HUMAN AFFAIRS *25*, 28–39, 2015 DOI: 10.1515/humaff-2015-0003

CHANTING WITH BENEFITS: INSTRUMENTAL TRUST AND FAMILIARITY AMONG MEMBERS OF ITALIAN SOKA GAKKAI

MARIA GIULIA PEZZI

Abstract: The article looks at an analysis of trust issues among Soka Gakkai members in Italy. The organization is made up of official members and neophytes, who interact on a daily basis in an informal environment, with a high degree of intimacy and familiarity. Trust among members can be considered a core issue, and is seen as being composed of an instrumental element. This paper deals with how this component influences relationships between members in terms of economic practices and mutual assistance. Starting from the assumption that Soka Gakkai affiliates are able to manipulate interactions in order to achieve goals which may not strictly comply with the aims of the organization itself, the article makes clear how the confidence created by the shared religious experience fosters frequent economic transactions, work affiliations and general economic support.

Keywords: Soka Gakkai; trust; informality; economic practices; social capital.

Introduction

The case of the Buddhist sect Soka Gakkai (Japanese for "Society for the Creation of Value") is particularly interesting given the great expansion it has undergone both in terms of a consistent increase in the number of converts, especially in Italy, and in its growing recognition internationally.

The data reported in this paper were obtained during ethnological fieldwork in the Italian city of Monza, carried out between 2007 and 2008. The aim of my research was to investigate the nature of the relationships between members of Soka Gakkai, and identify any ambiguity between discourses and practices, but also to consider the importance attached to the issue of trust between members. This was conducted with the intention of proving my main hypothesis: that Soka Gakkai provides an explicit definition of reality to which believers must conform to have their membership recognized. To achieve this, they must practice certain patterns of behavior that make sense only when the Buddhist doctrine is performed in institutionalized ways and on particular occasions, and yet at the same time they can also be manipulated by actors seeking to gain advantages in their own spheres of personal and informal action.

While conducting the fieldwork, I participated in many meetings, both at private houses, and at *Kaikan* (the cult's center in Milan), where I interviewed many members and neophytes. In a second phase of the research, I collected quantitative data using a survey.

From the theoretical point of view, I considered trust as an ongoing process of negotiation between the "internal" personal sphere and an "external" interpersonal one, which produces a situation which is continually (re)created by the interaction between people, in a context of ambiguity and uncertainty, as conversion to a new religion can be. With this in mind, I consider trust to consist of three interrelated elements: instrumental, moral and emotional, as proposed by Torsello (2004).

In this paper, only the instrumental component of trust will be analyzed. Starting from the assumption that Soka Gakkai affiliates are able to manipulate interactions in order to achieve goals which may not strictly comply with the aims of the organization, this article makes clear how the confidence created by the shared religious experience makes economic transactions, work affiliations and general economic support, become frequently accepted practices.

A brief history of the religious movement

Soka Gakkai International is a faith-based organization that has at its foundation the teachings of the Buddhist Monk Nichiren Daishonin, who lived in Japan in the thirteenth century.

Right from his earliest writings, Nichiren hinted that his purpose was to unite all the different interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine under one "roof", and in doing so he chose the symbolism of *Lotus Sutra,* that of cause-effect (which he considered to be the most important teaching of Buddha by far), as a unifying element. In fact, this extrapolation of a single, somewhat arbitrary, element of Buddhism served simply to produce another sect (Babbie, 1996, p. 103). On his death, in 1282, a dispute arose between the followers of his school and many sects were formed that fought each other for recognition of the "true doctrine of Nichiren" (*ibid.*).

In the 1920s, an elementary school teacher, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, approached Nichiren Buddhism and began to study the scriptures in an attempt to find a new teaching method. The philosophical system of Makiguchi was essentially based on an appropriation of the Kantian notions of Good, Beautiful and True, the last of which, however, Makiguchi replaced with the concept of Profit, which was in his opinion less abstract and to be found more in human life (*ibid.*, p. 105).

