

Faith and practice: Bringing religion, music and beethoven to life in soka gakkai

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Abstrak

This paper presents research on the activities of a symphony orchestra organized by Soka Gakkai, Japan's largest new religious movement. Examples drawn from the author's experience as a musician and researcher within the group illustrate that the members' activities are a fusion of Buddhist practice, value inculcation and musical expression. The latter informs their religious experience, manifest on the one hand as Western musical elements infused into Buddhist chant, and on the other as a deep reverence for one particular composer—Ludwig van Beethoven. Historical evidence and ethnographic case studies provide an explanation for this dynamic combination, and point to avenues of inquiry that can be undertaken by scholars researching Japanese new religious movements at the grassroots level. Material drawn from fieldwork is in part analysed using typologies of new religions proposed by Japanese scholars. These models prove useful in describing general tendencies, but longterm participant observation reveals complexities of personal religious experience that do not necessarily conform to macrolevel theory.