

## On Sōka Gakkai and Kōmeitō: A (non-Sociological) Critical Reflection around Certain Sociological Studies

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### Abstract

*The problem of epistemological and methodological status and the function of sociology is a centuries-old, complex theme of interest. Sociological studies on the religious international movement Sōka Gakkai (SG) and the related Kōmeitō political party mirror the complexity of this problem. Developing a comprehensive survey on critical literature regarding SG and Kōmeitō offers a parallel, and equally interesting, thematisation of sociology's epistemological-procedural problems. By offering concrete examples of analysis and problematisation, this paper aims to underline the importance of articulate sociological investigation, including finalised theoretical research that applies doctrinal and philosophical elements to the procedure.*

**Keywords:** Sociology of religion, Methodology, Sōka Gakkai, Kōmeitō, Human revolution

### Introduction: Sociological Significance of Sōka Gakkai

Sociological interest has given rise to much scientific research into Sōka Gakkai (SG), a Japanese Buddhist organisation founded in 1930, and the Kōmeitō Japanese political party, founded in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century, especially in fields like sociology of organisations, sociology of religions (and new religions), and political sociology. The patrimony of English-language studies goes back to the early 1960s, and has a vast and problematic heritage because it is rich in both scientific and non-scientific components. This dichotomy may be explained by the complex object of research, the ambivalence or intrinsic weakness of sociological research methodology or even individual scholars' personal attitudes. One problematic element comes from the specificity of research into SG and Kōmeitō, the particular context of the conducted research and methodological applications. Such concrete factors directly impact the quality of sociological studies. There is a scarcity of available empirical data on SG, and it is difficult to source what is there; there is even a certain distrust within SG towards 'scientific' researches and investigations, and an unconsciously-shared prejudice against SG from some scholars, due to an aggressive and pervasive anti-Gakkai public media campaign. The Aum subway attack in Japan in March 1995 played a part in this, as Levi McLaughlin underlines in his paper, *Did Aum Change Everything? What Soka Gakkai Before, During, and After the Aum Shinrikyō Affair Tells Us About the Persistent "Otherness" of New Religions in Japan*. Recalling a series of attacks against SG's honorary president, Daisaku Ikeda, he argues that it, 'indicates that new religions have been stigmatized as dangerous outsiders for as long as the modern usage of the discrete category of "religion" has held sway' (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 61). While the Aum subway attack changed many things, against Ikeda, SG and Kōmeitō were already widespread before the Aum attempt. These attacks even include scientific papers. For example, in his 1965 paper *Political Prospects of Soka Gakkai*, William Helton started in this way: 'With its rigid organizational hierarchy, its broad sociological base, and the fanatical devotion of its members, the *Sōka Gakkai* (literally, Value Creation Society) has been able to make significant inroads into Japanese politics, thereby arousing the anxiety of many elements of Japanese society' (Helton, 1965, p. 231). The persecution of Ikeda has become a paradigmatic example for today's Japanese media atrocities, as documented in Adam Gamble and Takesato Watanabe's recent book, *A Public Betrayed: An Inside Look at Japanese Media Atrocities and their Warnings to the West* (2004).

A wider, more complex problem exists involving sociological knowledge and its epistemological and methodological status and functioning as a whole, a problem which sociological studies on SG and Kōmeitō mirror. The development of a survey on critical literature regarding SG and Kōmeitō offers a parallel, and equally interesting, thematisation of the epistemological-procedural problems that face sociology. Some research in the field is rigorous and high-quality, like Karel Dobbelaere's 1998 essay, *Soka Gakkai: From Lay Movement to Religion* or Bryan Wilson and David Machacek's 2001 essay *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World* (see, also, Dobbelaere & Wilson, 1994).

Even among the papers written in English, there are those that are extremely documented and well done, such as Ko Maeda's detailed paper, *Liberal Democratic Party 2009 Defeat*, in which he considers the weakening support for Kōmeitō by referring to Hiromi Shimada's 2007 book, *Komeito vs. Sokagakkai*, or Axel Klein's 2012 critical-analytical paper, *Twice Bitten, Once Shy: Religious Organizations and Politics After the Aum Attack*. Papers like these show a varied perspective, utilising an interesting mix of substantiated and weaker elements. Other serious studies are predominantly substantiated and self-legitimised by their school membership instead of rigour and uniform methodology, richness of knowledge, or deep investigative reflection.