Makiguchi, was impressed by the writings of Nichiren and believed the source of Good, Beautiful and Profit could be identified in the *Dai-Gohonzon*. In the Soka Gakkai (Society for Education and the Creation of Value, or SG) of the 1930s, a small group was founded, dedicated to the study and discussion of Eastern and Western philosophy. During the war years, religious freedom was abolished in Japan and SG was declared illegal. Makiguchi and his most promising disciple, Josei Toda, were imprisoned and Makiguchi did not survive his period of confinement.

However, religious freedom was restored with the Allied occupation, and Toda immediately tried to re-establish the movement. Less than a decade later, in 1951, thanks to fervent proselytizing, the number of devotees had reached around 5,000 (*ibid.*). On his

death, in 1958, he was succeeded by his disciple, Daisaku Ikeda, a person of great charisma. In 1965, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) was officially founded and Ikeda became its first president. In 1978, following disagreement between SGI and Nichiren Shoshu (founded 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 was later also "excommunicated", although to this day he still holds office as Honorary Chairman.

Soka Gakkai began expanding in Italy in the 1970s. The Italian Buddhist Institute of Soka Gakkai (IBISG) was created on 27 March 1998. The institute is affiliated to SG International and helps promote the values of peace, culture and education. By 2014, SG had approximately 50,000 members in Italy.[1]

Since the movement is made up of believers and does not require the presence of a clergy, the SG is organized in the same way all over the world. At the base is the local *group*, consisting of approximately 10 to 15 members. It organizes discussion meetings, called *zadankai*—"Association of sit down and talk"—which meet twice a month. At these meetings, members share their experiences of Buddhist practice as applied to everyday life and mutually support each other. The older members encourage beginners to correctly practice the teachings of Nichiren, which are studied together, but they also encourage proselytizing—or *shakubuku*. A number of groups make up a *sector* and several sectors are grouped into *chapters*. There is also coordination at higher levels: the chapters are grouped into *centers*, and these are grouped into *regional centers* or *regions*. The regional centers form the Soka Gakkai of a nation.

Soka Gakkai, a doctrine in practice

In order to understand the development of the doctrine subsequently derived from the teachings of Nichiren, one must consider one of its fundamental parts, the Three Great Secret Laws. In summary, they are: the veneration of the graphical representation of the Supreme Being, designed by Nichiren himself; the *Gohonzon* or 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 Sanctuary of the True Teaching, the place of prayer.

This kind of Buddhism is then considered a *practice* that needs to be enacted in order to be effective. The focus is on the fact that if it is correctly practiced then one can inhabit one's world correctly, including all that this idea involves; relationships with other people, attitudes towards difficulties, mindset, etc. Practicing it correctly does not only mean chanting the mantra correctly but also refers to body posture (such as how to sit, how to join hands, and the direction and height of the gaze): striving day after day to assume the proper body position will lead to a proper attitude to faith and life in general. One could say that by enacting the ritualized practice SG Buddhism becomes embodied.

Moreover, Nichiren's Buddhist practice has two aspects: one can perform it for oneself (chanting the mantra in front of the object of worship, enabling goals to be achieved), but it can also be performed for others, assuming that happiness cannot be purely individual. It is also in this scope that *shakubuku* (proselytizing) is practiced, which is seen as a means of

[1] http://www.sgi-italia.org/sokagakkai/IBISG-QuandoNasce.php, accessed April 2014.

cleaning one's own karma, as well as providing others with tools to improve the conditions of their life. It is, therefore, a concerted effort towards a common goal, *Kosen-rufu*,[2] which encourages practitioners to come closer and feel the support of others particularly in difficult times, when faith falters or they feel overwhelmed by events.

Fortune and benefits

For those who seek to perform *shakubuku*, particular stress is placed on convincing them of the *benefits* they will gain through practice. The Italian term "beneficio" actually refers to two Japanese words: *fuku*, which literally means "luck", but in Buddhism means the "benefit that you gain through *Gohonzon*, or even its power, its strength"; *kudoku*, which translates as "create happiness and eliminate evil" (Minganti, 1988, p. 47-48).

