

Soka Gakkai International ("International Value-Creation Society"; also, SGI) is a lay Buddhist movement that was founded in 1930 by a Japanese educator, Tsuneaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) and has now over 12 million members in 190 countries. The *International Association Brazil Soka Gakkai* (port. *Associação Brasil Soka Gakkai Internacional*-BSGI), the Brazilian umbrella organization of SGI, was founded in 1960 by its president Daisaku Ikeda and since then has been expanding in the whole country. In this article I discuss some key *Soka Gakkai* doctrinal elements -such as "benefit" (benefício), for instance- and how they resonate with doctrinal elements found in Pentecostal/neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil.

I am not suggesting, nevertheless, an immediate and obvious relation of cause and effect such as: *Soka Gakkai* wants to become more attractive to non-members, therefore it borrows elements from other Brazilian religious groups. This is not a matter of effect following cause, and this affirmation is far from being correct, as the ethnographic analyses will show. My approach to the question is that *Soka Gakkai* indeed has in its scope a central element related to prosperity -individual and collective- that is "translated" by the members into a doctrinal message that is very similar to the message spread by the neo-Pentecostal churches in the country. Despite the similarities, I suggest that *Soka Gakkai* does not follow the exact style of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil. The role the Organization plays in this scenario is to reinforce the responsibility of the members to carry out the mission of the *Kosen-rufu* (peace through individual happiness), focusing on the importance of prosperity: individual and global.

[SOKA GAKKAI; BRAZIL;
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PROSPERITY THEOLOGY].

article

CHANTING FOR BENEFITS:

Soka Gakkai and prosperity in Brazil*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Upon the visit of John Paul II to Brazil for the third time in 1997, the Pope was met with great popular acclaim when, during his speech in the city of Rio de Janeiro, he asserted in front of a public of two mil-

lion people: “If God is Brazilian, the pope is *carioca*!” The expression “God is Brazilian”, widely known in Brazil, was perhaps not by coincidence one of the very first expressions that during my fieldwork I heard being taken almost as a personal offence by the members of *Soka Gakkai* in Rio Grande do Sul. “Buddhism indeed fits very well in Brazilian society,” one of the informants² said. Talking to another informant³, he asserted: “if god existed, he would not be Brazilian; he would be smarter than that, he would be universal. Besides that, god does not exist; what exists is your inner strength, the power that does not depend on any supreme being.”

Soka Gakkai International (“International Value-Creation Society”, also SGI) is a lay Buddhist movement that was founded in 1930 by a Japanese educator, Tsuneaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) and has now over 12 million members in 190 countries. The International Association Brazil *Soka Gakkai* (Portuguese: *Associação Brasil Soka Gakkai Internacional*-BSGI), the Brazilian umbrella organization of SGI, was founded in 1960 by its president Daisaku Ikeda and since then has been expanding in the whole country.

The difficulties that *Soka Gakkai* members in Brazil face every day to spread their faith are partially due to the strong Christian background of many Brazilians. This is a constant issue, and members and the Organization commit themselves in a project to engage notions and values of the Buddhism of *Soka Gakkai* in an attempt to spread them throughout Brazilian society. In this article I discuss some key *Soka Gakkai* doctrinal elements -such as “benefit” for instance- and how they resonate with doctrinal elements

found in Pentecostal/neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil. I am not suggesting, nevertheless, an immediate and obvious relation of cause and effect such as: *Soka Gakkai* wants to become more attractive to non-members, therefore it borrows elements from other Brazilian religious groups. This is not a matter of effect following cause, and this affirmation is far from being correct, as the ethnographic analyses will show. My approach to the question is that *Soka Gakkai* indeed has in its scope a central element related to prosperity -individual and collective- that is “translated” by the members into a doctrinal message that is very similar to the message spread by the neo-Pentecostal churches in the country. Despite the similarities, I suggest that *Soka Gakkai* does not follow the exact style of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil. The role the Organization plays in this scenario is to reinforce the responsibility of the members to carry out the mission of the *Kosen-rufu* (peace through individual happiness), focusing on the importance of prosperity: individual and global.

2. BUDDHISM AND *SOKA GAKKAI* IN BRAZIL

The history of Buddhism in Brazil is mainly related to Asian, particularly Japanese, immigration. With the beginning of Japanese immigration in 1908, Buddhism came to Brazil. Clarke (2001:197) points out that although its presence in Brazil dates to the 1920s, it was not until the 1960s that the Japanese New Religious Movement began to make an impact beyond the boundaries of Japanese immigrant communities. Moreover, it was only in the 1980s, with the immigration of Chinese and Tibetan groups, that the number of different Buddhist groups increased and Buddhism became widespread in Brazilian society.

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) began in 1937 as a lay association of *Nichiren Shoshu*, one of several

¹ “Carioca” is the patronymic for the person who was born in Rio de Janeiro.

² I used pseudonyms throughout the article in order to protect the privacy of my informants.

³ Unless stated otherwise, all the testimonies gathered in this article are the result of personal communication with *Soka Gakkai* members in Brazil.



denominations tracing its origins to Nichiren (1222-1282). Although Nichiren Buddhism dates from the thirteenth century, *Soka Gakkai* is a contemporary religious group. The first SGI district established outside Japan was inaugurated in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, on October 20, 1960. The movement resulted in the inauguration of many bases in different parts of the country, as well as regional branches. In 1960, the association had fewer than 150 members, all of them of Japanese origin. In the last decades, however, the Brazilian *Soka Gakkai* branch has evolved into a Buddhist group with centres in almost every region of Brazil. According to official information from the *Soka Gakkai* International headquarters in São Paulo⁴, there are currently 160,000 Brazilian members -mainly in urban areas- 90 percent of whom are of non-Japanese origin.

