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'Seeds of Happiness': An Oral History of Members of Soka Gakkai International-New Orleans

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‘Seeds of Happiness’: An Oral History of Members of Soka Gakkai International-New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
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International and Global Studies

by

Lorvelis Amelia Madueño

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Abstract

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a Japanese new religious movement present in 192 countries. Despite the substantial amount of academic work that has been produced on SGI's overseas expansion, many scholars continue to overlook the local context when analyzing the organization's global presence. This paper is based on oral history interviews and examines the experiences of five members of the SGI-USA New Orleans Buddhist Center, located in New Orleans, Louisiana. This thesis argues that many SGI practitioners choose to join and remain in this organization because it fills specific spiritual and emotional voids in their lives, creates an inclusive environment in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, and allows them to hold leadership roles. Utilizing oral histories to analyze the experiences of members of new religious movements like SGI might contribute to a better understanding of the successful global reach of these groups.

Keywords: Soka Gakkai International, Japan, new religious movement, oral history, New Orleans.

Introduction

On March 15, 1974, over 350 people from across the Gulf South region of the United States convened at the University of New Orleans to meet Daisaku Ikeda, the recently appointed president of Soka Gakkai, a Japanese new religious movement based on the teachings of a thirteenth-century Buddhist priest named Nichiren. Members of the Soka Gakkai community in New Orleans consider Daisaku Ikeda's 1974 visit a significant event. During this meeting, Ikeda told the Japanese members in attendance about the importance of participating in and contributing to American society. When talking to Japanese members, Ikeda emphasized the importance of learning English, getting a driver's license, and paying taxes. Ikeda named the group of members who attended this meeting the Happiness Group and asked them to plant Seeds of Happiness, i.e. spread the teachings of Soka Gakkai, across the Gulf South region of the United States. After the meeting was over, the Happiness Group, Ikeda, and his wife headed to City Park, a public park in New Orleans, to have a picnic. The area where the picnic took place is known as the Friendship Grove.¹

In 1975, a year after visiting New Orleans, Ikeda formally created Soka Gakkai International (hereinafter SGI) as an umbrella organization of Soka Gakkai. Despite being connected, Soka Gakkai operates solely within Japan and is strongly concerned with politics.² SGI, on the other hand, operates outside of Japan, cannot engage directly in politics, and is registered as a non-governmental organization (NGO) with the United Nations. Soka Gakkai is

1. "Tree planting ceremony is today at NOMA," *The Times Picayune*, March 20, 2004.

2. In 1964, Ikeda founded *Komeito* (clean government), a conservative political party. Many Japanese believed that the creation of *Komeito* violated the constitution's separation of politics and religion. In 1970, *Komeito* separated from Soka Gakkai. Individuals in one organization were prohibited from holding leadership appointments in the other. Furthermore, the party started to administer its affairs and processes without Soka Gakkai intervention. As of 2020, *Komeito* and the Liberal Democratic Party, Japan's primary government coalition, control the Lower House of Representatives of the National Diet, the Japanese national legislature.

academically categorized as a new religious movement, a group with modern origins, i.e. nineteenth century onwards, existing along the periphery of traditional Japanese religions. Despite the substantial amount of academic work that has been produced on SGI's overseas expansion, many scholars continue to overlook the stories of local members when analyzing the organization's global presence. Why are SGI members attracted to this organization and how can oral histories with local practitioners help us understand its appeal? This paper is based on oral history interviews and examines the experiences of five SGI-New Orleans members. This thesis argues that many SGI practitioners choose to join and remain in the organization because it fills specific spiritual and emotional voids in their lives, creates an inclusive environment in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, and allows them to hold leadership roles. Utilizing oral histories to analyze the experiences of members of new religious movements like SGI might contribute to a better understanding of the successful global reach of these groups.

After becoming the third president of Soka Gakkai, Daisaku Ikeda set out to establish branches of the organization outside of Japan. Many scholarly writings on Soka Gakkai's overseas expansion examine the organization's history in specific locations while others investigate its adaptation strategies. In "The Transplantation of Soka Gakkai to Brazil: Building the Closest Organization to the Heart of Ikeda-Sensei," Ronan Alves Pereira examines SGI's presence in Brazil. In 1960, Ikeda established the first international branch of SGI in this country.³ During its initial period of expansion in Brazil, SGI's use of *shakubuku* or conversion practices was met with heavy criticism because it involved getting people to reject their previous religious beliefs. From 1966 until 1978 leaders of the Japanese-Brazilian community, as well as

3. Discussing the title of his article, Pereira mentions that the Brazilian branch of SGI utilizes the phrase "building the closest organization to the heart of Ikeda-Sensei" in its publications and speeches to motivate members to honor the long history of Soka Gakkai in this country.

members from other new religious movements, denounced *shakubuku*.⁴ Furthermore, members from *Komeito*, Soka Gakkai's political party, were visiting Brazil.⁵ Once this information reached Brazil's militaristic government, it raised concerns about the possible political intentions of Soka Gakkai. In 1974, a planned visit of Ikeda was canceled as he was not issued a visa to enter Brazil. Over the years, the Brazilian branch of SGI learned to adapt itself to these cultural and political conditions. The focus on religious conversion switched to an emphasis on cultural activities like government-sponsored celebrations and local festivals. Moreover, *shakubuku* became a more peaceful practice in which members tell others about SGI without expecting them to convert. Lastly, this branch started welcoming non-Japanese and non-Japanese Brazilians and offering services in Portuguese.

In "The Soka Gakkai in Australia: Globalization of a New Religion," Daniel Metraux found that one SGI center in Australia was mostly composed of Asians who did not identify as Japanese.⁶ Furthermore, most members did not have a particular interest in Japanese culture. Instead, SGI's wide appeal seemed to be based on the organization's ability to create and maintain group identity and cohesion among Asians of diverse ethnicities. In his interviews, Metraux discovered that many surveyed members insisted that SGI provided for both their religious and social needs, functioning as a support group in times of need and as the basis for a social outing.⁷ In Australia, then, SGI has allowed non-Japanese Asians to create a community

4. Ronan Alves Pereira, "The Transplantation of Soka Gakkai to Brazil: Building the Closest Organization to the Heart of Ikeda-Sensei," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008): 98.