One example of this is Carlo Barone's 2007 paper, *A Neo-Durkheimian Analysis of a New Religious Movement: The Case of Soka Gakkai in Italy*. The Author, who mixes first hand empirical research with second-hand data and information, proposes an application of the economic theory of religion to the Italian SG as a diagnostic and interpretative method of explaining and understanding its growth. From this he derives not only a unilateral explanation 'from the inner' structural-doctrinal dynamic functionality of SG without any comparative reasoning or consideration of current cultural tendencies and existential criticisms in society, but also creates narrow and rigid theoretical-conceptual maps to which phenomena are forced to unreflectively enter. It is peculiar to see SG's internal dynamism and religious life reduced to a conform, unidimensional 'representation' of non-rational adhesion and faithful support of its members. For Barone, this positive dynamism does not need a philosophical or doctrinal explanation; it is positive because of its dynamical-emotional functionality. He writes:

(...) SG is structured as a network of small groups, where members regularly meet to share their experiences, in an informal and emotionally dense atmosphere. The interaction dynamics that characterize these meetings are weakly hierarchical and every individual is stimulated to participate actively. In a sense, this context of interaction forces each member to focus his or her attention on the discussion topic: in a small group it is very difficult to be "invisible". This shared attention is channelled into a set of sacred objects: the selves of the members, the Gohonzon, the venerated founder Nichiren, the charismatic leader Ikeda. These symbols are strongly charged with feelings of enthusiasm, respect, admiration. This ritual interaction dynamic works as a powerful generator of individual emotional energy, which makes these encounters a highly rewarding experience in itself, quite apart from the search for utilitarian benefits (Barone, 2007, p. 137).

First, in over 20 years of personal participation in these weekly meetings I have rarely seen anyone stimulate *every* individual into active participation: some people listen silently, others do not stop speaking; some participate, while others are quite, passive, or reserved; some are always present, others often absent; and some are believers that show a true veneration for Nichiren and Ikeda, while others display different degrees of maturation in understanding, faith, and personality. Second, it is surprising that Barone offers empirical information that SG's meetings are 'weakly hierarchical' without thematising the problem addressed by other scholars, that SG is hierarchical and rigid (e.g., Helton 1965). These differences in observation hint at Italian SG's controversial difficult, and unexplained experiences. Between 2000 and 2002, Italian SG underwent a crisis of authoritarian deviation (see Busacchi 2016, pp. 55-81). Third, Barone uses the term 'sacred' in a conventional way, which is imprecise if applied to SG and Nichiren's Buddhism. This reveals his superficial level of doctrinal-philosophical knowledge of Nichiren's Buddhism as well as his unreflective (yet understandable), strict adherence to the Durkheimian ABC and theory. Is it necessary to know what is conceived as 'sacred' in Nichiren's Buddhism before using it, or that typically refers to life itself and the land or place where Mystic Law is practised and life is respected and well-conducted? I think it does. Where a sociologist notices in an SG meeting that someone is 'sacralising' Nichiren, Ikeda, or other figures and leaders, he is experiencing an evident (and interesting) case of deviation and distortion of the teachings.

Many studies like Barone's reflect a degree of weakness or non-uniform research quality because of their methodological pluralism: a multi- or mixed-approach method characterised by the parallel or intertwined use of first-hand and non-original or second-hand (unverified) data or information. Some such studies depend strongly on these secondary sources. Okuyama Michiaki's paper, *Soka Gakkai as a Challenge to Japanese Society and Politics* (2010), is an example of this. His argumentative construction does not result from his scientific research, but rather a personal synthesis realised by 'randomly' following a heterogeneous procedure and a rationalised, well-organised *free* reflection. Michiaki works around extant documents, studies, and materials. Some of these materials are serious academic texts, while others are of uncertain quality, such as personal or anecdotal reports (see Michiaki 2010, pp. 87-89). Michiaki shows awareness of the fragmentary consistency of his references, but works with them nonetheless. He explains his methodology with the justification that, 'the number of the publication of serious academic works on Sōka Gakkai and Kōmeitō is still very limited' (89). He is clear and sincere in the development of his argument, but clarity and sincerity constitute only a small part of the necessary instruments and dispositions for a *scientific* study.

