

TOPICS IN TRANSLATION

# TRANSLATION AND RELIGION

Holy Untranslatable?



Edited by Lynne Long

## Chapter 15

### **When East meets West via Translation: The Language of Soka Gakkai in Italy**

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The cartoon in Figure 4 is taken from *Il Nuovo Rinascimento*, the official magazine of the Italian chapter of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI), which is the Japanese Buddhist organisation founded upon the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. The cartoon depicts the setting of a typical Buddhist meeting, or *zadankai*, a Japanese word that roughly means 'to sit together, pray and have a peaceful discussion'. It is also the very same word that Italian practitioners of the Soka Gakkai's form of Buddhism use to describe their meetings in Italy. The apparent impossibility of finding an Italian equivalent of this (and many other foreign words related to the practice of SGI Buddhism) is symptomatic of the difficulties one encounters in Italy when examining the language and practices of a 'foreign' religion. The 'Carmen la Candela' cartoon strip was published monthly in *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* from 1999 to 2001. The magazine's boards of editors, however, decided not to publish this particular cartoon, for fear it would offend the sensibilities of Catholic readers.

The cartoon features Carmen the Candle and Vincense the Incense Stick, two ever-present objects found on every Buddhist's altar, and they are commenting upon the behaviour of Italian practitioners at a *zadankai*. An invisible voice-over begins by urging the attendees to stop employing Japanese religious terminology. 'Italian', it says, 'is a beautiful language, rich in history and tradition. I therefore suggest that we return to our cultural roots and start speaking Italian!'

The assembled practitioners agree and voice their approval by means of the following bursts of enthusiasm:

- 'Holy Virgin, that's a very good idea!'
- 'It's a miracle!'
- 'Ohhh! Thank Heavens!'

- 'Good God, I can't believe my ears!'
- 'Ah, the ways of the Lord ...'
- 'By all the Saints in Heaven!'
- 'Thank God! It's about time!'
- 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary, how true!'

The voice-over then reacts to this outpouring of support: 'Hmmm, maybe we should wait for better times'. To which Vincense the Incense Stick comments: 'Yeah, and God help us!'



Figure 4 'Carmen la Candela' strip cartoon

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Over the past 30 years, Italians have increasingly found themselves interested in a broad range of Oriental religions. This phenomenon is particularly worthy of study in as much as it has taken place in what is generally considered to be the Roman Catholic country par excellence. Indeed, as Italian religious practices have deviated from the standard and homogeneous traits long associated with the official model proffered over the centuries by the Catholic Church, the issue has been widely analysed from sociological as well as from theological points of view (Burglassi, 1968, 1980; Calvaruso & Abbruzzese, 1985; Cipriani, 1989; Marchisio & Pisati, 1999). In this chapter, I propose to investigate this phenomenon with respect to what it tells us about language and translation. Put somewhat differently, I argue that once Roman Catholicism's relations with other foreign religions are examined from a Translation Studies perspective, it then becomes possible to understand more fully the nucleus of what Italians call their 'religious sense'.

In this respect, it is particularly important to emphasise the resistance that the Italian word *religione* offers when applied to a non-Christian belief system. Jacques Derrida suggests two possible etymological derivations of the Latin word *religio*: the first stems from the Ciceronian tradition, *relegere* from *legere* (to harvest, gather), while the other, following Lactantius and Tertullian, is based upon *religare* (to tie, bind) (Derrida & Vattimo, 1995). Those interpretations overlap to build a strong link between men and a supreme deity. This is evident in the Italian definition of the word *religione*: 'Il rapporto, variamente identificabile in sentimenti e manifestazioni di omaggio, venerazione e adorazione, che lega l'uomo a quanto egli ritiene sacro o divino' (Devoto-Oli, 2002), in which the acts of 'homage, reverence, adoration' are of particular relevance.

The semantic reverberation of this one word, considered both from its etymological origins and from its long-standing use as a synonym for Roman Catholic dogma and for the Roman Catholic Church itself, renders it largely impermeable to any attempt to accommodate references to alien practices and rituals within its meanings.

Two very distinct Buddhist presences flourish on Italian soil today. First, there is the Unione Buddisti Italiani (UBI) an association that represents about 35 groups from different traditions, such as Indian, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. In the year 2000, the UBI numbered 50,000 members. Second, there is the Italian Soka Gakkai, a Japanese-inspired form of Buddhism founded upon the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, which includes by itself some 30,000 members (*La Repubblica*, 2000).