5. *Ibid.*, 114.

6. Daniel Metraux, "The Soka Gakkai in Australia: Globalization of a New Religion," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 4 (2012): 108.

7. Daniel Metraux, "The Soka Gakkai in Australia: Globalization of a New Religion," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 4 (2012): 128.

around the shared practice of Nichiren Buddhism. In this sense, SGI functions as a religious and social institution with the ability to craft a notion of pan-Asian identity in this country.

Girardo Rodriguez-Plasencia's "Joining Soka Gakkai in Cuba: Affiliation Patterns and Factors Influencing Conversion Careers" explores Cubans' decision to convert to the Soka Gakkai of the Republic of Cuba (hereinafter SGRC).⁸ Rodriguez-Plasencia identifies three main motivations behind Cubans' motivation to join the SGRC. First, the search for practical benefits, which refers to SGI's ability to provide solutions to daily problems, such as family arguments and financial struggles. Second, the quest for spirituality, which Rodriguez-Plasencia attributes to a fascination with what he calls Oriental religions and alternative worldviews.⁹ And third, SGI's anti-theistic message. Rodriguez-Plasencia's argument regarding SGRC's ability to provide alternative spiritual paths to Cubans is compelling as it indicates that the organization contributes something new to Cuban society; a way to find meaning in one's life without having to look to the traditional models exemplified by Catholicism and Afro-Caribbean religions. The SGRC has not only adapted to local conditions but also given a new meaning of religion to Cuban practitioners, one that provides them with non-Western alternatives to deal with life's uncertainties.

Although there is a plethora of articles and books written on Soka Gakkai's international expansion, few scholars utilize oral histories to determine the reasons behind people's decision to join and remain in this organization. Oral histories with five SGI-New Orleans members collected during the fall of 2020 form the bulk of this study. Oral history is a field of study and a

8. Girardo Rodriguez-Plasencia, "Joining Soka Gakkai in Cuba: Affiliation Patterns and Factors Influencing Conversion Careers," *Social Compass* 62, no. 2 (2012): 160.

9. *Ibid.*, 163.

method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.¹⁰ In listening to narrators and recording their stories, interviewers get to not only expand their knowledge but also look at their research from a completely different world of experience.¹¹ The sample presented here consists of two Caucasian men, one Caucasian woman, one Japanese man, and one African American woman. All five narrators appear with their real names and not pseudonyms, something that distinguishes this project from other scholarly writings on SGI.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all five interviews were held and recorded on Zoom, a videotelephony service. Seeing the narrators' facial expressions greatly enhanced the interviews. The combined collection of these oral history interviews yielded fifty pages of transcript. The interviewer preserved the voices of the narrators while creating readable documents. The fact that the interviewer was not a member of the organization did not deter the collecting of oral histories; narrators expressed positive thoughts at having a non-member investigate and write about the history of their organization. Following the standards of the Oral History Association, the interviewer was patient and thanked narrators as they recounted difficult and painful aspects of their lives. With help from the narrators, the interviewer carried out virtual participant observation and attended several online local, national, and international SGI meetings and events.

10. "Oral History: Defined," Oral History Association, accessed September 14, 2020, <https://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>.

11. Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2005): 23.

Soka Gakkai: The Society for the Creation of Value

Religion in Japan manifests through several traditions that include Shinto and Buddhism.¹² Shinto focuses on the relationship between the practitioner and the *kami*, which are often called “gods” in Western scholarship. However, this translation is not entirely accurate because the term *kami* encompasses personified deities, forces of nature, and spirits of the dead. In Japan, the most revered *kami* is Amaterasu, known in the West as the sun goddess. According to the oldest written historical records of Japanese creation myths, the Emperors of Japan are direct descendants of Amaterasu.¹³ In the sixth century, Buddhism arrived in Japan by way of Korea.¹⁴ During the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867), Buddhism was the state religion of Japan.¹⁵ In 1868, the Meiji Restoration re-established imperial rule in Japan and brought about a massive reorganization of religion. From 1868 until 1882 the Japanese government began to promote Shinto as a political ideology rather than as a religious practice and decreed this new

12. Many scholars have argued that “religion” is a controversial term to use in discussions of Japanese traditions like Shinto. Isomae Jun’ichi and Jason Ananda Josephson, for instance, have challenged the usefulness of the term “religion,” stating that prior to the reopening of Japan in 1853, there was no concept of religion as it was known in the West. Because of this, and pressures put on the Japanese to end their isolationist policy, “religion” was invented in Japan during the nineteenth century. Other scholars, like Ian Reader and Hans Martin Kramer, have argued that the term “religion” is, in fact, useful and can be adapted depending on context. For thorough discussions on this matter, see Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Hans Martin Kramer, *Shimaji Mokurai and the Reconception of Religion and the Secular in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015); Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991); Jun’ichi Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religion, State, and Shinto* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2014).

13. In the early eighth century, Ō-no-Yasumaro, a Japanese nobleman, finished compiling the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihon Shoki* (The Chronicles of Japan). These texts are considered the oldest collections of Japanese myths, songs, legends, and oral traditions.

14. Buddhism is one of the world’s largest religions, encompassing a variety of beliefs and traditions based on the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, a philosopher and spiritual guide who was born in Lumbini, modern-day Nepal, in the fifth or fourth century BCE. Buddhism is broadly divided into Theravāda and Mahāyāna. The former is an older tradition, and it is the dominant religion of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The latter is the largest major tradition of Buddhism and it is practiced in China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet.

