

# Jehovah's Japanese Witnesses

## Growth, Conflicts and Prospects of a Transplanted American New Religion<sup>1</sup>

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THE WATCH TOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY (WTBTS) has been making noteworthy inroads into Japan, which now has the fifth largest population of Jehovah's Witnesses (after the United States, Mexico, Brazil and Italy). In 1994 the number of active members peaked at 194,608 (calculated on the basis of those who are committed enough to engage monthly in proselytizing activities, thus a rather conservative figure) and a steady growth rate that adds around one thousand new members each month.<sup>2</sup> There *are* many religious groups in Japan that far exceed the Watch Tower Society in membership. Out of an estimated three thousand new religious movements in Japan, twenty-five to thirty of these claim memberships greater than the Watch Tower Society (Shimazono 1993, 222, 227-8). However, it is unlikely that any of these achieves a higher proportion of membership involvement in training and proselytizing activities than the Watch Tower Society does. And in a time when many of the major new religions of Japan that were established before the Second World War are experiencing declines in membership, the Watch Tower Society continues to expand. In comparison with other Christian groups in Japan, Jehovah's Witnesses will in 1996 exceed in membership the largest Protestant group in Japan and, thereafter, be second only to the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> With the Christian population in Japan being only one and a half percent of the

total population, this may not seem to be a significant achievement, even if it is becoming increasingly disturbing to some other Christian groups (Boyle 1991; Wood 1990). Nonetheless, viewed as persistent growth in an environment that has generally been very resistant to the incursion of Christianity, particularly since the economic boom that began in the 1960s (with only the Mormon Church and the Unification Church coming anywhere near matching the current growth rate of the Watch Tower Society), this development is drawing more and more attention to the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan.

Though at one point, during the Second World War, the Watch Tower Movement in Japan was all but destroyed, its postwar growth has been rather impressive. During the 1970s growth rates climbed above thirty-five percent annually and were higher in Japan than anywhere else in the world (Wilson 1977). Annual growth in the 1980s peaked at fifteen percent in 1983 and declined from there to seven percent at the end of the decade. Growth in the 1990s has been seven to eight percent. This compares with a recent growth rate of barely one percent in a combined tabulation of Protestant and Catholic membership (Burton-Lewis 1992). Even more noteworthy is the level of involvement among Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan. Membership in most Japanese new religious movements is relatively easy to

acquire and to maintain; aside from annual membership fees, few demands are made on most members (Inoue 1990, 190–91). Many Catholic and Protestant groups in Japan report only one-third to one-half of their membership attends church services on a given Sunday (Burton-Lewis 1992, 124). In contrast, among Jehovah's Witnesses it is only those who turn in monthly reports on their proselytizing efforts that are counted in published statistical reports. Around thirty-three percent of these serve as "regular pioneers," devoting ninety hours a month, unpaid, to canvassing work and conducting studies with prospective members, while another fourteen percent puts in sixty hours doing the same activities as "auxiliary pioneers."<sup>4</sup> Attendance at meetings (generally five hours a week) is taken for granted and is in addition to this. If one were to consider peak attendance as a significant indicator, a figure that includes those who are nominal members and interested non-members, the annual "memorial service" (the Watch Tower Society's version of a communion service, but also an occasion when special effort is made to invite non-members) drew 375,131 people in 1994 in Japan (*Watchtower* 1/1/95, 13).

It is in looking at Jehovah's Witnesses as a relatively successful Christian group and as a group that has succeeded in mobilizing a high level of commitment among members that this essay seeks to investigate the achievements of the Watch Tower Society in Japan. What follows is an examination of the postwar development of the Society in Japan, an analysis of strategies that have been used and a look at current programs sponsored by the group. Consideration will then be given to opposition that the Witness community has faced from other religious groups and from the society at large. In conclusion, an assessment will be made of the nature of the success of this group in carving out a niche in Japanese society and its future prospects.

#### THE POSTWAR DEVELOPMENT OF THE WATCH TOWER SOCIETY IN JAPAN

The Watch Tower Society has had two beginnings in Japan. The early efforts, before the war, were all but destroyed in a ruthless campaign to silence religious dissent. Known at the time as Tōdaisha (The Lighthouse), the movement was led by Akashi Junzō, a mostly self-taught Japanese man who lived in the United States from age eighteen to thirty-six. Returning to Japan as a missionary for the movement in 1926, he focused on translating, embellishing and distributing the writings of Joseph Rutherford, the second president of the Watch Tower Society. Though he recruited a following to help in disseminating literature, little effort was made to institutionalize regular meetings and total committed membership never exceeded more than a few hundred people. It was a period of high tension with the surrounding society, especially during the 1930s, as Rutherford was a vociferous critic of apostate religion, big government, capitalist exploitation and nationalism. Akashi boldly aimed these critiques at the growing militarism in Japan in a time when most religious groups were cowering and conforming to government demands for support for the war. Arrests, lengthy interrogations and the imprisonment of many members during the war all but destroyed these early efforts. The final turn of events came after the war when Akashi leveled criticism at the Watch Tower Society's leadership in New York, whom he accused of compromising biblical truth in a quest for higher membership goals. A severance of ties with the parent body followed and Tōdaisha disbanded when American missionaries came to Japan in 1949 to restart the movement (Inagaki 1972; WTBS 1972, 214–22; Nelson, 1995).

