

## REVIEWS

Bryan WILSON and Karel DOBBELAERE, *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. xi + 267 pp. ISBN 0-19-8279915-9.

As Japan's New Religions have expanded overseas they have attracted increasing academic attention, first from Japanese scholars who have examined their penetration into areas with sizable Japanese immigrant communities, and more recently by Western scholars interested in the issues raised by their expansion beyond their original Japanese ethnic and cultural bases. Among these new religious movements none has attracted more attention than Soka Gakkai International (SGI), as it calls itself since the split between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū, its former parent Buddhist sect.

It is only to be expected that SGI should command attention, for so far it has been the most successful Japanese new religious movement, not only in Japan itself but also in non-Japanese communities overseas. It grew rapidly in the USA, claiming around 200,000 members by the mid-1970s, and it has a fairly small but (according to the authors of *A Time to Chant*) expanding membership of around 4,000 in the UK. Soka Gakkai has, of course, been a focus of attention in Japan because of its often aggressive proselytism, its political activities, its involvement in various scandals, and its recent vitriolic split with Nichiren Shōshū. For its part it has sought attention from scholars in the wider world, and certainly in the UK, by actively communicating with Western academics. All of these things have heightened its profile and made it a major presence in studies of Japanese New Religions abroad.

The book under review is the first to deal at length with SGI-UK, as the movement is now known in Britain (until the split it went under the title Nichiren Shoshu UK [NSUK]). The authors, Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, are two well-known sociologists of religion who, while not specializing in Japanese religion, have both demonstrated an interest in the area. *A Time to Chant* is, as far as I am aware, the first book on any Japanese New Religion in the UK, and as such it represents the breaking of new ground. It is not, however, the first study of Soka Gakkai overseas, for two recent books deal with the movement in the USA (HURST 1992 and SNOW 1993; see also the review by STONE 1993). Neither book is mentioned here, presumably because they came out too late to influence the present volume.

Wilson and Dobbelaere attempt to draw "a profile of the movement and... trace the source of its attraction and its pattern of growth" (p. 2). They do this by examining the sociological structure of SGI's British membership on the basis of a comprehensive questionnaire administered to a "random sample" of adherents, the names of whom were drawn from a membership list provided by the sect. The authors also interviewed numerous adherents—the text is interspersed with quotes from these exchanges, fleshing out the dry sociological data of the survey and bringing to life the personalities and feelings of the members in a way that raw statistics never can.

The authors begin the volume with a brief overview of Soka Gakkai's history

in Japan. Although the brevity is understandable (the book is, after all, about SGI in the UK), the account is nevertheless unsatisfactory in that it largely eschews discussion of the movement's controversial past, particularly its aggressive *shakubuku* (proselytizing) activities in the 1950s and 1960s. These activities helped make Soka Gakkai the largest New Religion in Japan, but they also made it perhaps the most unpopular. Though hardly discussed in the book, *shakubuku* remains important as a means of advancement in the movement; as one British member states, "To have a position of responsibility in NSUK you have to do *shakubuku*" (p. 105). The account also avoids such issues as Soka Gakkai's uncompromising attitude to other religions and its alleged domination by the personality cult of President Ikeda Daisaku. Whilst one does not necessarily expect a book about Soka Gakkai in the UK to focus on the problems aroused by the movement in Japan, I think it is important to mention these omissions because (as will become clear in my comments on Wilson and Dobbelaere's handling of the dispute with Nichiren Shōshū) they do contribute to my feeling that the authors have sidestepped some of the more problematic and controversial aspects of the Gakkai.

There is, moreover, surprisingly little information about the movement's history and development in the UK. I found this a rather serious omission, given the authors' expressed concern with clarifying the SGI's pattern of growth. Surely such a concern demands attention to such questions as how the movement started, who provided the impetus for its development, what attracted its earliest British members, and, possibly, how it differs from other Japanese New Religions that have attempted to take root in the UK. Attention to such issues would have given greater perspective to the detailed sociological data, and would have added greatly to our understanding of SGI in the UK.

The core of the book concerns the authors' survey, for which they received 619 usable returns. Since the names of those surveyed were drawn from a list of loyal SGI members, there is an unsurprising lack of dissent in the responses. Although some members clearly do have reservations about aspects of the movement (there are, for example, a few mild concerns voiced over the personality cult of Ikeda Daisaku), they appear, overall, to be a rather contented group who find much of value in the religion.

