

As we see it

Review of the 6 Sept 2004 *Forbes* articles 'Sensei's World' and 'Death Wish'

Forbes is a trusted business magazine that reportedly reaches some 5 million readers worldwide yet, unfortunately, chose to publish two articles containing numerous factual errors and mischaracterizations of Soka Gakkai in Japan, SGI and affiliated institutions. Though several Soka Gakkai and SGI-USA officials were interviewed and provided ample documentation for our statements, no Soka Gakkai or SGI-USA official was quoted in response to the allegations made against us by the *Forbes* authors in their articles.

We feel the *Forbes* readership as well as the general public deserve to see our critique and evaluate the merit of these two articles for themselves.

• "Sensei's World" by Benjamin Fulford and David Whelan (127-32)

"Sensei's World: Soka Gakkai, a strikingly wealthy Japanese sect, tries again for U.S. glory with a splendid new campus. Daisaku Ikeda's unaccountable empire can thank lax treatment of the nonprofit world" (127, title and blurb). "Religious entities ... enjoy all the benefits of tax exemption without any requirement that they say what they are up to. Soka Gakkai is a shadowy case in point" (127, col 2).

The constituent member-organizations of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), including the Soka Gakkai in Japan and SGI-USA, as well as affiliated institutions are legally and financially accountable in accord with the domestic laws of their respective countries in which they are incorporated.

In addition, Soka Gakkai and SGI have numerous publications in which their activities are explained in detail. Mr. Ikeda's activities and the text of his speeches are regularly featured in these publications.

The article seems to attack the privileges afforded to tax-exempt educational and charitable institutions by attacking primarily a foreign and little known Japanese organization, Soka Gakkai, and its affiliates in the US. The article does not, however, address why societies find it within their interest to offer tax relief to such groups. Here is one: these groups contribute to the welfare of society by nurturing the spiritual, cultural, educational and sometimes material well being of many of its citizens. Similarly, the Soka Gakkai has a long history of empowering and speaking out on behalf of many in Japanese society who are otherwise without a voice.

"Ikeda, now 76 and president of Soka Gakkai International, the sect's global umbrella, claims 12 million followers and has amassed an empire..." (127, col 2).

Mr. Ikeda does not "claim" 12 million followers. There are 12 million SGI members. Contrary to the authors' characterization of the SGI as Mr. Ikeda's "empire," Mr. Ikeda neither controls the assets of SGI organizations nor influences how SGI organizations comply with the tax laws of their respective countries.

"A nasty split from Nichiren Buddhists set off a cycle of alleged violence, blackmail and intimidation. ... But yet-darker allegations have been made" (127, col 3).

The split was with the Nichiren Shoshu sect. Soka Gakkai members were and continue to be Nichiren Buddhists. The Soka Gakkai has not been involved in "violence, blackmail and intimidation," and no such charges have ever been brought against the organization.

"... its tithing demands and its commercial activities" (127-28).

There are no "tithing demands." All contributions are strictly voluntary and are not a requirement of membership.

"A thousand spiritual centers worldwide include a site worth \$6 million near New York City's Union Square" (128, col 1).

Six million dollars is a lot of money, but it hardly seems an extravagant amount for any assembly center in downtown Manhattan. How does that compare with even modest churches in the same area?

"In the U.S. a church can lose its federal tax exemption for getting into politics. Soka managed to get around a similar restriction in Japan, where Ikeda has built up a political party, New Komeito, that helps the long governing Liberal Democrat hold power" (128, col 1-2).

According to the US Internal Revenue Code (IRC), if a 501(c)(3) organization gets involved with partisan political activity or attempts to influence legislation, it risks losing the right for their contributors to deduct donations from their income taxes and its own tax-exempt status. No such privilege exists for Japanese religious organizations.

According to New Komeito's views on politics and religion in Japan: "Japanese postwar governments have consistently interpreted Article 20 [of the Japanese Constitution] as barring the state and its agencies from exercising their vested authority to intervene or participate in religion on any occasion. The historical context of this question in Japan is clearly different from the issue of separation of religion and state as discussed, say, in Europe. The problem in Japan has been that the state has historically controlled or co-opted religion, the latter traditionally exploited out of the self-interests of the former. Thus, the primary concern of the Japanese Constitution has been to guarantee the independence of religious organizations and freedom of religious belief, protecting them from state interference" <<http://www.komei.or.jp/en/about/view.html>>.