Akashi's excommunication was not uncharacteristic of Watch Tower Society responses to dissent within the movement.

Since then he has been portrayed by the Watch Tower Society as an apostate who became deluded during his interrogation and claimed to be the Christ and as one who lacked the humility needed to conform to the "true" pattern of theocratic leadership. But there may well have been other reasons for his dismissal. The Society may have moved quickly to prevent a more acrimonious schism later. They also may have shrewdly seen the potential for greater growth in the improved climate of religious freedom in postwar Japan if they began anew with less independent-minded leadership (Nelson, 1995). As it is, only a handful of Tōdaisha members continued with the reorganized movement.

The new founding of the Japan mission thus began in January 1949 when Don Haslett, formerly the Society's branch coordinator for Hawaii, arrived in Tokyo and began searching for a location to launch the movement again. He purchased a building in the Minato-ku area of Tokyo, very near Keiō University. This location would remain the headquarters and publishing center of the movement until 1972 (and still serves as a home for elderly missionaries). By the end of 1949, Haslett had been joined by his wife and eleven other adult missionaries, many of them Japanese Hawaiians who had trained at the Society's missionary training school in South Lansing, New York. They were soon joined by others from Australia and New Zealand; by 1952 there were a total of fifty-one missionaries. Thereafter the number of missionaries would climb to as many as eighty, until 1972, when missionary involvement began tapering off.<sup>5</sup>

Early missionary efforts concentrated on urban centers with populations of over a million. By 1952 centers of mission activity had been established in Tokyo, Kobe, Nagoya, Osaka and Yokohama, as well as in Kyoto and Sendai. The year 1957 marked another big expansion of efforts with missionary activity beginning in Hiroshima,

Sapporo, Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Kagoshima and Sasebo. The strategy was similar to what Jehovah's Witnesses have employed throughout the world. The new missionaries began calling on homes soon after settling in, using what little Japanese they had already learned to tell the message of Jehovah's kingdom, distributing pieces of literature that had been translated into Japanese and meeting regularly with people interested in learning more about the group's doctrines. The reception they generally received in the early years was for the missionaries surprisingly positive. There seemed to be little animosity left over from the war, even in places like Tokyo and Hiroshima. People were eager to become acquainted with foreigners and to learn English. Initially people gathered in missionary residences or in front yards when the crowds grew. Later on people readily invited Witnesses into their homes; it was easy to get Bible studies started. Growth was not dramatic, but steady. By 1952 there were four native Japanese doing pioneering alongside the missionaries and around three hundred "publishers" (i.e., active members). Missionaries generally only worked in about ten locations at a time and remained in most areas for only three to five years, long enough to get a congregation started and indigenous leadership trained on the job before moving on to new locations. By 1965 there were 3,639 publishers. After this growth became more dramatic, perhaps in part due to increased anticipation focused on 1975 as a probable year for the apocalypse. The year 1969 saw a twenty-five percent increase and the 10,000-members-mark was reached in 1970. (Watch Tower Society congregations are started in different areas but also, as is the universal practice, are generally divided when they reach around one hundred and fifty members. Multiple congregations, as many as four, then use the same simple, functional Kingdom Hall facilities.) By 1972 there

were around eight congregations in most of Japan's population centers of over a million people; Tokyo had thirty-three congregations. Growth rates grew to thirty-eight percent in 1974. By 1975, when Armageddon had been expected, there were 33,000 members. There were isolated incidents of members selling all their assets to devote themselves full time to pioneering work; others had foregone medical treatment, expecting the end of the present world system. Defections increased for awhile after 1975, and growth rates dropped to nineteen percent the following year and eleven percent the year after that.

