

journal of global buddhism
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Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 1 (2000): 160-163

Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion.
By Phillip E. Hammond and David W. Machacek

Reviewed by
James William Coleman



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Hammond, Phillip E. and David W. Machacek *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. London: Oxford University Press, 1999, xi + 224 pages, ISBN: 0-19829-389-5, US \$45.00.

Like many sociologists, I have something of a love-hate relationship with survey research. On the one hand, it can provide hard empirical data that are virtually unattainable by other means. But unless it is backed up with more direct qualitative research, survey methodology often leaves the investigator standing on the outside unable to plumb the real depths and complexity of our social life. Hammond and Machacek's new book, *Soka Gakkai in America*, is an excellent example of how valuable good survey research can be, as well as of its inherent limitations.

The heart of this book is the authors' survey of 401 members of the Sōka Gakkai randomly selected from the subscription lists of its various publications. Although the research was funded by the Sōka Gakkai itself, the authors do a commendable job of keeping their critical distance, while still maintaining sympathy with their subjects. Hammond and Machacek used a long, carefully constructed closed-ended questionnaire that proves to be a rich mine of empirical data. They do an excellent job describing Sōka Gakkai's demographics and the attitudes of its members, and they reach some interesting conclusions about the reasons for the success of this new religion in the West. On the other hand, however, readers of this book who are not already familiar with the Sōka Gakkai are not going to get much of a feel for the role that this unique and interesting branch of Buddhism plays in its members' daily lives. We need more than a set of facts to breathe life into our understanding of religious behavior. If the authors do any more work on the Sōka Gakkai, perhaps they will be able to include more case studies and personal anecdotes to put more meat on the bones provided by their excellent quantitative research.

Among their numerous interesting findings, Hammond and Machacek found that like meditation-oriented Buddhist groups, Sōka Gakkai members are far more likely than the general public to come from Jewish backgrounds and less likely to come from the conservative Protestant denominations. Sōka Gakkai also seems to be far more attractive to members of the baby-boom generation than to other-age cohorts. Sōka Gakkai members are more highly educated than the general public and more likely to be “new-class” information workers or other professionals. One striking difference from the meditation-oriented Buddhist groups is in the high percentage of minority members that the survey revealed. Eighteen percent of the respondents were African Americans—a significantly higher percentage than in the overall population.

The most essential practice of Sōka Gakkai Buddhism is chanting centered around veneration of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Although this practice plays an analogous role to that of meditation in other Western Buddhist groups, there is at least one major difference. In addition to any spiritual benefits, followers of Sōka Gakkai believe that chanting produces concrete material rewards, and one of this study’s most interesting findings concerns the benefits the members expect it to produce. The most common reasons the respondents gave for chanting were in descending order of importance: career success, better relationships, physical health, material rewards, and financial rewards—a decidedly unspiritual list. However, when asked about the benefits they had actually gained from the practice, there was a major shift; the respondents were far more likely to mention things related to psychological well-being and spiritual growth.

Hammond and Machacek’s repeated use of a market analogy to interpret their rich collection of data was more problematic. It is one thing to talk about the “religious marketplace,” but when the authors start discussing the “supply side” and “demand side” of religion, the analogy begins to obscure more than it reveals. For one thing, the economic analogy subtly derides the religious experience, implying that it is no more profound or important than the experience of buying a new car or making a killing on the stock market. But beyond that, the simple fact is

that religious behavior is not based on a market. Although religion can have profound economic implications, it is not centered on the buying, selling, or exchange of commodities; nor is it governed by the laws of supply and demand. If a local church is losing members, it cannot put its “product” on sale to attract more customers. What sense does it make to depend so heavily on a market analogy when such basic market mechanisms simply do not operate?

There is little doubt that the demands of the global market are transforming the way we live and the way we think, but it is essential to the future of social science that we maintain a critical distance from these developments. The incredible richness of human behavior cannot be reduced to the mechanical operations of the marketplace. After all, the roots of Buddhism stretch back more than two millennia before the origins of contemporary capitalism to a time when market exchange was of far less importance. Any analysis that reduces religion simply to one more capitalist exchange ignores our deepest spiritual impulses and impoverishes its subject matter.

Despite this weakness, Hammond and Machacek reach some interesting conclusions concerning the reasons for the Sōka Gakkai’s success in the West. From an organizational standpoint, they argue that much of Sōka Gakkai’s success can be attributed to its skill at positioning itself at the right place in the religious spectrum. It is different enough from the mainstream religions to be able to offer something unique, but not so different as to be threatening or to earn social condemnation as some kind of a cult. On a more individual level, they argue that Sōka Gakkai, along with many other new religions, is riding the growing cultural wave of “transmodern values,” which they hold to emphasize personal and spiritual growth, as well as a healing of the self, human relationships, and the environment. Although I think that their exposition of those values and their origins could be more fully developed, their underlying point seems well taken.

In sum, I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Western Buddhism or the growth of new religious movements. It is

methodical, well supported, and informative, and is bound to give the reader plenty of food for thought.

Reviewed by
James William Coleman
Professor of Sociology, Department of Social Sciences
California Polytechnic State University
jcoleman@calpoly.edu