

Book Review

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The continual evolution that are the hallmarks of religious history have been observed with great clarity in our era as religions that once were geographically bound have spread exponentially on the global stage. The two books under consideration here look at Soka Gakkai, a mid-twentieth-century lay Nichiren Buddhist movement in Japan that has spread throughout the world in recent decades. Both books examine Soka Gakkai from a sociological perspective, so if you are looking for a theological consideration of the way Soka Gakkai has translated and

adapted the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, these are not the books you want. If, on the other hand, you seek to understand how such a seemingly obscure religion has become such a successful international Japanese export, both Dobbelaere's and Metraux's books will be useful to you. In the 1970s some people predicted that Soka Gakkai was in decline and would eventually die out. These volumes show why, despite some serious challenges, Soka Gakkai has continued to thrive as a global religious movement.

Dobbelaere's book *Soka Gakkai: From Lay Movement to Religion* is an overview of the Soka Gakkai movement both in Japan and as a global phenomenon. Dobbelaere gives us a concise history of Soka Gakkai's development in Japan and its relationship to the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood. His discussion of the split between the laity and the priesthood in 1991, when all Soka Gakkai members were excommunicated from the Nichiren Shoshu sect, is especially useful. Dobbelaere places this laity-priesthood conflict in its historical context, as an example of the kind of ongoing laity-priesthood tensions that we can observe in sixteenth-century Protestantism and current Roman Catholicism. When groups with such different social objectives (lay members seeking religious support for their lives, priests seeking perpetuation of hierarchical institutions) try to work together, it is not surprising that they experience conflict. The fascinating way that Soka Gakkai was able to perpetuate its religious mission after the split is clearly described.

In later chapters Dobbelaere discusses the characteristics of Soka Gakkai members, including those in Europe; their religious practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*; and the ways the organization supports members' study and practice of Nichiren Buddhism. Most interesting is the way that Soka Gakkai's teachings attract certain sorts of individuals

to the movement. In Europe "twenty-percent of the SG membership works in social services and the arts" (p. 31). This Dobbelaere attributes to Nichiren Buddhism's "general ethic" which "stresses the importance of service to others, encourages humanitarian responsibility, and underlines the supreme importance of human life" (pp. 31-32). In general, Soka Gakkai members in America and Europe are found to be "transmodern," a term defined by Hammond and Machacek in their volume *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion* as combining ancient wisdom and teachings with the modern sensibilities of global connectedness, self-fulfillment, and a sense of interrelationship with both nature and other human beings. These become attributes that attract new members in the process of conversion as they seek meaningful everyday lives in the rapidly changing modern context. Soka Gakkai members' abilities to transform their own karma through chanting gives them the optimism that is a characteristic of the transmodern perspective. Especially interesting in this consideration of conversion is Dobbelaere's discussion of how the new Soka Gakkai member's faith matures as he or she chants before the Gohonzon, transforming what is originally magical thinking into a more active, sacred self-analysis.

Also included in this precise, and therefore highly useful, survey of Soka Gakkai are a review of the educational mission of the organization, an institutional comparison with Christianity, a discussion of gender separation in Soka Gakkai, and eighteen pages of photographs tracing the history of Soka Gakkai. Dobbelaere concludes with a consideration of Soka Gakkai's transformation from an exclusivist, aggressively proselytizing movement into one that seeks cooperation and dialogue with other religious faiths, while respecting their integrity. All in all, this is the best brief introduction to Soka Gakkai available in English.

Daniel A. Metraux's book *The International Expansion of a Modern Buddhist Movement: The Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia* concerns itself with a particular geographic region and examines Soka Gakkai in the context of other Japanese new religious movements "to determine why and how these uniquely Japanese religions have attracted such a culturally diverse following abroad" (p. 1). Metraux's focus is on the adaptation of Soka Gakkai to new cultural and religious contexts. His book begins with the history of Soka Gakkai and a discussion of its emphasis on society, peace, education, politics, the conflict with the priesthood, and its internationalization.

The greatest strength of Metraux's book is the extensive statistical analysis of Soka Gakkai members in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines) based on "extensive surveys" (a sample questionnaire is included) conducted by the author. The book also includes some qualitative research in Australia, with member profiles, and an initial look at the Soka Gakkai movement in Cambodia. Much of this information is not available elsewhere, so it is very helpful for anyone interested in Soka Gakkai as a global movement.

Metraux's general conclusion is that Soka Gakkai has adapted to each cultural context in which it finds itself, one key to its success. At the same time it has particular characteristics that make it attractive to potential converts. This is despite much anti-Japanese prejudice left over from World War II in some of these areas. For many countries with a Buddhist tradition, Soka Gakkai's presentation of Nichiren Buddhism is not only comfortable but also potentially life transforming because it offers a new approach to that ancient faith. Metraux found that "SGI members in these countries maintained that SGI's emphasis on individual responsibility and initiative, together with the organization's ability to provide them with a strong sense of optimism and a

community of believers and supporters made membership in the organization very appealing" (pp. 27-28). As in the United States, the founding members of Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia were older women, but the membership has become younger as rapid social and economic changes have made this movement, with the characteristics noted above, attractive to a wider circle of people.

Metraux's great contribution in this and other books is his willingness to actually talk to Soka Gakkai members, reporting how they experience their practice and their commitment to Soka Gakkai. The transcriptions of the members' testimony are especially worthwhile. By providing much of the raw data, both quantitative and qualitative, Metraux allows each reader to make his or her own evaluation of the facts, while taking seriously the practitioner's faith. The cultural presentations by Soka Gakkai in many different contexts form a bridge of communication between more traditional cultural and religious forms and Soka Gakkai's approach to the world.

If there is one overall conclusion to be drawn from all these data, it is that Soka Gakkai's practice of Nichiren Buddhism seems flexible enough to be relevant to many different cultures and to attract members of many different social groups. Thus this book should be of interest to sociologists of religion who might want to look at Soka Gakkai as a case study of a new religious movement and its adaptations as they are happening. To watch how this new Buddhist movement interacts with nationalism in Singapore, Islam in Malaysia, and Catholicism in the Philippines is fascinating. Also of great interest is the way that Soka Gakkai's growing membership in Australia is part of that nation's increasing diversity. Metraux's prediction of future growth and endurance for Soka Gakkai in Southeast Asia and Australia is based on his understanding of how successfully the practice of Nichiren

Buddhism works to transform and give ongoing meaning to the lives of Soka Gakkai members.

In conclusion, these two volumes are recommended to scholars and libraries wishing to have a complete collection of works on Soka Gakkai. Metraux's volume is most valuable for the data it presents, Dobbelaere's for its concision and theoretical contributions.