

Scholars To Study SGI-USA
By JEFF FARR, ASSOCIATE EDITOR
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We're about to find out a lot more about the SGI-USA. How much time do members spend studying Buddhism? Why do members join in the first place? What do members think of other religions? Do they consider themselves liberals or conservatives? What is the ethnic makeup of the organization?

These are just a few of the questions that a respected scholar from the University of California at Santa Barbara will ask in a survey to be sent to 1,200 randomly selected members across the country. Dr. Phillip E. Hammond, of the UCSB department of religious studies, with the assistance of doctoral student David W. Machacek, will conduct the survey beginning next month.

The SGI-USA is fully endorsing this study. "Among other things, this is a golden opportunity for a distinguished scholar to study and write about our members," Al Albergate, the SGI-USA community relations director, says. "This will provide objective information for other scholars and anybody interested in learning about SGI-USA."

Because the accuracy of the results will depend on a maximum response, Greg Martin, an SGI-USA vice general director, urges those who receive the survey to fill it out and return it promptly. With more than 90 questions, the questionnaire will take about an hour to complete. Most of the questions are multiple choice, with several short-answer questions also included.

At a meeting last June, SGI-USA's Central Executive Committee agreed to open the organization up to this study, believing, as Mr. Martin explains, that "the interest of respected scholars in our organization can only help to increase understanding of our movement in society." This was the case with a study of the SGI-UK by Dr. Bryan Wilson and Dr. Karel Dobbelaere, published by the Oxford University Press in 1994 as *A Time To Chant*.

Dr. Hammond, whose most recent books are *Religion and Personal Autonomy* and *The Protestant Presence in Twentieth Century-America*, shares an interest with Dr. Wilson in the social and cultural forces that lead people to pick one religion over another. Both find the SGI's rapid growth in Western countries of great interest.

"I want to explore the possibility that the path into the SGI presumes that people are somehow, for some reason, dissatisfied with the options that have been historic," Dr. Hammond explains.

The Oxford University Press, based on the success of the Wilson book, will publish the results of the Hammond study on the SGI-USA some time in 1999. While Dr. Hammond's survey was developed with input from SGI-USA members, SGI-USA has no editorial control over either the questionnaire or what will appear in published form. An independent grant from UCSB is providing funds for printing the questionnaire, the postage and the technical means for analyzing the data.

When the data is in, the fun of writing the book begins, according to Dr. Hammond. "Eventually this [data] will take shape and what I like to call a story line will emerge — it will be apparent how we want to tell the story," he says.

Results of the survey will be compared with the University of Chicago general census survey of the United States in order to see how the SGI-USA membership fits into the American religious landscape.

Responses will also be compared with those collected by Bryan Wilson, which will tell us a lot about similarities and differences between SGI-USA and SGI-UK members.

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