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A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain. By Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1994. Pp. xi, 267. ISBN 0-1982-7915-9 (cloth), \$39.95.

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A *Time to Chant* is an excellently-written, dispassionate sociological account of Soka Gakkai Buddhism in the United Kingdom. Every one who reads *JBE* has heard of Soka Gakkai, and several million people—mainly in Japan but also in many other countries of the world—belong to the movement and regularly practice individual or group daimoku (chanting of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* “namu-myoho-rence-kyo”) and gongyo (recitation of sections of the *Lotus Sūtra*) as the core of their Buddhist practice. Soka Gakkai is a mass lay Buddhist movement which began in the 1930s and grew rapidly out of a strand of Japanese Buddhism (that of Nichiren) which has impeccable Sino-Japanese credentials but was previously unknown in the West. True to the example of the much-maligned Nichiren, Soka Gakkai attracted hostility in Japan from its inception. It continues to draw criticism from many Buddhists of other persuasions who view the openly materialistic orientation of the organization as un-Buddhist, according to their own particular understandings of “Buddhism.” In the United Kingdom, Soka Gakkai International (SGI-UK), formerly Nichiren Shoshu UK, is probably the largest and has been one of the fastest-growing Buddhist groups, comparable in scale with the Tibetan New Kadampa Tradition and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. SGI-UK has an impressive stately home, Taplow Court near London, for its headquarters and approximately 5,000 members (Wilson & Dobbelaere report 3,609 registered members in 1988). As in Japan, an effective organizational structure encourages local SGI practitioners and their leaders to meet regularly in each others’ homes for discussion and guidance and to participate from time to time in district, chapter, national, and international meetings and cultural events.

The overwhelming majority of members of SGI-UK are in no doubt that the practice of Buddhism delivers the results that it claims, and mostly here and now. According to Wilson and Dobbelaere “of the 96 per cent who chant for particular goals, only 3 per cent said that those goals had not been realized” (195). The goals SGI Buddhists aim at are immensely varied, ranging from acquisition of specific sums of money to compassion towards others and the spread of Buddhism world wide. Soka Gakkai appears able to encompass all of these disparate aims, to foster in its members a spirit of independence and enterprise and, despite the apparently highly individualistic nature of the basic chanting practice, to mobilize the majority of members into collective activities promoting personal, social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual uplift on a global scale.

Apart from a general introduction to Nichiren Buddhism, an epilogue which suggests an explanation for Soka Gakkai’s success in the UK and an appendix providing a brief and somewhat second-hand history of the frictions

which led in 1990–1991 to the separation of Soka Gakkai from the “parent” Nichiren Shoshu sect, the main part of the book is constructed around the results of a substantial questionnaire (whose text is also included as an Appendix) sent to 1000 members of SGI. In marked contrast to the reluctance of some religious sects to be the subject of academic investigation, Wilson and Dobbelaere found the leaders and members of SGI-UK to be more than willing to cooperate in the implementation of a large-scale survey. Names and addresses were provided for the selection of a sample for the questionnaire mailout and the authors were able to arrange individual interviews with any members they wished. The questionnaire was constructed partly on the model of the European Values Survey so that comparisons could be drawn throughout the book between the values and opinions of SGI members and those of the UK population at large. I am no expert in questionnaire design and analysis, but even without Bryan Wilson’s reputation to guarantee the quality of the analysis it seems obvious from the clear and careful way in which the results are written up that the statistics are being treated responsibly and with appropriate caution throughout. We learn some very interesting things. In some respects (for example, in their middling political orientation) the attitudes of members of Soka Gakkai conform nearly exactly to those of the UK population at large (138) whereas on a “materialism scale” fully 95 percent of Soka Gakkai members emerge as “mixed post-materialists” (20 percent) or “pure post-materialists” (75 percent); the latter being those who “attach more importance to belonging, self-expression and intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction than to physical and economic security” (144). In contrast, the UK population as a whole boasts only 18 percent “pure post-materialists,” while 49 percent of UK citizens fall into the categories of “pure materialists” and “mixed materialists” (where they are joined by only 5 percent of Soka Gakkai respondents). So much for Soka Gakkai being materialist!

After the introduction, the titles of the chapters are as follows: II. The Size and Shape of SGI-UK; III. Encounter, Attraction and Conversion; IV. Religious Biographies; V. The Members, Their Families, and Their Friends; VI. The Social Structure of SGI-UK; VII. The Values of the Value-Creators; VIII The Involvement of the Members; IX. Practising Nichiren’s Buddhism; and X. What Chanting Achieved. A wealth of material is presented in what is to date the only book-length study of SGI-UK, and all the important aspects of SGI-UK as they affect the broad membership are covered, although I find the exclusion of people with Japanese sounding names from the sample unjustified, given that members of many nationalities other than British are included, the Japanese members seem to be among the longest-established followers in this country and appear to be in all re-

spects ordinary people. The reporting of statistical correlations can be dry, and a few passages which describe themselves as “interesting” are not, but for readers who prefer personal narratives there is a substantial amount of transcribed interview material in the book, drawing on the attitudes and experiences of members and ranging from the predictable (or, to use Wilson’s preferred term, “expectable”) attitudes of 1990s men and women, to material which is revealing, surprising and sometimes deeply moving. Wilson & Dobbelaere’s own understanding of the central practice of chanting is that it is “a conscious and deliberate endeavour to establish a relationship with the Gohonzon which virtually amounts to a form of induced psychotherapy” (223). I think *JBE* readers might find “amounts to a form of Buddhism” easier to understand, and perhaps more accurate. Wilson & Dobbelaere’s general conclusion is that SGI practice works at a number of different levels (psychological, social, economic etc.), and SGI-UK therefore functions as “one of those emergent associations which . . . have been recognized to be spontaneous structures mediating between the individual and the increasingly impersonal wider society, particularly as manifested in the state itself” (226). This functional view of SGI stands in contrast to a view of Soka Gakkai as dysfunctional or deviant, and it will be a verdict with which Soka Gakkai leaders, and members, should be pleased.

As an amateur sociologist, I would in conclusion observe that this book is not “just” a study of SGI-UK; there is a social and organizational context within which it has emerged. The status of new religious movements in Japan is established not only by their success in attracting and keeping members and the like, but also by symbolic acts such as building large headquarters. These help to establish the group’s status “objectively,” that is, in terms of values espoused by the whole of Japanese society such as group solidarity, constructive effort, wealth, and recognition by important public figures. Daisaku Ikeda, the leader of Soka Gakkai has been extremely active internationally, engaged in a constant round of meetings with important world figures, none of them religious leaders. An early example was the historian Arnold Toynbee with whom Ikeda published a “dialogue.” Leading academics have far higher status in Japan than in the West, and Bryan Wilson is held in deservedly high esteem there. (I very well remember calling in on one of the smaller “new religions” in Japan and seeing the disappointment on the faces of the reception committee when they realized I was Bocking, Brian, not Wilson, Bryan!) The authors were able to carry out this study of SGI-UK successfully because they received full cooperation from the SGI leadership and full access to members, who were encouraged by the leadership to respond to the questionnaire. By taking the trouble to co-author a full-length (and extremely good) study focus-

ing exclusively on SGI, Bryan Wilson has paid Soka Gakkai an unparalleled compliment. Could there be better proof of the power of Soka Gakkai's Gohonzon?