15. Andrew Skilton, “Buddhism in Japan,” in *A Concise History of Buddhism* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1994), 176.

kind of Shinto, called State Shinto (*Kokka Shinto*), to be a nonreligious form of education.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the government asked the population to worship the Emperor as a divine being. The Japanese government also forced Buddhist sects to either adapt to its religious policies or face eradication. Many schools of Buddhism, predominantly Zen ones, decided to both accept and promulgate nationalistic ideals.¹⁷

In 1930, educators Tsunesaburō Makiguchi (1871-1944) and Jōsei Toda (1900-1958) created an organization called *Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai* (Value-Creating Education Society).¹⁸ Initially, a group for educators, the organization quickly developed into a broader Nichiren Buddhist movement. As World War II loomed, the Japanese government continued enforcing its view of Shinto as a nationalistic ideology. The government punished religions that refused to integrate State Shinto into their teachings.¹⁹ In 1943, the police approached Makiguchi and Toda and asked them to accept a religious talisman that demonstrated adherence to the ideal of imperial divinity.²⁰ Makiguchi and Toda refused to do so and were imprisoned along with other

16. The term *State Shinto* was not used in Japan during the Meiji era but was instead introduced by United States military leaders during the occupation period to distinguish it from “Sect Shinto,” Shinto practices that were not related to militarism and/or patriotism. The US and the Occupation authorities were able to achieve this by issuing an order called the “Shinto Directive” in 1945. The purpose of the directive was to abolish ultra-nationalistic and militaristic Shinto practices while allowing the Japanese people to keep worshipping at Shinto shrines. The issue of State Shinto practices continues to be a matter of heated debate in Japan, especially due to the existence of places like Yasukuni Shrine, which houses the remains of several convicted war criminals. Although no Emperor has visited the shrine since 1978, some prime ministers and other government officials have, making them the targets of media controversies and lawsuits.

17. For a thorough discussion of Zen and nationalism in Japan, see Robert H. Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993): 1-43.

18. “History,” Soka Gakkai International-USA, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.sgi-usa.org>.

19. Daniel Metraux, *How Soka Gakkai Became a Global Buddhist Movement: The Internationalization of a Japanese Religion* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 9.

20. “Biography,” Tsunesaburo Makiguchi Organization, accessed August 31, 2020, www.tmakiguchi.org/biography.html.

top leaders of *Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai*. Makiguchi died in prison but Toda survived and was released in 1945.

After World War II ended with Japanese defeat, the creation of a new constitution introduced radical changes in Japanese society, including the separation of religion and the State. In this environment of unprecedented religious freedom, Toda rebuilt *Sōka Kyōiku Gakkai*. Under Makiguchi's leadership, the organization had focused its efforts on educators. Toda, however, wanted to make Buddhist philosophy accessible universally.²¹ In 1946, Toda dropped the word *kyōiku* (education) from the organization's title and renamed it *Sōka Gakkai* (Society for the Creation of Value).²² On August 14, 1947, Toda met his successor, Daisaku Ikeda, at a Soka Gakkai meeting in Tokyo.²³ In 1960, after ten years of Toda's mentorship, Ikeda became the organization's third president. Soon after assuming the presidency, Ikeda visited several pre-World War II Soka Gakkai propagation bases in North and Latin America. Ikeda met with many overseas Soka Gakkai members, most of them Japanese wives of United States servicemen who had returned home following World War II. Because of this, Soka Gakkai found itself having only Japanese members abroad. Nevertheless, the organization quickly started spreading to non-Japanese communities once its leaders realized that Japanese emigres were assimilating into local society.²⁴ In 1975, Ikeda created Soka Gakkai International (hereinafter SGI) at a peace conference on the island of Guam.

21. "Reconstruction of the Soka Gakkai," Josei Toda Organization, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.joseitoda.org/president/reconstruction.html>.

22. In the Japanese language, *sōka* is always written with a macron, a symbol that indicates a long vowel sound. The organization does not use the macron symbol in its international publications, i.e. the organization is known internationally as Soka Gakkai.

23. "Encounter with Daisaku Ikeda," Josei Toda Organization, accessed August 31, 2020, www.joseitoda.org/president/encounter.html.

24. Masako Watanabe, "The Development of Japanese New Religions in Brazil and Their Propagation in a Foreign Culture," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 35, no. 1 (2008).

As of 2020, SGI had approximately twelve million members across 192 countries. In the United States alone, the organization has more than 500 chapters and around 100 community centers. Soka Gakkai and SGI practitioners believe that the Lotus Sutra, a collection of the teachings of the historical Buddha, contains the ultimate truth of life: that Buddhahood, a state of spiritual enlightenment, is inherent within every single person without distinction of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender. The daily rituals of SGI members include chanting the phrase *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō*, which translates as “I take refuge in the Lotus Sutra,” and reciting specific portions of this text, a ritual known as *gongyō*. The repetition of the phrase *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* is known as *daimoku*. The organization does not promote chanting to bring forth any kind of supernatural and/or superhuman power. Instead, it asks people to bring up wisdom from within themselves through chanting.²⁵

As a tool to help practitioners focus when they chant, Nichiren created the *Gohonzon*, a scroll inscribed with Chinese and Sanskrit characters, which SGI members enshrine in their homes. Every SGI community center also houses a *Gohonzon*. According to an SGI-New Orleans leader, images of the *Gohonzon* are never included in virtual gatherings.²⁶ Doing so would be considered disrespectful. One of SGI’s main pillars is the belief in the “Human Revolution,” a process of inner transformation whereby individuals can awaken their spiritual potential and contribute to the advancement of society. For SGI members, one of the ways to participate in this Human Revolution is by doing *shakubuku* or talking to non-SGI practitioners about the core ideals of the organization.

25. Paul Benham, interview by author, New Orleans, September 15, 2020.

26. Introduction to Nichiren Buddhism and celebration of the founding of the Young Men’s Division, virtual meeting, attended by the interviewer on September 11, 2020.

The SGI-USA New Orleans Buddhist Center

SGI is organized into units, groups, districts, chapters, zones, and territories. Units have two or three people. Once the number of members reaches thirty, a district is formed. Districts are groups of households around nearby neighborhoods that meet weekly. In the United States, SGI has three main territories: Central, East, and West. SGI-New Orleans belongs to the South-Central Zone, a smaller section of the Central territory, which is made up of six states: Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and parts of Florida.²⁷ SGI members belong to specific divisions, depending on age ranges. These are the Men's and Women's Division, the Young Men's and Young Women's Division, the Junior High/High School Division, and the Elementary School Division. The SGI-USA New Orleans Buddhist Center is located at 1331 Prytania St., New Orleans, LA 70130. This center serves eight districts in the New Orleans area. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the center was offering on-site "Introduction to Nichiren Buddhism" meetings on Monday evenings as well as in-person activities such as home visits and discussion meetings.²⁸ During the pandemic, the center held its individual and group meetings as well as specific events via online platforms.