However, it is interesting to recognise that Michiaki's work reflects a certain dimension of the problematic complexity

of sociological research while simultaneously denouncing the difficulty of developing an empirical investigation due to SG's decrying attitude towards scientific studies. Referring to George Ehrhardt's 2008 article on the relationship between the Kōmeitō political party and Soka Gakkai members' support, he writes:

How to mobilize voters is an important question, but Ehrhardt does not seem to have reached any convincing conclusions. In his view, one of the difficulties in doing research on Sōka Gakkai and Kōmeitō lies in the lack of first-hand information and the scarcity of scholarly literature. Ehrhardt explains: "This lacuna may partly stem from Gakkai's well-known suspicion of outside investigators and its reluctance to allow access" (87).

I experienced something similar in Italy when I tried to reconstruct the previously mentioned 2000-2002 internal SG crisis of authoritarian deviation. I discovered that the problem does not lie only in the lack of access to information and small likelihood of being introduced or accepted as a non-follower, a participant observer, able to gain access to all levels of SG's religious and organisational life. Papers concerning SG have a tendency to avoid deep theoretical analysis and often intertwine data subsumed by doctrinal and theoretical documents with empirical, experiential, and communicative data. In some cases, theoretical-philosophical deepening is considered of secondary or marginal importance, even when the investigation refers to the religious-spiritual life of a movement. By proceeding in this way, even a serious scholar can fall into the prejudicial trap of an unreflective use of categories, theoretical perspective, and pre-determined or pre-configured evaluations. This presents a notable risk of an ineffective or non-concrete advancement in knowledge and understanding. In addition, a scholar's work can involuntarily mirror or become a platform for certain predominant interpretations or *narratives* around a given object of research and study. Scholars are humans; as humans, they are susceptible to sensational news and media campaigns. In Italy, an example of this is Cecilia Gatto Trocchi, an academic scholar who published in 1994 a very questionable book, *Le sette in Italia*, which evidences the abuse of the concept of 'sect' and her prejudicial vision of Sōka Gakkai and (perhaps) other religious or spiritual movements.

The case of Italian sociological studies on SG is interesting and particular. It is particular because SG's success in Italy is unique in the world for different reasons and its various aspects, and it is interesting because it mirrors the problematic circular dynamism between academic sociological research and the commitment of a new religious movement in society. Barone, echoing Maria Immacolata Maciotti (*et alii*), writes:

We should keep in mind that SG has a very positive reputation among most sociologists: its coordinators are often aware of this fact at least in Italy, and in recent years SG has actively collaborated with several sociological surveys and academic publications concerning this religious movements as well as broader religious issues. In turn, this is part of a more general activism of SG in the field of intellectual and cultural activities that, as we will see, is grounded in its origins and that constitutes an important ingredient of its successful adaptation to contemporary societies (Baron, 2007, p. 120).

This, again, presents contradictory information from sociological research on SG. Scholars like Ehrhardt and Michiaki denounce the excessive closure of SG, while scholars like Maciotti and Barone reveal the zeal of its leaders and members, underlining that it 'constitutes an important ingredient of its successful adaptation to contemporary societies'. If this is an 'important ingredient' of its success, it must be at play in Japan too, where SG's followers are in the millions. However, Ehrhardt and others denounce 'the Gakkai's well-known suspicion of outside investigators and its reluctance to allow access'.