The data provided by the survey is detailed, and will be of use to anyone interested in the Japanese New Religions abroad. SGI-UK has a fair proportion of non-British members (particularly from the US, the Caribbean, and Malaysia), and is essentially an urban phenomenon, with around two-thirds of all members living in or near London. Adherents, who are virtually all first-generation converts, are "relatively mature" in age (p. 46) when they join (in contrast to Hare Krishna converts, who tend to be rather young). Few are over the age of 50, however. More members are drawn into the movement through the influence of friends or partners than by any other means. Wilson and Dobbelaere state that the organization has a "strong democratic and egalitarian emphasis" (p. 166), a point that seems at odds with its hierarchic structure in which leaders are appointed from above (p. 168).

Many members have been drawn in by the promise of direct practical benefits, and a number are convinced that "chanting worked almost like

magic" (p. 55). Whilst many who were originally captivated by such promises often find deeper meanings the longer they remain members, this focus on the benefits and material gain remains prominent throughout the organization. Certainly SGI, like its parent Japanese organization, lays heavy stress on the material effects of chanting, and many members seem, at least at the beginning, to find this an alluring side of the religion. Most members had chanted for specific goals (often for material and self-serving benefits such as cars or money). Often the attainment of such material and personal goals is seen as part of the process of changing one's karma through invoking the *Lotus Sūtra*. Wilson and Dobbelaere cite various testimonies of believers about the efficacy of chanting, but have little to say about how believers react when chanting does not seem to bring results, and how they deal with this challenge to their faith. This surely is an important point to consider when analyzing a religion that claims tangible benefits for its instrumental practices. Some of the most acute insights in Winston DAVIS's book on Mahikari, for example, come in his discussion of how members react when their spiritual healing fails to work its magic (1980, pp. 223–38). It is a pity that Wilson and Dobbelaere are content with reporting the benefits and advantages of chanting, rather than, as Davis did with Mahikari, getting a little further under the skin of the religion by considering its most telling and critical areas—how members react when it seems not to deliver the goods.

SGI's message of self-help appeals especially to the self-employed and to people who work in the media. A relatively large proportion of the membership is made up of "independent people—people who were engaged in full-time education, or people who had, as they themselves would like to put it, taken responsibility for their own lives by embarking on self-employed careers" (p. 116). Adherents are also attracted by SGI's "privatization of morality"—its emphasis on personal responsibility and hence on what is called the "privatization of morality" (p. 133). In such respects, the authors conclude, SGI's general orientations towards personal fulfillment and its permissive ethic are "a virtual espousal of the secular ethos of post-Christian Britain" (p. 220).

This appraisal may not be as complimentary as it sounds, given recent criticisms of the post-Christian British ethos as self-serving, crassly materialist, and distinctly lacking in compassion. I suspect, though, that the authors intended it in a positive sense, to suggest that SGI is in tune with, and therefore liable to grow in, contemporary society. The authors certainly do not view SGI members as merely self-centered—they point out that the religion espouses practical social action, and produce data from their survey indicating that adherents have strong social consciences. But the rhetoric of social caring is common also to Thatcherism. What concerns me is that, given the attitudes and conditions espoused by the Britain of the 1980s (and to some extent, though perhaps not so strongly, the 1990s), and given the close parallels between aspects of SGI thought and rhetoric (personal responsibility, the emphasis on material success, and indeed, the use of material success as a validation of personal merit) and the rhetoric of Thatcherism, a more penetrating examination of these issues is required. Certainly the authors should have

probed further the questions of social concern and positive social action, to ask how much these are used as means to counterbalance the image of personal aggrandizement and materialism associated with the sect.

In their epilogue Wilson and Dobbelaere strike a very positive tone, concluding, “Well may dedicated members affirm that SGI is a faith whose time has come—a time to chant” (p. 231). Their suggestion that SGI is a more positive force than other New Religions provides cause for serious concern, for it seems framed more by value judgments than by balanced academic analysis. SGI’s chanting, for example, is presented as “more than mere relaxed meditation and the affirmation of a mantra as in Transcendental Meditation” (p. 223); what, one asks, would TM adherents have to say about such an assessment? And what of the claim that SGI “perhaps far outstrips other contemporary new religious movements—in its promotion of concern for world peace, ecological issues, refugee relief, and educational and cultural programmes” (pp. 222–23)? One should point out—since Wilson and Dobbelaere do not—that other Japanese new religious movements are also engaged in such activities, and that while SGI is indeed active for world peace it has also displayed, at least until recently, a distinct lack of cooperation with (and even hostility towards) peace movements involving other religious groups. Whether SGI outstrips other New Religions is a matter of opinion; what is problematic is the fact that Wilson and Dobbelaere offer nothing but conjecture to support their assertion.