The SGI-New Orleans membership has fluctuated over the years. In the 1970s, SGI members in New Orleans used to fit in one living room.²⁹ In 1988, when the center received its *Gohonzon*, the membership numbered a few hundred people. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. The devastation caused by this hurricane prompted hundreds of SGI-New Orleans members to leave the city; many of them never returned. When asked about

27. Up until 2019, SGI-New Orleans belonged to the East territory.

28. In home visits, leaders go to members' homes to discuss SGI doctrines, chant, and recite the Lotus Sutra. Discussion meetings, on the other hand, are small group gatherings of around twenty to thirty people.

29. Paul Benham, interview by author, New Orleans, September 15, 2020.

his memories of this event, Brian Saito, an SGI-New Orleans member originally from Japan, sank in his chair and narrated:

One of our districts was lost overnight. Over one hundred households in fact. My wife and I went to Houston but at some point, we wanted to know what had happened to the center. We attempted to get into the city many times, but the National Guard kept stopping us. The General Director of SGI-USA came and said, "I'll talk to them." We were stopped by a National Guard ensemble and the General Director started telling them about the center. He kept saying: "I have to see if my community center is still there." The National Guard let us go and we were able to see the center for ourselves. It was basically untouched, only the entrance sign was damaged. That day, we drove for a bit on the highway. At some point, we decided to stop the car. We got out and looked down at the city. It was horrible, just concrete and water everywhere. From that spot, we chanted *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō*. It's a painful memory, but I always carry it with me.³⁰

Saito and his wife removed the *Gohonzon* from the center and brought it with them as they evacuated. On October 1, 2005, members reunited for the first time after the storm and reinstalled the scroll.

On Saturday, August 29, 2015, a Power of Community event was held in New Orleans to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Several religious groups were invited to deliver short speeches; SGI was one of them. Victoria Smith, an SGI member since 1989, spoke to the community on behalf of the organization: "I shared a couple of quotes from President Ikeda and then I chanted three times. Many members were in the audience and they chanted with me. It was really powerful to have planted *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* in many people's lives."³¹ As of September of 2020, the SGI-New Orleans membership numbered 705 people, which was approximately the same number of members it had in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina blew through the city.

30. Brian Saito, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 10, 2020.

31. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

Experiencing Human Revolution

Before joining SGI, the five narrators featured in this project were searching for spiritual and emotional peace. Brian Saito was born in Tokyo in 1955. His mother joined Soka Gakkai some years before he was born. Even though he was born into the organization, Saito did not practice until he was seventeen or eighteen years old. He chose to join because of a friend. During his interview, Saito remembered how he felt back then: “I found a reason to live. Before I started practicing, I was just hanging out, drinking, and smoking. I didn’t have any desire to be anything. I enjoyed every day without thinking about the future. But after I started practicing, I realized that I wanted to use my life to support other people.”³² Saito married in 1983 and moved to New Orleans on January 20, 1984. He and his wife joined the local SGI chapter once they settled in the city. Saito owns a frame shop in New Orleans. Many of the proclamations and awards that SGI-New Orleans has received over the years have been framed by him.

Paul Benham, one of the original members of the Happiness Group, found a way to tap into his inner spiritual potential when he joined SGI. Benham was born in Mississippi in 1948. He moved to New Orleans after graduating from high school in search of employment, which he found, and he stayed in the city for thirty years. When asked about his current profession, Benham flashed a big smile and shared that he was a salesman for about twenty-six years. At some point, he chose to become a tree nursery owner, something that makes him incredibly happy. In November of 1970, Benham encountered Soka Gakkai for the first time.

I had not much interest at all in religion and never did. I think the reason was that we belonged to a church that was diminishing badly in Mississippi. My Sunday school class was just three of us and it just didn't resonate with me. After I moved to New Orleans, I was kind of interested in karate, but there weren't many schools at the time. One Sunday morning, I met up with a friend at the French Quarter and someone came up to me and gave me a *World Tribune*, Soka Gakkai's weekly

32. Brian Saito, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 10, 2020.

newspaper. She had written the address of a meeting on it. For some reason, I went to the meeting thinking, “well, maybe it’ll be something about karate.” When I went to the meeting, it seemed kind of familiar to me, especially when I heard people chanting. I realized that the philosophy was everything that I’d always believed in. This really intrigued me, and I left thinking that I would never come back to another meeting, but I was invited back. It was a fulfilling experience, especially in the early months and years of my practice. It gave me something I’d always been looking for. I wanted to get in touch with my spiritual side, I just never had found a way to do it.³³

SGI has given Victoria Smith, a family physician, the opportunity to think of her struggles from a completely different perspective. Smith was born and raised in Roselle, New Jersey. Smith was raised Southern Baptist, but she revealed that this religion did not make sense to her. In 1989, Smith was introduced to SGI by Jennifer, a friend who had learned about the organization in the streets of New York but had not started practicing. Jennifer asked Smith to accompany her to an SGI meeting in New Haven, Connecticut.

It was wild to go to this first meeting because it was everything I had been looking for since I was twelve years old. I was looking for a religion where people of all shapes, sizes, colors, and ethnicities could worship together. People were chanting and that touched something inside me. And so, I started trying to chant, even though I didn’t know what I was doing! [laughs]. Over the next two months, I watched my friend’s life. She had a lot of different struggles, but somehow whenever she faced a struggle, she had hope. Anytime I faced any type of struggle, I was absolutely defeated. Two months after that meeting, I sank into just absolute despair and depression. The first thing that I thought was “you need to call Jennifer.” I called her and said, “can I come and chant with you?”. I chanted for one hour with her; it was the first time that I was in this deep pit of despair, but I felt like there was light. That was October of 1989 and I received my *Gohonzon* on December 10 of that year.³⁴

Before moving to New Orleans, Smith practiced with SGI in Connecticut, California, Tennessee, and Massachusetts. She entered Harvard Medical School in 1994, graduated in 1998, and then chose to do her residency in southern Louisiana. Smith shared that she has struggled with

33. Paul Benham, interview by author, New Orleans, September 15, 2020.

34. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

depression since her college years. Once she became a Buddhist, and more specifically, an SGI member, Smith found a way to “bring out the positive aspects of [her] life and awaken to [her] wisdom, compassion, strength, and perseverance.”³⁵ Smith mentioned that SGI’s core ideal of Human Revolution, the belief that every single person is capable of transforming poison into medicine, i.e. turning a difficult situation into something of great value, had a huge impact on her spiritual perception of SGI.