3. THE LAW OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

The explanations regarding the law of causality that I had the chance to hear during the research were constantly related to the situations of daily life. “What I dedicate is proportional to what I receive back; it is the benefit that comes back to me,” an informant said. The notion of “benefit” is directly connected to the idea of the law of cause and effect; and although SGI constantly relates present trials with compensation in next lives, what *Soka Gakkai* in Brazil emphasizes is to relate the teaching to an immediate and positive effect. The benefit is the consequence of any good cause: be it chanting the mantra -the *Namyohorengekyo*- or dedicating oneself to the cause. “It is the inevitable consequence of a life dedicated to Buddhism. What I dedicate is proportional to what I receive back; it is the benefit that comes back to me,” an informant stated. When asked about the meaning of “benefit”, informants

usually listed items such as good health, familiar harmony, professional success and economical achievements.

Members explain the access to benefits through the idea of karma and the possibility of softening its action in present life. The reason for happiness or unhappiness in this life is explained as a fundamental cause experienced in past lives and members refer to it as past karma. Karma means action that is expressed in three possible ways: mentally, verbally, and physically. Although they believe in the existence of good karma and bad karma, it is the bad karma accumulated in past lives that is responsible for the suffering in the present life. The “good news” *Soka Gakkai* divulges to Brazilians is that happiness or unhappiness caused by past karma is not immutable. On the contrary, they emphasize that it is possible to change the future through actions in the present life.

It was during a talk with Mrs. J. M. Souza, a 77-year-old lady and member of *Soka Gakkai* in Porto Alegre, Southern Brazil, when I heard for the first time the expression “rain of benefits”. The story of the Souza family is the story of many Brazilian families and reflects, in many ways, the economic situation of the country. Mrs. Souza, along with her husband and her seven children, moved from the interior of Rio Grande do Sul state to the capital city of Porto Alegre at the beginning of the 1970s seeking better life conditions and more opportunities for work and study. But like many families in the same situation, the Souza family faced serious economic difficulties, and even hunger. Added to that, Mrs. Souza had serious respiratory problems and was constantly admitted to the public hospital of the city. Due to the several difficulties the family was experiencing, Mrs. Souza decided to visit a couple she met as soon as her family arrived in Porto Alegre. This couple was, according to her, a very special couple. Mrs Souza said:

“I talked to them because I needed money. And I knew they were special, they had a different

⁴ BSGI headquarters, interview, São Paulo, June 2006.

brightness in the eyes. I was so desperate, and my family was in such a critical situation of hunger. I clearly remember the exact moment the woman looked me in the eyes and said: “I have something for you. I have something very special and precious for you and I am sure that it will change your life forever.” I asked what was it about and she replied: “a powerful prayer: *Nam-myoho-rengue-kyo*. It is a Buddhist mantra that will transform all your suffering into happiness. Believe it. It will depend exclusively on your determination in dedicating yourself to the practice of faith.” And I accepted immediately. I trusted in the words of that couple that helped us so much”.

Back home, Mrs. Souza invited her husband so they could pray together. He accepted, and followed Mrs. Souza in the prayers. The family converted to Buddhism two months later, and at the moment of consecration Mrs. Souza established her first big challenge: to have her own home. According to her, after thirty-nine days of reciting *daimoku* for more than ten hours per day, her family moved to their own house. “Added to that, my respiratory problem was vanishing gradually and now we are very happy in our home. Thanks to *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, my dreams came true. With the mantra, I received rains of benefits.” The thirty-nine days of reciting *daimoku* for more than ten hours per day changed, according to Mrs. Souza, her bad karma in this life. She believed the more benefits she gets, the more she testifies to non-Buddhists the power of the mantra. According to the members, the act of chanting is not an empty ritual, but a means of focusing the attention on one’s own contribution to solve problems in life, and consequently a means of realizing potential responses. The BSGI members also receive advice from other members to continue chanting about any matter in order to be successful and receive the benefits.

4. BSGI PUBLICATIONS AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF THE NOTION OF PROSPERITY

The testimonies are of extreme importance in the process of homogenization and reproduction of the doctrines established by *Soka Gakkai*. The Organization uses different ways of communication (be it during the weekly meetings, in the journal or in the magazine) dedicated to communicating the members’ personal experiences. The importance of the acquisition of benefits is strongly reinforced by *Soka Gakkai*, and it is one of the most efficient ways in which the group divulges the relevance of the mantra and its importance on people’s lives. A good example is revealed in one of the BSGI journals, where the group published an article entitled “stimulating the conquest of daily victories.” According to the article, the establishment of objectives aiming at the dynamic growth (the SGI theme year for 2006) is stimulated towards to and because of the *kossen-rufu*. The practice of Buddhism is stimulated by having personal happiness as the main end, and “the person that dedicates a true heart and the whole life to this noble ideal, independently of other people being aware of that or not, will infallibly conquer enormous benefits”⁵.