"The pre-accreditation means that for the past year American undergrads at Soka U-- which reported to the IRS that its assets exceed \$740 million -- have been eligible to obtain up to \$23,000 in federal Stafford loan over the course of their education. Needy recipients can get up to an additional \$4,000 year in Pell Grants" (128, col 2)

According to an SUA statement: " *Forbes* incorrectly stated that SUA students received federal loans during the past year. The 2004-2005 academic year is the first in which SUA students from the U.S. are eligible for federal loans. *Forbes* is a highly respected magazine, specializing in finances. It perplexes SUA that the reporters failed to understand that a university's assets -- which obviously include the value of our two campuses and restricted operating and scholarships endowments -- do not preclude the need of many students for federal scholarships and loans. The authors failed to mention that half of SUA's students come from the U.S., and half come from 32 other countries and that no student is asked about ability to pay or religion during the admission process. *Forbes* did not report that over 82% of SUA students are receiving some form of financial aid."

"What are Ikeda's aims? Five years after gaining command of Soka Gakkai, he told a Japanese writer: 'I am the king of Japan; I am its president; I am the master of its spiritual life; I am the supreme power who entirely directs its intellectual culture.'" (128, col 2-3)

Fulford attributes this statement to Mr. Ikeda but offers neither source nor context to substantiate it as "Ikeda's aims." James White -- whom Fulford and Whelan reference twice -- provides a context important to note in his 1970 book *Soka Gakkai and Mass Society* (229):

This isolated remark has been widely cited as an example of megalomania; it conflicts sharply with the favorable personal impression he makes, which certainly has nothing of pomposity or hubris in it. It seems likely that his answer was meant as a realistic

appraisal of his position as it is defined doctrinally and perceived by a great many of the faithful; wide reading of his speeches and essays and personal conversations lead me to believe that the following statement more accurately reflects Ikeda's temperament. On being told that some believers regard him as a divine figure, Ikeda answered,

'I am very touched at their respect, but they go too far. It would be dreadful if such a misconception should spread among the members....

'Can a person such as a I ... be thought of as a living god or a Buddha-incarnation? It is sheer nonsense! ...'

"In the years since, 'world peace' has been the sect's mantra. New Komeito promotes pacifism in Japan. Representatives of the sect have worked the UN and other official venues touting international harmony and goodwill--and usually Ikeda" (128, col 3).

It is not necessarily a bad thing to promote world peace, international harmony and goodwill. We have mounted exhibits, initiated interfaith dialogue, collaborated with other groups on peace-education initiatives, etc. Mr. Ikeda puts forth annual proposals for peace.

"Followers mount a traveling show equating him [Ikeda] with Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi" (128, col 3).

Dr. Lawrence Carter, dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel of Morehouse College, who conceived the "Gandhi, King, Ikeda: A Legacy of Peace" exhibit, makes this statement:

The exhibition does not equate the three gentlemen's losses; it does not equate their suffering and it doesn't equate their achievement. Neither does it equate the effect that each of them respectively had on their nations or the world. It parallels their lives and commitments to peace and nonviolence. It spotlights Ikeda's efforts to institutionalize philosophies of nonviolence related to Gandhi, King and Thoreau. The exhibit also includes others internationally, interracially and interreligiously who qualify for the designation "Ambassadors of Peace." The exhibit encourages viewers to consider civil society leadership models that are not interested in the use of military weapons and war as viable first options to conflict transformation.

"Believers are encouraged to be 'many in body, one in mind.' This means 'You have to make sensei's [teacher's] heart your own. You have to fulfill [Ikeda's] dreams instead of your own,' maintains Lisa Jones, a former aide and follower who ghostwrote an Ikeda book and now maintains a Soka-doubter Web site." (128, col 3).

"Many in body, one in mind" is an expression frequently used by Nichiren, the 13th-century Buddhist reformer. It means that while each person is different, he/she should practice Buddhism with the same faith as Nichiren's. Each member of SGI is encouraged to pray and work for his/her own dreams as well as for the happiness of all humankind and peace of the world. This expression never means replacing one's dreams with someone else's.

