

INTERVIEW

Questions Everyone Has To Ask Themselves

Dr. Jane Hurst, who teaches philosophy and religion at Gallaudet University, has studied the SGI-USA for many years. SGI President Ikeda introduced her paper "A Buddhist Reformation in the 20th Century: Causes and Implications of the Conflict Between the Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood" in a speech last year (Sept. 5, 1997, World Tribune). Last Oct. 22, she spoke with Bill Aiken, SGI-USA vice general director, Jeff Farr, World Tribune associate editor, and Yoshi Nagaoka, Seikyo Shimbun staff writer, at her office in Washington, D.C.

WT: Nichiren Shoshu has recently decided to re-excommunicate SGI members. The first excommunication was in 1991.

JH: From an outside point of view, this is just a legalistic, structural issue. For me, legally, they certainly have the right to decide who is in and who is out as a member. It is characteristic of religious groups that are more rigid to have stronger boundaries. So to want to have a very strong sense of who's in and who's out is important to them. The stronger that line, the more you know that there's a rigidity within the group.

And that rigidity may serve a purpose for them. If you look at groups like the Amish in America, who don't use electricity and live a very simple life, for them, they have to have a boundary to keep their organization together. From an outside point of view, why would you? From the inside point of view, it's understandable. I want to honor their desiring to do that.

But while in some ways it's just a legalistic issue, the real issue to me is that each Soka Gakkai member has to ask, "What is the best way that I can embody and practice and propagate Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism?" Even to ask that question from the priesthood view is wrong, right? Because the priests would tell you how. The moment you even ask that question, you're already not part of what the priesthood wants.

Their hope is that people will give up their freedom to make that choice. But I don't think the excommunications have much relevance for Soka Gakkai members. It's just not an issue.

It depends on your attitude about what makes salvation. Is salvation being part of the right organization? Or is salvation devoting your life to a correct practice? Those are two different things. There may be some interlacing of those things, but they really are two different things. So for the members, they have to ask if this is what fits. And they can pray, and they can chant, and they can decide. And that's oddly the freedom of being outside the boundaries of the priesthood. In a way you couldn't have exactly asked the question that way before 1991. It's just funny, isn't it?

WT: If we were your neighbors, and you were trying to explain to us what the differences are between the two sides, what would you say?

JH: There are two organizations that share a dedication to the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. However, they have radically different perspectives on how best to embody and practice and spread those teachings. One is a far more traditional and conservative and hierarchical view.

The other is part of what looks like, I hope, a movement toward global connection and understanding, and a more — every word you use that's the opposite of *conservative* - wouldn't come out right — a more creative and more dynamic approach. The SGI is part of the modern world. When you look at the problems that we face as a world, it seems to be

grappling with them on a broader level than the priesthood. If you look at the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, it's amazing!

By now it's clear to me that if I were an SGI member I personally couldn't give up that freedom. But I've always been a rebel. I never liked tradition. You know, I always liked to smash tradition. That's the '60s thing still in me.

WT: How do you think this issue speaks to the future of religion?

JH: There will always be people who want to have hierarchical religion. My concern is not so much the hierarchy itself but that form. I am very willing to honor people who know more than I do, who have something to teach me, who are my betters in some way, who have something that I can get. And thank heavens they are a rung above me, so I can learn something. Then I am not stuck with what I already know.

But when that becomes a formal structure that also says, "And by the way, you're not as good as I am," then no! So if the priests are only priests by virtue of having a tradition behind them, if anyone who enters into that tradition is a priest, then no. Essentially we are all — *equal* isn't even quite the word — we are all citizens of this planet. And by virtue of that we are all equal.

Of course, some of us have different roles. But I don't like to make a hierarchy out of those roles in the ultimate sense. Maybe it's OK in the limited sense that somebody could teach me how to drive if I don't know how to drive. But in the ultimate sense, of course not. You just know how to drive, and I don't — that doesn't make you a better human being.

The priests can't imagine people having the free will to dedicate themselves to a cause from their own inner knowing. They think it has to be imposed from above. There are people who have no idea that you could sit, you could pray, and that your prayer could say, "This is how I must be," and you would follow that. There are people who just don't think that's how you do it. They think you tell people the right way, and then they do it the right way, and then everything's fine.

WT: In your paper, you mentioned a lot about the changes the SGI-USA has made since 1990. That part of the paper was encouraging to us, being people who are right in the middle of it and don't always see the bigger picture — like how far we have come.

JH: Well, this is funny, but — I said this to my class today, and it's so embarrassing — I was a cheerleader in high school. I got out there and yelled, "Go team!" And I think there's a part of me that, every time I see people who are courageously challenging what someone else says is right with what their heart says, is impressed by that courage and wants to yell, "Go team!" I see that courage in the SGI. I see the courage to get beyond the original structure of the SGI, beyond the way the communities were organized, beyond the form of all those layers.

It's actually a kind of nice form of organization, but I admire the SGI looking again at the form to see what it's actually supposed to be doing. And enlivening that form — it's something that I didn't think would happen. I am glad I was wrong. I'm glad I was wrong.

Because it just seemed like that was going to be the way it was. And the progress now is the result of individual members taking it on. It's the courage of each person to ask those questions of him- or herself. In some ways the split is helpful, because each person has to ask, "Where do I stand?"

I do also want to say that I am very impressed with SGI President Ikeda's response to the dedication of the membership, because he has not made himself into the supreme object of worship. I've seen many a religious leader where that was not the case — leaders of all kinds of religions, of all kinds. And people find it very easy to worship the leader. That certainly is the way to avoid your own responsibility. "He's so great. I could never do that

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much.” Then you never will.

So for SGI members to maintain both that admiration for him and that sense of personal responsibility, equal to his own — and which *he* would say is equal to his own — is very impressive. It’s impressive that he has created that atmosphere, and that he’s done that very gracefully, very graciously.

But I think the secret of it is that this wasn’t hard for him. It seems to me that what he did is what every member does. He sat down and prayed. He said, “How should this be?” He spent hours, days, months and years chanting, and he’s following the answer that he received. He couldn’t do otherwise. It wouldn’t even be a question to him of doing it otherwise. It just wouldn’t be.

So I’m still a cheerleader, I guess.

WT