

Phillip HAMMOND and David MACHACEK, *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. 234 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. \$87.00. ISBN 0-19-829389-5.

THE SOKA GAKKAI is the largest and most enduring of the many Asian-based religions that have found a haven in the United States since the 1960s. Although the American branch of Soka Gakkai (SGI-USA) has experienced some decline in numbers since the 1970s, it has found a niche within American society and is likely to endure for many years to come.

Philip Hammond, D. Mackenzie Brown Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and David Machacek, who also teaches at UC-Santa Barbara, provide a superb analysis of the history and theology of the US branch of the Gakkai in their recent book, *The Soka Gakkai in America*. Hammond and Machacek assert that SGI-USA has been successful because it made the transition from being a religion of immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s to being a competitor in the American religious market. While several other new religions of Eastern origin experienced sudden popularity in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s and then declined almost as rapidly as they had grown, SGI-USA achieved stability, growing into a religious alternative for thousands of Americans. American society experienced a wide variety of changes in the 1960s, which made the social environment far more receptive to religions of Eastern origin precisely when changing immigration statutes opened the country's doors to a flood of immigrants from Asia. There followed not only a rise in the number of immigrants from Asian countries, but also an increase in the number of Asian religions in America.

The authors assert that these religions arrived at a time of fundamental change in America's religious landscape. Americans were becoming increasingly mobile, not only geographically, but also socially. America saw the rise of a "meritocracy" where one's position in the social order depends on what choices one makes in one's own life. There was also an awakening to religious pluralism: "While some traditionalists held fast to Protestantism as the 'true' religion, others, perhaps the majority, came to see that religion could take many forms, each entitled to exist in America" (p. 174). Religion became less a community defined by shared history, doctrine, code, and rituals, and more an individual way of being in the world. Moreover, pluralism led to the emergence and spread of what the authors label "transmodernism, a desire for religion oriented to healing—the self certainly..., but also human relationships with the environment, and relationships with the divine" (p. 175). The ascetic impulse in transmodern culture is played out in the mundane world, but it relocates the rewards for hard work and ethical behavior to the mundane world of the here and now.

The authors introduce in depth the many Americans who joined SGI-USA.

Young and socially mobile, they have typically experienced a time in their lives when they had the freedom to explore the new variety of religious alternatives available in the United States. Well-educated participants in the new class of information and service occupations, they accepted an ethic of success and actively sought upward mobility.

Soka Gakkai's emphasis on taking responsibility for one's own life and taking action to achieve personal goals no doubt spoke to the experience of young professionals in the new meritocracy. At the same time, they were socially progressive—world travelers, interested in and exposed to foreign cultures, their inward, self-orientation balanced by a global consciousness. Religiously, as well, they turned inward, focusing on the inner spiritual realm. In these many ways, converts to Soka Gakkai in America have been pioneers in a era of dramatic cultural change. (pp. 176–77)

My own research of Soka Gakkai chapters in Southeast Asia and Canada indicates that many of its more recent members are upwardly-mobile, well-educated young professionals. They find the Soka Gakkai's views that one is responsible for one's fate and that through hard work one can change one's destiny to be very appealing. The Soka Gakkai empowers the individual to "make the impossible possible." This is in marked contrast to more traditional religions that pin one's fate in the hands of a transcendent deity or outside religious figures. The idea that one is master of one's destiny and that one can overcome any set of problems appeals to the young professional not only in Singapore, but in Montreal and San Francisco as well. Thus, the findings of authors Hammond and Machacek are remarkably similar to what I have found in my own research.

I have concluded that another key reason for Soka Gakkai's successes in Southeast Asia and elsewhere is the independent indigenous nature of each chapter. National and regional chapters of SGI are lead and staffed by local leaders who work hard to adapt SGI to the customs and traditions of their native culture. Each chapter is quite independent of all others and there is very little control from Tokyo. Hammond and Machacek support these findings by showing that SGI-USA is quite American in its structure, leadership, and actual practice of religion.

Hammond and Machacek have based their conclusions on the results of an exhaustive survey that they sent to hundreds of SGI-USA members. Their reliance on the survey is thus the basis for both the book's strengths and weaknesses. Their data and interpretations allows for an excellent analysis of who SGI members are and the nature of their collective social worldviews. We even learn such obscure data that they voted 7 to 1 for Bill Clinton in the 1992 election.

Unfortunately, the authors very often tend to get lost in their sea of data. The reader is flooded with so much minute information and sociological jargon that it is hard for him to get a broader picture of Soka Gakkai as a whole. Another problem is that the information is too statistical. SGI-USA is made up of many individuals, but we in no way get to know them as real people. Perhaps some personality profiles or extensive interviews would have given us a more human look at SGI-USA and we would have a clearer longer-lasting impression of who joins and why.

Despite these apparent flaws, *Soka Gakkai in America* represents the best modern study of SGI-USA. The research is based on a broad spectrum of members and is carried out in considerable depth. The authors base their

conclusions on their data rather than on any preconceptions. They also provide a superb portrait of the history and theology of both Nichiren and the Soka Gakkai in Japan. *Soka Gakkai in America* comes highly recommended.

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