

## Nichirenists and Christians in Japan -- Schisms and Setbacks

by David J. Hesselgrave, Executive Director Emeritus (Spring, 2000)

The e-mail response to my inquiry to the Information Office of the Soka Gakkai in Tokyo was straightforward: Nichiren Shoshu High Priest Nikken Abe had carried out his threat to raze the Shohondo (Grand Worship Hall) at Taisekiji head temple grounds located at the foot of Mt. Fuji. As one mildly familiar with Japanese Buddhism and post-war religious movements in that land, the news came as a surprise and almost a shock.

Built a quarter century ago at a cost of \$100,000,000 (well over twice that figure at today's exchange rate), the Shohondo was one of the most impressive buildings in the Buddhist world. And yet, in spite of the pleas and protests of prominent architects, politicians and religious leaders of various persuasions, a Nichiren Buddhist priest had spent \$35,000,000 to have it demolished!

But why? That question leads directly to my present assignment which is to aid readers in their understanding of contemporary Japanese Buddhism and draw some pertinent lessons for Christians from that understanding. Nichirenism, Nichiren Shoshu, and the Soka Gakkai Nichirenism dates back to the thirteenth century and one of the most unique Buddhist leaders in the history of Japan. Nichiren insisted that the true Buddhism was that revealed by Sakyamuni on Vulture Peak and recorded in the Lotus Sutra.

According to him, true faith is expressed in the Daimoku (Sacred Title) *Namu myoho renge kyo* ("Adoration to the glorious sutra of the wonderful law") which is an encapsulation of the truth of the Lotus. The words of the Sacred Title were inscribed by Nichiren on a piece of wood. That piece of wood is called the Gohonzon, and true worship consists of chanting the Daimoku before the Gohonzon or one of its numerous replicas.

All rival faiths and teachings, Buddhist or otherwise, were anathema to Nichiren and he never failed to denounce their teachers or threaten rulers who espoused them with calamities of the worst kind. To varying degrees his iconoclasm is still embraced by Nichirenists today.

By the twentieth century Japanese Nichirenism had given birth to almost forty different sects and organizations. Two of them--Nichiren Shoshu (Nichiren Orthodox Sect) and its affiliated lay organization called Soka Gakkai (Value-creation Society) came to eclipse all others in size and influence. And in their relationship is to be found one of the most intriguing and instructive histories discoverable in all of contemporary Buddhism.

The Soka Gakkai was organized by one Tsunesaburo Makiguchi in the 1930s as a pedagogical society. Shortly after its birth the direction of the Gakkai was altered when Makiguchi and his younger protégé, Josei Toda, were converted to Nichiren Shoshu. Thereafter, truth was conceived of as an objective "given"; discoverable in the Lotus Sutra; and demanding of acceptance and faith by all people everywhere.

Goodness, beauty and *ri* (advantage, benefit) on the other hand, are subjective values; determined on the bases of human preferences and existing circumstances; and "created" by true worship and right effort. In this alchemy provided by Makiguchi's philosophy, the Gohonzon became a powerful "happiness machine" providing health and wealth, and peace and prosperity, to every worshiper. In the uncertain aftermath of World War II, thousands and then millions of Japanese embraced the Gohonzon; chanted the Daimoku; and set out to propagate the "true faith."

On the death of Toda in 1958 most observers predicted either the demise or eclipse of Soka Gakkai. But Toda had prepared Daisaku Ikeda for a leadership role and after Ikeda assumed its presidency the Society really took off. In 1964 the Komeito (Clean Government party; subsequently reorganized as the New Komeito) was formed. It soon became a major force in Japanese politics and now has representation in the Japanese cabinet. In 1972 a program of building and beautification at the temple grounds in Taisekiji culminated in the dedication of the state-of-the-art Shohondo. In 1975 Ikeda took the lead in forming Soka Gakkai International, an organization that now boasts 76 constituent organizations and members in 120 countries and territories. Statistical reports vary, but worldwide membership is now reckoned to be in the neighborhood of 15,000,000.

