

SOKA GAKKAI PRAY FOR A RICHER LIFE

Growing Coast Sect Merges Material and Spiritual

By NANCY J. ADLER

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LOS ANGELES, March 2—Mr. and Mrs. John Meyer and their two small daughters placed their shoes at the side of the doorway, walked to the center of the incense-scented prayer room, knelt on an orange rug before an altar and started reciting the Lotus Sutra, a Buddhist religious text.

Mr. Meyer, an architect, and his family are frequent worshippers at the headquarters of the new Nichiren Buddhist sect on East First Street, in Boyle Heights, a largely Mexican-American district of Los Angeles.

They, like thousands of families who have converted to Nichiren in recent years, pray for a richer spiritual and material existence in their lifetime.

Nichiren, a branch of the 2,500-year-old Buddhist faith, attracted little Western attention until its lay organization, the Soka gakkai ("value creation society") burgeoned as the supporters of a militant political party in Japan. In 1964 the party had more than 16 million followers.

Came to U.S. in 1960

Eight years ago the Nichiren Sokagakkai movement was formally organized in this country with headquarters in Los Angeles. It disavows any of the political ramifications of the sect in Japan.

Recent statements that the movement is "the fastest growing religion in the country" turn out, on investigation, to be hard to corroborate.

Masayasu Sadanaga, vice general director and chief of Nichiren in Los Angeles, says the sect has been gaining as many as 3,000 to 4,000 members a month. But he admits that his only gauge of membership, which he says totals 40,000, is the number of scrolls (Gohonzon—the objects of worship) applied for.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the sect is growing. Last May, after a fund-raising drive, the Nichiren sect dedicated its modernistic, glass-walled Enichizan Myohoji Temple (translation: The Temple of the Mystic Law in the Benevolent Sunlight) at Etiwanda, 50 miles east of Los Angeles.

Hostile to Zen

The Soka gakkai are particularly antipathetic to Zen Buddhism, a branch that has been popular since the mid-fifties among beatniks and hippies. They say that "Zen is a selfish teaching; a contradictory one, that it goes along with laziness and creates a loss of value in everyday life."

Robert Scott Ellwood, assistant professor of the University of Southern California's school of religion, says:

"The two sects differ in spirit. Nichiren tends to be a very intolerant, fanatical kind of organization. It is a secular religion. Zen has a quiet, take-it-or-leave-it sort of approach.

"Zen believes that in Buddha nature the essence is implicit in every man at the depth of his mind—that the individual's separate existence is unreal and that the only reality is the Buddha nature, the divine presence that is the foundation of all separate existences.

"Nichiren Soka gakkai is the kind of organization where to be large, growing and booming is part of their essential philosophy. If they didn't believe they were the largest growing religion in the world it would puncture their balloon."

Mr. Sadanaga says: "Nichiren promises followers spiritual and material happiness in this life. People are told to pray for whatever they believe will make them happy. And it gets results because people naturally work hard for the things that will give them security and material gain."

Seven Syllables Repeated

One device for obtaining this end is reciprocal patronizing of members' businesses.

The Nichiren formula for acquiring what one wants in life centers on the constant repetition of seven syllables—na-mu-my-ho-ren-ge-kyo. The chant derives from Sanskrit and Chinese. Roughly translated, it is supposed to signify the essence of the universe.

The recitation may be done in a restaurant, on the free-ways, anywhere. But mostly it is done before the Gohonzon scroll reproducing inscriptions of Nichiren Diashonin.

In any case, Nichiren has a distinctive appeal for many Occidentals. Joe Landis, an executive producer at C.B.S.-TV, once a Roman Catholic, then an agnostic, joined the sect nine months ago "because I liked its ideas and concepts.

"It is more compatible with my intellectual mind than other religions," he said. "There are fewer fairy tales. I first thought it was a crazy California fad till I started studying. But it is a philosophy of life combined with religion. And there is an emotional need for religion in everyone."