The group reinforces the practice of sharing the benefits -process of obtaining good things through the chanting- to every member. Independently of the ways of communication in which this is done, members must express their personal experiences. The narratives usually emphasize the members’ difficulties, their sufferings, and the necessary victory and triumph over all their problems. In this way, the Organization portrays an image of what should be the “ideal member”: people that experienced extreme difficulties and suffering; people that accomplished the dream of meeting president Ikeda personally; and people that overcame all the difficulties

⁵ Brasil Seikyo, edition n. 1825, 1st January 2006.



of life (essentially about finances, health and family) and which today dedicate their lives to the mission. This “ideal member”, beyond all things, must have experimented countless benefits. The way the Organization reinforces this it is through the publications, and leaders carefully decide the themes to approach topics that are part of the Brazilian socio-cultural universe.

The case of Rosa, a middle-aged woman and member of *Soka Gakkai* in Southern Brazil⁶, is an accurate example of the values BSGI aims to reinforce: a life full of challenges and difficulties, and the immense benefits resulted from the chanting. The illustration of the importance of the publications and how they are used to reinforce the doctrine of prosperity and the effectiveness of chanting the mantra is revealed through her history. She was a member of *Soka Gakkai* since her childhood, who always dedicated a great amount of time in her life to the activities of the Organization. Among the many benefits, Rosa asserted, one of the most significant for her was to meet president Ikeda. She expressed her emotion: “I could not receive a better benefit; it was my moment and my vow before my friend, father and master of life”⁷. Rosa’s story is full of difficulties after her marriage. Her first big challenge was to be a mother, as she had two cysts in the uterus. She was submitted to a surgery and after some time she gave birth to her daughter. As Rosa’s family grew, their economical problems grew as well. Rosa said:

“My situation was so problematic that I avoided taking a bus or a train to save money. I did everything on foot. Our lack of money was so serious that one day we almost lost our house, as we did not have enough money to pay the mortgage for a long period of time. On another occasion, the electricity of our house was cut off, and we stayed 3 days with no electricity at all”⁸.

⁶ Brasil Seikyo magazine, 18th February 2006.

⁷ Brasil Seikyo magazine, 18th February 2006, p. A7.

⁸ Brasil Seikyo magazine, 18th February 2006, p. A7

After that, Rosa was determined to change her situation. She spent a whole night reciting *Daimoku* and believing more and more in the Buddhist practice. In less than two years, Rosa and her family got over the financial problem, according to her testimony. She affirmed: “One year after that incident, we paid off the mortgage and today I can say, very happy and proud, that the house is ours!”.

The notion of prosperity *Soka Gakkai* reinforced in its publications has as its meaning the acquirement of any desired benefit. Unlike Christian groups, BSGI invests in an image that communicates that, through the mantra, anyone is able to alleviate the negative karmic power, and consequently, to change any reality. The possibility of any change, I believe, is what makes *Soka Gakkai* consistently attractive in the Brazilian religious scenario. They “offer” to the prospective member not only the power of modifying and conquering everything they want, but also they do not have elements such as guilt and sin, elements found in the Christian core.

5. DAISAKU IKEDA AND THE NOTION OF PROSPERITY

I argued in the previous section that one of the main ways of communication BSGI uses to convince members and prospective members about the effectiveness of the mantra and also about notions of prosperity -essential to create a positive image in the country- is through the publications. In this section I describe another way of approaching the same topic, through the image of Daisaku Ikeda. I argue that Daisaku Ikeda plays a fundamental role in the process of reinforcing notions related to prosperity through his teachings and through the emphasis on the relation master-disciple.

It was May 2006 when I arrived at Patrícia’s house in Porto Alegre, as usual, for the *Soka Gakkai* weekly meeting. Exceptionally, that specific week

they decided to have the meeting at Carlos' house, located two blocks away. They had more people than usual attending the meeting –first-time visitors and also members-, and they needed a bigger and more ventilated place to comfortably accommodate everybody, due to the hot weather that day. There were thirty-five people (contrasting with the usual small number of attendants, between ten and fifteen), and that night Carlos, the owner of the house, led the chanting of the mantra while Patrícia conducted the teachings of the night. They were excited about the number of attendants and about that date in particular, for the third of May is celebrated as *Soka Gakkai* day. The same date in 1951 Josei Toda, the second president of *Soka Gakkai*, assumed the leadership; it was again on other date in 1960 that Daisaku Ikeda, the third and current president of *Soka Gakkai*, assumed the leadership. And since then, SGI started to celebrate the day of *Soka Gakkai* every year on the third of May, all over the world.

The image and importance of Daisaku Ikeda to *Soka Gakkai* has been discussed by different authors (Hurst, 2000; Seager, 2006), and although it is not the focus of this work to discuss the importance and/or relevance of this charismatic leader to the Organization, it is necessary to consider how Ikeda's role is relevant in the elaboration of a perspective that reinforces the idea of a religion that emphasizes the notion of prosperity. I believe it is also relevant to consider how members construct a particular perception of Ikeda's image in order to understand how specific elements that are part of the discourse of *Soka Gakkai* in the country -which he is responsible for creating- are effective and attractive.

