THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN FRANCE: THE CASE OF SOKA GAKKAI

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Abstract: Recognized since 1983 as a consultant NGO to the United Nations, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a lay Buddhist organization, aims at bringing about world peace through educational, cultural and spiritual activities. As such, it can be considered a form of engaged Buddhism, which can be defined as "the application of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, to the resolution of social problems". However, SGI originally adopted a missionary approach that led to accusations of intolerance. Its religious foundation, rooted in the teachings of Nichiren (a Japanese monk of the 13th century), first led the burgeoning Japanese organization to be actively evangelistic in its method and exclusivist in its theological point of view. This religious organization thus underwent several adaptations to Western society, notably the development of a humanistic and pacifist ethos, in order to become the SGI we now know. But despite the tolerant and progressive values it promotes, Soka Gakkai France (SGF), SGI's French offshoot, is, paradoxically, the victim of religious intolerance in a country famous for its separation of Church and State. Contrary to other European countries where SGI has established itself, various French authorities have considered SGI a "cult." Therefore, the objectives of this paper are twofold: (1) the first is to clarify how the evolution of SGI's official discourse, from a certain religious exclusivism to universal tolerance, may be also a consequence of its acculturation to Western society, and to show to what extent this tolerance is practically implemented in France; (2) the second will be to offer an account of the difficult but perhaps changing relations between SGF and the French society—be it with its political representatives, the media, or other French Buddhist organizations.

Keywords: Soka Gakkai International, SGI-France, Religious Tolerance, Laïcité, Shakubuku.

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Introduction

In countries where religious pluralism is the norm, and in Western countries in particular, representatives of religious groups are often encouraged for various reasons and purposes to engage in religious dialogue and even religious cooperation. Such exchanges necessarily entail a certain openness towards religious groups that may be quite different from one's own religion. In other words, religious dialogue and cooperation require, at the minimum, religious tolerance. Tolerance is defined by the current edition of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as "sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own" (Merriam-Webster 2019). However, religious tolerance does not concern only sympathetic relations between religious groups, but it also relates to a government's official and legal dispositions towards religious groups and the members affiliated to them. In many countries, religious tolerance has been legally established as freedom of religion, which confers the right to practice any religion, if one chooses to belong to any religion at all.

But, obviously, reality is much more complex and nuanced than clear-cut definitions taken from dictionaries. Religious tolerance can often be limited, in the sense that some religions may accept certain religious groups and not others or that a government will condone some religions and disapprove of others by considering them "cults" for instance and by not granting them the legitimizing status of "religion." This paper thus aims at examining such limitations through the case study of a new religious group, that of Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist organization established in almost 200 countries. It will focus especially on its French offshoot, known as the Soka Buddhist Movement (*Mouvement bouddhiste Soka* in French). The study of this Buddhist group will hopefully underline the capacity of religions, both new and old, to change overtime their behavior towards other religious groups. The case of Soka Gakkai is indeed an excellent example of the development of a new religious group that started as a highly proselytizing group, which led some critics to see it as intolerant, but which eventually grew into an international organization promoting peace and religious tolerance.

This change of behavior could be explained simply by the changing circumstances in Japan and the expanding number of its members, thereby making the conversion of new members less crucial to the group. Nonetheless, this paper will argue this is also related to its adaptation to Western culture. Hence, the first part of this study will be devoted to the analysis of the origins and the development of the movement, from Nichiren's teachings in the thirteenth century to Soka Gakkai's current efforts to engage in religious dialogue in France, thus putting into perspective the "intolerance critique." Moreover, as was pointed out by Pastorelli, "new religious movements highlight the politics and the attitudes of society and of State when faced with the growing pluralism occurring in European civilizations" (Pastorelli 2010, p.165). The comparative analysis of the integration and the position of Soka Gakkai in France and Italy given in the second part of this paper will show how religious tolerance on the part of the local and national authorities, the media and society at large can drastically vary from one country to

another. Therefore, it calls into question the legitimacy of the categorization of religious groups as either "religions" or "cults."