Even more problematic is the authors’ handling of the dispute between Nichiren Shōshū and Soka Gakkai (pp. 232–45). Behind this bitter dispute, clearly tinged by the personal antipathy between the leaders of the respective groups, lie many serious issues concerning the relationship between a professional priesthood on the one hand and a committed lay religious movement on the other. Indeed, as Jacqueline STONE has shown (1994), the dispute reflects in many ways the classic conflict in Nichirenism between a position of strict opposition to other religious movements and a position of greater accommodation, with Nichiren Shōshū representing the former and Soka Gakkai the latter.

The dispute has been followed in a number of articles in English (ASTLEY 1992, MÉTRAUX 1992, VAN BRAGT 1993), all of which offer commentary on and access to Japanese sources that might have aided Wilson and Dobbelaere in their assessment. None of these articles is referred to, however—perhaps here, too, important work pertinent to the authors’ research appeared too late to be of use to them. As it is they relied on secondary sources—newspaper accounts and other materials in English—to assess a dispute played out in the Japanese language. Moreover, the citations from Soka Gakkai and its media far outweigh those from Nichiren Shōshū, and as a result of this imbalance, their presentation of the charges swapped back and forth appears to favor Soka Gakkai over Nichiren Shōshū. In any event they have failed to come to grips with the real issues of the dispute and have instead presented an almost apologetic justification of the Soka Gakkai position, in which the charges against Nichiren Shōshū are presented as true and those against Soka Gakkai are dismissed as unimportant. We are given a long list of Soka

Gakkai's charges against Nichiren Shōshū, including condemnations of the exorbitant fees the sect charges for posthumous names and denunciations of its high priest Nikken for drunkenness, high living, arrogance, hypocrisy, and heresy, but there is no discussion of whether these charges have any real foundation (discussion that would seem warranted, given the evidence of Soka Gakkai involvement in producing spurious evidence against Nikken, such as edited photographs portraying the priest in a bad light [*Chūgai Nippō*, 25 May 1993, pp. 8–9]). Moreover, no mention is made of the somewhat ironic fact that Soka Gakkai had been instrumental in persuading so many people to affiliate with Nichiren Shōshū and to therefore get their posthumous names from its priests. Would Soka Gakkai have found any serious moral objections to these practices if it had not fallen into dispute with the sect over other matters? Indeed, if such corruption had been endemic among the priesthood, as is suggested, then why did Soka Gakkai not start railing about it (except, it seems, in private comments) until Ikeda had been rebuked by the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood for a speech he had made?

When it comes to Nichiren Shōshū's allegations against Soka Gakkai, however, the authors show little patience:

The principal charges leveled against Ikeda and Soka Gakkai were of rather diverse kind, some trivial and some inherently improbable, but all of them testifying to the priesthood's deep-seated distrust of the Soka Gakkai leadership.... (p. 238)

This dismissal stands in stark contrast to comments made by Trevor ASTLEY:

A series of incidents including official investigations into Gakkai dealings by the National Tax Agency as well as the Police had obviously played a decisive part in testing the Shōshū's patience, as is testified by the long list of complaints contained in the Notice of Dismissal, any one of which was serious enough and all of which had been put in full public view by the media. (1992, p. 170)

This is not to say that Nichiren Shōshū is the innocent party in the dispute, for it is clear that there has been corrupt and scandalous behavior on both sides. But what is equally clear is that neither party went public with their complaints until the leadership fell out; after that, charges and counter-charges became the order of the day.

A balanced account of the dispute has to examine both sides with an even hand. This the authors fail to do, and thus undermine much of what they say earlier in the book. It may be that their positive evaluation of SGI is justified by what they found in their study of the group; indeed, I too have come away from my meetings with SGI-UK members with a positive impression, finding them more open and easier to deal with than Gakkai adherents in Japan. The movement does preach a message that resonates in some (primarily highly motivated and educated) segments of society, and it clearly has the potential to increase its following. However, when one sees the manner in which Wilson and Dobbelaere have portrayed or interpreted the Soka Gakkai-

Nichiren Shōshū dispute, one is sadly drawn to question how far one can accept their analysis in the main text.

I am sure that Soka Gakkai (which, especially in its Japanese form, has not always had such a positive press) will be quite pleased with this portrayal. Whether anyone reading it from an academic perspective would feel the same is a little less sure. The book is useful within narrow and closely defined parameters, providing substantial amounts of sociological data on SGI adherents in the UK and clarifying some of the reasons why they are attracted to the religion. Whether it can be accepted as a balanced academic portrayal of a movement whose “time has come” is, however, an entirely different question; in my opinion it cannot.

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