### ***Italian SG and its 2000-2003 Crisis***

In Italy, an important line of participatory research was developed between the late eighties and nineties, led by Maciotti's work. Its mixed quantitative and qualitative approach is well-conducted with both a constant, parallel comparison between factual and evaluative data and a reflective level of meta-analysis (see Acquaviva & Pace, 1996<sup>2</sup>). Significantly, much current sociology involved in studying complex social phenomena like religious movements increasingly prefers qualitative rather than quantitative approaches. Maciotti's 1996 book, *Il Buddha che è in noi: Germogli del Sutra del Loto (The Buddha within Us: The Sprout of the Lotus Sutra)*, explicitly utilises qualitative approaches. Maciotti is aware of the margins of uncertainty inherent in this method. Using her vast experience, knowledge, and careful technique for connecting and mixing various forms of content, she continuously harmonises, rebalances, and readdresses her comprehensive work of interpretation, which is articulated between description-explanation and understanding. Maciotti offers Italy an extraordinary example of a value-neutral, professional-ethical approach that manages the complex situation of contrast within SG's internal organisational life. She was involved as a scholar and as a person of reference to whom part of the organisation turned for an intervention. After her studies in the late eighties and nineties, she became renowned as a person of reference.

Her involvement in studying SG introduced new, important elements for analysing social science methodologies. This study displayed Maciotti's comprehensive approach, moderate disposition, and capacity to penetrate facts

hermeneutically by determining an advancement in sociological studies (and offering cultural-reflective and ‘political’ support to an SG internal group. In 2002 she published her case study of Italian SG crisis with a first analysis and balance, in the sociological journal *La critica sociologica* (see Maciotti, 2002). During the same year, she gave a presentation at an academic conference of sociology (‘Tentazioni di potere all’interno di un nuovo movimento religioso. Il caso Soka Gakkai in Italia’ / ‘Temptations of Power Within a New Religious Movement: The Case Soka Gakkai in Italy’. Conference on “Religioni d’Italia. Fedi e forme di spiritualità in un’epoca di pluralismo” / Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Florence, Italy - November 30<sup>th</sup> 2002).

There are still sociological themes that are not systematically investigated: the theme of the sacred in domestic spaces; SG’s introduction of Eastern elements to Western culture; the relationship between personal, inter-relational, and collective commitments and their effects on personal emancipation and social/communitarian progress; the elements of particularity and novelty in SG as a religious and social organisation compared to other new religious groups and movements; and the relationship between theoretical and practical-dialectical bases of political and religious engagement within Sōka Gakkai. Beyond significant talks and critical discussions on the web, Italian SG has not been the subject of a new systematic and specialised comprehensive study for more than twenty years. Referring to Japan, Michiaki says that ‘the number of publication of serious academic works on Sōka Gakkai (...) is still very limited’. The same is true for Italy, and ostensibly other countries. Such a lack of knowledge does not represent a lack of sociological research interested in religious movements and organisations; it is a sign of cultural impoverishment and limited understanding of new human and social dynamics and tendencies. As mentioned, the Italian crisis is minimally if at all considered and analysed by sociologists; it is a chapter of history that has yet to be written. This lack of analysis negatively impacts SG’s internal and social life, because it summarises all its activities as expressive of a revolutionary approach for the individuals’ emancipation and for progress of the society as a whole. SG’s Buddhist doctrine emphasises the evolutionary and emancipatory process as it is applied to the moral growth of individuals and to the life of an organisation as it is committed to society.

This line of reflection does not unilaterally promote or defend the idea that science must have the last word, or that it must be considered the best, truest explanation of all phenomena. I do not endorse the scientific and philosophic credo that phenomena like personal motivations, spiritual experiences, and faith can be completely explained rationally and intellectually. The religious is understood through the religious; only personal experience within a spiritual field or context creates the intuitive and emotional conditions for a full and deep understanding of the religious. This approach to thematising the limits of scientific penetration can be generalised. If it is true that not only blacks can study the blacks (see Maciotti, 1996, p. 30), a deep and complete understanding of their past misfortunes cannot be obtained by reading their narrations and autobiographies, systematically investigating their past through historical or sociological lenses, or by (freely) mixing and applying psychological, anthropological and sociological conceptual nets and theories. To truly understand the *experience* of slavery, the *pain* of such a condition, the *martyrdom* and *fight* for black freedom, the scientist must go beyond rational attitudes and expertise.