1. The Development of Soka Gakkai's Religious Tolerance

1.1. Origins of the Movement and its Relationship with Nichiren's Exclusivism

Soka Gakkai is a lay organization that was created in 1930 by Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871–1944). Until 1990, it had been affiliated to the monastical Nichiren Shoshu sect. Like several other Japanese Buddhist sects, Nichiren Shoshu's (and thus Soka Gakkai's) doctrine is based on the teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), a monk who lived in the thirteenth century. At this time, Japan suffered from various plagues and famines, earthquakes and typhoons, and an impending invasion by the Mongols. Nichiren attributed these disasters to the degeneration of the Buddhist teachings, brought about especially by the Zen, Nenbutsu (Amidism), Shingon and Ritsu sects (Stone 1994, p.233; Machacek et al. 2004, p.18). According to some sutras, the transmission of the teachings of the Buddha would deteriorate over time, leading to the "Final Dharma Age" or *mappō* (Stone 1994, p.247). In the eyes of Nichiren, it was indubitable that he and his fellow men and women were living in that final age. He argued that only his teachings could lead again to the Buddhist illumination, or liberation, and avoid Japan's downfall. At the core of Nichiren's doctrine was the idea that the *Lotus Sutra* represents the culmination of the Buddha's teachings, inasmuch as it allegedly contains all his previous teachings in one sutra. Furthermore, Nichiren maintained that chanting the *daimoku*, that is to say the name of the Lotus Sutra (*Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* in Japanese), was the sole path towards salvation (Stone 1994, p.232).

It is clear how Nichiren's teachings may have been interpreted by critics as intolerant. After all, he also demanded that the Japanese government recognize his version of Buddhism as the only truly valid one, rejecting all other teachings. However, as Jacqueline Stone has argued, it is more pertinent to use the term "exclusivism" rather than "intolerance" when speaking about Nichiren's doctrine, since the latter carries a historical weight too closely associated with European religious history (Stone 1994, p.232). Indeed, according to Hobolt, Van der Brug, de Vreese, Boomgaarden and Hinrichsen, in their article "Religious Intolerance and Euroscepticism," the modern concept of intolerance developed out of the religious controversies between Protestants and Catholics in 17th- and 18th-century England. At the time, the doctrine of 'religious toleration' sought to remove religious opinions and dogmas from the political realm (Hobolt et al. 2011, p.3).

It is true that Nichiren's doctrine was exclusivist in nature, in the sense that it considered his teachings to be the only ones that were in fact true, but this kind of claim was not rare in Nichiren's time. Therefore, our view of Nichiren's doctrine needs to be nuanced and avoid anachronistic judgements based on 21st century values.

This exclusivism was carried down from Nichiren to the Nichiren Shoshu sect (日蓮正宗, its name meaning "True Nichiren Sect"), and from its monks to Soka Gakkai—even though Soka Gakkai operated a doctrinal shift after it split from Nichiren Shoshu, as I will explain in the following part. This exclusivism of Soka Gakkai is probably best exemplified by the stance Tsunesaburō Makiguchi took during World War II when he and some of his followers were arrested and imprisoned, in part for opposing the State Shinto and for refusing to install a Shinto talisman in their building (Dobbelaere 2001, p.5). The exclusivist legacy can also be found in Soka Gakkai's soteriology, and especially in its concept of *kōsen rufu* (広宣流布). This word refers to the idea that world peace could only be achieved if Buddhist values are respected, which implies the "vast propagation of Buddhist teaching" (Ikeda 1987, p.160; Dobbelaere 2001, p.89). Concretely, the diffusion of Buddhist values takes place through proselytism. In Nichiren's Buddhism, there are two main proselytizing techniques: *shakubuku* and *shōju*.

1.2. A New Way to Engage the World: From "Shakubuku" to "Shōju"

After the death of Makiguchi, Jōsei Toda (1900–1958) officially became the second president of the religious organization on May 3, 1951. Toda was one of Makiguchi's disciples and was part of the group of members who were arrested in 1943. In his inaugural speech, Toda vowed to convert 750,000 families to Soka Gakkai before his death. He was successful in this endeavor as this number was reached in 1957. He called this large proselytizing campaign the "Great March of *shakubuku*" (Dobbelaere 2001, p.9; McLaughlin 2019, p.49). *Shakubuku* (折伏, "to break and subdue") refers to a Buddhist technique of proselytization that takes the form of a harsh refutation of someone's "false teachings" in order to convert them to "the True Dharma" (Paul and McRae 2004, p. 49; Stone 1994, p.233). In a rally on October 31, 1954, Toda, who often used emphatic language in his public speeches, went so far as to state that "In our attempt at *kōsen rufu*, we are without an ally. We must consider all religions our enemies, and we must destroy them" (Kisala 2005, p.144–45). The Soka Gakkai second president was then addressing the youth divisions of the organization. These divisions spearheaded the "great march of *shakubuku*" (Kisala 2005, p.144). Because of this intense and somewhat overzealous proselytizing, Soka Gakkai began to be seen by its Japanese critics as an intolerant sect that was to be feared and castigated (McLaughlin 2012, p.13; Melton 2004, p.24).

