Soka Gakkai in America: Supply and Demand of SGI (2)

David W. Machacek

THERE were two good reasons to get excited about this study: First, it was a rare opportunity to collect data on members of a new religious movement (NRM) from a national random sample; second, it was an opportunity to study an NRM that, unlike most, achieved organizational stability. It was an opportunity, therefore, to examine factors influencing the development and growth of new religions.

Soka Gakkai in America is a success story. The typical story is one of sudden growth and equally sudden decline. Although SGI-USA has experienced cycles of growth and decline, long-term growth has exceeded long-term decline. Based on the number of subscriptions to SGI publications in the US and the average number of members per household indicated by respondents to our survey, we estimate approximately 36,000 active members in the US, and growing. Note that our data underrepresented nominal or inactive members and newer, more marginal members. Consequently, that estimate is a conservative one.

By comparison, the current membership of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) is estimated at about 3,000 active members. The Unification Church has fewer than 5,000 active members. Both organizations have been losing members in recent years.

SGI-USA is also successful in another way. It achieved a level of legitimacy that is not shared by most of the NRMs. Apart from minor incidents early in the organization's history in the US, and a very small group of disgruntled ex-members, SGI-USA has been largely ignored by the anti-cult movement. In the mainstream press, stories about the activities of Soka Gakkai in Japan are more frequent than stories about the movement in the US, and when stories about SGI-USA do appear in American newspapers, it is usually to report, in the local news, the members' efforts to clean up a local park or sponsor a public exhibit.

While there have certainly been rough spots along the way, the story of SGI-USA is one of overall success, and explaining that success, relative to the other new religions that appeared in the US at about the same, is the major purpose of our study.

Current research suggests three major factors that influence the success of a religious organization: 1) The degree to which the social environment is open to religious competition; 2) decisions made and actions taken by a religious organization itself regarding how it will deliver its message (marketing tactics); and 3) the degree to which that message appeals to people in that society. We found that all three factors tended to favor the growth of Soka Gakkai in America.

During the middle of the 20th century, the American social environment was opening up to religious competition in particular to religions of Asian origin. New immigration laws made it easier for people from Asian countries to immigrate to the US. Not only did the number of new immigrants from Japan rise, the demographics of those immigrants changed dramatically. Prior to 1965, immigration from Japan, for instance, was restricted to the wives and children of American citizens. Immigration statistics show that in 1965, 90 percent of all immigrants from Japan were housewives or dependent children. Apart from young children, males were almost entirely excluded. By 1975, the proportion of housewives and dependents among new immigrants from Japan had dropped to two-thirds, while the proportion of professionals rose from 4 percent to 15 percent. By 1994, professionals accounted for 20 percent of all new immigrants from Japan. By that time, as well, the proportion of male immigrants had risen to about one-third of all immigrants from Japan. The new demographics of Japanese immigrants to the US meant not only that there were larger numbers of Buddhists in America, but also that representatives of Buddhism would have access to a much broader pool of potential recruits.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of a one-time "Judeo-Christian" religious consensus resulted in declining authority of the mainline churches. Permanent divisions over issues of public morality—such as the sale and use of drugs and alcohol, sexuality, relations between labor and business, and race relations—and over issues of the proper interpretation of the Bible resulted in a decline in the authority of mainline churches and a greater emphasis on personal, individual choice in matters of faith. Even the US Supreme Court came to recognize the individual conscience as what is protected by the religious disestablishment and free-exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution. The outcome was a cultural awakening to the reality of religious pluralism in America, which made the social environment much more open to religious diversity and competition.

These factors, however, did not favor Soka Gakkai over the other new religious movements that appeared at about the same time and under the

same social conditions. The ability to compete for new members was not a guarantee of growth. In order to grow, Soka Gakkai had to find some way to get its message out.

Imagine, if you will, religious organizations as firms trying to sell a product. If you are going to import a product designed on the basis of one set of cultural assumptions into a society with a very different culture, the product is going to have to be redesigned to accommodate the new social realities.

For example, let's say I wanted to import lap-top computers from Japan to the United States. However, the computers designed for a Japanese market cannot connect to the power supply that is available in my American home. In order to use the computer, I will need an adapter. What if I then discovered that my new computer will not communicate with my printer because the two devices use different programming languages. Now I am going to have to figure out some way to translate the programming language used by my computer to that used by my printer. Obviously, such a product is not going to sell very well unless adjustments are made to accommodate the new environment.