This discourse is intertwined with another aspect of methodological interest, which concerns the importance of implementing scientific research, auto-reflective, and auto-interpretative conceits. In some cases, this can affect the process of deepening and understanding a due phenomenon. Maciotti investigated the Italian SG crisis as a case of *authoritarian deviation*, an interpretation with which I agree. However, this understanding is significantly changed by implementing the Buddhist perspective of ‘human revolution’, a general approach of active humanism that encourages and sustains human emancipation by transforming sufferings, developing inner power, and promoting progress in society. This philosophy embraced by SG invites interpretation of its crisis through the essential perspective of an *emancipatory crisis*. From an internal perspective, it becomes clear that the dynamism of an organisation’s life is an indicator of its maturity and refinement, and that its ‘defects’ and ‘malfunctions’ are vital components for further progress.

Many things have significantly improved within SG since the crisis in Italy. However, other parts of it remain problematic and complex. Although the Italian organisation has more than tripled in size since 2000, several hundreds, maybe thousands of people have reportedly left the organisation or are at its margins. There is friendliness, warmth, and enthusiasm between its people, as well as fragmentation and relationships of passive conflict between ancient or experienced practitioners and central leaders. Unfortunately, such relationships are not thematised within Italian SG. While their leaders seem content to let time pass, I would stress the importance of ethical-spiritual and social-cultural reasons to start (even 15 years later) open sessions of mutual sharing, positive confrontation, and sincere dialogue between people on all sides of the conflicts.

### ***Sociological Interpretations of the Kōmeitō***

Sociologically, the Japanese Kōmeitō Party and its relationship with SG represents a different and peculiar case study.

The Kōmeitō Party was founded in 1964, and is still operating. It originated from the Kōmei-kai and the Kōmei Seiji Renmei, which were originally were two political branches of SG. Kōmeitō refers to SG's philosophical ideals but is an independent entity; cyclic, active participation of SG members takes place in the party. Since 1960s, a large part of Kōmeitō's electorate is constituted of SG members. Michiaki rightly underlines that the two are significantly linked, which explains the high level of public criticism they receive from Japanese society, and the analytical criticism they receive from the academic world. He is also remarks on the parallel movement of progressive reciprocal detachment, which, after the defeat of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2009, has become a fact of public evidence (LDP and Kōmeitō or New Kōmeitō had been victorious coalition partners since 1999; see Shimada, 2007). Michiaki explains SG members' involvement in Kōmeitō's political affairs and following of Shimada as, 'the only occasion in which they feel the real capacity of the organisation that they belong to' (Michiaki, 2010, p. 88). He also mentions that, 'Sōka Gakkai members are far from uncritical supporters of Kōmeitō', and that, 'although Sōka Gakkai members are active in election campaigns, it does not mean that they are also active in daily political activities in support of Kōmeitō' (ibid.).

Compared to sociological studies on SG as a religious organisation, political-social studies concerning SG's relationship with Kōmeitō seem to be more aggressive, polarised, and ideologically inspired. An example of this is Daniel A. Metraux's 1999 paper *Japan's Search for Political Stability: The LDP-New Komeito Alliance*. Metraux not only uses ambiguous and inaccurate formulas, but through them he reveals prejudiced and journalistic language and methodology instead of a rigorous formulation and argumentation. This can be seen in passages like the following:

The consequent search for a governing majority at the end of the decade has led to a now-realized marriage of convenience between the LDP, which represents Japan's ruling establishment, and the New Kōmeitō (New Clean Government Party), whose political patron, the Sōka Gakkai, is a massive self-proclaimed Buddhist social reform movement that purports to represent the disadvantaged and underprivileged in society (Metraux, 1999, p. 926).

Conversely, papers which are disciplinary and thematically focused on Kōmeitō and Japan's political life tend to be more serious, rigorous and well-conducted. Examples of the latter include Maeda's 2010 paper and Willy Jou's 2010 scientific research, *The Heuristic Value of the Left-Right Schema in East Asia*, and Frances Mccall Rosenbluth's interpretative paper, *Japan in 2011: Cataclysmic Crisis and Chronic Deflation*.