Preparations, however, had already been made for a longer stay in Japan and greater expansion—but not as great as what was to occur. A new headquarters and printing plant was opened seventy-five miles southwest of Tokyo at Numazu in 1972. By the end of the decade this new center had been outgrown. A new location was then selected in Ebina, just west of Tokyo, and opened in May 1982. (This center was expanded considerably in 1989, and plans are presently being made for more expansion.) The 100,000-membership-mark was reached in 1985; growth rates had declined some but still remained robust. Large urban centers have been the most fruitful areas for recruitment, particularly in Kobe, Osaka and Yokohama. Rural areas have always been more resistant to recruitment by canvassing efforts, with greater social pressure directed against those who begin Bible studies with Witnesses. The island of Hokkaidō, made up largely of a population that has moved from elsewhere in Japan during this century, has been a high growth area as well. Since 1992, every neighborhood in Japan is being canvassed on a regular basis by Jehovah's Witnesses; many neighborhoods in urban areas are visited every two months; most rural areas are visited every four to six months (WTBTS 1992, 48–49). Early missionaries had never envisioned such suc-

cess, believing that the end of the age would be upon them much sooner. The Japan Branch leadership was turned over to a Japanese "brother" in 1975. Since then a "branch committee" has been formed to oversee the work in Japan. Presently, six of the seven committee members are Japanese. Most "district overseers" and most "circuit overseers" are also Japanese. (There are presently eleven districts in Japan with ten to twelve circuits in each, and most circuits have twenty or more congregations. In 1994 there was a total of 3,365 congregations.) District and circuit overseers are supported by the Society. They generally do not maintain a home of their own and are expected to remain childless, spending their lives, together with their wives, staying in the homes of members as they travel around and visit a different congregation each week. At the congregational level, elders (up to three or more) are lay members who supervise the teaching and proselytizing work. Distinctions between clergy and laity are repudiated, at least ostensibly, and local congregations are not saddled with the support of a professional leadership.

#### *Strategies and Motivations*

The strategy used has been the same as that used worldwide. Those who express interest in learning about Watch Tower Society teachings are encouraged to have a Witness meet with them once a week in their homes for "Bible studies" that focus mostly on the Society's literature. As the person's interest grows, he or she will be invited to attend Sunday meetings at a Kingdom Hall. This initial indoctrination period will generally continue for a year or more. Full membership comes when a person is baptized, and then only after having demonstrated a willingness to serve Jehovah, to conform to the group's moral standards, and after having successfully answered to the satisfaction of the congregation's elders a lengthy list of

questions regarding the group's doctrine. Faithfulness to the task will, thereafter, be maintained through weekly involvement at meetings, canvassing work and a steady diet of the Society's literature.

Meetings are less times of worship than indoctrination and training sessions. People used to a rich tradition of worship experience might feel that worship gets eclipsed by teaching in these meetings. Singing is kept to a minimum and there are no special musical performances or liturgy. Charismatic leadership is not encouraged. Hour-long sermons on Sundays given by a congregational elders, or an assistant (ministry servant), follow outlines that are prepared in the Brooklyn, New York, headquarters of the movement. This is followed by an hour-long study of a *Watchtower* article that follows a question and response method. The questions are given in the footnotes of the article so that members can prepare responses in advance that reflect what has been written in the article. Generally, members of all ages eagerly speak up to demonstrate their understanding, encouraging a shared experience. The method is obviously pedagogically effective in engaging people in the learning process. Nonetheless, sessions are very much controlled by an elder and questions and answers are limited by what is given in the text. Other meetings held during the week include, first of all, a book study, generally held at a member's home, that focuses on reading and discussing current texts published by the Watch Tower Society. On another weekday night, a Theocratic Ministry School meeting concentrates on cultivating communication skills to be used in ministry. Again, there is no segregation by age as all participate in honing their skills before the group by giving short presentations on assigned topics. This is followed by a Service meeting that trains members for door-to-door witnessing and often involves

role playing to sharpen members' apologetic responses.

All this training is very much directed toward the cultivation of lives that are meant to exemplify Jehovah's Witnesses, including active involvement in "service work." Door-to-door canvassing work or distribution of literature on the streets is not an option for members and everyone must put in at least an hour a month to remain in good standing. Many put in much more. Members are encouraged to become pioneers, either regular or auxiliary; significantly, forty-seven percent of Witnesses in Japan do. Housewives figure prominently among these pioneers, as do young people, who are generally encouraged to forego a college education and postpone marriage to devote themselves to proselytizing. Many members work part time or at jobs that allow flexibility in working hours so that they can do pioneering.

Ostensibly, the motivation for all this activity is one of carrying out the biblical command to evangelize the world, with door-to-door preaching work believed to be the divinely-appointed method (*Watchtower* 7/15/79, 20-21; Franz 1991, ch. 7). An urgency is added to the task because of the imminence of the apocalyptic destruction of the present world-system. The Watch Tower Society has interpreted the high level of commitment of members in Japan as being derived from a deep-seated cultural factor that was very evident in the widespread worship of the emperors in former times and in the willingness on the part of soldiers to die for the emperor. Such deep devotion resulted in disillusionment after the war but now has a new object in Jehovah (*Watchtower* 1/1/92). Faithfulness in the task is considered essential to develop the spiritual fortitude needed to withstand the persecution that will occur during the apocalypse. Continued failure to perform service work can lead to being "disfellowshipped" (i.e., excommunicated). One's

service work is meant to be central to one's life. An emphasis on ascetic living and the transience of the present world system reinforces this, as do continuous reminders received through articles in the *Watchtower* and *Awake!* featuring Witnesses who suffered in Nazi concentration camps and others who have been persecuted for their beliefs, thus accentuating the difference between Jehovah's Witnesses and other people.