In 1979 Daisaku Ikeda was succeeded in the presidency by Einosuke Akiya, but to this day Ikeda remains as honorary president and a dominant influence in the Soka Gakkai and, some say, in the New Komeito as well. During these past twenty years, however, relationships between High Priest Nikken Abe and Ikeda, and between Nichiren Shoshu, Soka Gakkai and the New Komeito political party, have not fared well. Power struggles and factionalism finally reached a climax in 1991 when High Priest Abe took the radical step of excommunicating Ikeda and all his followers. So for almost a decade now the Soka Gakkai has been without a priest (it often refers to itself as Buddhism's first "Protestant movement"). It has also been without its sacred object of worship, the Gohonzon, which the high priest moved from the Shohondo to another building. And since the demolition of the Shohondo in the summer of 1999, the Soka Gakkai, Nichiren Shoshu and the entire Buddhist world has been bereft of one of the most strikingly beautiful religious buildings ever constructed.

### **Learning in Order to Teach**

It is axiomatic in missions that one must learn before one is qualified to teach. Seldom, however, is this principle taken to mean that we should learn from other religions as well as about them. In fact, among conservatives merely to say such a thing smacks of heresy--of the idea that Christianity is incomplete and needs to be informed by other religious traditions.

*But it need not mean that. In fact, it may mean something quite different. It may mean that, by studying receptor culture religions phenomenologically, we can gain important insights about both those religions and the receptor culture and its people-- modes, mores and values; the nature of interpersonal relationships; methods of decision-making; the dynamics of change; and much, much more.*

Precisely that is what some researchers had in mind when, after World War II, they devoted significant time and energy to a study of the various "new religious movements" that were spreading across Japan like wildfire. They wanted to learn why the messages of these movements seemed so compelling while the true Gospel was so often misunderstood or even disregarded.

Researchers came up with answers from which we have learned much and from which we still have much to learn. We have learned, for example, something about the impact of the Japanese method of decision-making on evangelism, church planting and church growth. But we have yet to learn, for example, the tremendous potential of widespread and wise use of a single Christian primer (of the kind employed to such great advantage by the Soka Gakkai) that grounds believers in biblical theology, basic apologetics, and contextualized Christian lifestyle and witness.

## Lessons from the Schism In Nichirenism

Christianity barely holds its own in contemporary Japan. Conciliar denominations are stagnant or dying. Evangelicals grow very slowly. Charismatic/Pentecostal growth is only somewhat more encouraging. Revival is not in evidence. Certainly all Bible-believing Christians hope for it. Many actively pray for it. Some even predict it. *But revival has not come. Why? More than almost any other, that question weighs heavily on the minds and hearts of foreign missionaries and Japanese Christians alike.*

In the light of recent happenings I would like to address that question. But before doing so a caveat is in order. Obviously I am not Japanese or even a Japanologist. I departed the Japanese scene long ago and since that time have, for the most part, viewed it from a distance. But current events and personal involvement and study have occasioned prayerful reflection concerning the lack of revival and a general spiritual awakening in Japan. So I hazard a few observations and sincerely invite responses from those more qualified to render their judgment.

My reflections begin with Nichirenism. All scholars agree that Nichiren was an indefatigable exponent of truth as he understood it. Following his example, Nichiren Shoshu, Soka Gakkai, and the Komeito--all alike laid claim to the "true Buddhism" and united in its defense and propagation. All together laid claim to true teaching, true faith, true worship, true mission, true happiness; indeed, to truth itself. And yet, the leaders of all three organizations have now allowed antagonism and dissension to cast a giant shadow upon their truth claims and testimonials.

Next, my reflections shift to a cursory examination of some relevant events in the history of Japanese Protestantism. Very early in that history (toward the end of the 19th century) the concurrent incursion of higher criticism and universalism took direct aim at the uniqueness of the Christian faith. A promising revival was nipped in the bud. A profound debate among Christian leaders ensued. The face of Japanese Christianity was changed, never to be the same again.

In the 1930s and 1940s Japanese churches were challenged by theological liberalism from within and political chauvinism from without. Christians were faced with the options of uniting under the strictures of a Shinto regime on the one hand, or maintaining an uncompromised faith and suffering the consequences on the other. Hopes for revival were put on hold until the dark night of war passed and a new day of religious freedom dawned after World War II.