In his book *Buddhism: The Living Philosophy* (1974, second edition in 1976), Daisaku Ikeda—the current honorary president of Soka Gakkai and the president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI)—seemed at first to follow the steps of his predecessors in presenting Nichiren's exclusivist doctrine. He justified the practice of *shakubuku* with the duress of times, but also emphasized that, like a father's attitude to rebellious children, *shakubuku* should be stern and loving at the same time: when Buddhism has reached all people and become a recognized worldwide religion, it may be possible to employ motherly gentleness in winning new members. But the Latter Day of the Law was a stern time when the Buddhism of Shakyamuni lost its hold on the popular mind. For this reason,

methods must be stern, like the love of a father for his children. Shakubuku is imbued with that stern, but deeply concerned love that is reflected in paternal affection. Shakubuku must be stern because people must recognize the danger of failing to see the truth (Ikeda 1976, p.90).

On the other hand, starting from the second half of 1970s, under the leadership of Ikeda, the religious organization moved away from "confrontational Nichirenist exclusivism" and towards a milder form of evangelization (Stone 1994, p.254). In fact, this shift from severe proselytizing to an increased emphasis on religious tolerance has a doctrinal basis that dates back to Nichiren's teachings. Indeed, *shakubuku* is one of the two techniques of proselytization suggested by Buddhist canonical sources. The second one is called *shōju* (摂受, "to embrace and accept"). For Nichiren, the propagation of the *Lotus Sutra* was to be adapted to the specific time and situation in which someone would find themselves. While *shakubuku* was more appropriate to Japan at his time, the *shōju* technique would be more suited to a country where Buddhism was not already part of the religious landscape (McLaughlin 2019, p.11–2). In that case, Nichirenists would not explicitly reject other people's opinions and beliefs, as may be the case with the *shakubuku* practice, but they would "[lead] others gradually without criticizing their position" (Stone 1994, p.233–34). It is also true that Nichiren's teachings advised for more leniency towards other religions than for other Buddhist sects. David Burton thus speaks of Nichiren's doctrine as a combination of "intrareligious exclusivism" and of "interreligious inclusivism" (Burton 2010, p.328).

For some members of the SGI, this developing religious tolerance is explained by the group's emancipation from the control of Nichiren Shoshu's conservative monks (Kisala 2005, p.149; personal communication with members). But Stone suggests in her article (Stone 1994) that several reasons may explain Soka Gakkai's pivotal turn from the 1970s onwards. The first one may be the increasing criticism Soka Gakkai faced from some Japanese opponents, especially because of its relations with the Komeito, a Japanese political party. It could also have come from a diminished sense of urgency since the hardships of World War II lessened as time went by. Concretely, while the term "*shakubuku*" is still the one that is used the most to talk about the dissemination of Nichiren's teachings, its meaning has changed. The members of Soka Gakkai International now tend to talk about their religion with families and friends, rather than trying to convert people they barely know or do not know at all. They are also invited to present their own beliefs in a more cordial tone, in the form of a "dialogue," mirroring Daisaku Ikeda's dialogues with philosophers or political figures (Hurst 2004, p.112–13; McLaughlin 2012, p.17).

The change of attitude towards people who do not belong to Nichiren Buddhism and Soka Gakkai was probably also a way to adapt to Western countries, particularly to the European socio-cultural context, where heavy proselytization is frowned upon (Dobbelaere 2001, p.54), and as a way to blend more easily into the diversified religious landscape, or to become more "mainstream," as Stone and Kisala have argued in their respective articles (Kisala 2005; Stone 2014). At the instigation of Daisaku Ikeda, religious

tolerance and religious dialogue officially became part of SGI's precepts in 1996, the year the organization published its charter. The document details the main goals and principles of the organization, among which SGI shall respect and protect the freedom of religion and religious expression [...] 7. SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity (Liogier 2004, p. 495–96).

1.3. SGI and Interreligious Dialogue in France

The example of SGI in France (or SGI-France) is a good case in point of the larger history of SGI concerning proselytization and religious tolerance, insofar as SGI-France seems to have followed the same pattern of first a vigorous *shakubuku* practice and then, a more moderate form of proselytization. A long-time member and representative of SGI-France recounted in an interview conducted for this research that when he began practicing Nichiren Buddhism in the 1960s, he would argue for the benefits of his practice whenever possible and with whomever he would encounter, be it friends, acquaintances, or people he had just met in a bar. However, over time, he changed his practice and would only talk about his religion when asked to do so.

