

David A. SNOW, *Shakubuku: A Study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Movement in America, 1960–1975*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993. xiv+339 pp. \$67.00. ISBN 0-8153-1137-0.

Jane HURST, *Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism and the Soka Gakkai in America: The Ethos of a New Religious Movement*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992. xv+376 pp. \$53.00. ISBN 0-8153-0776-4.

Sōka Gakkai, the largest lay Buddhist movement in Japan, began in 1937 as a lay organization of Nichiren Shōshū, one of several denominations tracing its origins to the Japanese Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222–1282). Sōka Gakkai has been much studied in the context of the Japanese New Religions,

and the acrimonious schism that divided it from Nichiren Shōshū in 1991 has drawn even more attention to the organization. Less well known, however, is Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), branches of which operate in 115 countries outside Japan. The two volumes under review represent the first book-length participant-observer studies of the Sōka Gakkai movement in the United States, originally known as NSA and recently renamed SGI-USA.¹ Using contrasting methodologies and focusing on different periods in NSA's history, these sympathetic yet balanced accounts offer insights into how a Japanese Buddhist lay organization has fared in an American context.

David Snow's study covers NSA from 1960 through 1975. His fieldwork was conducted in Los Angeles from January 1974 through July 1975, during NSA's most vigorous period of expansion. Established in 1960 chiefly as a religious support group for the Sōka Gakkai brides of American GIs, NSA soon grew beyond its early constituency, facilitated by strong popular interest in alternative and non-Western religions during the late 1960s and 70s. By 1974 it claimed some 200,000 members, the majority of them young, non-Japanese Americans. Snow's study, which takes a sociological approach, focuses on the process of recruitment and the obtaining of nominal conversion during the period studied. Hence his title, *Shakubuku*, which in NSA usage means not the strict refutation of "wrong views" on the basis of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as Nichiren employed the term, but any form of direct or indirect proselytizing. The practice of *shakubuku*, says Snow, is what "renders NSA a true social movement rather than a cult" (p. 248) in that it constitutes a vehicle by which NSA acts upon the larger society.

The worldview underlying and motivating NSA's propagation efforts is described in a chapter on "goals and ideology," which could stand alone as an effective course reading. According to Snow's account, NSA views the world as decadent, beset by grave problems, and characterized by misery, conflict, and uncertainty. While Snow sees this outlook as characteristic of new religious movements, it can also be understood in the context of traditional Buddhist notions about the world, as expressed in the *Lotus Sūtra*: "The threefold world is without security/Just like a burning house." NSA's analysis of the problem and its proposed solution are, however, distinctive. Humanity's troubles are said to stem from two interrelated causes: karma, or the past actions of individuals that have brought about their present condition; and the alleged powerlessness of existing religions and philosophies, which, being one-sided and incomplete, lead people astray. The sole solution in the Latter Day of the Law (*mappō*) is said to lie in Nichiren Shōshū's central practice: chanting the *daimoku* or title of the *Lotus Sūtra*—"Nam[u]-myōhō-engekyō"—as Nichiren taught, with faith in the Gohonzon ("object of worship"),

¹ At various stages in the organization's history, the acronym NSA has stood for Nichiren Shōshū of America, Nichiren Shōshū Academy, and Nichiren-shōshū Sōka-gakkai of America. The acronym SGI-USA (for Sōka Gakkai International, USA) was adopted in 1991. This review will use "NSA" except when referring only to the organization at present.