After they introduced the visitors to the whole group, the leaders explained why that date was so important to BSGI. Patrícia, the leader of that night, talked about Ikeda and explained how and why the president was so important to all members of *Soka Gakkai*. Daisaku Ikeda is so fundamental to the Organization that, according to Patrícia's perception,

the life of Makiguchi and Toda would be in vain without the life of Ikeda. The more she talked, the more she emphasized the importance of the "master of life." The excitement of Patrícia talking about Ikeda was so contagious that a visitor, visibly interested in the topic, interrupted Patrícia asking her to explain more about Ikeda. Patrícia, very kindly, then shared a personal experience regarding her life and the difficulties she had had when she was younger. When Patrícia was 18 years old (she was, at the time of the research, 37), she developed panic syndrome. The effects of the disease were disastrous, and affected different areas of her life. Patrícia revealed: "I had unreal fears, cried compulsively, avoided people and public places, especially at night, I had serious difficulties at work and so on." It was at that time that, through Carlos' life (the owner of the house, and her neighbour) and his wife's, she met the Buddhism of *Soka Gakkai*. She converted 7 years ago, and even after the conversion she still had serious crises. On a certain day, sharing with a leader her desperation regarding her disease and all the limitations she still faced because of that, the leader challenged Patrícia to chant more to connect her heart to master Ikeda's heart. Although Patrícia did not understand how the connection between both hearts could change her problem, she decided to follow the leader's instruction. After intense practice and prayers to connect her heart to Ikeda's heart, Patrícia explained that she never had crises anymore. "I was totally cured; and I learned that the more you pray, the faster you achieve your aims," Patrícia commented. Although they did not develop the topic that night, it was clear that Ikeda has a perceived power that goes beyond the Organizational dimension and that makes him the central character of BSGI. After Patrícia's emotive testimony, a member amended:

"It is impressive how marvellous he is. There is nothing he wrote that does not touch my heart. It seems that he knows me personally, and he always



knows exactly the problems and difficulties I am going through at that moment. Sometimes I think he is writing those letters to me (laughs). But he writes with such wisdom because he lives constantly in an elevated state of life”.

The texts that Ikeda writes and that are divulged in the magazine *Third Civilization* and in the journal *Brasil Seikyo* -both published by BSGI- mentioned by the member, constantly reinforce a position that stimulates the member to chant even more and also to challenge himself to recite the mantra to achieve things -usually objectives considered noble, such as changing the world and making their own spiritual revolution- but also to find their own happiness. In a country that faces serious economic inequalities and still deals with large groups that live in an unacceptable state of misery, the concept of happiness can sometimes be conceived in a very particular way. One of the best explanations I have heard during my research when asked about the “logic” of the benefits was that the recitation of the mantra *Nam-myoho-rengue-kyo* and the dedication to the Buddhist cause are the true causes of a complete and supreme happiness. “When we sincerely dedicate ourselves to the Buddhist practice it is as if we were making a deposit of “good luck” in our life saving accounts, and at the right moment, the benefits will be manifested,” an informant said.

6. “BENEFIT”: THE GOOD EFFECTS OF CHANTING

Rosa, one of the informants I interviewed, recounted the beginnings of her faith and how she was told to chant the mantra to become more familiar with *Soka Gakkai* Buddhism. “Try it for a month, and if you do not feel any benefit during that time then give up,” it was suggested to Rosa. She was advised to chant freely for her wishes and desires, but she remained

sceptical. “Being told that you can have anything you want with this practice and be happier whatever is going on in your life sounded too good to be true,” Rosa said. “Life brings up challenges and difficulties,” Rosa used to say during our interview, and after a few months of chanting she went through a health crisis relating to a problem in her back. She asserted:

“I had noticed that when I chanted purposefully with as much conviction as I could, I got positive results. There were several occasions when my back pain seemed to recede almost completely when I chanted. I felt this life force not as some abstract thing but as something tangible which gave me the strength to be more positive”⁹.

I have heard about the centrality of the benefits in members’ lives not only during personal conversations but also during the weekly meetings. But it was through the *relato* (or personal testimony) of Maria I heard in a weekly meeting how I could understand the dimension, the relevance and the power of attraction exerted upon people’s lives by the promise that the notion of benefit represents. Maria was a tall and black woman in her forties who had been married for more than ten years to a man who, as she defined, was a rogue. Maria shared with the group that she had always trusted him, and that she believed that all the money they saved together during the ten years of marriage was being used to pay the monthly mortgage of their house. After the divorce, nevertheless, Maria had an unpleasant surprise: the mortgage of the house, which she believed had been totally paid off, had not actually been. Maria found out that her ex-husband had paid only three years of the mortgage, and the rest of the money (which they had saved together along the years) was used by him “god knows for what”, in her words. The situation Maria was going through was, in her words, the biggest

⁹ Rosa, personal communication, Porto Alegre, August 2006.

problem she had ever faced in her life. “I was totally alone, with a huge debt and all the interests from the delayed payments of the mortgage,” she said. As a result of an intensive time of prayers and her lawyer’s negotiations with the bank, Maria successfully regularized her situation. “It seemed impossible, but now I finally have my own house... the dream of my own house came true!”, Maria exclaimed. Members and visitors who listened to Maria’s testimony were so amazed with the story she told, that I could not ignore that the “dream of owning a house” is largely shared by that group. During the research, I could identify that only three people out of the thirty-five members who attained that meeting owned a house. The rest of the group faced a very common reality of renting a house in the neighbourhood, reflecting in many senses the Brazilian working-class public to which BSGI directs its efforts of attraction. The *relatos* of that night revealed that the group is effective not only as a plausibility structure -here, thinking in terms of a group that constantly reinforces faith and beliefs- but also as community support. In the face of economical difficulties and unemployment, the group uses personal relations and networks established inside the local unit of the Organization to help each other, to suggest a member for a job, to spread announcements, to ask for prayers, and so on.

Although the official discourse of the Organization focuses on world peace and reinforces to the members a posture that stresses the human revolution, the instantaneous effectiveness of the prayers is used as an advertisement and is constantly divulged -by leaders, members and publications- as the main argument why *Soka Gakkai* is a religion that is worthy to be followed. The reinforcement of the discourse, present in my informants’ own discourse, was clear and constant during different *relatos*, interviews, and even in informal conversations.