In France as in other countries, SGI's change of attitude towards other religions is not just reflected by a shift towards a milder form of evangelization, to use a Christian term, but also in the literature published by the group (books, journals, official websites). Daisaku Ikeda's books represent a significant part of this literature. Several of them have been translated in French, among which we can mention two that explicitly deal with religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue: *Bouddhisme et Islam, le choix du dialogue* (in English *Global Civilization: A Buddhist-Islamic Dialogue*, 2003, first French edition in 2004, second edition in 2008 [Ikeda and Tehranian 2008]), and *La Sagesse de la tolérance, une philosophie de générosité et de paix* (*The Wisdom of Tolerance—A Philosophy of Generosity and Peace*, 2015, French publication in 2018 [Wahid and Ikeda 2018]). It is worth noticing that in both cases Daisaku Ikeda's dialogues take place with practitioners of Islam. Since in France (as in other countries) the place of Islam has been at the center of intense public debates, Ikeda's books may be a way for Soka Gakkai International to position itself as a champion of religious tolerance, more so perhaps than if it had been with representatives of Catholicism, for example. For the same reason, these books might appeal to French readers in particular, as some parts of the texts echo specific current debates around the notion of *laïcité* in France. This is the case of Ikeda's *Global Civilization: A Buddhist-Islamic Dialogue*, in which he and Majid Tehranian tackle the issue of the *hijab* worn by some Muslim women (Ikeda and Tehranian 2008, p.40)—the wearing of the *hijab* has been one of the main points of contention regarding the place of religions in public spaces in France.

Since the early 2000s, SGI-France has also organized annual interreligious conferences in their centers, often in Paris, Nantes, Lyon or in Trets. The conferences generally gather representatives and lay practitioners of Islam, Protestantism, Buddhism, Catholicism and

Judaism. These events highlight the fact that, for a new religious movement, SGI-France is a rather unique example. In forty years, the group went from starting a completely new national branch to being viewed by its opponents and certain state agencies as a "cult" (see part 2 of this article) to participating in interreligious conferences along the most prominent religions in France. However, while these examples of religious tolerance and interreligious dialogues prove a tendency within the group to develop good relations with other religions, at the international level inter-religious dialogue does not appear to be the number one concern of the group. SGI seem to put a greater emphasis on the notions of education, peace, culture, and social engagement through art, which may be explained by its origins as an intellectual movement mainly concerned with educational and cultural questions (McLaughlin 2012, p.21). And despite its efforts, SGI appear unable to get rid of the old accusations of intolerance, fueled by "anti-cultists" and other opponents (Kisala 2005, p.150). This is all the more true for SGI's French offshoot, as I argue in the second part of this article.

2. SGI-France Faced with Religious Intolerance?

As Sabrina Pastorelli pointed out in her 2010 article, new religious movements highlight the policy and the attitudes of society and the state when faced with the growing religious pluralism in European civilizations. The analysis of the legal position and the reaction of the community facing these "new" movements may constitute an important element in understanding the degree of openness of a given society [my translation] (Pastorelli 2010, p.165).

This is why a study of SGI-France offers the possibility to put into question the strong tendency in France to consider new religious movements (NRMs) as *sectes* (the French word for "cults") and not as religions in their own right.

2.1. A Quest for Governmental Approval

Before the split of 1991, Soka Gakkai was part of the Nichiren Shoshu France. It arrived in the early 1960s in France, the first European country in which the group created a national branch (Liogier 2004, p.435). In terms of the number of practitioners, France ranks second in Europe, with more than 15,000 members, behind SGI-Italy (the largest branch in Europe) which has now around 93,000 members (CESNUR 2019; see also Introvigne's article in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). The difference between the group's status in France and Italy does not stop here. Surprisingly enough, the same religious group does not enjoy the same public image and the same relationship with the respective governments.