The Italian word "beneficio" (incorrectly translated from the English "benefit", though Makiguchi himself always spoke of "profit"), in fact, has been the source of much misunderstanding and criticism. In Italian the term actually refers to the act of doing something good for someone, of giving a reward; it is something, therefore, that comes from someone else, as a gift, which is a very different concept from "creating happiness", which Buddhism talks about. Makiguchi had instead intended benefits to mean profit; that is, the positive consequence of actions undertaken to achieve a certain result.

One can well imagine the potential difficulties encountered by an SG sympathizer who decides to start chanting and comes across the notion of gaining benefits for the first time. As Macioti maintained, some people misunderstand the term when beginning to practice, to the point that they chant in order to obtain benefits in many different areas, from winning the lottery to finding a parking place more easily (Macioti, 1996 p. 59). According to Buddhism, it is reasonable to think one can solve specific problems, but this must always be the outcome of an attempt, a determination: when one is able to sustain the necessary effort, the result will come about by itself.

As explained by Roberta, a Soka Gakkai devotee for more than 20 years who has held various positions of responsibility over time, some people take advantage of the ambiguity of the term "beneficio" when doing *shakubuku*, with more or less explicit awareness:

> when they meet someone with problems... I do not know, diseases, states of severe depression, financial problems, they go to them and say, "I'm the one that's right for you! Chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* and you'll have concrete proof of its power! You will get many *benefici*!" These people have not understood the practice at all: *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is not a magic formula, you have to study, strive, practice... you get nothing for free. Then some people deceive themselves by thinking that they have found a magic formula that allows them to solve everything, that an hour a day of *daimoku* [chanting the mantra] is enough... [...] (Pezzi, 2008, p. 31).

Therefore, practice is the only real way to gain benefits which are not immediately perceptible but may become apparent only with time. Relying on the *Gohonzon*, "praying

[2] *Kosen-rufu* refers to the need to spread Nichiren's Buddhism, with the final aim of achieving world peace and harmony.

with joy and gratitude" (Minganti, 1988, p. 50), enables one to find unexpected "powers": the courage, strength and will to live. These are the real benefits on which every practitioner should focus, never forgetting that even material benefits may be affected by internal changes and by new ways of considering the nature of the problem one is trying to solve.

On the other hand, it would be naïve to think that neophytes could be so at ease with such a complex doctrine, which, moreover, is to some extent removed from the way the Roman Catholic religion (that had and still has a very strong influence on Italian culture) considers the issue of benefits, usually conceived of as a manifestation of divine goodness, rather than the end point of purposeful personal effort. As Carlo Barone maintains:

> there is little doubt that the search for utilitarian benefits plays a crucial role in the decision of potential converts to join SG [...]. The marketing strategy of this religious organization relies on these instrumental attitudes by presenting Nichiren Buddhism as a feasible way of solving one's own problems, while at the same time asking very little of new members (Barone, 2007, p.129).

Barone proposes therefore that SG members should be called "utilitarian believers" (*ibid*., p. 130), since the first contact with the new religion is usually the consequence of a search for well-being, either material or non-material, and not without problems, despite Buddhist practice often being presented as such.

Trust and religious practices: Reducing complexity

Practicing SG provides the key to understanding reality, enabling one to deal with critical situations. The state of bewilderment that many people claim to have experienced in these cases can be resolved through Buddhist practice, that is, through action. It represents a "path" to be followed that will help the believer to free himself of the uncertainty of the infinite possibilities of existence and reach an ultimate, clear and specific goal: absolute victory in every aspect of their lives.

In an editorial published in *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* (Nakajima, 2008, p. 3), Tamotsu Nakajima clarifies the relationship between faith, practice and reduction of 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 the circumstances, but Nichiren Daishonin teaches us that everything starts with prayer and that a prayer that is strong and full of conviction can transform everything, just as he wrote in the Gosho: "[...] the prayer of a devotee of the Lotus Sutra will never remain unanswered" [...] .
> This means that, whatever the situation, a person who chants a vigorous daimoku for their own happiness and for that of others can turn poison into medicine and has nothing to fear.