The effectiveness of the mantra seems to have an important place in the discourse of the members. But not only is its effectiveness important; the focus

was also put on the instantaneous effects of the prayers and how fast things can be solved when one recites the mantra *Nam-myoho-rengue-kyo*. The effectiveness and the instantaneity of the prayers and how members and leaders divulge how worthy it is to follow *Soka Gakkai* becomes even more attractive if one is experiencing a similar situation. In the next topic I will discuss how *Soka Gakkai* tries to reach a specific public -the same public neo-Pentecostal churches struggle to recruit- and how the prosperity theology discourse is appealing to this specific stratum of society. I believe it is possible to understand many of the successes and the reasons for specific decisions BSGI has taken regarding Brazilian society when we take into account the socio-economic reality of the public they try to reach.

7. PROSPERITY THEOLOGY: AN APPROACH

The emphasis *Soka Gakkai* gives to the results of chanting and especially to the benefits is not a conduct applied only in Brazil (Metraux, 1996). What is particular to the Brazilian context, nevertheless, is that BSGI is acting in the same religious field as neo-Pentecostal churches, expressive religious movements in the country that present specific characteristics regarding the prosperity theology.

The historical process relating to the presence of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil¹⁰ resulted in a scenario described by Bastián (1986) as an explosion of competing groups. Freston (1993), who already discussed the three waves of establishment of these groups in Brazil, has reinforced the expressiveness of Pentecostalism in the country. Different authors (Fernandes, 1984; Freston, 1995) have considered Pentecostalism to be the most important movement in the changing of mentalities in contemporary Brazilian society “above all among the poorest urban

¹⁰ For more, see Bornholdt (2009).



sectors” (Freston, 1994; cited in Vásquez, 1998:76). Pentecostalism is indeed a truly popular religion in Brazil (Vásquez, 1998).

Different explanations are given for conversion to Pentecostalism in Latin America. More recently, different authors have stepped back from the broad claims about the political and economic causes of conversion and focused instead on practical reasons for conversion to Pentecostalism (Steigenga and Cleary, 2007). Regarding a different country in Latin America, Stoll (1993) argues that conversion to Protestantism represented increased security -comprehending also economic security- for potential converts during Guatemala’s civil war (Steigenga and Cleary, 2007). Mariz (1994) and Burdick (1993) focus on religious choices in Brazil’s diverse religious marketplace. According to Steigenga and Cleary (2007:17), these authors concluded that conversion to Pentecostalism “combines specific strategies for coping with poverty (based in a strict asceticism) with a policy of flexible admission (that allows for illiteracy, racial diversity, and a flexible schedule of religious worship).” Chesnut’s (1997) explanation for conversion is that converts are originally drawn to Pentecostalism when they reach the crisis stage of some form of poverty-related illness (physical, psychological, or social). Steigenga and Cleary (2007), nevertheless, argue that while these authors focus on pragmatic or instrumental explanations for conversion, others suggest that it is primarily the “spiritual, supernatural, experiential, and doctrinal elements of Latin America’s new religious competitors that draw new converts” (Steigenga and Cleary, 2007:17). According to authors such as Míguez (1999) and Cox (1996), the motivation for adhering is defined by people’s needs to find answers to transcendental questions, or a process that helps people to restore elemental spirituality.

I agree with Vásquez (1998) that in the absence of possibilities for effecting structural change due to the decline of collective actors (such as trades union,

political parties, etc.), poor people seek empowerment at the micro level. “Pentecostalism provides one of the few vehicles available for them to reach this more modest, but more realistic empowerment” (Vásquez, 1998:97). The country’s economy worsened considerably toward the mid-1980s as people began to feel the effects of the debt crisis and the adjustment measures used by the government to respond to it. Although urban poverty in Brazil is not new, the economic changes transformed qualitatively the lives of poor people. Vásquez (1998) believes that in Brazil, religion is one of the central ideological resources that help make sense of and guide action upon these constraints and pressures. “Because of this centrality, any attempt to assess the viability of a particular religious tradition (...) should take into account its effectiveness in dealing with local needs and expectations” (Vásquez, 1998:171). The national political crisis led to a redefinition of the limits of the poor, and with the relative decrease in Catholic popular actions, the search for different alternative religious utopias -such as Pentecostalism and other new religious movements- grew considerably, filling the gaps left by the popular churches (Vásquez, 1998).

7.1. Prosperity theology and the Brazilian case

One of the most effective ways in which contemporary religious groups have filled this gap is through prosperity theology. Some of the prosperity theology’s roots can be traced to the notion of the Abrahamic covenant, and the idea of blessing coming to those who are faithful to God. In addition, this gospel combines a stress on Pentecostal healing revivalism with the notion of “positive confession”, which is the idea “that the born-again Christian can make a statement in faith that appropriates the blessings of God. Critics of “positive confession” parody it by branding it as a gospel which simply states: “Name it and claim it!”“ (Coleman, 1995:167). Coleman also argues that the

stress on autonomy and personal responsibility is combined with the assurance of success, once correct faith has been attained. This notion of correct faith encourages high consumption patterns, aggressive investment and financial initiatives (since they can be assured of enough divine assistance). This is a doctrine “which advocates neither the virtues of conservation nor limitation of desire, but rather a belief in the infinite availability and renewal of resources as a reward of correct faith” (Coleman, 1995:168). Coleman (1995) explains that as a consequence, prosperity teachings stress that selfishness consists not in demanding more resources, but in being satisfied with less, since the best way to use resources is to cause the salvation of others.