In France, Soka Gakkai has an ambiguous status. For a long time, it has been identified by parliamentary commissions and government agencies as a "cult." It started in 1985 with the Vivien report, in which the Nichiren Shoshu France was mentioned

as a *secte* (Vivien 1985). It is worth noting that the authors of the report based their judgment on the fact that it was not part of the French Buddhist Association. However, this association was created by a former member of Nichiren Shoshu with which he had difficult relations. The objectivity of the document can thus be questioned (Liogier 2004, p.501). Despite this report, the then French president François Mitterrand (1916–1996) received SGI's president, Daisaku Ikeda, in 1991. Five years later, the Gest-Guyard report listed 172 "cults," among which Soka Gakkai (Gest and Guyard 1996), and in 1999 the report of the MILS, which stands for *Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes* (i.e., the Interministerial Mission to Combat Cults), published a report in which Soka Gakkai was mentioned several times (MILS 1999). Overtime, with SGI-France's efforts to fight the "secte" designation, the religious organization started to be recognized as a group that does not represent a threat for public order or individual liberties, as some anticultists feared.

On December 23, 2003, the Interior Minister (in charge of relations with religious groups), having received a letter from SGI-France, sent a letter to the group stating that "no cultic deviances have been observed in the activities of Soka Gakkai in France by the police or the *gendarmerie nationale* [national police force]" (Hourmant 2019, p.118). This official recognition probably helped pave the way for SGI-France's to acquire the legal status of "worship association" (*association cultuelle*) in 2007, which "provides public accreditation for legitimate religions" (Hervieu-Léger 2004, p.55). And yet, despite all this, the MIVILUDES' (the Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combatting Cultic Deviances) 2017 report (MIVILUDES 2017) again mentioned SGI-France as an example of a religious group that was still a source of problems, even though the president of this government agency had asserted the opposite in a letter in 2008 (the documents are available on SGI-France's website: https://bit.ly/323wv4o).

What may explain this difficult acceptance on the part of the French official representatives may have to do in part with SGI's sociocultural aspirations. The goal of the group is indeed to generate a "human revolution" and a world of peace thanks to the propagation of the *Lotus Sutra*. Among other things, SGI works as an NGO with the United Nations, focusing on nuclear disarmament, human rights and sustainable development. Because of its activities, SGI can be considered a form of engaged Buddhism, which can be defined as "the application of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, to the resolution of social problems" (Queen 1995, p.1). However, Louis Hourmant and Raphaël Liogier have argued that SGI's goals encroach upon the "territory" of the French state, which has, as a centralized state, the monopoly of issues regarding public health, education and culture. In other countries, such as the USA, religious groups (including non-mainstream ones) are not only spaces of worship and socialization, they are also engaged in educational and charitable activities to help people in need. Nobody finds this unusual. In France, this is the prerogative of the state and, while social activities by traditional religions may be tolerated, when new religions develop a sustained social activism, this is perceived as invading the field reserved to the state (Liogier 2004, p.444–45 and 560–63).

On the contrary, in Italy, SGI has had much less difficulty being recognized as a legitimate religion. This is evidenced by the *Intesa*, a sort of concordat established between the religious group and the Italian government, that SGI-Italy obtained in 2015. It allowed the NRM to appoint chaplains in the army (this is only possible for religions with an *Intesa*), as well as to be partially financed by taxpayers' money. For Massimo Introvigne, this difference of status between France and Italy may be explained by at least 3 reasons: 1) the anticult movement plays a much lesser role in Italy than the one in France (although, Italian anticultist websites are used by French anticultists); 2) Italy has a generally more tolerant rhetoric towards NRMs; 3) there are famous members of SG in Italy, which participates to its good image and successful media coverage (Introvigne 2004 and Introvigne 2006).

2.2. The Role of the Media in Religious Tolerance

The media are occasionally hostile to Soka Gakkai in Italy too, when they are influenced by anticult activists, but the difference is that in France hostile media accounts have broader social and political consequences. It is not rare for new religious movements to be portrayed by the French media as *sectes*. Famous newspapers (*Le Figaro*, *L'Humanité,* for instance) and TV talk-shows (*Des Racines et des Ailes*, *Zone Interdite*, *Enquête Exclusive*) often feature exposés of *sectes*. However, their accounts are often lacking in objectivity and even simply in accurate information. The usual depiction of *sectes* is that of a *gourou* (a deprecatory term in French) who brainwashes his/her followers in order to steal their money and to quench his sexual desires, often directed at children (Palmer 2004; Hervieu-Léger 2004).

