the path that leads to the achievement of *kosen-rufu*:

Kosen-rufu is possible when the disciples appropriate the same spirit of the master. Without this shared commitment it is way too easy to fall prey of one’s emotions or external circumstances, and you can easily collapse when faith is tested by adversity (IKEDA, 2008, p. 10).

The relationship between master and disciple, then, is based on a relationship of total trust tied to very specific emotional states – fear and discouragement, and uncertainty about the future – that, thanks to interaction, may be dealt with in an alternative way:

[...] because the Law itself does not speak. Because in this life you need to have someone who is at least a little ahead of you. Because Buddhism is the human relationship. Having a master is not having someone to lean on, to become alike, but learning to reveal oneself together with that someone (PROLA; RAMPELLI, 1997, p. 24).

Master and disciple are, above all, embodied in two emblematic figures: Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda. Toda himself had been a disciple of Makiguchi, but it is thanks to the first that Soka Gakkai actually started taking root in the Japanese society after World War II. Ikeda converted to the Buddhism of Nichiren in 1947 and in the following years he began attending classes taught by Toda, in which the *Gosho* (the writings of Nichiren) was explained. Toda was immediately struck by the religious zeal and the depth of the issues addressed by the young Ikeda and soon it became clear that he would be his successor.

At the end of the ceremony of *Gojukai* (when the *Gohonzon* is given to new members) a documentary is shown, in

which the master-disciple relationship between Toda and Ikeda is clearly explained, and it serves as an example of the relationship that should exist between each believer and his master. What is striking about this documentary is the way how the figure of Ikeda is represented: the emphasis relies on his humility and his complete dedication to the teachings of his master, as well as the way how he fought against all odds to ensure that the Law could reach as many people as possible. Ikeda, before being today's *Sensei* (master), was a disciple who demonstrated to be able to listen before putting the principles into practice, he never sought the good in itself, but his good has always depended on the achievement of the happiness of others.

The oneness of the master-disciple relationship is a circular motion, which in principle allows anyone to grow, to move from a low life state to a better mastery of his own life.

Relying on a master is an act of faith: in the beginning, the relationship is unbalanced, the disciple devotes himself entirely, being in a state of uncertainty where he still has not learned to read his own emotional state in terms of the Buddhist practice. Subsequently, the imbalance is reduced and master and disciple eventually merge into a single figure: when they arrive at the same level, both will have to learn from the other and both have experiences to share. "Every disciple become master when, having acquired and deepened the understanding of the teachings that were transmitted, wants others to rely on him" (LAYOLO, 1997, p. 33).

The new member of Soka Gakkai, then, feel empowered by the confidence that others have had before him in the prospect of achieving results in this life, no longer surrendering to the adversities because concrete examples of people who have gone through the same stages became stronger are constantly in front of him.

A final important aspect of this relationship is that of "asking for guidance": the individual has the opportunity to ask to speak to a tutor in private. The tutor is not expected to provide a solution to his problems, but rather an indication of a possible way forward, "perhaps because the chanting is not done in an appropriate manner. Maybe you have not studied enough, maybe you have not understood some of the

teachings of Nichiren. Maybe you do not fully understand what may be the teaching of the *Gohonzon*.”

Eventually, most people “ask for guidance” expecting an attitude of understanding, and to receive some material to work on in order to improve themselves.

7. CONCLUSION

Studying trust issues among members of Soka Gakkai has proved to be controversial: on the one hand, the wide range of the concept of trust may involve the feeling of not being able to grasp all of its aspects, on the other hand, “trust” is an aspect of life that is not sufficiently discussed by social actors themselves, in the sense that the presence or absence of trust is often taken for granted and regarded as the natural result of human interaction. The latter aspect, particularly, was often revealed in the course of my interviews and in the questionnaires, as many respondents thought my questions in this regard were not relevant and, indeed, invited me to study more in order to capture the true essence of the Buddhist practice. My questions on trust had acquired a new meaning and importance in the light of the fact that, despite the contradictions that gradually emerged, people still did not think they are relevant.

Considering what has emerged so far, I may highlight a key aspect in the relationship between trust and Soka Gakkai: trust and distrust between members co-exist, though not always at an explicit level, but their co-existence is surely often implied.

From a religious viewpoint, the members of SGI are required total trust: in themselves, in relation to other members, in respect of SGI, as well as towards its leaders and, above all, towards the doctrine itself.

In fact, a discrepancy between what people *say* and what they *actually do* may be reported. By analyzing trust from its three constituent elements (instrumental, moral, and emotional), trust emerges as the result of a negotiation process between the beliefs of an individual social actor and those shared at a collective level. This is particularly seen in the analysis of answers to

the question on “need”: despite SGI expressly prohibits certain practices, and everyone usually agrees with the actual validity of prohibition, this prescription may be not observed on the basis that trust is deemed to be able to overcome the lack of information and uncertainty.

In conclusion, in the light of the premises and results of my research, I may highlight the following key issues in the relation between trust and Soka Gakkai:

- The identity of the Soka Gakkai practitioner is constructed symbolically, it acquires meaning through religious practices, and its foundation is trust in oneself, in the various organs of SGI, and in the fellow members.
- Trust and distrust between members co-exist, if not at an explicit level, surely at an implicit one. Thus, there is a certain degree of ambiguity in the relation between actual behavior and discursive practices of SGI members, but it does not seem to make the intrinsic value of the practice less effective.
- The existence of trust between members allows them to manipulate the interactions within the personal sphere of action in order to obtain benefits (not necessarily in the material sphere) in case of need.
- Trust, as well as trust in trust, provides the practitioner with a key to understand the world, which allows him to reduce the complexity of human life by implementing a circular motion that produces more trust in the chances to overcome personal problems.

OS BENEFÍCIOS DE CONFIAR NA CONFIANÇA: O CASO DO SOKA GAKKAI ITALIANO

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as questões de confiança entre os membros italianos da seita japonesa Soka Gakkai a partir de uma perspectiva antropológica. A confiança entre os membros e neófitos pode ser considerada uma questão-

-chave, uma vez que eles interagem diariamente em um ambiente informal, com um alto grau de intimidade e familiaridade, o que é visto como algo que consiste em um elemento instrumental, moral e emocional. Este artigo aborda a forma como esses componentes influenciam a vida dos devotos da Soka Gakkai no que diz respeito à sua relação com a experiência religiosa, a organização como um todo, os membros e eles próprios, supondo que a análise da confiança em diferentes níveis dentro de um movimento religioso pode ajudar a pontuar os principais elementos do seu ethos e as formas como a complexidade é reduzida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Confiança. Soka Gakkai. Ethos. Religião. Antropologia.

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