

Priestly or Pragmatic: Two Approaches to Religion
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“A priesthood of all believers” was one of many thought-provoking ideas presented by Dr. Jane Hurst, professor of Philosophy and Religion at Gallaudet University during a Culture Department Renaissance lecture at the Washington, D.C. Community Center on May 17. Dr. Hurst has observed the SGI-USA since the early 1970s. Her book, *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai in America: The Ethos of A New Religious Movement*, was published in 1992 (New York: Garland Press).

Dr. Hurst compared Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation of the mid-1500s to the recent split between Nichiren Shoshu and the SGI. The Protestant Reformation occurred during a time of rapid social changes that caused individuals to adopt a more global and progressive view. The Roman Catholic Church remained focused on ritual, mysticism and adherence to a hierarchical connection to a spiritual source. The laity, meanwhile, was increasingly engaged with the world. The Church excommunicated Martin Luther and his followers, resulting in the present day Protestant/Catholic split in Christianity.

Similarly, the SGI and Nichiren Shoshu conflict is not only about issues of doctrine, Dr. Hurst said. When located in an increasingly global environment, it’s about the nature and purpose of religion itself. Out of this conflict are emerging “priestly” and “pragmatic” orientations to religion, concepts that Dr. Hurst defined.

A “priestly” orientation emphasizes a connection to the sacred only through mystical ritual that is tradition-focused and hierarchical, Dr. Hurst said. Nichiren Shoshu displays this orientation, she said, by:

- denying the individual’s ability to connect to Nichiren Daishonin and the Mystic Law without the aid of a priest; and
- maintaining a hierarchical, closed, un-democratic and ethnocentric structure.

A “pragmatic” orientation, according to Dr. Hurst, supports the individual’s faith connection to the sacred with the aim to make the present-day reality of believers better through that faith. The SGI-USA displays this type of orientation, she said, by:

- emphasizing the individual’s responsibility to attain enlightenment through personal faith, practice and study; and
- creating an organization based on democracy, diversity and openness.

A pragmatic orientation, said Dr. Hurst, allows the laity to become their own priesthood, what Martin Luther called “a priesthood of all believers.” The benefit of “a priesthood of all believers” is that each individual forms a direct connection to a spiritual source.

Dr. Hurst was followed by Dr. Robin Meader, SGI-USA member and assistant professorial lecturer in English at the George Washington University. The weakness of “a priesthood of all believers,” she said, is that the lack of authority can corrupt religious purity. Members should be careful that their study of Buddhism does not deviate from Nichiren Daishonin’s true teachings. Dr. Meader cited Shakyamuni’s words, reminding people to always “return to the text” and “embrace not the person, but the law.”

“It was good to have a third party perspective on the priesthood–Soka Gakkai split,” Stuart Washington said. “When I first heard about the priesthood issue, I wondered how does this relate to me? Now I understand that if you see someone doing something wrong, you have to stand up and fight.”

Jimi Lyons said: “Scholars around the world are giving their perspectives on the temple issues, and it gives you a feeling of solidarity. What we are going through now will ripple through government and religion and will be noted when people look back.”

Dr. Hurst encouraged the members to “walk the talk” of our Buddhist philosophy and take responsibility for turning the poison of the conflict with the temple into the medicine that will power the dynamic growth of the Soka Gakkai.

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