The methodological and procedural aspects of social-political research provide countless points to focus on, many of which are significantly different from those referred to in sociological investigations of religious movements and organisations. This paper aims to thematise and consider, even in political-social studies on political parties and the social dynamics of politics, is the theoretical aspect: the importance of integrating and interpolating theoretical-speculative and doctrinal elements into scientific studies. This level of analysis and analytical-critical diagnosis could allow the scientific and hermeneutical process to reverse current predominant explanations and evaluations. To this end, given the problem of considering the relationship between politics and religion as an object of scientific study, the relationship between Kōmeitō and SG serves as an interesting and explanatory case study.

SG has been critiqued and attacked since the 1960s. The public criticism of SG's political activism and Kōmeitō's religious involvement increased until around 1970, when SG decided on the radical solution of completely separating the two organisations. Even this action failed to halt the criticism against SG and Kōmeitō, and they are still focused of unconstitutionally mixing faith and politics, religion and state. This is the perspective through which SG members' activism and public engagement is understood and interpreted. This perspective also constitutes a unilateral, pre-formed, and unreflective approach that negatively affects scientific researches and rigorous studies. Such studies limit themselves to superficial levels of describing human behaviour, social interaction, and utilitarian-instrumental acting with specific goals. Sociologists can verify and justify the validity of these critiques, but for the sake of the scientific knowledge they must go beyond this first level of analysis and diagnosis to deeper theoretical-speculative levels.

Despite decades of scientific research on SG and Kōmeitō, it has never been deemed necessary to develop a more articulated analysis of Daisaku Ikeda's political philosophy. He has been the president of SG since 1960, founded the Kōmeitō political party, and wrote several articles on politics and religion in the 1960s, including a significant and long essay on religion and politics. These works explained the theoretical-philosophical basis of Japan SG's involvement in politics, and through them it is possible to better define the nature and characteristics of this involvement. By developing an articulated and analytical survey of these works, researches can not only find a doctrinal and practical-ethical legitimisation of people's engagement, but they can also avoid reducing their interpretations of this engagement to the behavioural, simplistic, narration of identity groups, power, and social interactions that is distorted by instrumental interests.

Ikeda's theoretical and practical point of view on politics and political engagement is intertwined with a new humanism based on Nichiren's (1222-1282) Buddhism, which reinterprets the Lotus Sūtra as the main religious and spiritual

vehicle for human emancipation. To Nichiren, not only is all life sacred and all people equal in dignity and potential for spiritual enlightenment, but spiritual progress goes hand-in-hand with concrete, personal, and social realisation. Nichiren's Buddhism expresses a form of intra-worldly religious realisation which is not ascetic or detached from the material world: it offers an emancipatory path *through* the world by transforming sufferings, difficulties, and limits into sources of personal and social advancement and emancipation. *Human revolution* is the key term Ikeda uses to illustrate the process of spiritual-moral, practical-material, and social-political human emancipation. This philosophical approach promotes a true personal metamorphosis from an egotistic to an altruistic existence and experience of life, from spiritual weakness and moral degradation to strength and active social commitment. It advances and defends the idea that the more a person makes efforts within his/her community and for the happiness of others, the more his/her true Self emerges; the more he/she develops compassion, the more he/she becomes human. Nichiren speaks of a Buddha as a common enlightened person who embodies in his/her daily life the behaviour of a true human being.

Ikeda's political and social thoughts mirror his religious views. He focuses on peace, culture, and education and expresses a specific approach to life and society that is echoed in all aspects of SG life and activity. SG members are not simply 'activist', they embrace a Buddhist philosophy of human revolution which expresses a vision of emancipation through active humanism. In accordance with the principles of this active humanism, SG's activities focus on the three main themes of peace, culture and education. This philosophical aspect must be considered in evaluative sociological analysis that examines the progressive detachment of SG from politics. Its separation from Kōmeitō was not simply due to public criticism, which can be seen in the fact that SG has never tried to found Buddhist political parties in other countries like Italy or the U.S. Questions about Ikeda's work on political theory and political philosophy must be taken into account when studying SG: what was it, and what meaning and value does it have today?

