

Through the SGI: A Personal Odyssey (4) **By Dr. Howard Hunter**

A professor of religious studies at Tufts University visits various SGI organizations around the world. In this issue, Professor Hunter journeys to Italy.

ALL roads lead to Rome." I could not help thinking of this familiar saying as I concluded my visits to SGI centers in India, the U.K., Mexico and Italy. I had developed a high regard for the fine SGI communities of New Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, London, Mexico City, Turin and Florence, and members in Latina, Sienna and Bhubruneshwar. It was in my final Italian destination, Rome, that I found the quintessential expression of the multifaceted reality of present-day SGI outside of Japan.

What do I mean by this? I mean that in Rome I experienced all the very positive aspects of other SGI groups I visited in Italy: a vibrant community of talented persons, a well-defined purpose, strong indigenous leadership and generous, committed and responsible members. Before discussing Rome, however, let me tell you about Turin and Florence.

My Italian visits began in the Piedmont area of northern Italy in the beautiful city of Turin where SGI leaders arranged a variety of meetings with members and non-members, including a distinguished Roman Catholic expert on the new religions of Italy. Professor Massimo Intravigne welcomed me to his home and to his library specializing in contemporary religions throughout the world. The professor informed me that his research on Soka Gakkai International in Italy led him to the conclusion that it was an organization well within the mainstream of Italian society. He views SGI-Italy as an organization appealing to a cross section of the Italian population and able to work effectively within Italian culture to present and to promulgate its message.

I found it especially interesting to learn from Professor Intravigne that there are 50,000 Buddhists in Italy, 17,000 of whom are members of SGI. I also thought it was a real testimony to the strength of SGI that a notable scholar was of the opinion that SGI has an excellent opportunity to contribute significantly to mainstream Italian life and thought.

ONE evening, members of SGI-Turin showed a video of a recent culture festival which highlighted the talents of SGI members in the area. Presented before standing-room only crowds, the entire program was prepared through the voluntary efforts of members. Not only were the audiences enthusiastic, but the members also found the experience very encouraging. The festival was a good example of the way in which SGI encourages artistic expression. In music, song, dance, dramatic and comic acts, stage and scenery design, as well as in many other ways, the members expressed an unmistakable joy. Several members told me that participation in such festivals was a rich and meaningful part of their membership in SGI. These festivals also bring SGI to the attention of the communities in which they are held.

My impression of Turin was so positive that I could not imagine it would be equaled elsewhere. I was wrong. In Florence, I again heard responses from members that

similarly revealed the dedication they shared for the religion, philosophy and social activities of the SGI. Members from a wide-ranging spectrum of Italian society spoke to me individually and in groups about the ways in which their involvement with the SGI contributes to their well-being. In interviews which were sometimes intensely moving, I learned how the SGI had provided many members with practical methods to deal with the difficulties of their lives in positive and productive ways.

One member of a distinguished Florentine family described the changes in his relationship with his father over a period of years. He told how, when his father was facing a serious illness, and finally a terminal illness, the teachings of SGI Buddhism brought both him and his father to keep insights about life and their relationship that culminated in a profound sense of acceptance and reconciliation. The memory of the poignancy of this member's testimony will remain with me forever. Another member from a quite different part of Florentine society spoke simply of his problems with substance abuse and how he was able to overcome addiction through the practice of SGI's philosophy and his membership within its supportive community. Many others spoke of the central place that SGI-Florence holds in their lives. A significant asset to their programs is their headquarters in a villa that has been beautifully restored by SGI members.

While in Florence I was privileged to meet with two members of the faculty of the University of Florence whose expertise involves studying social groups within Italy. One of them had become familiar with SGI several years ago and is still quite interested in the organization as a subject of academic inquiry. Though reserved in expressing judgments, he noted that he had some difficulty in identifying the specifically religious aspects of SGI. He appeared to equate religious activities with the more devotional and contemplative practices with which he was familiar, and not with the activism and practical commitments that he viewed as distinguishing characteristics of SGI. One could scarcely come away from visits to SGI in Florence and nearby Sienna without being impressed by the considerable number of students among the SGI membership. Not only do they bring energy and vitality to the organization but they also give one reason to believe that SGI is building a strong foundation for the future.

NEXT I traveled to Rome where I ended my visits to SGI-Italy on a truly high note. There, I again had the opportunity to have extensive interviews with a remarkably diverse range of individuals and groups. Meetings with the founders of SGI-Rome reminded me that within a short period of thirty years the teaching and practice of SGI have grown from the groundwork of two individuals, a capable Japanese man who arrived in Rome with no connections and a woman doctor who is greatly admired by members of SGI-Rome. Together these two dedicated individuals began the SGI organization in Rome and remain important figures in it.

It was in Rome that I had an experience I had nowhere else during my visits. Before beginning my travels to Italy, I was asked whether I would be willing to meet with a newly formed special interest group of homosexual members within the larger organization. I replied that, of course, I would be happy to do so that I considered it a privilege to be able to discuss with these persons their deepest personal concerns. When I met with members of this group, I learned at once that several members had experienced rejection, alienation and severe self-doubt. Of course, not all of these members had experienced such a sense of despair but all of them had suffered to one degree or another. They uniformly testified that it was thanks to SGI and its teaching of self-acceptance, self-understanding and the unique worth of each individual that

they had gained a positive view of their lives. They were able to put their concern for their sexuality in perspective and to avoid being preoccupied with it. It was genuinely moving to hear these testimonies. It was also heartening to hear very strong statements of support for these members throughout the general membership.

IN Rome, the leaders arranged for me to meet with university scholars who are familiar with new religions in Italy, especially SGI. Like Professor Intravigne, these scholars view SGI as integral to the larger Italian social order. Its values are compatible with the humanistic emphasis found in the teachings of major social institutions of Italy. A distinctive aspect of SGI Buddhism is its emphasis on locating the source of authority for one's life and actions within the divine that one has within, one's self. Throughout my visits to several countries, it was most interesting for me to ask members this question regarding the source of authority in their lives. To an almost totally unanimous degree, the answer was the same: "The source of my authority is the Buddha nature that is to be found within myself."

One of the distinctive characteristics of the young members I interviewed in Rome was the frequency with which they expressed a troubling sense of alienation. Some felt estranged from traditional religious institutions that too often left them dissatisfied with what they see as a disparity between the ideals and the actual practices of these institutions and their leaders. Some were alienated by the political system, which they felt to be too often corrupt and unresponsive to human needs. While such expressions are scarcely unique to Italian youth, the frequency of expression of such alienation was notable. This was especially so in relation to attitudes they held toward their fathers, whom they often described as excessively authoritarian and lacking in sensitive understanding of their problems. Also, nowhere else in any of my visits in India, England and Mexico did I hear so many references to problems young persons were having in the area of close personal and romantic relationships. Older patterns of behavior and standards of propriety seemed all but abandoned and the resulting lack of clearly stated and widely accepted values left many of these young people confused and perplexed.

My visits to SGI-Italy confirmed the impression I had gained throughout my visits to other countries: that SGI has a strong student membership; that SGI leadership and membership are indigenous to the local society, though Japanese founders and leaders are respected and appreciated; that SGI groups have a distinct openness and engagement within their respective societies; and that there is a freedom of movement in and out of SGI organizations. There is an ongoing discussion in SGI communities about the most appropriate form the organization should take and the most effective methods of presenting SGI's philosophy and practice. My visit to Italy was a fitting climax to this initial series of visits to SGI globally. I have nothing but admiration for the SGI members I have met, and I am confident that SGI is a religious movement with a bright international future. □

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