In Brazil, many scholars have studied prosperity theology (Oro, 1992; Campos, 1996; Mariano, 1996; Jungblut, 1997). With the establishment of neo-Pentecostal churches in the country -the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) being the most important group- the conducts and notions relating to being a Christian (or evangelical) in Brazil started to change. They have propagated the idea that, in order to be a Christian, one must be liberated from the devil and must also obtain financial, health and business prosperity. “Have an encounter with Christ”, according to Mariano (1999), started to mean having a prosperous and happy life, and also the belief that one can count on divine intervention to fulfil even material desires.

The relation between money and Pentecostalism in Brazil has become more and more evident since the 1990s, with the rapid numerical, political, TV-mediated and entrepreneurial expansion of UCKG, which started to apply particular methods of collecting money from its followers. These methods generated polemic in the national media and among scholars (see for instance Mariano, 1999). Amid the particular techniques, there are systematic practices of challenging the followers, launching financial campaigns, promises of blessings in exchange for

donations of money, intimidation of the convert in order for him or her to give money to the Church -under the threat of a life dominated by power and satanic curse. Despite the polemic, UCKG widely associated the notion of prosperity theology to its practices, and scholars (Pierucci and Prandi, 1996) consider it today a church that has innovated by openly conceiving and associating itself to the label of a religious business enterprise that aims to offer “effective answers to the demand for effective results from its followers or clients” (Pierucci, 1997:252). Mariano (1998:7) asserts that some scholars have emphasized positive aspects of prosperity theology: “rejection of the theodicy of redemption through poverty and suffering (Mariano, 1996; Mariz, 1996) and a break in the tradition of resignation (Pierucci and Prandi, 1996)”.

7.2. *Soka Gakkai* in the context of prosperity

The discourse *Soka Gakkai* presents to the Brazilian public is very similar and resonates with many elements encountered in the prosperity theology. BSGI leaders informed me that the vast majority of the members, usually low working-class, at some point had faced economic difficulties. I could confirm this information in the places I have visited during my research, and also through the works of Pereira (2001) and Maranhão (1999). Although the struggle of the members is not exclusively related to money -but, as mentioned here, also to items such as health and familiar harmony- *Soka Gakkai* seeks to reinforce in its doctrinal repertoire elements that bring alternatives that aim to change or to soften such life conditions.

The message imbued in the group’s doctrinal body (and transmitted through leaders, members and publications) appeared to be the solution to fill part of the gap left by the economic system and by the popular churches, which once dominated the Brazilian religious scenario. The many cases I have



found during the fieldwork support the idea that *Soka Gakkai* has acted in the Brazilian religious field with the same “techniques” and using very similar arguments to attract new members. The immediate conclusion, one could affirm, is that *Soka Gakkai* is using prosperity theology -previously a method of attraction exclusive to neo-Pentecostal churches- as part of its own repertoire to recruit new members. Although this suggestion makes sense at first, it is necessary to be cautious in pursuing such a statement. I suggest an approach that indeed recognizes the similarities in the discourse of both groups and the attractiveness those elements exert upon the members’ lives, but I do not believe in a model for *Soka Gakkai* mission that follows the exact style of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil. The first aspect that supports my argument is that both movements, although having similar discourses regarding this matter, originated from different contexts and different socio-cultural backgrounds; secondly, the ways in which both groups created strategies and techniques to establish themselves in Brazil were also based on different processes. And the third aspect that reinforces the idea of prosperity theology in *Soka Gakkai* and in neo-Pentecostal groups as two similar but different things is revealed in their respective doctrines: *Soka Gakkai*, for instance, does not have any element related to *glossolalia* or healing, neither does it use elements related to corporality or demoniac possessions.

8. CONCLUSION: THE PARTICULARITIES OF BSGI’S NOTION OF PROSPERITY

In this section I want to raise the main arguments supporting the idea that the notion of prosperity promoted by *Soka Gakkai*, although resonating with the discourse of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil, presents practical particularities, specific *Soka Gakkai* features within its specific context. The first evidence that lends weight to my argument is related to the

origin of both movements -*Soka Gakkai* and the neo-Pentecostal churches- and the context in which they were created.

The Brazilian Pentecostal movement is the result of successive waves of arrival/evangelism in Latin America, including: 1) the churches of European immigrants (e.g. German Lutherans), 2) the “historical” denominations (e.g. Presbyterians, Methodists, etc), 3) the fundamentalist “faith missions” and 4) the Pentecostals (Stoll, 1990). Pentecostalism in Brazil is related to the American process of reviving fundamentalism. The beginning of American Pentecostalism is often credited to the black evangelist William J. Seymour, who led revivals in Los Angeles in 1906. Brower, Gifford and Rose (1996) argue that the Pentecostals pursued a vigorous religion that they felt would sanctify the lives of the poor. They embraced very strict rules of personal behaviour to show that they indeed practised a Christian lifestyle; “they accepted Biblical inerrancy as God’s way of defining the world; and they believed in dispensationalism and the Second Coming of Christ as the supernatural determination of history” (Brower, Gifford and Rose, 1996:40).

The international diffusion of prosperity theology is seen in the context of the widespread resurgence of conservative Protestantism in general. Martin (1990) presents a wide-ranging analysis of this phenomenon, chiefly by tracing what can be defined as the diffusion of a western Protestant ethic, via the Anglo-Saxon revivalism, to the Catholic countries in Latin America. Some of the most successful Pentecostal bodies in Brazil were missionary in origin, but more were national-led breakaways from mission-dominated churches. Stoll (1990) informs us that the first breakaway was for organizational reasons (revolts against missionary control) and the second was liturgical (in a shift to the enthusiastic form of worship). The split polarized the different groups and widened differences, and this process reinforced the techniques to market the gospel in the country (Stoll, 1990).