Mindy Milam, a licensed clinical social worker, describes SGI as a practice that informs everything about her life. Milam was born and raised in New Orleans and has worked as a therapist since the mid-1990s. Before that, she was a school social worker for about nine years. Milam was also introduced to SGI by a friend who was already a member of the organization.

For the first couple of years that my friend talked to me about SGI, I said: “Yeah, I’m really not interested. I don’t want to know anything about religion.” That was twofold: part of it was my stereotyped assumptions about what Buddhism was. I thought, “Buddhism? you must be a vegetarian, you have to renounce everything.” So, I think it was my ignorance that led to part of my reaction. The other thing was, I was a lesbian fighting in the 80s and 90s for civil rights in this city and across the country. Often, organized religion was at the heart of opposition to equal rights for lesbians and gays back then. In July of 2011, I went to Colorado and visited this friend and her partner. They asked if I wanted to chant with them and I had not a clue what it was, but I’m curious so I said, “sure.” When I chanted with them, I felt like I had done this before in some other lifetime I suppose. It felt very familiar and powerful. At that moment, I knew I would chant for the rest of my life. I came back to New Orleans from that trip and I found the community center here and went and introduced myself. So, I first chanted in July, and in that November, I received my *Gohonzon* and became a member of SGI.³⁶

Milam explained that her life was already good when she discovered SGI. During her interview, Milam took a deep breath, laughed, and said: “Had I never joined SGI, at my funeral,

35. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

36. Mindy Milam, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 5, 2020.

people would've said that I lived a good life. I traveled and did a lot of things. What this practice has done is helped me enjoy life so much more because I've tapped into a sense of mission. So, my life feels so much more enriched and profound than it would have been without it."³⁷ Milam also shared that SGI has allowed her to see difficult situations in a different light. Like many other SGI-New Orleans members, Milam was heavily impacted by Hurricane Katrina. She lost both her house and her business since she owned a private practice as a therapist. Around 90% of what she owned flooded. Saito and other SGI members helped Milam demolish what was left of her house. Discussing this theme, Milam said:

I'm not even sorry I went through Katrina. I've learned so much because this practice gave me a way to look at what I was going through in such a more profound way. Buddhism says, "life includes suffering" and it's not because I'm a sinner. Suffering is an inherent part of life and there's a way that our happiness doesn't have to be controlled by our suffering. There's a way to overcome suffering. This practice showed me that.³⁸

When William Moody IV joined SGI, he found a way to overcome addiction and transform his life and that of his twin brother. Moody was born in Lafayette, Louisiana, and moved to New York after high school. He stayed there for about five to six years before moving to New Orleans. At the time of this study, Moody was a student at DePaul University working to obtain a graduate degree in Value-Creating Education for Global Citizenship. In this online program, students take a variety of courses dedicated to the teachings of Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda. In 2012, Moody was introduced to the practice of chanting *Nam-myōhō-enge-kyō* while he was still living in New York.³⁹ He had been chanting for some months when a young woman

37. Mindy Milam, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 5, 2020.

38. Ibid.

39. The chanting of *Nam-myōhō-enge-kyō* is not unique to SGI. Other Nichiren Buddhist groups devote themselves to the Lotus Sutra as well.

named Miley talked to him about SGI. Miley ended up moving to New Orleans as well and took Moody to an introductory meeting at the SGI-New Orleans center. Moody had been struggling with different kinds of addictions, anxiety, and depression for years. Reminiscing about his life condition back then, he shared:

I think I always struggled with anxiety when I lived in New York and even before when I lived with my family. I found myself self-medicating with different substances and drinking a lot on the weekends. I was also a heavy cigarette smoker and was very unhappy and unclear in my direction. I have a twin brother and he was struggling with drug addiction himself. My family was struggling and calling me a lot, trying to ask that I took care of my health, but I didn't know what to do. That's when someone shared chanting. I think they could see that I was stressed and needing something in my life. What drew me to chanting was the sense of hope that I started to feel in my life. I was very drawn to the physical practice of chanting. It made me feel like I had more energy and I felt more optimistic. Chanting started relieving my anxiety and making me feel much more able to cope and have hope for the future. I helped my brother start practicing and he overcame heroin addiction. That was his first major benefit from the practice. That was the main reason I started practicing. Ultimately, it made me feel like I could breathe and that I had hope for my future. It also gave me a concrete way to help my brother.⁴⁰

Becoming an SGI member and remaining in the organization has allowed Moody to overcome his addictions and to think of obstacles as opportunities to create positive situations. Furthermore, he has absolute conviction that his life is continuously advancing, expanding, and growing because of this practice.

SGI members also feel attracted to this organization because it provides them with a mentor-disciple relationship. SGI practitioners see Daisaku Ikeda as their spiritual mentor and guide. In 1974, when Ikeda visited New Orleans, Paul Benham was a Young Men's Division leader. Traditionally, this division and the youth divisions take care of organizing welcoming meetings for Ikeda. Benham reminisced about his experience meeting Ikeda:

40. William Moody IV, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 2, 2020.

The thing that I remember the most is that great feelings came out of my life. We had dinner with President Ikeda that day and we all got to ask him questions. The answers he gave me have been a kind of guideline for my practice and my life. It was like some amazing fortune to be able to have that happen. I've never forgotten it. It was like a real experience in which I encountered my mentor. Mentally, he was already my mentor, but I encountered him physically and that is something I've never forgotten. He has a really powerful presence and it's something that a lot of people feel a connection to. The last time I saw him was in 2006 in Japan. I went to a meeting where he was, and I was feeling really beat up from Hurricane Katrina. At the time, he would have been close to eighty years old but the energy that he exuded was absolutely amazing. I've never met anybody that moves me like that. That's something I love about this practice; people like President Ikeda are trying to tell me how I can develop my life and have a better life condition. Through that, I can become a wiser, more capable person.⁴¹

