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Department's Final Yehan Numata Reading Group  
with Dr. Levi McLaughlin

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# A Reflection on McMaster's Religious Studies Department's Final Yehan Numata Reading Group with Dr. Levi McLaughlin

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The Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University wrapped up its 2015-2016 Yehan Numata Buddhist Studies Program on Friday, April 8, 2016. Our Department hosted Dr. Levi McLaughlin from the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at North Carolina State University. Dr. McLaughlin's research interests include Chinese and Japanese religions, methodologies and theories employed in Religious Studies, and the intersection of religion and politics in Asia. Dr. McLaughlin shared with us a portion of his forthcoming book manuscript, titled *Soka Gakkai: Buddhism and Romantic Heroism in Modern Japan*. He shared many personal anecdotes while discussing his research, and our reading group quickly became acquainted with the intriguing world of Soka Gakkai (the "Value Creation Study Association") in Japan.

Dr. McLaughlin developed an interest in Soka Gakkai while living and studying in Japan. He discovered that this new religious movement was under-studied and that depictions of this group were polarized, with

tabloid representations and Soka Gakkai publications accounting for most of the information available to scholars. Dr. McLaughlin subsequently spent many years in Japan observing and participating in Soka Gakkai activities, particularly within the musical sphere. There are several orchestras in Tokyo that are administered by Soka Gakkai. Dr. McLaughlin initially joined the Young Men's Division as a violin player and continued as a violin instructor upon his graduation from the Division. He also became a doctrinal instructor for the movement, which involved taking examinations similar to those taken to become a member of the civil service. Through direct participation in Soka Gakkai activities, Dr. McLaughlin gained access to the voices scholars do not usually hear. These voices were extremely valuable for his research.

Dr. McLaughlin faced some methodological challenges while conducting his research in Japan. For example, he noted that it is not sufficient to treat Soka Gakkai as a form of Buddhism. Although Soka Gakkai grew out of a lay organization associated with the Nichiren Shōshū tradition, the Soka University campus in Japan displays no evidence of belonging to a Buddhist group. Upon visiting this campus, Dr. McLaughlin noticed there were several statues of Western heroic figures. These statues correspond with the Soka Gakkai aesthetic, which encompasses nineteenth century Western music, artwork, and literature. Dr. McLaughlin commented that Soka Gakkai may owe a portion of its success to this linkage with the past, or the "tried and true wisdom of years gone by."

It was not ideal for Dr. McLaughlin to become friends with upper-level bureaucrats of Soka Gakkai for research purposes, because they would have funneled his access to information about the organization. These administrators were determined to erase Soka Gakkai's history from around the time of World War Two, which was characterized by the movement's refusal to submit to state control and subsequent government repression. For instance, Soka Gakkai's leaders refused to enshrine

the deity tablets that were distributed by the Grand Shrine at Ise, which supported State Shinto during the war. Dr. McLaughlin was particularly interested in studying rare materials published by Soka Gakkai during this period. A group he referred to as “Gakkai watchers,” or non-members who had spent many years of their lives collecting Soka Gakkai publications helped him to procure these invaluable resources. The organization also obtained a negative reputation for its aggressive post-war proselytization campaign, yet it succeeded in gaining many members and continues to thrive.

In this study, Dr. McLaughlin tried to uncover the reasons for Soka Gakkai’s popularity. Why is this organization so successful? Why are there so many members? He discovered that the organization was and still is particularly appealing to the disenfranchised. Those who fell through the cracks during Japan’s post-war economic miracle could gain access to education, political involvement, and employment through Soka Gakkai. Dr. McLaughlin alluded to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “Cultural Capital” as another way in which Soka Gakkai has appealed to marginalized people. Soka Gakkai membership provided (and still provides) access to cultural pursuits that would not otherwise be available to people including music, theatre, and art.

Soka Gakkai focuses heavily on proselytization. It publishes a daily newspaper and many other print materials. Websites, music and visual media are other ways of reaching out to members and non-members. For long-time members, leaving the organization is complicated. Indeed, Soka Gakkai is much more than a religious tradition for these members; it permeates all aspects of their lives. People grow up attending Soka Gakkai schools, delivering Soka Gakkai newspapers and attending Soka Gakkai-sponsored cultural events. Nevertheless, Dr. McLaughlin reminded us that Soka Gakkai members are critical, self-aware people, and there is a large amount of diversity within this group. Despite Soka Gakkai’s

emphasis on proselytization and the challenges associated with leaving, members have not been deceived into joining this movement.

Dr. McLaughlin's research uncovered a wealth of information about Soka Gakkai. Regrettably, I have only been able to provide a very brief introduction to his work here. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank-you to Dr. McLaughlin for visiting our department and acquainting us with his fascinating research. For those readers who are interested in exploring some of his previous work, please visit his [website](#).

Sadly, our 2015-2016 Yehan Numata Buddhist Studies Program has concluded. I look forward to attending, and writing about, next year's lectures and reading groups. Thank you to all of the scholars who visited our department and shared their fascinating research with us.