

Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion  
By Phillip Hammond and David Machacek  
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In the preface to their book, Phillip Hammond and David Machacek grant that - as sociological observers -- they are 'outsiders' who have no personal experience with Soka Gakkai practices. They state quite candidly that they had the opportunity to

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attend a chanting session but were unable to attentively follow along, even when provided with a simplified phonetic transliteration of the chant. Their situation illustrates a difficulty more apparent than real but one that, nevertheless, prevents many Americans from becoming personally knowledgeable about practices such as those engaged in by members of an essentially Japanese organization like Soka Gakkai. As a result of this gap in personal experience, the authors have been compelled to utilize a 102-question survey to solicit opinions from church members willing to cooperate in providing responses. The authors mainly rely on this opinion survey and some personal interviews for their information.

The authors acknowledge that they were paid a total of \$28,000 to produce the study but they insist that this small stipend covered only the costs of production and in no way influenced the objectivity of their efforts. Taking them at their word, and recognizing their lade of personal acquaintance with the new Japanese religious organizations, their apparent unfamiliarity with the archaic Japanese renderings of Mahayana Buddhist jargon, and the limited funding available to them, one can understand and not expect too much from the book. The authors, themselves, are at pains throughout the book to point out how much their conclusions rest upon the accuracy and honesty of the responses to their questionnaire. If the reader keeps this simple caveat in mind, then an honest and fair evaluation of the book should be possible.

Part I of the study is devoted to a description of the organization and its menders, with chapters on the history and philosophy of the group, its membership, and church practices. This information, delivered in a straightforward manner, provides some useful background of the type that can easily be obtained from church brochures and textbooks on basic Buddhism. The authors list a bibliography of sources they consulted but noticeably absent were the names of Nikkyo Niwano, founder of Rissho Kosei Kai, and Harvard University Professor Helen Hardacre. Niwano (recently deceased) has written voluminously on the Lotus Sutra and its relationship to the Japanese 'New Religions.' Hardacre has produced two useful works: Kuroznmikyo and the New Religious of Japan and Lay Buddhism in Contemporary Japan, a Study of the Reiyukai Kyodan The former book deals with a 'new' religious organization based on Japan's Shinto heritage. The latter is especially important as it details the workings of the Reiyukai Kyodan, a lay-Buddhist association that has spawned numerous other Japanese organizations including, most notably, Rissho Kosei Kai, which has far surpassed its parent organization in size and influence. The authors of Soka Gakkai in America would have been well advised to consult these important sources. It is difficult to imagine how anyone could get an adequate picture of Japan's New Religions (especially those based on worship of the Lotus Sutra) without doing so.

The authors mention the schism in Nichiren Shoshu of America ('shoshu' meaning 'true religion' in Japanese) between the priesthood and the laity. This and other notable organizational difficulties, they point out, has convinced the leadership of SGI-America to make a series of adaptations that diverge from the original Japanese model and attempt to incorporate strategies more acceptable to American culture. They do not, however, follow up this observation with questions about where the American church can go from here if it is severed from it Japanese roots. Will Americans, for example, start chanting in English? Will American church members adopt a different scripture that they can actually read and understand instead of merely pronounce? Other Japanese churches in America have had to struggle with these questions and it might interest the reader to know how Soka Gakkai of America plans to deal with them. Does SGI plan to become a mainstream American church or does it plans on remain on society's fringe, forever a Japanese church in America?

Part II of the book focuses more on the 'converts' themselves. The authors state their intention to answer, in their words, "certain theoretical questions: (1) How do religions respond to a new social environment? and (2) What makes a new religion appealing to people in that environment?" Both questions

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treat of 'religion(s)' in the plural, and so obviously assume that a generalized conclusion can be arrived at from this limited survey of one particular Japanese church, imported into American culture, splintered by internal schism, and suffering a self-described 90% attrition rate. Drawing general conclusions from this undoubtedly peculiar experience hardly seems warranted.

There are Americans who do speak Japanese and who have learned to read the Lotus Sutra in Japanese, in either or both of the major pronunciation styles. Their numbers are not large, but such persons could have shed a great deal of light on the prospects and limitations of Soka Gakkai practice. Apparently, no such persons were consulted. It appears as though only 'pronouncers' of the title and two chapters (out of twenty eight) of the Lotus Sutra were interviewed for this study. How much insightful information such persons could hope to provide seems problematical. In short, the authors have provided an extended report of what Soka Gakkai members say about themselves but little analysis about just what they actually do that distinguishes them from other Americans who have gravitated to Buddhism in one of its many forms. The absence of this type of information begs the question of just why Americans who, by-and-large, do not speak Japanese - archaic or modern - can repetitiously intone nonsense syllables from a foreign language and claim to have obtained any benefit from doing it. If this, more limited, question cannot be answered, even partially, then it would seem a bit presumptuous to claim that theoretical work has been done in 'answering' the above two highly-generalized questions.