the mandala that Nichiren devised. (The Gohonzon is enshrined in individual members' homes and revered as the embodiment of the universal Law and essence of the *Lotus Sūtra*.) This practice, it is said, enables anyone to access inherent Buddhahood and thus break the chain of negative karmic causality, achieving positive reform of character ("human revolution") and, eventually, enlightenment ("absolute happiness"). Since the individual and his or her surroundings are understood to be nondual, social and environmental problems are seen as the sum of all individuals' karma. Thus, as a growing number of people chant the *daimoku* and realize their inherent Buddha-potential, the world will become harmonious. The performance of *shakubuku*—proselytizing—is accordingly seen as both a powerful cause for transforming one's own karma and a compassionate action leading to the happiness of all. Snow suggests that the sense of personal mission, responsibility, and special status acquired through internalizing this vision motivates NSA members every bit as much as the promise of material and spiritual benefits to be gained from chanting. NSA's goal

is not—as it might appear at first glance to the casual observer—the development of a cult of selfish, egoistic, happy chanters, unmindful of the problems and conditions of the rest of the world. Rather, it is the realization of something far more ambitious and global—the construction of...a civilization that not only transcends the limitations of the major philosophies and international powers in the world today, but one in which peace, prosperity, happiness, and creative spontaneity are enjoyed by all. (pp. 63–64)

In analyzing NSA as a proselytizing movement, Snow asks: How are potential recruits initially contacted and their nominal conversion secured? While NSA makes use of publications, large-scale cultural events, and college seminars to reach out to potential converts, Snow finds that recruitment is done chiefly through members' existing family and social networks. He sees this as a function of NSA being a non-communal, "open" movement that does not demand the severing of extra-movement ties; in contrast, groups that are communal and relatively "closed" (such as the Krishna movement or the Unification Church) must make greater efforts to win recruits from among strangers. Of 330 people in Snow's statistical sampling who joined NSA between 1966 and 1974, only 18% were recruited by strangers. This comes as a surprise, in that the popular perception of NSA during the 1970s was shaped by members' assertive "street *shakubuku*"—going to sidewalks, parking lots, shopping malls, or other public places to invite passersby to introductory discussion meetings. Snow argues, however, that the value to NSA of street *shakubuku* lies chiefly in its function as a "commitment-building mechanism" that serves to strengthen members' identification with the organization, rather than in the numbers of converts it produces. The local NSA discussion meeting itself, typically held in members' homes, constitutes the chief forum for introducing newcomers to the practice and winning nominal

conversions of guests. *Shakubuku* closely examines the dynamics and strategies of such meetings.

In discussing “who joined and why,” Snow argues that “structural strain” explanations attributing the rise of new religious movements to deprivation, inequity, or other stresses in the social order do not fully explain why some individuals join such movements while others do not. He suggests that the dramatic growth of NSA—and of other movements—was fueled by the emergence in the late 60s and 70s of a large demographic constituency of young, single adults, many of whom were students or people lacking permanent positions of employment. As further “microdeterminants” of who joined NSA, Snow found the most important factors to be the possession of pre-existing ties with NSA members, ample discretionary time, and absence of strong, countervailing commitments.

Snow is also critical of theories that seek to explain why people join new religious movements in terms of mental predispositions such as alienation, search for meaning, personal crisis, or hunger for community. Strong affective bonds with someone inside the movement and intense interaction with the group are presented as more important factors. Moreover, as Snow acutely observes, psychological/motivational theories of conversion face a serious methodological difficulty in that they rely on members’ testimonials, which may well reflect the individual’s unconscious restructuring of his or her past history in light of a newly acquired worldview. Members’ own accounts of “why I joined” may thus be artifacts of the conversion process as much as they are explanations of why the conversion took place. Snow suggests that movements such as NSA serve not only to express preexisting needs and stresses but as “important agitational, problem-defining, need-arousal, and motive-producing agencies” and that “the latter function may oftentimes have primacy over the former” (p. 237). His discussion of “the convert as social type” suggests that conversion not be defined in terms of subjective personal transformation, which is hard to assess, but of outwardly identifiable changes in the members’ universe of discourse. Such changes include reconstruction of autobiography in line with a newly adopted worldview, and embracement of a “master attribution scheme,” or unitary explanation of why things are as they are, such as NSA’s attribution of suffering to individual karma.