Many SGI members have never met Ikeda and yet, they constantly strive to deepen their spiritual bond with him. William Moody IV explained that in SGI, the mentor-disciple relationship is based on the idea of constantly seeking the mentor's encouragement and advice. Through this exchange, members can expand their capacity to support themselves and others. Even though Moody has not met Ikeda in person, he has reported on local activities and personal triumphs and received personal messages from him. Moody believes that his connection with Ikeda is something that any SGI member can have. What solidifies the relationship between Ikeda and his disciples is the fact that the latter are willing to learn from him. They do so by reading his writings, listening to his speeches and lectures, and trying to live by his example. When asked whether he thought he would get the opportunity to meet Ikeda in person, William smiled and said: "He's 92 years old, I don't think that I'll probably get to meet him before he passes away. I don't think it's necessary, honestly, because our connection exists and it transcends everything else in my life."⁴²

41. Paul Benham, interview by author, New Orleans, September 15, 2020.

42. William Moody IV, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 2, 2020.

Ikeda has always been known for empowering and encouraging women. Victoria Smith joined SGI when she was twenty-two years old. At the time, she was pursuing an undergraduate degree. She remembered struggling with self-esteem and seeing how other young women around her felt the same way. Smith spoke about Ikeda helping her realize her true potential: “When I started reading President Ikeda’s writings, I realized that SGI was a religion that wanted to help and empower women. There were times I didn’t believe in myself but my mentor, who I hadn’t even met, was there telling me how amazing I was.”⁴³ Ikeda’s approach of creating events, speeches, and lectures specifically crafted for women distinguishes him from leaders of other Japanese new religious movements. Further research with female members of SGI can help to elucidate this matter.

The narrators in this study have chosen to join and remain as members of SGI partially due to the spiritual benefits the practice has given them. All five narrators were either discontent or uninterested in religion before joining SGI. Discussing this theme, they expressed that although SGI is a religious organization, it is different from the religions they either grew up in or experienced throughout their lives. The narrators expressed that they do not shy away from telling people that SGI is a religion, but the terms that they prefer to use when talking about the organization are “way of life” and “life philosophy.”⁴⁴ The organization’s message regarding self-reliance, transforming poison into medicine, and the possibility to enjoy a permanent mentor-disciple relationship motivated these members to become Buddhists. These core ideals of

43. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

44. Brian Saito explained that in Japan, he always uses the term *shin shūkyō* or “new religion” to talk about SGI. In an American context, Saito and the other narrators believe that the terms “way of life” and “life philosophy” are commonly associated with Buddhism and therefore provide the listener with a better idea of the organization.

SGI have allowed the five narrators featured in this project to experience their lives in new, fulfilling ways.

Born with Infinite Value

The first years of Soka Gakkai in the United States were marked by a large Japanese and Japanese American membership. However, SGI-USA's membership has grown to be quite diverse. The first thing a newcomer will notice when attending an SGI meeting, whether it is local, national, or international, is the racial and ethnic diversity present. On September 07, 2020, the interviewer attended an online SGI-New Orleans meeting. Of the fifty or so people in the meeting, the interviewer was one of many Hispanic/Latinx individuals. The rest of the attendees were a mixture of Caucasians, African Americans, Asians of various ethnicities, and biracial/multiracial individuals. On September 27, 2020, the interviewer joined SGI's World Youth General Meeting. The event celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of Ikeda's first steps to establish Soka Gakkai branches outside of Japan. SGI members from 192 countries participated in this meeting. Entering this international meeting, the interviewer quickly noticed that members from seemingly ethnically homogenous countries were, in fact, racially and ethnically diverse.

Soka Gakkai's core ideal is that Buddhahood, a state of spiritual enlightenment is inherent within every single person without distinction of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender. New Orleans' historical ties to slavery motivated Ikeda to establish a Soka Gakkai branch in this city and to share the organization's message regarding equality. Daisaku Ikeda's most ambitious project was *The New Human Revolution*, a series of thirty books in which he documents the origins and development of Soka Gakkai both in Japan and abroad. The following

is an excerpt from Volume 19 of *The New Human Revolution* in which Ikeda talks about his decision to visit New Orleans.

New Orleans is located at the mouth of the Mississippi River and once flourished as a port for exporting cotton and other agricultural products. It is also known as the birthplace of jazz. It could be said that the city's prosperity was built on the suffering of African Americans, who made up the rural labor force of the American South. Wishing to see this place of such sorrowful history transformed into a place brimming with happiness, [Ikeda] poured his heart and soul into speaking with everyone he met. He also named the group of members who attended the meeting that day the Happiness Group. Through this encounter, the members awakened to their mission and went on to cultivate luxuriant trees of happiness and trust in their communities and society at large.⁴⁵

Before leaving New Orleans, Ikeda asked the members of the Happiness Group to contribute to his mission of creating an international Buddhist organization that would not only value diversity but also celebrate it.

In the present study, narrators expressed that growing up, they were used to seeing religious organizations as segregating institutions. During his interview, Paul Benham claimed:

I grew up in a really segregated community that put a lot of people down. And of course, New Orleans has its racial problems as well and I never did like that. I always thought it was kind of brutal to put people down because of the color of their skin or how much wealth they have. That always rubbed me the wrong way. Some people have a problem with that because they want to be better than others. What makes SGI different from other groups is that it's inclusive. In SGI, everyone is equal; everyone's life is equally precious, and everyone has the same potential of awakening their Buddhahood.⁴⁶

Similarly, Victoria Smith explained that she always wanted to belong to a religion in which “people of all shapes, sizes, colors, and ethnicities could worship together.”⁴⁷ Reminiscing about the first time she attended an SGI meeting, Smith said: “When I walked into that room, I saw

45. Daisaku Ikeda, *The New Human Revolution* (Santa Monica: World Tribune Press, 2013), 89-90.

46. Paul Benham, interview by author, New Orleans, September 15, 2020.

47. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

Black people, White people, Asian people, young people, older people. It was everything I had been looking for.”⁴⁸ Mindy Milam shared that she grew up in a Protestant family. At Church, everybody looked like her, i.e. White middle-class Americans. Milam pointed out that she used to feel like there was no opportunity for interactions with people different than her. Joining SGI allowed Milam to become part of a diverse community that emphasizes equality for all.

