



Phillip Hammond and David Machacek. *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, xvi + 224 pages, ISBN: 0-19-829389-5, US \$45.00.

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It was with great interest that I opened up *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. As a researcher of the Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Buddhism since 1973, I hoped that my own qualitative data gathered from a primarily Religious Studies perspective would be verified by the extensive statistical data collected and analyzed by Phillip Hammond and David Machacek. I was relieved and pleased to find that not only were our bodies of research in essential agreement in most major areas, but also that their detailed and mathematically sophisticated statistical approach taught me many things that qualitative data and less scientific sampling did not. My only reservation is that this study attempts to explain what is a deeply personal spiritual experience for practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism from a purely social scientific perspective, although admittedly this *is* their purpose.

Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion is exemplary data-based social science. The statistical methods, models and conclusions are explained in a clear, common sense fashion. The data was collected in a way that makes sense, that is, by sending questionnaires to a random sample of subscribers to SGI publications. Extensive cooperation from SGI-USA was required for this to be possible, and the organization provided a great deal of help and information to the researchers. The authors correctly note the possibilities for bias inherent in this kind of coop-

eration and are careful to adjust their analysis accordingly. (Of course, an antagonistic approach to the organization would have equal possibilities for bias in the opposite direction.) Overall, one is left with the impression of fair-mindedness in the collection and discussion of the data. A very useful set of three appendices allows the reader to judge the way in which the data was collected, the authors' interactions with the Soka Gakkai organization, the characteristics of those who responded to the questionnaires, and the survey instrument itself. So much research on new religions seems to have hidden agendas of various sorts, and it is refreshing to find such clarity and openness. Furthermore, one can see how this model for research on religious groups could be applied to almost any example with excellent results.

What sorts of analysis and conclusions do Hammond and Machacek offer? Their overarching judgment is that Soka Gakkai has been a highly successful American movement because it has always sought to accommodate itself to American culture rather than to challenge it. This might seem strange in a religious movement coming from Japan, but the Japanese value of conformity to social expectation surely played a role in this adjustment to the American situation. In part, because it has sought to be externally conformist and to be rather gentle in its expectations of the changes that members should make in their lives as a result of Soka Gakkai membership and practicing Nichiren Buddhism, there has been a very high attrition rate in the organization. In chapter three the authors note that this is very common in new religions (and perhaps in more established ones, too), and from this we can conclude that outsiders' occasional suspicions of "brainwashing" of Soka Gakkai members are rendered meaningless considering how easy it is to leave the group and how frequently it happens.

The most interesting statistical information concerns diversity in SGI-USA. 51 percent of the members are white, 18 percent black, 11 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 7 percent Latino/Hispanic, and 15 percent other. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, the general United States population is 78 percent white, 12 percent black, 1 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 9 percent Latino/Hispanic, and 0.1 percent other (p. 44). Soka Gakkai in America is significantly more diverse than the American population, and significantly more diverse than the vast majority of religious organizations. This is a result of social networks, an urban core of membership, and most important, the value Soka Gakkai places on the worth and potential of each individual regardless of racial or cultural background. This value was visible as long ago as the mid-1970s when Soka Gakkai published its own statistics celebrating its diverse membership.

In chapter after chapter, the authors offer well argued and careful analy-

sis of such things as the meaning of chanting to those who practice Nichiren Buddhism and how this changes with time and commitment; the various levels of organization involvement by marginal, general, and core members; and reactions to the schism between the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood and the Soka Gakkai organization. In addition, the authors discuss both the “supply-side” factors in chapter four (how the religious environment and the particular religious organization interact to present a product in the religious marketplace that someone might want to convert to) and the “demand-side” factors in chapter five (the religious needs and expectations of potential members) that have allowed SGI-USA to be so successful.

Particularly intriguing is a discussion of transmodernism that seeks “to bring together the best of modernity and the inherited wisdom of religious traditions” (p. 127). When Soka Gakkai members spoke of “world peace through individual happiness” in the 1970s and the organization’s commitment to “Peace, Culture, and Education” in the 1990s, we see at work the bringing together of individual healing and commitment as a way to affect the global environment and to shape the future according to their own values. As the authors point out, we are undergoing a global culture and economic shift from producer orientation to consumer orientation. This is not just a description of an economic transformation, though this does fuel the global economy. Transmodernism also looks to the individual as a self-generating source of wealth (economic, social, spiritual), rather than to the group (see pp. 127-134). For the Soka Gakkai, this individualism takes place within the broader social ethic of being a global citizen whose individual actions will create the 21st century. Conversion to Soka Gakkai, the authors say, “expresses social values already held, reinforces them through association with like-minded others, and legitimates them with a Buddhist religious tradition.” Given the power of the emerging transmodern sub-culture, Soka Gakkai can expect “a promising future” according to the authors.

As noted above, Hammond and Machacek are not focusing on the inner spiritual dynamics of the chanting ritual. I just want to point out that the individual’s experience of chanting is what draws practitioners to Nichiren Buddhism, and chanting is what keeps them affiliated with Soka Gakkai. Members have told me that chanting has transformed their lives in myriad ways. One example used in this book is that members begin by chanting for material things (for example, a new car), but end up experiencing more subtle benefits (better relationships). In other words, the original goal one has in chanting is not necessarily identified with the benefit that one receives. The authors describe this as a kind of compensation for rewards not received and an ascription of meaning in the face of failure (pp.

68-76). If one assumed that chanting the Lotus Sutra was not spiritually effective, this analysis would be logical. However, if one assumed that chanting the Lotus Sutra *is* life-transforming, the change in goal from “a new red Voyager van” to “greater peace in my family” would make sense as a spiritual transformation away from transitory material goals toward lasting world-transforming values. Are these values “compensators” as the social scientific perspective views them, or are they proof that chanting works to transform the individual? I do not fault Hammond and Machacek for being consistent with their own approach. I just want to be sure that the core of faith that Nichiren Buddhism practitioners experience is represented in any analysis of that faith. This is a small reservation in an overall invaluable work.

We have come a long way in our study of new and recently imported religions in America from the days when a critical, often covertly anti-religious or Judeo-Christian perspective permeated analysis of these groups. What has emerged is an invigorating reliance on data collected in a scientific and fair-minded fashion and an exploration of theoretical approaches to understanding the information collected. *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* is an exciting book. One doesn't usually feel that about a statistical study, but Hammond and Machacek have used their data on Soka Gakkai to illuminate the kind of intellectual history that originally attracted those of us who have made thinking about these ideas the core of our professional lives. I recommend this book to those interested in the subject matter of Soka Gakkai, a model of how to do statistical research and analysis, and the transformation of culture at the turn of the millennium.