The Buddhism of Nichiren transforms lives from being a "constant struggle" to a "path to success". For the practitioner there are no uncertainties: chanting the *Lotus Sutra* and living by performing actions is the only possible path that leads to victory. It is easy to understand how a theoretical system of this type 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 favour of the benefits that *will* come.

In his chapter, “Can we trust trust?”, Diego Gambetta poses the problem of comparing trust and mistrust in cooperation and wonders what the choice of whether or not to grant trust depends upon. Can trust be seen as a cost-effective approach? Based on the analysis of game theory, Gambetta comes to the conclusion that the choice depends on the way in which the interaction begins in a situation where information is lacking, 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 winning over the initial reluctance of the potential new practitioner by proposing an effective means (the mantra) of solving any problem.

The author shows how trust can emerge as a by-product of the moral and religious values that require honesty and mutual benefit. In the case of religious groups, personal ties and moral values can only serve to encourage the attitude of trust if they are concepts on which it is widely based. Motivations and beliefs are part of the identity of the individual and dependent upon them is the propensity to place greater trust in those with whom they have ties of this type, rather than those who do not share them, even though both may be complete strangers. This type of trust, on the basis of personal character, can be strengthened by high degrees of ritualizing (*ibid*., p. 225).

In the case of SG, an important aspect emerges in this regard: since all the opportunities for members to meet and engage in dialogue are structured so as to make use of the bond of trust that must be assumed to exist between members, a “spiral of trust” emerges during these meetings that determines all subsequent behaviours.

During the meetings participants are encouraged to talk about their experiences and share them with others, but that is not all: they are expected to try to solve their problems by practicing correctly, using greater effort and deeper faith. The members of the group place their expectations in the success of the single individual on his path of personal growth, who, consequently, is prompted to put trust in the trust of others, and by doing so finds it easier to finally engage in actions that will ensure that those expectations are met.

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

This was evident from the responses to the questionnaire that I distributed to SG members in Monza in 2008. One of the questions asked “How much do you trust the members of your group?” and one of the respondents (female, 25 years) answered: “This question about trust doesn’t make sense, I don’t understand exactly what you want to know, trust referring to what? It is like asking how much 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, that is, how trust can be considered a natural act when it involves individuals that we consider to be family: relatives, friends, but also fellow believers.

Gambetta, in concluding his article, argues that the most cost-effective attitude is to have trust in trust and distrust in distrust, for two reasons: first, to behave as if you have trust triggers a circle through which the social actor can always keep track of the interaction and check the accuracy of their impressions. Secondly, trust is not a commodity that deteriorates with use, but rather, the more trust is put into play, the more of it one can expect to have in the future (Gambetta, 2000, p. 235).

Chanting with benefits: The utilitarian use of trust

Chanting not only for oneself but also for others may lead to high levels of cooperation and the manifestation of what Fukuyama called "social capital" (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 7). Consequently, through my survey I wanted to investigate the real nature of the fiduciary relationship between members of the same group when it comes to material benefits. At the level of doctrine they are forced to rely on faith to sustain themselves through the recitation of the *daimoku*, and to support each other. But what happens in cases where there is real need?

In the first draft of the survey there was a question phrased thus: "Would you turn to a member of you group in cases of need?" The word "need" was used without further specification. Submitted to a test sample, all of them in returning the filled in copy immediately 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 prompted me to pose the question differently, distinguishing between the need for "financial assistance", "material support" and "spiritual help". In the following section, I will mainly discuss the first two, in an attempt to provide an insight into how SG members relate to in-group economic practices.