Ms. Jones once worked as a member of the editorial staff on SGI-USA publications but did not "ghostwrite" any of Ikeda's books; nor was she an "aide" to him. No factual checking on this point was made with us.

"'world peace,' which will be achieved when one third of the world chants, one third merely celebrates Ikeda, and the other third doesn't care..." (130, col 1)

This interpretation of world peace has never been made by the SGI or Mr. Ikeda and is a distortion of a principle introduced by the early Indian Mahayana scholar, Nagarjuna, in the *Mahaprajnaparamita-shastra*. The city of Shravasti, where the historical Buddha Shakyamuni stayed during the rainy season, was said to have had a population of 900,000. According to Nagarjuna, one-third of the people had seen the Buddha, one-third had heard of him and one-

third knew nothing about him. This principle is understood within the Nichiren tradition as being the ratio that produces a level of influence to create a peaceful society.

"Ikeda has enticed Mikhail Gorbachev and Henry Kissinger into numerous discussions" (130, col 1).

Fulford and Whelan present no basis for their characterization here, because there is none.

"More idealistic or benign than sinister and manipulative? ... Soka University files an IRS form; the organization behind it doesn't" (130, col 1).

It is Soka Gakkai -- not SGI-USA -- that gives the largest donation to SUA. Soka Gakkai is a Japanese religious corporation, and therefore Soka Gakkai's earnings within Japan are not taxable in the U.S. In Japan, Soka Gakkai files tax returns statements and pays taxes under Japanese tax laws.

"So the Ikeda-related wealth here is virtually untouchable" (130, col 3).

The assets referred to are those of SGI-USA, Soka University or the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, respectively. None of them are assets under the control of Daisaku Ikeda.

"In a July op-ed in the *Asahi* newspaper, Koji Ishimura, a professor of tax law at Hakuho University, argued that Soka's political activities were an abuse of its status as a religion. 'The influence of a ruling party that relies on a specific religion's organization to for its power base is growing stronger,' wrote Ishimura, who called for Soka's donations to be taxed" (130, col 3)

In the Japanese-language article, Mr. Ishimura did say, "The political influence of a party that relies on a specific religion's organization to form its power base is growing stronger," but did not specify Soka Gakkai and did not call for Soka Gakkai donations to be taxed. Both the Japanese government and constitutional scholars have held that religious organizations enjoy the freedom of political activity. Freedom of political activity by religious organizations is part of the freedom of speech guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of Japan.

"... Ikeda threw a scare into the Japanese insurance industry in the 1960s ..." (132, col 1)

In his book, James White says that Soka Gakkai claimed that eight million members participated in the campaign [to raise funds for Sho Hondo], giving an average of 4,500 yen each (US\$12.50 at the exchange rate of the day.)

"Meanwhile the tax-favored billions continue to roll in, almost entirely outside the purview of authorities anywhere" (132, col 3)

Each of SGI's constituent organizations, including the Soka Gakkai in Japan and SGI-USA, as well as affiliated institutions are legally and financially accountable in accord with domestic laws under which they are incorporated and operated. Tax-exempt status has been granted only pursuant to domestic tax laws. Favorable tax treatment has never been pursued illegally by an SGI organization anywhere in the world.

"After an extended development fight, the 660 acres [of SUA-Calabasas] today may be home to only half a dozen linguistics students destined for job as language instructors for Japanese Soka emissaries" (132, col 1)

According to an SUA statement: "Over the past ten years graduates of SUA Calabasas have gone on to teach English to students in Brazil, the Philippines, China, Taiwan, India, Korea, Canada, the U.S. and Japan. The Calabasas campus is fully utilized with its facilities and faculty providing expert English language instruction to more than 500 visiting students during any academic year."

"Soka U insists it is an independent, nonsectarian school not even as religiously influenced as, say, Brigham Young or Notre Dame universities. ... At least majority of Soka U's trustees have direct Soka Gakkai connections. Today 70 % of Matriculants are Soka Gakkai members" (132, col 1).

According to an SUA statement: "Forbes correctly stated that SUA promised to be a nonsectarian university with a first-rate library and renowned secular faculty. It correctly stated that our library, track and art gallery are open to the public. It correctly stated that SUA has an 81% faculty retention rate and that SUA received national pre-accreditation last year only two years after opening. Forbes neglected to mention (although the reporter was given the information more than once) that SUA, Aliso Viejo has one of the highest first year student retention rates in the country -- over 96% in each of our first three years. Forbes failed to mention that half of SUA's students come from the U.S., and half come from 32 other countries."