No single methodology can be exhaustive, and while Snow’s sociological-functional insights open new perspectives on who joins new religious movements and why, they are less effective in illuminating the nature of the dramatic changes in value or “inner transformation” that converts claim to experience. Whatever one’s methodological preferences, however, *Shakubuku* makes a significant contribution by critically reevaluating prevailing theories of conversion. It also provides a vivid picture of what NSA at the grassroots level must have been like during the mid-1970s. In some ways, however, it is limited by its time frame. NSA’s worldview has probably changed little since the time Snow conducted his research, but the organiza-

tion itself—and its methods of proselytizing—have altered significantly.

In contrast to David Snow's sociological approach, Jane Hurst's study focuses on issues of religious meaning. "New religious movements," says Hurst, "arise and attract a following as a response to a need felt by their members to change their lives in some way....[They] are radical attempts to assert an integrated world view that perceives life holistically and as consistently meaningful" (p. 9). Her chosen methodology for investigating NSA is to study its "ethos," a term derived from the work of anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Clifford Geertz. In contrast to a religion's explicit, cognitive content—its "worldview" or "belief system"—ethos is implicit and involves the moral or aesthetic "felt quality" of a religion. Hurst notes that, while it is difficult to argue that a particular worldview is right or wrong, one can assess critically the values and actions deriving from that worldview; hence the usefulness of "ethos" as an evaluative tool. Hurst identifies three key elements in NSA's ethos: individual power, change, and the mission for world peace. Members experience a sense of power, efficacy, and control over their lives from their twice-daily ritual of chanting *daimoku* to the Gohonzon, believed to offer direct, unmediated access to the universal law or ultimate reality. According to Nichiren Shōshū teachings, chanting enables one to manifest the Buddha nature and change karma; hence an attitude of confidence and readiness to "take charge" of one's fate. Difficulties are seen as challenges to be overcome; no failure can be irremediable. At the same time, since all things are held to be interconnected, individual struggles to overcome obstacles are linked to improving the destiny of humankind. Personal efforts thus take on immense, self-transcending meaning as stepping stones to world peace.

Hurst's study explores NSA's ethos in a series of progressively narrowing contexts: the history of Nichiren Shōshū and Sōka Gakkai, NSA in America, NSA as a functioning new religious movement, and the individual commitment process. A salient feature of her study—and a refreshing contrast to several earlier studies of the Japanese Sōka Gakkai—is her attention to NSA's explicitly religious content, derived from Nichiren's teachings, and how it is understood and assimilated in members' lives. Her heavy reliance on internal sources for her account of Nichiren Shōshū history, however, results in a few statements requiring correction or qualification. For example, Buddhism is generally considered to have entered Japan in the sixth century, not the seventh (p. 86). There is no evidence that Nichiren personally "saw himself as the True Buddha, superseding all other Buddhas" (p. 88); this represents a later doctrinal development within Nichiren Shōshū. Nor is it quite the case that "Nichiren's Buddhism emerged and flowered in 20th century Japan after several centuries of virtual dormancy" (p. 112). While Nichiren Shōshū remained an obscure denomination until its association with Sōka Gakkai, other Nichiren lineages have enjoyed moments of considerable power and prominence in, for example, Muromachi-period Kyoto and the modern imperial

era.² Nevertheless, by deliberately narrating Nichiren Shōshū history from a Sōka Gakkai/NSA perspective, Hurst effectively shows how SGI members see themselves as carrying on the vision and struggle of a thirteenth-century Buddhist teacher.

Hurst's concern with ethos and how it is internalized leads her to examine the long-term process of becoming a "strong member," an effective complement to David Snow's focus on immediate strategies of proselytizing and recruitment. Based on her work with NSA, she develops a four-part model of how individuals become committed to religious movements: (1) "initial contact"; (2) "experiment" (in the case of NSA, one chants to see if it brings benefit); (3) "experience," of both regular ritual practice and of group involvement, in which members come to perceive consequent positive changes in their lives; and (4) "ongoing commitment," in which there occurs a full internalization of the group's ethos: faith in the Gohonzon (central to all aspects of life); and "world peace," a personally felt responsibility. Each stage is elaborated in terms of both objectively observable behavior and subjective attitudinal changes reported by members.