Accepting financial aid, as well as borrowing money from other members, is an explicitly forbidden practice. On the Italian SG website, there is a section entitled "Rules for the members of the Institute", where a whole section is dedicated to this matter:

> If proof of the following behaviour is provided, actions will be taken against the IBISG[3] member:
> [...]
> b) the exploitation of belonging to IBISG, or of the position in the Institute, for one's own purposes, for example, borrowing money, setting up companies for profit, achieving consensus of political nature, achieving advantages through psychological pressure.[4]

Borrowing money from other members—even when there are serious economic problems—is considered as a lack of respect towards the faith itself: practitioners should engage only in activities that have to do with religion, and the exchange of money is not one of them. However, in answer to the question "would you turn to a member of your group if you needed financial assistance?" 14% responded "yes" and 26% "it depends" (making a total of 40%), which contrasts with what is explicitly prohibited by SG (Pezzi, 2008, p. 55).

Within the SG, doing business with association members is also strongly discouraged, as is 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 point of view: 26% said they would be prepared to turn to members, 22% responded "no", while 52% claimed that it depended on the circumstances (*ibid.*). My personal experience with members of SG is that

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[3] Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai. The most important of the "actions" referred to is expulsion from SG.

[4] http://www.sgi-italia.org/sokagakkai/IBISG-RegolamentoAppartenenti.php, accessed April 2014

in reality the practice of turning to other members in cases of need involving work, assistance, or the resolving of problems that require a specialist in the field, are quite common and that 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 whether they belong to the SG or not. A small amount of "healthy distrust" allows social actors to control their own choices in times of uncertainty or where there is a lack of information. However, to a certain extent, SG members are more inclined to trust other members on the basis that they trust that they will not disappoint them: given that the competence to carry out a certain task is often taken for granted, it is thought that the subject will, however, do his very best on the basis of the existing relationship. In my opinion, what plays a vital role are the expectations that members have of their fellow devotees, which are based on the sharing of certain moral and religious values, thanks to which trust justifies certain choices. This is evident from 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 a majority (32%) responded they had sought help among members, while a few had turned instead to family members (6%), and 30% had identified other behaviours (*ibid.*).

I asked SG member Roberta what she thought of these findings:

> *R: You don't do this: you cannot Start doing business with Buddhists, we cannot do business...*
> *MGP: Yes, but you cannot say it does not happen either. For example, when you started your business... who were your first customers?*
> *R: F. [former member of her group]. When I said that I wanted to start my own business she asked me to make something for her, she trusted me immediately. I did not know where to start, but you know if she had not told me I maybe would never have had the courage to actually start, or it would have needed much more effort. So instead, I went from wanting to take action, to acting immediately. Because she gave me direct confidence, [...] you know, then things moved in another direction, but if it hadn't been for her, I would not have learned certain things.*
> *MPG: so when you need someone with specific skills, e.g. a blacksmith, a house painter, a lawyer... and there is one in your group, what do you do?*
> *R: Well, I've always been wary, at first I always try to understand who am I dealing with, because you know, especially when you begin to practice... a lot of people are still not balanced. Maybe they have so many problems, so I always feel like I'm walking on eggshells. But others trust immediately. Are you chanting? Well, then the job is yours! I know there have been several disappointments... people seen only a couple of times, who were entrusted with important things, the result of having many quarrels. It's for this reason that you shouldn't do it, because if things go wrong it's your fault, not the person who is incompetent. After all, you who entrusted him with it.*
> *MPG: But beyond these bad experiences, it seems to me that if you need someone, on equal conditions, you prefer a member of SG...*
> *R: Oh, yes... I think it ends up always like that. You see each other often, with some people you have real friendships, with others you don't, yet we help each other. If you have a house painter in the group and you don't turn to him when you need one, then it looks as if you don't trust him, right? However, I know people I wouldn't trust with anything and others I'd trust completely. It always depends on the person* (Pezzi, 2008, p. 77).

