This chapter discusses the contemporary characteristics and historical development of Sōka Gakkai, or the 'Value Creation Study Association', a group that began in 1930s Japan as a society of educators and grew into a postwar religious mass movement. Sōka Gakkai is now not only Japan's largest collective of religious adherents; it is most likely the largest mass movement in Japanese history. Today, the group has a self-declared membership of 8.27 million households in Japan and more than 1.5 million adherents in 192 countries abroad under its overseas umbrella organization Soka Gakkai International, or SGI.1 Recent scholarship challenges these figures and points to a figure in the neighborhood of two percent of the Japanese population.2 Yet even allowing for the certain

1 The most detailed sources for Sōka Gakkai membership numbers are the group’s website and its published public relations materials. See Sōka Gakkai, “Gaiyō,” and its own Sōka gakkai seikatsu hōkoku (創価学会生活報告) issued by the Sōka Gakkai Public Relations Bureau at the organization’s headquarters in Shinanomachi, Tokyo. Assessing the Gakkai membership is otherwise difficult, as Sōka Gakkai does not report its membership to the national government, and its membership statistics do not appear in the Shūkyō nenkan (宗教年鑑), the annual report on religious affiliation released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). Scholars of Japanese religion have pointed to other ways to assess Sōka Gakkai’s membership. Shimazono Susumu cites a survey of 32,000 people in Japan on religious affiliation taken by a research institute within Japan’s national broadcast company NHK in 1978 in which a total of 3.3% of respondents claimed that they were Sōka Gakkai members. This figure appears to have been (and to still be) in line with a realistic assessment of the number of Gakkai adherents in Japan (see Shimazono 2003: 18–19). More recently, Michael Roemer has reassessed quantitative accounts of religious membership in Japan to provide the most sophisticated view to date of individual religious belief in contemporary Japan. He finds that 4.32% of respondents to surveys conducted from 2000 claim to believe in ‘Buddhism’, 3.19% are followers of a ‘new religion’, and 1.87% self-identify as Sōka Gakkai adherents (see Roemer’s chapter in this volume).

2 While other large-scale Japanese religious organizations may have huge numbers of registered members, few are exclusive sects with adherents whose personal identities are rooted in group membership. Though Shintō organizations and traditional Buddhist sects, such as Jōdo Shinshū (浄土真宗) and Zen (禪) denominations, claim registered memberships with numbers that approach Sōka Gakkai’s, most of those registered maintain parishioner status purely as a formality. Sōka Gakkai’s membership numbers also far exceed those of other so-called ‘new religions’; Risshō Kōseikai (立正佼成会), also a lay Nichiren Buddhist movement, claimed 4,585,652 Japanese members in 2005, and its predecessor Reiyūkai just over 1.6 million. The only other non-state Japanese organizations that are comparable with Sōka Gakkai in terms of numbers, active memberships, and group solidarity are labor
exaggeration of its reported membership figure, possibly by more than an order of magnitude, and even taking into account frank admissions by members that only roughly twenty percent of their stated membership can be characterized as ‘active’, one can still surmise that every person in Japan is either acquainted with a member, related to a member, or is a member of Sōka Gakkai. Few other organizations of any type in Japan have come close to matching Sōka Gakkai’s success in building a distinct, autonomous, and centrally-administered group with committed members in every community, at every socioeconomic level and in every sphere of vocational, social, and civic life.

Sōka Gakkai is commonly understood as a lay Buddhist movement. The group began as a lay association under the temple Buddhist denomination Nichiren Shōshū. Nichiren Shōshū, or ‘Nichiren true sect’, follows the teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282), a medieval Buddhist reformer. Trained primarily in the Tendai tradition, Nichiren broke away early in his life from established temples to preach that only faith in the Lotus Sūtra (held to be the historical Buddha Śākyamuni’s final teaching) and the practice of chanting the title of the Lotus in the seven-syllable formula namu myōhō renge kyō 南無妙法蓮華経 (known as the daimoku 頂目) were effective means of achieving salvation in mappō 末法, the degraded Latter Days of the Buddha’s Dharma. Nichiren reviled other Buddhist traditions, castigating their ‘false sects’ and ‘evil monks’. He petitioned the military government in Kamakura to abandon support of other temples and otherwise challenged the established order of the day, leading the authorities to exile and attempt to execute him. In willingly undergoing persecution, Nichiren established a model of Buddhist martyrdom that has inspired religious clerics and lay followers since the thirteenth century. Nichiren’s strength of conviction, his triumph over adversities, and his lifelong attention to lay adherents have all contributed to a thriving, centuries-long tradition of Nichiren-based Buddhism in Japan. In addition

3 My observations to date match the figure of 20% attendance/participation mentioned to me independently by members in both Kantō (Tokyo area in the east) and Kansai (Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto region in the west). The local district meetings (chiku zadankai 地区座談会) that I attended as a participant observer in Chiba Prefecture (next to Tokyo) between 2000 and 2004 reported just over 90 members and had between 16 and 20 regular attendees.