I don't have to compromise anything about myself to be an SGI member. I can have everything in my life and still practice. I don't have to sacrifice anything about me or my identity because sacrifice is not a principle in this practice. Guilt is not a principle. Sin is not a principle. SGI allows me to be human and it supports me to become my best self. The idea that we are all inherently born with infinite value and unlimited possibility is so positive and appealing.⁴⁹

SGI implements a Buddhist concept known in Japanese as *zuiho bini*, which translates as “adapting to local conditions.” Discussing the fact that SGI originated in Japan, William Moody IV shared that the practice never seemed distinctly Japanese to him. According to Moody, SGI is the most diverse community he has ever come across.

I think if someone approached me at the beginning and said something like, “oh, there's this awesome religion you should check out,” coming from the experiences that I've had in the past with organized religion, I probably wouldn't have been as open to learning about it. I think people can be resistant to organizations so, I understand it can be hard to understand that there could be an organization like the SGI. SGI has spread so successfully because it has adapted to local contexts and I think it has to do with the fact that Buddhism's principles always remain the same, but it's always practiced differently depending on where it is.⁵⁰

By shedding its Japanese character, SGI has managed to adjust to specific cultural settings.

The core SGI teaching of Buddhahood asks members to embrace the idea that everyone can achieve enlightenment in this lifetime. SGI's idea of inclusiveness, then, rests on the notion that every single person has the same spiritual potential. This is an aspect of the organization that

48. Ibid.

49. Mindy Milam, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 5, 2020.

50. William Moody IV, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 2, 2020.

continues to appeal to the five narrators featured in this project. According to the narrators, someone's racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic status does not diminish their ability to grow, awaken to their mission, and positively impact their communities and the world.

Bodhisattvas of the Earth

Soka Gakkai and SGI do not have priests or temples but rather lay leaders and community centers. Soka Gakkai was once a part of Nichiren Shōshū, a Buddhist organization with a priesthood system. Under Ikeda's leadership, Soka Gakkai became an organization that aimed to place practitioners at the same spiritual level; having priests went against that vision. In 1990, Soka Gakkai argued several times that the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood was driving the organization away from Nichiren's original teachings. According to the SGI-USA website:

Rather than devote themselves to widely spreading Nichiren Buddhism, the priesthood relied on families that had for generations supported them. And they emphasized that any priest was inherently superior to any lay practitioner. They relied on a tradition common among Japanese Buddhist schools in which lay believers pay priests to recite the sutra on their behalf. This very passive form of Buddhist practice was focused on rites and rituals for which parishioners depended completely on priests.⁵¹

On March 5, 1991, Nichiren Shōshū terminated the policy of entrusting the guidance of Nichiren Buddhist practitioners outside Japan to SGI.⁵² Instead, the priesthood began to guide overseas practitioners directly. On November 28, 1991, Nichiren Shōshū excommunicated both Soka Gakkai and SGI. In her interview, Victoria Smith expressed that one of the challenges she found in being Baptist was “the elevation of the clergy above the common parishioner.”⁵³

51. “The SGI's Religious Revolution,” Soka Gakkai International-USA: Nichiren Buddhism for Daily Life, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://www.sgi-usa.org/2018/03/21/the-sgis-religious-revolution/>

52. “Events leading up to the excommunication of Soka Gakkai,” Nichiren Shoshu Temple, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.nst.org/sgi-faqs/the-history-of-the-relationship-between-nichiren-shoshu-and-the-soka-gakkai/4-events-leading-to-excommunication-of-soka-gakkai/>

53. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

SGI's idea that every person is just part of a universal whole made a lot of sense to me. Because of this, many SGI members and I look upon our excommunication from Nichiren Shōshū as a time of liberation.⁵⁴

All SGI members are encouraged to become leaders in the organization. At the time of the interviews, the five narrators held leadership positions in SGI-New Orleans. Before agreeing to be part of this research, however, narrators made it clear that they would not be acting as spokespeople of SGI. Instead, they presented themselves as members interested in sharing their thoughts and experiences. As the Full Division Leader of the South-Central zone, Brian Saito oversees all divisions belonging to this area. Saito mentioned that SGI-USA's structure is changing very rapidly due to the emergence of gender identities such as non-binary: "Non-binary people do not belong to either male or female divisions and that's ok. We're preparing for that, in fact, we already have many non-binary people in our membership. We want to support all our members."⁵⁵ This addition to SGI's divisions will allow non-binary people to engage in leadership roles and construct environments specifically dedicated to those who share this gender identity.

SGI teaches that every person can become a Bodhisattva— an individual capable of attaining Buddhahood, or spiritual enlightenment, and who chooses to guide others to do the same. According to Daisaku Ikeda, SGI members can become Bodhisattvas of the Earth by vowing to propagate the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and to infuse their chanting of *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* with a sense of mission.⁵⁶ Because of these ideals, every SGI member is considered a leader, whether they hold a specific title or not. Discussing this theme, Paul Benham said: "Anyone who tells anybody about this practice or helps them start their practice are leaders in the

54. Ibid.

55. Brian Saito, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 10, 2020.

56. "Who are Bodhisattvas of the Earth?", *The World Tribune*, March 16, 2018.

purest sense of the word. Sometimes it's the people who don't have any leadership position at all who encourage members the most and who introduce people the most.”⁵⁷ The purpose of leadership in the SGI is to help members tap into their Buddhahood. Therefore, holding a leadership title does not make someone special; it does not set them apart from other practitioners.⁵⁸

In his writings, speeches, and lectures, Ikeda has emphasized how leadership in the SGI is about personal growth and an opportunity to create value for oneself and others. William Moody IV shared that being an SGI leader is one of his greatest responsibilities.