There are also cases of SG devotees who have relied on fellow group members for more specific and more material "needs". That is the case of S., female—55 years old, as Marco, a member of the same group, recalls. S. had started chanting *Daimoku* in 2009, having

been introduced to Buddhism by a co-worker. She had no particular problems that led her to embrace the new religion, but she stated that she instantly felt a sense of fascination and admiration for President Ikeda, whom she soon started calling her *Sensei* (Master). She had been a very active member from the beginning, a fervid practitioner, always offering her house for group meetings, doing *shakubuku* and engaging in all the parts of the Buddhist practice. In 2011, shortly after becoming an official SG member and having received her copy of the *Gohonzon*, she lost her job as a secretary. Being a single mother, with a daughter in her twenties studying at university, she felt the urge to find a new job as soon as possible, but after four months she did not seem to have had any luck. Her fellow group members were as helpful as possible, trying to help her emerge from such a difficult situation through *Daimoku*, but they also encouraged her to practice more and with stronger conviction that better times were surely about to come. One day she must have realized that money was really getting tight and that she needed help. She hosted the meeting at her house as usual. They chanted *Gongyo* and *Daimoku*, but when the moment came to discuss everyone's experiences and answer questions about Buddhist practice, S. pulled out an electricity bill saying "this is due tomorrow and I have no money, I'm going to need your help". Marco recalls the air getting thick in the room and people looking at each other puzzled, until someone pointed out that such issues were not supposed to be discussed at occasions like these, if at all, and then started encouraging S., telling her she should have faith in the *Gohonzon* and trust in the power of *Daimoku*. The situation seemed to have been resolved, but Marco discovered a few months later that a group member had in fact given S. the money to pay her bill, which she never returned.

Sometime later the situation recurred. S. had found a job in the meantime, but she needed someone to lend her money to pay part of her car insurance. Once again, she openly addressed the matter during a meeting, in front of all the members, but this time Marco decided not to pass over it and told her clearly that asking directly for money was a demonstration of distrust towards her own faith in Buddhism, and that she should chant and engage more if she wanted to pay her bills, because she was supposed to solve her problems using her own resources and on her own terms, with the help of *Daimoku*, instead of expecting others to step in when she had failed.

S. left SG shortly after that. Whether the decision was directly linked to other members' refusal to provide financial assistance, Marco could not tell, because she never mentioned it directly. Marco pointed out that although such cases are rare, nevertheless, they do occur.

What is important about this story is that the first time that S. asked directly for money, she was instantly discouraged by her *Responsabile*[5] and fellow-members were clearly embarrassed by her request. However, in a more private setting, where members are able to enact personal relationships based not on religious fellowship, but on acquaintance and familiarity, someone agreed to lend her money, and indeed did so, though no one had stood up offering to help during the meeting in the public sphere. On the second occasion, Marco had to be firm, though he himself claims to have felt "heartless", because what could perhaps be tolerated as a one-time request risked becoming an established practice, and this was made

[5] Italian for a "tutor".

even more improper by the fact that S. never returned the money, though she had found a job in the meantime.

The existence of a type of instrumental (one could equally say "utilitarian") trust between Soka Gakkai practitioners is undeniable. Despite the fact that it is forbidden at an explicit level, in reality there is a discrepancy between discourse and actual practice. There is a high degree of reciprocity and familiarity between people of the same group, thanks to their small to medium size, which favours close and frequent ties that can last for many years, creating a level of group cohesion and acquaintance comparable to that found in family contexts, where social capital is particularly high, not only on the basis of blood ties, but also on the basis of continuous and repeated interactions. It is also clear, in the latter example, that though group cohesion is important and usually functions as the network basis for each practitioner, members are also able to manipulate interactions at a lower lever, that of member-to-member relationships.

"Doing *zaimu*"

Before concluding this article I would like to briefly address another issue, that of "doing *zaimu*", which refers to the practice of donating money to SG as a sign of gratitude for benefits received and for those that are about to come. SG members are never expressly asked to give money to the organization, and especially in the earliest stages of their acquaintance with SG, they are discouraged from making any kind of donation, because supposedly they have not yet studied and practiced enough to fully comprehend all the implications of donating.