Hurst finds both notable successes and potential problems in how NSA/SGI-USA functions in the American setting. She credits NSA with having achieved a remarkable degree of racial and ethnic harmony. Though Caucasians represent the largest percentage of its membership, NSA has attracted more converts among African Americans and Latinos than other Buddhist groups in the United States, as earlier studies have noted (LAYMAN 1976, p. 131; PREBISH 1979, p. 76). Gender issues, however, are another matter. Hurst finds that, in a manner consistent with Japanese institutional patterns, NSA generally accords women a subordinate ritual and leadership role (although recent indications suggest this may be changing). Similarly, despite NSA rhetoric in support of American ideals of liberty and democracy, the organization remains hierarchically structured on the model of the Japanese Sōka Gakkai; leaders at every level are appointed from above; and policy is often decided in Japan. Emphasis on strongly hierarchical forms of institution and traditional gender roles has been a source of friction in several Buddhist communities in the United States with substantial numbers of American converts, so Hurst is probably correct in pinpointing these as potential trouble areas for NSA.

A related issue, one of the most thought-provoking ones raised by Hurst's discussion, might be termed the "politics" of NSA's ethos of personal change. Both Hurst and Snow stress the undeniably empowering role this element plays in NSA: since suffering is attributed to individual karma, and since any bad karma can be eradicated by chanting,³ members rarely see themselves as

² Three typographical errors also occur in this historical chapter: Nichiren's birthplace should be Kominato, rather than Kominata; the temple where he took the tonsure was Seichō-ji, not Seichi-ji; and the name he assumed at that time was Zeshōbō (not Zenshōbō) Renchō (p. 92).

³ The rather mechanistic, "cause and effect" notion of "chanting and changing karma" described by both Snow and Hurst as central to official NSA ideology would seem to suggest a

victims but actively assume responsibility for bettering their lives. Hurst attributes NSA's racial harmony partially to this ethos; the conviction that one is in control of one's fate precludes racial or ethnic scapegoating as a way of blaming others for one's problems. However, as others have noted in studying Japanese New Religions, locating total responsibility within the individual tends to erase even the idea of a structural problem and thus undercuts any impetus to effect change through political action (HARDACRE 1986, p. 23). Hurst also indicates this when she observes that "the ultimate equality in each person's quest for enlightenment [vis-à-vis the Gohonzon] is so refreshing and exhilarating to most NSA members that they do not question some of the inequities built into NSA itself" (p. 155), or that "members who object to certain organizational features are told to chant to change them" (p. 206). The former statement may be true only generally; unofficial newsletters and open letters that circulated among members in some major cities during the late 1970s and early 80s, urging democratic, "American-style" organizational reforms, suggest that at times some NSA members have been deeply concerned about such issues. Nonetheless, Hurst's discussion convincingly shows how an ethos that stresses inner transformation as the only authentic source of change can, paradoxically, empower individuals while reinforcing the status quo.

Hurst's research and writing were done in the 1970s and early 1980s, plus an update in 1991–1992. Her account thus covers three time frames in NSA's development: the period of intense activity and rapid growth that Snow describes, retrospectively termed Phase I (up until 1976); a more moderate period, termed Phase II, when study and personal development rather than mass conversion activities were stressed (1977–1981); and the present, SGI-USA phase. Part of the value of her work lies in the documenting of long-term organizational shifts. Hurst finds that the present SGI-USA has matured, becoming "routinized" in the Weberian sense. The former, frenetic pace of activities, described by Snow, has slowed; emphasis has shifted from aggressive proselytizing to encouraging members' personal development. Spiritual transformation has increasingly replaced material prosperity in members' eyes as an index to the efficacy of practice. As with the Sōka Gakkai in Japan, the goal of mass conversion has been tempered to an emphasis on contributing to world peace by individual efforts.