Regarding the case of SGI, my argument is that although *Soka Gakkai* has become international, the group continued to bear the mark of its Japanese origin. Its basic principles and practices would be unintelligible without recourse to the context of Japanese history. The Nichiren tradition in Japan has long featured a critical attitude toward Japan's ruling establishment. Metraux (2000) argues that Nichiren himself criticized government officials of his day for their support of other Buddhist sects, which denied his assertion that "the Lotus Sutra represented Japan's best chance to escape the severity of *mappo*"¹¹ (Metraux, 2000:128). Nichiren Shoshu was for centuries one of the many sects of Buddhism that seemed to coexist well in Japan, and Hurst (2000) argues that despite its insistence that it alone taught true Buddhism, the lay members associated with Nichiren Shoshu temples did not attempt to proselytize to any great extent. This changed in the twentieth century when Tsunesaburo Makiguchi founded *Soka Kyoiku Gakkai* in 1930. Josei Toda, the second president of the re-named *Soka Gakkai*, was the person who, inspired by a "true, clear vision" (Hurst, 2000), dedicated his life to spread Buddhism through *shakubuku*. Hurst (2000) argues that in post-war Japan it seemed a perfect answer to the collapse of meaning and structure that followed the defeat in World War I. "With the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was no stretch of the imagination to believe that the world had come to the age of *mappo*, the final stage of history" (Hurst, 2000:73).

Part of the reason for the enormous growth of the group, Tamaru (2000) argues, lies in the rapid process of urbanization that occurred in Japan during the post-war decades and heightened the mobility of the population. Not only were the many restraints of government legislation removed, the accelerated

¹¹ "The doctrine held that after the death of the Buddha, Buddhism would pass through three great ages: an age of the flourishing of the law, then the age of its decline, and finally of its disappearance in the degenerate days of *mappo*" (Metraux 2000:128).

process of industrialization and urbanization displaced a considerable part of the population -soil for new religious movements. As the result of the World War II, an upheaval in Japan's social, government, and economic structures had occurred. Hurst (2000) believes that *Soka Gakkai* was an answer for the "negotiation" of a new life from the pre-war ashes. Its teachings, through the simplicity in its discourse, were the life-changing solution for many millions of members. Along with accelerated trends toward "globalization" in the post-war years, many Japanese religious groups -including *Soka Gakkai*- have developed extensive missionary activities outside the country.

Although there were few *Soka Gakkai* members established in Brazil -mostly Japanese immigrants settled in São Paulo state- SGI has consigned a crucial role to Brazil in its global mission, which is to spread *kossen-rufu* to the rest of the world. Clarke (2000) pointed out that when Daisaku Ikeda launched the Brazilian district of *Soka Gakkai*, he was aware of the theological and cultural distance between Nichiren Buddhism and Catholic Christianity. Clarke (2000) states that Ikeda likened his pioneering journey to Brazil to that of the first Catholic missionaries to Japan in the sixteenth century: "As a voyage into unknown territory, without any knowledge of the culture, customs, and language of the people he was seeking to convert" (Clarke, 2000:333).

The second aspect I would like to emphasize that reinforces the argument that although BSGI has imbued elements that resonate with the discourse of neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil they do not follow the same model, is that both groups created different strategies to establish themselves in Brazil, based on different processes. Neo-Pentecostal churches have begun to penetrate social spaces from which evangelicals were traditionally absent. Freston (1997) believes that politics and the media are the reasons for a particular and highly visible penetration. Another case is sport, with the movement Athletes for Christ.



Freston (1997) also considered groups such as businessmen, executives, the military and the police, gypsies and prisoners; also, famous people from various walks of life proclaim themselves evangelicals (actors and singers; famous television newsreader, prominent politicians, etc). Freston (1997:189) adds:

“Charismatics pioneer the huge market for evangelical products (clothes and objects with religious phrases, and so on), evangelical productions (overflowing stadiums for music presentations, in styles including rock, funk and rap, as well as Brazilian idioms such as *samba*, *pagode* and *baião*) and even evangelical shopping malls”.

The process of establishment of *Soka Gakkai* in Brazil followed a different path. Since its establishment in the country, the group created particular strategies taking into account the dynamics in national politics, resulting in a image of an NGO with Buddhist principles. This “face” of social engagement is probably one of the most effective processes experienced by the group in the country in the last twenty years. It is sufficient for now to stress that BSGI, despite constantly using elements that resonate with the doctrine found in neo-Pentecostal churches, passed through a different process of establishment and used different strategies to become attractive to Brazilian society through its social activities¹².

The third reason that reinforces the idea of prosperity theology of *Soka Gakkai* and neo-Pentecostal groups as two particular phenomena is to be seen in their doctrines, such as in the lack of glossolalia, healing or demoniac possession in *Soka Gakkai*'s doctrine, as suggested previously. At the theological level, neo-Pentecostal churches have as main characteristics the spiritual war against the devil and his designates on earth, the prosperity theology, the diffusion of the idea that any Christian must be healthy, prosperous,

happy and victorious in any endeavour on earth, and the rejection of the use of saints' symbols or images (Mariano, 1996). Also, “they practise experiential, participatory worship with singing, testifying, faith-healing, and speaking in tongues (glossolalia)” (Hallum, 2003:173).

