

Questions and Answers on the Temple Issue Why Did the SGI Support the Priesthood?

Q: If the priesthood has been misguided all along, why did the SGI support it in the past?

A: Historically, the SGI supported the priesthood on the premise that both parties shared a mutual commitment to the realization of kosen-rufu. Nichiren Shoshu, the Fuji School, was the order of Nichiren Buddhism that doctrinally recognized the Daishonin as the true Buddha of the Latter Day and appeared to revere the Gohonzon as the embodiment of the oneness of the Person (Nichiren Daishonin) and the Law (Nam-myoho-renge-kyo). It was the Buddhist school to which the first Soka Gakkai president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, was introduced, and through which he and the second president, Josei Toda, became aware of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings as revealed in the Gosho.

It was through the spread of his teaching that Nichiren Daishonin sought the spiritual empowerment of ordinary people for the purpose of building a peaceful society; this is the concept of his religious ideal called kosen-rufu, literally, to "widely declare and spread." Kosen-rufu is indeed the ultimate goal of the Daishonin's life and of his teaching as seen in his statement:

If Nichiren's compassion is truly great and encompassing, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo will spread for ten thousand years and more, for all eternity. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 272)

And:

Only I, Nichiren, at first chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, but then two, three and a hundred followed, chanting and teaching others. Likewise, propagation will unfold this way in the future. (MW-1, 93)

In truth, however, the propagation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and the Daishonin's philosophy had become quite stagnant by the time Makiguchi and Toda encountered it. Nichiren Shoshu itself was an impoverished and tiny Buddhist denomination by that time. Nevertheless, Makiguchi and Toda devoted themselves to its development and to making the Daishonin's prediction in the above passage a reality.

This does not mean, however, that they unquestioningly followed the instructions of the priesthood or the high priest. This was clear at the outset, when both Makiguchi and Toda refused the high priest's instructions to follow a governmental order during World War II that would have them incorporate worship of an amulet dedicated to the Shinto Sun Goddess into their daily practice. Both refused because they were deeply aware that this violated the Daishonin's teachings and spirit; that the Daishonin himself would never have compromised Buddhism in this way. Based on the "Twenty-Six Admonitions of Nikko Shonin" — Article 17 of which reads: "Do not follow even the high priest if he goes against the Buddha's Law and propounds his own views" — they were convinced that, as the Daishonin's disciples, they must take the same stance. Both were arrested for their stance and Makiguchi died in prison, a martyr to his convictions.

Both men had grown deeply aware of the Daishonin's real spirit and intent, and lived that spirit even at risk to their own lives. As a result, they were also acutely aware of which priests within Nichiren Shoshu shared that spirit and commitment and which did not.

Even after the war, Toda frequently and forcefully chastised those priests who had forgotten the Daishonin's spirit, were lax in faith or practice, or looked down on the members and complained about donations. Nevertheless, he was committed to protecting

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and nurturing Nichiren Shoshu, which he viewed as the most orthodox school of the Daishonin's Buddhism, and he dedicated himself to encouraging the development of priests who could devote their lives to kosen-rufu and the members.

This, too, has been SGI President Ikeda's conviction. Despite the awareness that there were many priests within Nichiren Shoshu who hated and resented the Soka Gakkai, so long as the priesthood as a whole supported the movement for kosen-rufu, the Gakkai devoted itself to the temple's protection and development.

The Soka Gakkai had over the years been aware of abuses or problems with specific priests. At times, the Gakkai pointed out such abuses, thereby meeting resistance and pressure from Nichiren Shoshu.

In the late '70s in particular, a group of younger priests became dissatisfied at the rate at which new temples were being donated by the Gakkai. They were growing impatient, because there were more of them than new temples to which they could be assigned as chief priests. They also railed against what they perceived as the Gakkai's view of priests and laity being equal. Some even held that the Gakkai had no right to receive contributions or build its own facilities for its members, that all donated monies should be handed over to the temple, and advocated a hard line of sanctions to put the Soka Gakkai in its place.

Pressured by the demands of these priests, however unjust they may have been, the Soka Gakkai cooperated with Nittatsu, the high priest of the time, and took a humble stance, publishing an "apology" that had to be pre-approved by the priesthood and endeavoring over the ensuing years to build hundreds of new temples. Nittatsu had always supported and shown understanding toward the Gakkai in the past, though he was often pressured by priests within the temple and others who felt enmity toward the organization. The Gakkai's concern was to maintain its harmony with the priesthood and avoid any undue harm or trouble to the members that might result from further sanctions or denunciations by disgruntled priests.

It was not until Nikken, the high priest himself, together with the executive leadership of the head temple, hatched and began to implement their plan in late 1990 to attack the SGI that the Gakkai began to admonish the priesthood as a whole for its actions. In addition, since the head temple had begun to twist interpretations of the Daishonin's teachings to justify those actions, the Gakkai began to refute their erroneous interpretations in the spirit of admonishing slander.

Even then, it was the priesthood and not the Soka Gakkai that perpetrated the ultimate act of separation: In November 1991, having rejected repeated requests for dialogue, they indulged in the final self-destructive act of excommunication, in effect removing themselves from the body of believers who had contributed most to their development and who were working hard to make the Daishonin's teachings known to the world.

It had finally become clear that the priesthood and its leadership were oblivious to kosen-rufu and the believers' needs, and were instead relentlessly denouncing, attacking, defaming and conspiring to do damage to those dedicated to that goal. The Soka Gakkai thus found itself with no choice but to strongly admonish Nichiren Shoshu and call for Nikken's resignation.

Seven in a series

Key Points:

- **The SGI supported the priesthood in the past with an expectation that the priesthood would live up to the spirit of Nichiren Daishonin.**

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- **While aware of shortcomings within the priesthood, the SGI protected the priesthood, supported and developed it. This was in line with the Daishonin's teachings about creating harmony among all believers, lay and clergy alike, and because the stance of the high priests before Nikken supported the Gakkai and its movement for kosen-rufu. However, Nikken later shattered the harmony created between the priesthood and the SGI to pursue his personal agenda, cutting off the organization.**

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