"But Soka Gakkai newspapers and other publications, filling a prominent shelf in the Soka University library -- named for Ikeda -- all feature Ikeda's interpretations of Buddhism: To wit, achieve world peace and democracy by becoming one in Soka and chanting" (132, col 3).

During his visit to SUA, Fulford said that he understood the library carried books mainly from Ikeda. So we took him on a tour of the library stacks where it was clear that the library's collection was first-rate, extensive and mainly academic, covering a broad range of subjects and authors. There was only one small portable bookcase near the elevators with a paper sign that read "SGI Publications". This library visit is reported by Fulford through the above statement.

"An initial goal of 1,200 students remains a ways off. Has the academic friction been a roadblock? The university says more hiring and building await full accreditation, which it expects soon" (132, col 3)

According to an SUA statement: "From the very beginning SUA announced that it would only admit about 100 students each year as we grow slowly to our eventual planned capacity of 1200."

"The campus also sports a security camera network rivaling that of any casino" (132, col 3).

According to the SUA website, "SUA operates 64 video cameras strategically placed around the campus to monitor building entrances and major thoroughfares"
<<http://www.soka.edu/page.cfm?p=24>>.

• Sidebar "Death Watch," by Benjamin Fulford (130)

"When police arrived at the scene, they recognized her and, even though she was still alive, kept her from getting medical help, according to her daughter, Naoko Asaki."

According to the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's concluding report which determined there was no evidence of murder, the councilwoman refused rescue by ambulance immediately after she was found on the ground. When the police arrived at the scene around 10:45 p.m. on September 1, 1995, they immediately called for an ambulance. The councilwoman was taken to a hospital at around 11:25 p.m. The findings of the public prosecutor's concluding report were carried in the Japanese-language newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*, in the April 15, 1997 edition.

It is worth noting that the councilwoman's daughter also filed a lawsuit against the Tokyo Metropolitan Fire Department and the emergency personnel who took Asaki to the hospital, claiming that they were responsible for her death. The lawsuit was dismissed.

"She says that when her mother died, the police tried to have her body immediately cremated."

The councilwoman passed away on September 2nd, and the public prosecutor at the Hachioji Branch of the Tokyo Public Prosecutor's Office requested an autopsy. The autopsy was performed that same day. There is no evidence that the police tried to have her body cremated.

"The prosecutor's initial investigator, Masao Nobuta, and the officer in charge of assigning him, Hiroshi Yoshimura, were both members of the sect. They said Asaki's death was suicide and linked it to her being questioned about the shoplifting of an item of women's clothing."

The initial prosecutor assigned to the case was Masao Nobuta, who happens to be a graduate of Soka University in Japan. The prosecutor who decided the final disposition not to prosecute the case, in April of 1997, and the deputy chief prosecutor who made the public announcement about the final disposition were not members of Soka Gakkai.

"This explanation ... became the focal point of a civil court crossfire of defamation cases, several won by Soka."

Soka Gakkai has won all of these cases, either as plaintiff or defendant.

"Autopsy evidence, allegedly withheld by police, was presented to show large bruises under her arms, suggesting she had been dragged."

It has been the practice of the Japanese police not to disclose evidence or facts in cases that were not indicted.

There were subcutaneous hemorrhages under her arms, but this does not suggest that she had been dragged, only that her arms might have been injured when she fell.

"One court ruled inconclusively on suicide."

All of the courts have found that there was no conclusive evidence of murder.

"Soka spokesmen say the religious affiliation of the investigators in the case was a random circumstance and that, in any case, others reviewed their work."

Nobuta, the Soka graduate, was only involved in the initial phase of the investigation. After he was transferred to another district, a year before the final disposition of the case was announced, a prosecutor who is not a member of the Soka Gakkai was assigned to the case, and he was replaced by another prosecutor [also not a Soka Gakkai member], who decided the final disposition of the case.

"Probes of the death petered out after Soka's Komeito party joined a coalition government in Tokyo."

The final disposition not to prosecute the case was decided and announced in April of 1997. It was more than two years later, in July 1999, that the Komeito joined the coalition government.