Those of us who became part of Japanese history at the midpoint of the twentieth century soon found ourselves in the midst of unprecedented efforts to reach Japanese with the true Gospel. We also found ourselves in the middle of a variety of theological debates and ecclesiastical divisions. Some of those debates and divisions were engendered by a commitment to Scripture truth; some were the outgrowth of old grievances and new power struggles; and many grew out of mixed motives. At any rate, for whatever reasons, and despite unprecedented evangelistic efforts and widespread efforts on the part of Bible-believing nationals and missionaries, the revival and awakening all hoped and prayed for did not come.

Finally, I reflect on the division that has recently developed between Evangelicals and Pentecostals/Charismatics in Japan. This schism has now become almost as divisive and debilitating as its predecessors. Many conservative Christian leaders who previously signed the same declarations, cooperated in the same programs, and shared the same platforms no longer meet together, pray together or evangelize together. Last year Charismatics and Pentecostals convened a great world congress in Kyoto in order to pray and plan for third millennium mission. Few Evangelicals attended. Rather, they have scheduled a similar event to be held later this year.

It is unlikely that many Charismatics and Pentecostals will attend. And yet, all alike pray for revival and spiritual awakening in their beloved Japan.

Commenting on this sad schism, one Japanese pastor recently wrote to me in the following vein: "You know that, in Japan, relationships are more important than truth." Yes, that may be the way it is, but it is not the way it should be. At least, if that's the way it is among Japanese Buddhists it should not be the case among Bible-believing Christians. And whenever it is the case the truth claims of either one can be expected to suffer. *Whether it be biblical Christianity or Nichiren Buddhism that is in view, it is likely that "truth" (think of "truth" as "true truth" in the former case and "false truth" in the latter) is commended only as long as relationships are actually defined by that "truth." When (as seems to be the case among both biblical Christians and Orthodox Nichirenists) relationships are defined by secondary issues and interpersonal conflicts rather than basic "truth," a fractured unity belies that "truth" rather than commending it to an unbelieving world!*

To test the veracity of that statement, we Christians might ask ourselves how we respond to the rancorous and destructive relationship that has developed between Nichiren priests, presidents, and politicians who so boldly proclaim, and stridently propagate, the "true Buddhism." Do we not take such divisiveness as another proof of the falsity of Nichirenist truth claims? Of course we do.

That being the case, all conservative Christians--Bible-believing nationals, missionaries and missiologists alike--do well to turn again to our Lord's prayer in John 17. The two relevant petitions are: "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth" (vs. 17); and, ". . . that they may be one . . . that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me (vs. 21). Let us admit that it may be difficult, or even undesirable, for Evangelicals and Charismatics/Pentecostals in Japan to lay aside all differences and freely come together in worship and witness. For example, many denominations and missions in Japan (and elsewhere) have taken official positions concerning spiritual gifts and their use that would militate against this. Though those positions merit review from time to time, national leaders and, certainly, missionaries should respect them.

*However, Bible-believing Christian leaders can and should find ways and means, and times and places, for united witness to the great truths of historic Christianity such as the full authority of Scripture, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, vicarious atonement, salvation by faith, bodily resurrection, the coming Kingdom, the judgment, and so on. This can be done by scheduling cooperative events that highlight cardinal doctrines such as these and encourage all Christians to understand, embrace and teach them.*

One respected Evangelical Japanese leader told me that he fully anticipated that the schism between conservative Christians in Japan would be overcome in ten or fifteen years. Well and good. But that implies ten to fifteen years of continued division--years that may be crucial to the history of Christianity everywhere and perhaps especially Japan. So let us pray that all concerned will learn from history, from current events, and from our Lord and His Word. Let us pray that the kind of partisanship and divisiveness that demean **true truth** will be overcome and that positive steps will be taken to defend and promote that **truth**. *It may be that revival and spiritual awakening in Japan await the emergence of committed and courageous Christian leaders who will take the lead, rise above the conflict, and bridge the chasm that separates Bible-believing Christians. Otherwise, what is to prevent millions of Japanese from asking why they should believe that the God of heaven and earth has sent either the false prophet, Saint Nichiren, OR our True Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?*