Hurst is probably the first scholar to address the impact of the recent

difference in emphasis from Nichiren's thought. While karmic causality was certainly integral to Nichiren's worldview, and while he saw the persecutions he faced as opportunities to expiate past evil karma, the day-to-day emphasis of his teaching is on faith as karma-*transcending*, in that attaining Buddhahood depends, not on eradicating karma or accumulating merit, but solely upon faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren may thus be seen as part of a medieval Japanese Buddhist attempt to soften or transcend the rigid mechanics of a strict view of karmic causality that many had come to experience as frightening and oppressive (LAFLEUR 1983, pp. 48–59). On the other hand, the thrust of some of the testimonials of long-time NSA members cited by Hurst sounds much the same as Nichiren's idea of faith as providing an inner point of reliance unaffected by karma or the fluctuations of circumstance.

Nichiren Shōshū/Sōka Gakkai schism—in essence a contest over religious authority—on SGI members outside Japan. She finds SGI-USA to be in many ways untouched by the split; given the rather small priestly presence in the United States, the controversy no doubt seems remote to many. However, Hurst notes that members' religious lives have been affected. They can no longer readily make the pilgrimage to their sacred site—Nichiren Shōshū's head temple, Taiseki-ji, in Shizuoka Prefecture. Moreover, according to Nichiren Shōshū doctrine, the authority to reproduce the Gohonzon and confer it upon new converts rests solely with the priesthood and derives from the one-to-one Dharma transmission of successive high priests going back to Nichiren himself. Since the schism, SGI converts have been unable to receive the Gohonzon.⁴ The fact that the United States is home to six of the seven Nichiren Shōshū temples outside Japan (the other is in Brazil) has also led to the formation of an American Hokkekō (lay temple group). As in Japan, its numbers are proportionately small: Hurst estimates about 1,800 Hokkekō members to some 50,000 to 100,000 active members of SGI-USA. What impact the presence of this rival group may have on SGI-USA in the future remains to be seen.

In Hurst's estimation, the days of SGI-USA's major growth are over; future influence on American culture will have to come, she suggests, through the "cultural impact" of ideas rather than through mass conversion. Paradoxically, however, it is in the failure of SGI-USA and other new religions to become mass movements that Hurst finds their greatest value, in that they provide alternative models of decentralized community and personal empowerment in an age dominated by overwhelming impersonal forces. Here she sees the religious element as vital: "By appealing to an ultimate source of power, new religious movements can create a sphere of power that defies the compelling bureaucratization that seems beyond human control" (p. 302).

Both Snow and Hurst have approached NSA in the context of new religious movements in the United States. However, their work will also be valuable to readers with interests outside this framework, such as Japanese New Religions, fieldwork in a multi-cultural context, religious movements in transition, or American transformations of Buddhism. Both volumes contain useful English-language bibliographies and informative accounts of the authors' fieldwork experience. Hurst includes an appendix of NSA songs.

⁴ However, on 7 September 1993 (after Hurst's book was published), Sōka Gakkai announced that it will confer individual Gohonzon reproduced from a mandala inscribed in 1720 by Nichiren Shōshū's twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan (SGI-USA 1993, p. 1). This Gohonzon was recently presented to Sōka Gakkai by one of about thirty priests who left Nichiren Shōshū in support of Sōka Gakkai. While Sōka Gakkai's decision to confer the Gohonzon on its own authority will insure new SGI converts a ritual focus for their personal practice, it also redefines the source of religious authority in a way that absolutizes Sōka Gakkai and does not augur well for future reconciliation with the priesthood.

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Jacqueline Stone
Princeton University