Nevertheless, a ritualized way of donating money does exist and there are many articles explaining how and why one should donate. According to a booklet printed by IBISG entitled "The spirit of the donation in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism"[6] (IBISG, 2014), the Japanese word *zaimu* refers to the right and duty of every person to economically support the community of which they are a member. What in fact matters is the attitude with which one donates, rather than how much is given (*ibid*., p. 5). The booklet cites an article which appeared in the movement's magazine *Il Nuovo Rinascimento*, in an attempt to provide better insight:

> The outcome of this act, which should be aimed at supporting the path to *kosen-rufu*, is that one surely will receive substantial benefit, which goes beyond what one can imagine. First of all, everyone must make the effort to study in depth the spirit of the donation in their life.
> One should never put pressure on members to take part in *zaimu*: it's a matter of faith and it has to do with the heart of the person. It is an opportunity within everyone's reach, but it should be the outcome of a spontaneous decision. One could say that *zaimu* is a barometer with which one can measure the *trust* fellow devotees place in our organization (*ibid*., my emphasis).

Making an offer then is a privilege and each member has to support SG and its activities in search of the common goal of reaching *kosen-rufu*; that is, world peace. If a person recognizes the importance of *kosen-rufu* and all the benefits that he has received, "doing *zaimu*" should be a natural outcome.

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[6] "Lo spirito dell'offerta nel Buddismo di Nichiren Daishonin".

In the official discourse, *zaimu* is not portrayed as direct financing, though in practice it is. Roberta, already cited in this article, reported that as building for the new *Kaikan* in Milan had started (5500 square meters, already in use, but yet to be completed), members were advised to "do *zaimu*" if they could, and that any amount, even the smallest sum, would be useful. Once again, the message conveyed was not that there was a need to finance the construction, but rather that "this would be a good moment to show gratitude for what you have obtained so far". A new, bigger, centre for the cult would be another important step towards realizing *kosen-rufu*.

I asked Roberta and other members if they knew how much the purchase and building of this site in a southern suburb of Milan had cost, and no one seemed to know or want to provide an answer. An online search produced no results either; none of the many websites and blogs that deal with SG, covered this issue, which is further evidence that its devotees completely entrust the organization at multiple levels.

Conclusion

The study of trust relationships between members of the Soka Gakkai has proved to be complex: "trust" is an aspect of life that is not sufficiently problematized by social actors, in the sense that its presence or absence is often taken for granted and considered a natural consequence of personal relations. This aspect was often revealed in the course of my interviews and in the surveys, as many of my interlocutors did not consider my questions relevant, and indeed invited me to study more to capture the *true essence* of Buddhist practice.

One key aspect of the relationship between trust and Soka Gakkai has emerged: trust and distrust between members co-exists, if not on an explicit level, then certainly on an implicit one.

From a religious point of view, members of the SG are required to have total trust: in themselves; in other members; in the SG, as well as its leaders and especially in the doctrine itself.

Nonetheless, there are, in fact discrepancies between what people say and what they actually do. By analyzing trust from its instrumental constituent element, it emerges that trust is the result of a negotiation process between the beliefs of the individual social actor and those shared at the collective level. This is seen especially in the analysis of the answers given in the survey to the question about "need". Despite certain practices being prohibition, and everyone generally agreeing on the validity of the prohibition, compliance to the rule is often not observed on the basis that trust is deemed to be able to compensate for the lack of information and uncertainty. Moreover, although the SG Buddhist doctrine emphasizes that the benefits are the result of studying and striving, which may then lead to real benefits, it seems that SG members consider in-group economic interactions as a viable way of obtaining immediate material benefits, on the basis of the mutual trust enforced by a shared religious experience.

Moreover, since SG members are always encouraged to prioritize practice and faith, it could be maintained that knowing where the money they donate goes is irrelevant, since they trust that it will be used for the best of the members' community as a whole. SG could

be thought of as a series of concentric rings that gradually become larger, from the smallest representing the individual's own group, to the biggest ring composed of all the SG members around the world and by the SG organization as a whole, making one enormous single group. Trust is then enacted and put in practice at all levels more or less in the same way, given that every practitioner considers their membership of the *group* as the constituent element of their identity as an SG practitioner.

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Department of Human and Social Sciences,
University of Bergamo,
Piazza Rosate 2,
24129 Bergamo
Italy
E-mail: mariagiulia.pezzi@unibg.it