Being a leader enables me to act for others and to live the Bodhisattva way. Being a leader has polished me and has allowed me to look at myself differently. I feel like since I've taken on leadership, I've had to do what we call Human Revolution on a very deep level. It has allowed me to learn what it is to really care about another individual and to support others. That was a very foreign concept to me before joining this practice. I was taught to look out for myself primarily. Buddhism has shown me that the fastest way to become happy is to help other people. But then it's not helping other people to the exclusion of your happiness. It's also very much focused on oneself. That's something that's kind of hard for Westerners to grasp, that there can be two things in the mind. We're so binary, it's either this or that.⁵⁹

SGI leaders, then, are expected to work on themselves with the ultimate purpose of selflessly helping and guiding others. Discussing this theme, Mindy Milam said: “No matter how high of a leader you are, no matter how long you've practiced, it's like our eyelashes are on our face but we can't see them without the help of a mirror. For me, supporting members can be like, serving as that mirror.”⁶⁰ Milam also shared that as a leader, she likes to deepen her Buddhist studies so she can teach others.

57. Paul Benham, interview by author, New Orleans, September 15, 2020.

58. Mindy Milam, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 5, 2020.

59. William Moody IV, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 2, 2020.

60. Mindy Milam, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 5, 2020.

A lot more women practice in SGI than men, which is reflected in many women in leadership positions in this organization. At the time of this study, Milam was serving as Women's Division Regional Leader for SGI-New Orleans. Before and during her interview, Milam pointed out that she would speak as a person as not as a representative of that leadership role. Nevertheless, she confirmed that the way SGI approaches the concept of leadership has always appealed to her. Similarly, Victoria Smith, a leader of the Women's Division, expressed enthusiasm when discussing leadership roles in the SGI. Smith shared that she considers herself the "grandmother" of SGI in two countries: Rwanda and Angola.

I introduced someone to SGI about 25 years ago, a young woman named Rachel who is originally from Haiti. She spent a year in Rwanda doing international public health and during her time there, she could feel the suffering due to the Rwandan Genocide. She determined that she would *shakubuku* and by the time she left ten people were chanting. Now, there is an SGI-Rwanda because of her. Then, she went to Angola, which was going through many challenges. She was able to introduce this practice and now there's a thriving small organization in that country as well. I was able to go there and spend two weeks with my sons.⁶¹

Both Milam and Smith are leaders in other aspects of their lives. Milam is an activist and has been involved with the National Organization for Women, an American nonprofit organization that promotes feminist ideals since she was in college. Besides being a family physician, Smith serves on the Board of Directors of Ochsner Health, Louisiana's largest non-profit health system. SGI's approach to women in leadership positions has allowed Milam and Smith to act as leaders in both their professional and spiritual lives.

SGI's lack of priests and its focus on women and equality have provided millions of members with the opportunity to hold leadership titles. The oral histories presented in this project reveal that the organization's message regarding practitioners' innate ability to become Bodhisattvas goes hand in hand with the issue of leadership.

61. Victoria Smith, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 11, 2020.

Conclusion

The five narrators featured in this project expressed that before joining SGI, they were either discontent or uninterested in religion. An aspect of the organization that attracted them was SGI's ability to fill specific spiritual and emotional voids in their lives. The narrators shared that practicing SGI's teachings on self-reliance has allowed them to experience many inconspicuous or long-term benefits. As explained by Brian Saito, SGI members continually push themselves to create value out of negative situations: "When you change, then your family changes and your environment changes. If we see something challenging, we investigate ourselves to figure out how we can change it."⁶² This belief in the power of transforming poison into medicine motivates the narrators to continue chanting *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* and doing *shakubuku* or sharing their practice with others. SGI has also succeeded in establishing itself in the lives of these narrators because it has provided them with what they consider to be a genuine mentor-disciple relationship.

The five narrators were also attracted to SGI because the organization accepts people from all genders, races, and ethnicities. SGI's diverse, welcoming, and inclusive environment was something narrators had been looking for quite some time. Additionally, they all expressed that although SGI is a religious organization, it is different from the religions they either grew up in or experienced throughout their lives. Besides having an anti-theistic message, SGI teaches that Buddhahood and ultimate happiness can be achieved in this life. These core ideals of SGI have allowed the five narrators featured in this project to experience their lives in new, fulfilling ways. Furthermore, it has allowed them to celebrate their own concepts of race, ethnicity, and gender and those of other practitioners. Further research regarding this topic could look at how

62. Brian Saito, interview by the author, New Orleans, September 10, 2020.

members of the SGI-New Orleans center observe and recognize this diversity. Does the center sponsor local ethnic festivals? Does it provide language services? SGI-New Orleans is far from monocultural; an exploration of its diversity and inclusion strategies could result in a fascinating project.

Even though all narrators presented themselves as members and not as spokespeople of SGI, they expressed a profound sense of commitment when discussing leadership roles. The ability to become leaders of a religious organization that focuses on equality appealed to the narrators from the beginning of their practice. Moreover, SGI teaches that there is no difference between men's and women's capacity to attain Buddhahood. This has led to a massive influx of women in leadership roles. Japanese new religious movements have a long history of placing women in influential religious positions. Nevertheless, many of these female religious leaders have been overshadowed by male religious figures and male-dominated institutions in several instances. Analyzing organizations like SGI through the eyes of women might provide explanations for the appeal of the organization that would be otherwise obscured by male-oriented narratives.

Even though the five narrators featured in this thesis encountered SGI in quite different ways, they talked about the organization and its appeal in similar terms. The narrators chose to join SGI because it provided them with a specific set of spiritual teachings and with a lifelong mentor, an inclusive and diverse environment focused on equality, and the opportunity to grow as leaders while helping others. Further research with the SGI-New Orleans center would be needed to assess commonalities in a larger interviewee sample. Nevertheless, the collection of interviews presented here demonstrates that utilizing oral histories might contribute to a better understanding of peoples' motivation to become SGI practitioners.

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Vita

Amelia Madueño was born and raised in Maracaibo, Venezuela. She moved to the United States in the summer of 2014 to pursue an undergraduate degree at the University of New Orleans (UNO). In 2016, Amelia studied abroad at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan. During her time in Japan, Amelia took courses in the Japanese language and contemporary Japanese history. For her undergraduate thesis, Amelia carried out ethnographic fieldwork for a year at the Japanese Weekend School of New Orleans and examined the life experiences of seven Japanese teachers. In the spring of 2018, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology with a minor in History (Magna Cum Laude, University High Honors, and Departmental Honors). In the fall of 2019, Amelia started her graduate degree at UNO. Her research interests include sociocultural anthropology, ethnography, oral history, and Japanese new religious movements.