The teachings of the Soka Gakkai are a blend of several elements. The basic source is the work of Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282), a Japanese

monk who, having studied the teachings of Shakiamuni Buddha via translation from Chinese, came to believe that the Lotus Sutra was the highest, and the only valid, scripture. That is, he associated the creed that the Buddha-nature is immanent in every aspect of reality and intrinsic to every living creature with the Lotus Sutra. Faith in this Sutra, he wrote, is the only effective means of salvation in an age (the Latter Day of the Law, or *Mappo*), in which the authentic teachings of the Buddha have fallen into general decay (Soka Gakkai Translation Committee, 1999).

Nichiren introduced several novel elements into Buddhism. The first is the *Gohonzon*, or object of worship, a *mandala* of symbolic representation of the universal, eternal Buddha, inscribed by Nichiren himself. The second is the *daimoku*, the invocation of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. Nichiren taught that one who takes faith in and chants *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* to the *Gohonzon* will definitely attain the same life condition of Buddhahood as he himself possessed. But these doctrinal aspects could not alone account for the enormous popularity that this religion achieved worldwide following the conclusion of the Second World War. Until the beginning of the last century, in fact, the doctrine was confined to Japan and restricted to the various temples established by a number of sects that grew after the death of Nichiren. For a strong organisation to be built, it was necessary to wait until a series of three outstanding figures assumed a strong leadership role both in spreading Nichiren's teachings and in gathering around them adepts from all social strata. The turning point occurred in 1930, when the scholar and teacher Tsunesaburo Machiguchi founded the Soka Gyoiku Gakkai (Value-Creation Academic Society).

Dissatisfied with the prevalent educational approaches, Makiguchi elaborated a pedagogical system based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin. The religious core of Gakkai ideology was reinterpreted and adapted for the masses by its second president, Josei Toda, who was deeply determined to spread the organisation throughout Japanese society. The third and current president, Daisaku Ikeda (born in 1928) further developed the doctrine into a planetary movement for peace and education. Charismatic and calmly authoritative, Ikeda expanded the organisation outside Japan. He succeeded in the task of simplifying the doctrine, thereby rendering it more palatable and appealing to the Western world. During this process of cultural translation, the international organisation became more and more centred on the cult of Ikeda's personality: Ikeda's writings on guidance are considered equal to the teachings of Nichiren himself and are similarly viewed as official repositories of truth. In the early 1990s, the Gakkai was solidly established in more than 150 nations, ready to sever the knot with the Head Temple and its clergy and to become an entirely lay

organisation. When the organisation arrived in Italy, its peculiar features were perfectly suited to elicit curiosity and interest. Its organisation and appearance as a 'religion without priests and clergy' proved to be an irresistible oxymoron, and its protean adaptability fascinated people who were in search of new religious horizons as well as those who were interested in a secular form of spirituality.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism first entered Italy in the early 1970s. At that time, Mitsuhiro Kaneda and his young wife Kimiko left Japan to settle in Rome. Neither of them spoke Italian. With barely any means, they decided to immigrate to Europe for religious reasons, namely, the desire to propagate Buddhism. During the same period, other Japanese followers of the SGI arrived in various European cities to devote themselves to the same task. As we shall see, each nation has had a profoundly linguistic response to the arrival of a hitherto foreign religion. And yet the data suggest that cultures with a religious background that is not Roman Catholic have been able to accommodate via translation a greater number of religious terms within their language, whereas Catholic countries have proved less able to adjust their language to an oriental religion. Italy, in particular, has the highest number of untranslated words and concepts (Table 2). Notwithstanding this fact, the same figures show that the number of people converted to Buddhism across the years is much higher in Catholic countries than in nations with a Protestant or secular religious heritage.

Together with the Kanedas, the only other member to transplant and, in fact, translate in *sensu strictu* Soka Gakkai Buddhism in Italy in the 1970s was an Italian woman, Amalia Miglionico, who previously lived in Japan, where she had practised Buddhism for a lengthy period of time. Miglionico became the SGI's first official translator from Japanese, and she still supervises most of the translations published in *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* and *Buddismo e Società* (another magazine published by SGI that examines religious issues in Italy). It is thanks to this three-person nucleus that an interest in the 'exotic' religious practices of the Soka Gakkai first began to grow in Italy. The initial steps may have been painfully slow, but the spread of Nichiren's Buddhism in Italian society has been nothing short of astonishing.

From the 181 SGI members registered in 1975, it had grown to some 30,000 members by 2000. This membership occurs within a highly structured organisation known as Istituto Buddista Italiano (IBIS), which is diffused throughout the entire country and is governed by a tightly woven, hierarchical network of leaders. The organisation was established in 1981. Eight years later the Italian State recognised it as a bona fide legal charity (Ente Morale) entitled to the same privileges as other religious charities. Its