The media did not spare SGI-France either. It has actively participated in creating SGI-France's image as a "cult." The best example is probably the case of the Arny Castle of 1988. At that time, SGI-France (then Nichiren Shoshu France) planned on buying the Arny Castle for the creation of one of their new centers. On February 10, 1988, the weekly magazine *Le Républicain* published an article titled "A Japanese cult purchased the Château d'Arny." But the fact is that this castle is located near a nuclear energy center. This drew the attention of the DST (Directorate of Territorial Surveillance, a domestic intelligence agency). Moreover, the negotiations for the purchase of the building were made by Mitsubishi's real estate department, which fed into some anticult conspiracy theories regarding Japan's supposed desire for the cultural and political conquest of Western countries. On top of that, on January 21, a Japanese engineer and nuclear physician was spotted near the nuclear energy center taking photographs. Quickly, this "spy" was linked to Soka Gakkai. The "information" was taken up by big French newspapers and in television news on major channels (TF1, FR3, La 5). Rumors of SGI as being financed by the Japanese mafia also circulated. In the end, SGI-France's reputation took a big toll because of this case (Liogier 2004, p.508–9).

SGI-France has continually challenged these accusations by some media outlets, both by using the *droit de réponse* (a legal disposition in France requiring that newspapers

and magazines publish a response from parties who felt vilified by an article) and by taking legal action against newspapers. Between 1992 and 1998, the group has won eight lawsuits for defamatory libels against seven different newspapers and one book. Extracts of the rulings are made available by SGI-France on its websites. Despite that, newspaper articles presenting SGI and SGI-France as a "cult" or at least questioning their activities continue to be published. This is the case, for instance, of *La Croix*, a famous French Catholic daily paper, which published in 2018 an article about Japanese new religious movements in which the journalist talked about the MIVILUDES' report and chose to interview the president of an anticult group, without offering a differing view on the matter at hand (*La Croix* 2018).

2.3. Soka Gakkai Not Fitting the French Archetypal Vision of Buddhism

It does not help either that only certain specific traditions of Buddhism are represented in the French media. Most of the time, when the media talk of Buddhism, they interview members, or report on Tibetan or Zen Buddhism. This has created a collective mental image that is almost automatically related to these forms of Buddhism. But obviously, Soka Gakkai does not meet the same criteria. Louis Hourmant was struck by these differences: Compared to Zen practitioners and more still to Tibetan practitioners, members of Soka Gakkai…blend into their surroundings because of the complete absence of exotic traits: they do not display saffron—or black—colored robes, they do not shave their head, they do not meditate in the lotus position but seated in a banal chair, they do not build pagodas or stupas … but they meet in apartments or in anonymous halls rented for the occasion [my translation] (Hourmant 1999, p.196).

Paradoxically, SGI's inherent secularism works against the group in France, where exoticism is still a defining trait of Buddhism in most people's imagination. Their acceptance by the wider French community is thus dependent on a stereotypical view of Buddhism. This is also evidenced by a criticism often made against the group: for a lot of critics, SGI is not truly a form of Buddhism since it is not part of the French Buddhist Union (UBF). UBF is a federation of various Buddhist associations, often regarded in France as representing French Buddhism. It is the main interlocutor for the government. As such, Buddhist associations that are not part of this group are generally regarded as part of "non-traditional" Buddhism, and this is one of the main arguments of anticultists that one can find on anticult websites. This might explain why in 2007 SGI-France changed its name for *Le mouvement bouddhiste Soka* (the Soka Buddhist movement), as it was perhaps an attempt to make it clear that the group is indeed a Buddhist one. Only time will tell, however, whether these efforts at changing the French public perception of Soka Gakkai International will bear fruit.

Conclusion

Religious tolerance is at the basis of any action taken towards the creation of peaceful relations between different and sometimes opposing religious groups. On that point, SGI demonstrated a capacity to change the manners in which it engages other Buddhist

sects and other religions, notably through a reinterpretation (or perhaps a rediscovery) of Nichiren's teachings regarding the propagation of the *Lotus Sutra*. SGI-France offers a good example of SGI's attempts at promoting interreligious dialogue at a national level, thus pushing away the limits of its former exclusivist stance. What is perhaps surprising is the group's ability to create such interreligious dialogues despite their hard-earned official legitimation as a "association cultuelle" and the negative public image still promoted by anticult opponents. These last two elements serve as a reminder that religious (in)tolerance also takes place between a religious group and society at large, be it through official representatives, official or quasi-official national religious associations, or even the media. The latter plays a sizable role in the public perception of a given religious movement, which in turn points to the problem of fixed collective images of certain religions. These constitute obstacles to the acceptance of the actual plurality of forms in the French religious landscape, since they automatically reject groups that do not meet the archetypal view of a given religion. This would indicate that religious tolerance and the acceptance of new religious movements may be partly limited on the extent of one's ability and desire to put into question her/his view of religion(s).

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