The same principles apply to religion, and it was the failure of many of the new religions to make such adjustments to the American social environment that accounts for much of their failure. SGI-USA, however, succeeded in adapting itself to the American social environment. In addition to surface changes—such as conducting meetings in the English language and sitting in rows of folding chairs rather than kneeling on the floor during meetings—SGI-USA adopted a low-profile, soft-sell recruitment method that was much more palatable to American tastes than the often aggressive and highly visible recruitment practices of other new religions. Furthermore, it has increasingly adopted the congregational style of religious organization that is preferred in American society, which gives local members great control over local activities. The national organization has also been moving from the more hierarchical style of the Japanese organization toward the more democratic style of American religions.

Whereas many of the new religions in America maintained practices that were at odds with American social institutions, Soka Gakkai adapted to American institutional practices. The result was that, while the practices of some new religions made them appear odd and sometimes even threatening to the American way of life, Soka Gakkai achieved an aura of legitimacy that allowed it to avoid undue public scrutiny and made it easier for Americans to join without disrupting their everyday lives.

Finally, we discovered that there is a growing portion of the American population that is demanding religion with Soka Gakkai's characteristics. Obviously, even the best marketing tactics will not sell a product that no one wants. So who is most likely to "buy" Soka Gakkai Buddhism in America? Three sets of variables tend to distinguish American converts to Soka Gakkai from the surrounding population.

First, converts score higher on an index of "post-materialism" than the American population generally. When asked about their value priorities, converts tend to place more emphasis on things such as self-expression, aesthetic beauty, and progress toward a society in which ideas count more than money; they place less emphasis on things such as economic growth, fighting crime, and strong national defenses. They place less emphasis on marriage and family; more on self-fulfillment. That emphasis on self-fulfillment translates into a rejection of traditional rules of sexual morality and the acceptance of more libertarian attitudes.

The emphasis on self-fulfillment is combined, however, with a strong sense of personal responsibility for oneself and for the impact one's actions on others and on the environment. That sense of personal freedom and responsibility is best captured in a measure of attitudes about poverty. Whereas the American public is evenly divided between those who think that poverty is caused by structural problems in the social system, those who think that poverty is the result of a lack of effort by the poor, and those who think that poverty just is and there is nothing that individuals or society as a whole can do about it, converts to Soka Gakkai tend to think that while poverty is caused by flaws in the social system, individuals can overcome it by their own efforts. We labeled this pattern the "human potential" perspective.

Religious persons in America have typically taken one of four positions in response to modernity. "Modernists" tend to reject religion as superstition in favor of science and reason. "Counter-modernists" tend to rejection science and reason on the basis of religious convictions. In between these two extremes are those who attempt to reconcile science and reason with religious faith by using scientific methods to enhance religious understanding—usually associated with the liberal Protestant denominations—and those who attempt to draw on the wisdom and guidance of religious traditions for guidance in social and scientific progress. This fourth perspective, which we call the "transmodern" perspective, best characterizes the religious thinking of American converts to Soka Gakkai.

For instance, converts to SGI-USA are three times more likely than

the American public to think of nature as sacred. They are more likely to take an interest in cultures other than their own. Many, for example, say they read about other cultures or have traveled to other countries. They are more likely to believe that rebuilding and healing society is related to healing the self, both physically and spiritually. They are cautiously optimistic about the potential for progress through science and technology, but recognize that progress is not always an improvement over traditional ways of doing things. They are more likely to be consumers of culture, expressing a much greater interest in visiting art museums, attending musical and theatrical performances, making art and craft objects. They spend more time reading newspapers and listening to the radio and less time watching television. Compared to the public at large, converts express greater optimism about the state of society and the future.

Taken together, these values suggest that Soka Gakkai is drawing its converts from a subculture in the United States that is rejecting the traditional Protestant values of hard work, thrift, and self-denial and demanding religion that provides meaning and moral sanction to the values of self-fulfillment, consumption, and the enjoyment of life.

These three factors—a social environment open to religious competition, organizational practices that are consistent with American social institutions, and a growing demand for religion that provides religious meaning and moral sanction to the values and behavior of a growing segment of the American population all contributed to the growth and overall success of SGI-USA.