The reasons behind Ikeda's decision to found the Japanese Kōmeitō Party in 1964 lie in his own philosophical-religious views of a humanistic religion of action, of active humanism that conceives human emancipation by developing inner power and striving for positive transformation and societal progress. Inevitably, such a vision will impact all aspects of social life, including politics. Ikeda notably evokes and actualises the Japanese Buddhist concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* (literally, 'the wondrous fusion of the sovereign and the Buddha'). A literal view of this concept mirrors the ideal of total fusion between political power and faith, between religion and politics. While this *literal* approach may have been Ikeda and SG's first interpretation and application of *Ōbutsu myōgō*, Ikeda's interpretation, as documented in his 1960s essays and articles, has always been flexible and is more related to the personal emancipation of SG's members than to the organisation's political engagement with society.

Reconsidering Ikeda's work on politics reveals a general approach that is flexible and to justify a political, organisational commitment or, alternatively, a people's commitment as citizens and humanistic philosophers of action. If today's concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* is more related to the personal dimension, it must remain a key concept that thematises the relationship between religion and politics. In his 1963 paper, *Religion and Political Ideology*, Ikeda stressed that this relationship must be harmonious and well-established; politics should be based on and inspired by a religious philosophy (i.e. Buddhism; see Ikeda, 1968, p. 16). Ikeda does not preach the unity of state and church, nor the complete fusion of religion and politics. In his long and articulated historical-philosophical research he reviews the many forms that the relationship between politics and religion has taken since ancient times, such as European Christianity. Even in the modern era this dialectic has been pursued, sometimes emerging from politics itself as in the case of Communism, a philosophical-political perspective embraced as a Pagan religion (Arnold J. Toynbee), and sometimes descending into a philosophical-ideological distorted fusion of God and State seen in Hegel's idealism. Ikeda's paper is a critique of Japanese politics, in which only the political *technique* is emphasised (7). In addition to denouncing Japan's lack of political ideals and philosophy, he offers the alternative perspective of a political system nurtured and substantiated by philosophy. A solely technical approach to politics and social life is not sufficient, correct, or right.

Every political, social, and institutional structure is created by man for the people, but we cannot sustain the idea that all improvements to these structures will directly lead to the good of each citizen. Such a view is too simplistic, as well as dangerous. Rather, by working for the good and happiness of each citizen, the structures of politics and society can be improved. Politics must therefore be inspired and guided by a humanistic philosophy as what is good for the man is good for politics; at its core, politics is an institution to serve man. This vision does not unilaterally consider Buddhism as the only philosophical basis for politics. As a Buddhist, Ikeda considers a politics inspired by Buddhism.

Not only can the concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* be considered in a generalised way ('the harmonious relationship between religion and politics', as Ikeda defines it in his political works), one can even define it, as I did, as the relationship between technique and ideal, between expertise and practical wisdom.

## Conclusion

This short, essential survey of Ikeda's political perspectives offers several elements for a rebalanced sociological analysis and evaluation of SG members' active engagement in politics and society and insight into the history of the relationship between Kōmeitō and SG. It also seeks to demonstrate how and why a sociologist should implement theoretical-speculative elements in his/her sociological research. The survey on the philosophy of human revolution offers a key to explain the peculiar fact individuated by Shimada that, 'although Sōka Gakkai members are active in election campaigns, it does not mean that they are also active in daily political activities in support of Kōmeitō'. A simplistic approach that interprets the relationship between SG and Kōmeitō as a dynamic of social power and mutual material interest is unable to explain and solve this peculiar, quasi-paradoxical fact. Surveying Ikeda's interpretation of the Buddhist concept of *Ōbutsu myōgō* reveals that his vision is flexible and focused on individual emancipation, despite its presentation in his 1960s political essays which are the theoretical bases and justifications for Kōmeitō and SG's engagement.

This paper promotes a reactualised sociological interpretation of SG, offering elements for an epistemological and methodological reflection on sociological work as scientific research. It highlights the importance of articulating quantitative and qualitative sociological investigation with theoretical research focused on doctrinal and philosophical principles and conceptions.

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