In the case of *Soka Gakkai*, it is the use of the ideology of human revolution, articulated by the third president Daisaku Ikeda, which constitutes not only the primary source of appeal but also the foundation of its principles. While the Buddhism of *Soka Gakkai* maintains the classical notion of karmic reincarnation, Ikeda “translated” enlightenment as a way of engaging the world, rather than liberation from it. The world is good or bad, they believe, as we cause it to be, and the only delusion is the idea that forces bigger than ourselves, and therefore beyond our control -“God's natural laws, or history- determine our chances for a life of suffering or enjoyment. Hell or heaven, delusion or enlightenment, are not conditions imposed on us, but states of being” (Machacek and Wilson, 2000:5).

The process of becoming a *Soka Gakkai* member indicates that newcomers are usually attracted by the friendly disposition of the people who are already members and who attribute their wellbeing to the practice of chanting. I have demonstrated (Bornholdt, 2009) that the primary activity of a *Soka Gakkai* member is to work on improving one's own circumstances in life, whilst receiving encouragement and guidance from more established members and leaders by participating and interacting in weekly meetings. It is at these meetings too where members will be presented with opportunities of involvement in worthy causes -be an effective action in the local community or simply educating the public about important social issues (even if they have never participated in any related activity). These activities are, according to my informants, not only a means for reforming the external social world, but also an opportunity for self-improvement. Machacek and

¹² For more, see Bornholdt (2009).

Wilson (2000:4) believe that “by participating in an exhibition to raise public awareness of human rights issues, one becomes more educated about these issues oneself; by participating in a musical performance or stage play, one also introduces the fine arts into one’s own life,” and indeed the participation in worthy causes is reinforced by *Soka Gakkai* as efforts for world peace. This is, according to the members, a very appropriate context in which individuals may improve themselves.

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Resumen

Soka Gakkai Internacional es una asociación budista laica, que fue fundada en 1930 por un educador japonés, Tsuneaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) y reúne hoy a más de 12 millones de miembros en 190 países y territorios. La *Asociación Internacional Soka Gakkai de Brasil* (port. *Associação Brasil Soka Gakkai Internacional-BSGI*) fue fundada en 1960 por su presidente, Daisaku Ikeda, y desde entonces ha ido expandiéndose por todo el país.

En este artículo discutiremos algunos elementos doctrinales importantes de *Soka Gakkai* -tales como el “beneficio” (*benefício*), por ejemplo- y cómo ellos se identifican con elementos doctrinales en iglesias pentecostales o neo-pentecostales en Brasil. No estoy sugiriendo, sin embargo, una relación inmediata y evidente de causa y efecto, tal como: *Soka Gakkai* desea hacerse más atractivo para los no miembros, por lo que toma prestados elementos de otros grupos religiosos de Brasil. No es una cuestión de causa y efecto, esta afirmación está lejos de ser correcta. Mi enfoque de la cuestión es que *Soka Gakkai*, de hecho, aplica como elemento central la prosperidad -individual y colectiva- que los miembros “traducen” como un mensaje doctrinal muy similar a los mensajes difundidos por los neo-pentecostales en el país. A pesar de las similitudes, sugiero que *Soka Gakkai* no sigue exactamente el estilo de las iglesias neo-pentecostales en Brasil. El papel que la Organización desempeña en este escenario es reforzar la responsabilidad de los miembros para llevar a cabo la misión del *Kosen-rufu* (la paz por la felicidad individual), centrándose en la importancia de la prosperidad individual y global.

[SOKA GAKKAI; BRASIL; NEO-PENTECOSTALISMO; BUDISMO; TEOLOGÍA DE LA PROSPERIDAD]

Resum

Soka Gakkai Internacional és una associació budista laica, que fou fundada el 1930 per un educador japonès, Tsuneaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944) i que reuneix avui més de 12 milions de membres a 190 països i territoris. L'*Associação Brasil Soka Gakkai Internacional-BSGI* (port. *Associação Brasil Soka Gakkai Internacional-BSGI*) fou fundada el 1960 pel seu president, Daisaku Ikeda, i des de llavors s'ha anat expandint per tot el país.

En aquest article discutirem alguns elements doctrinals importants de *Soka Gakkai* -com ara el “benefici” (*benefício*), per exemple- i com aquests s'identifiquen amb elements doctrinals de les esglésies pentecostals o neo-pentecostals al Brasil. No estic suggerint, però, una relació immediata i evident de causa i efecte, com ara: *Soka Gakkai* vol fer més atractiu per als no membres, per la qual cosa pren prestats elements d'altres grups religiosos del Brasil. No és una qüestió de causa i efecte, aquesta afirmació és lluny d'ésser correcta. El meu enfocament sobre la qüestió és que *Soka Gakkai*, de fet, aplica com a element central la prosperitat -individual i col·lectiva- que els membres “tradueixen” com un missatge doctrinal molt similar als missatges difosos pels neo-pentecostals al país. Tot i les similituds, suggereixo que *Soka Gakkai* no segueix exactament l'estil de les esglésies neo-pentecostals al Brasil. El paper que la Organització juga en aquest escenari és reforçar la responsabilitat dels membres per dur a terme la missió del *Kosen-rufu* (la pau per la felicitat individual), tot centrant-se en la importància de la prosperitat individual i global.

[SOKA GAKKAI; BRASIL; NEO-PENTECOSTALISME; BUDISME; TEOLOGIA DE LA PROSPERITAT]