Other motivating factors are obviously at work as well. Long-time missionary and former branch overseer Lloyd Barry (now a member of the Governing Body) is reported to have commented once that in Japan "pioneering is the thing to do" for young people who have just completed their schooling; and missionaries have acknowledged that peer pressure to do pioneering among Japanese Witnesses is intense (Franz 1991, 205). It is also acknowledged that most Japanese who join the Watch Tower Society tend to be very obedient; they do what they are told to do by congregational leaders and comply with the social mores of the group and the demands to control individualistic impulses. The authority structure in the movement is a system that finds an ideal complement among Japanese people who have been through school systems that reinforce a high level of discipline and conformity. Some of the effective pedagogical methods used are also similar to what Japanese students are used to. On top of this, a pervasive corporate spirit encourages each and every one to join in and do their part as an expression of loyalty to the organization, something that most people find culturally continuous with much of the Japanese social world. All this is encouraged as being consistent with sincere belief in doctrines that emphasize the rewards of the future over the present and the need to prepare oneself for times of testing by proving one's faithfulness. The intense commitment required of members adds to the cred-

ibility of the message being propagated. A record of one's spiritual performance is carefully quantified in such terms as hours spent canvassing and the number of Bible studies conducted, with a degree of competitiveness often present among Witnesses in this regard. This record can be a weighty matter for young men who hope to advance to leadership positions in the organization (along with the record of their spouses, if they are married). Statistical reports of growth are published monthly as visible evidence of the fruitfulness of people's efforts. Large, biennial circuit assemblies and even larger annual district assemblies bring together vast gatherings of Witnesses and can contribute profoundly to people's experience of the significance of the endeavor they are involved in.

#### *Problematic Aspects of Witness Growth*

Despite the record of involvement of members and the impressive growth rates of Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan, the effectiveness of canvassing effort warrants examination. If the total number of hours spent in proselytizing work is divided by the number of new members, a rough estimate of the fruitfulness of this activity can be arrived at. This comes to 7,998 hours for each new active member (i.e., publisher) in 1994. Put differently, this would amount to nearly two hundred forty-hour work-weeks for each new publisher. Less than five percent of this time is spent in Bible studies. However, these calculations need to be qualified. First, many new recruits are initially contacted in families or other social gatherings rather than as a result of house calls (as much as forty percent or more).<sup>6</sup> Effective recruitment occurs among women who meet at child-care facilities or PTA meetings, and some increase results from members having children. Secondly, there are defections, even if the rate is relatively low. Using one method of estimating the

rate of defections and averaging it over a recent five-year period results in a defection rate of around two percent per year.<sup>7</sup> Some of these have been excommunicated for moral offenses; others have merely dropped out or become inactive. Those who leave as a matter of conscience and make their views public are far fewer.<sup>8</sup> The result is that more are actually recruited than are shown in membership increases, but with so many drawn into the movement by alternative means, the time spent canvassing per each new recruit enlisted by that means is still greater than the above figure (Penton 1985, 243).<sup>9</sup>

There also seems to have been a significant decline in the effectiveness of these recruitment methods (with the above qualifications applicable). Ten years ago less than half as much time was expended for each new recruit, and twenty years ago seventy percent less time was needed. The most significant declines in annual growth rates occurred in the two years following the failed 1975 prediction mentioned above and in the years following a prolonged media attack on Witnesses in the wake of a particularly poignant blood transfusion case in 1985 (see below), when growth dropped to seven percent from thirteen percent the year before. Witnesses acknowledge that people are much less welcoming at their doors than in former years, often objecting to the Society's position of blood transfusions, and it is much more difficult to get people to agree to meet for Bible studies.

The official response to the decline in recruitment effectiveness is that the gathering of the "sheep" is nearing completion in Japan. There remains, nonetheless, an urgency to recruit those that remain. Door-to-door service work is viewed as not just a recruitment tactic but also a separating task, offering people a chance to respond and thus separating the sheep from the goats. No major changes have been introduced in recruitment methods, though some orga-

nized efforts are being made to contact by telephone people who do not answer their doorbell.

There are some other signs of weaknesses in the mobilization of members and in proselytizing efforts, even as the percentage of members committing themselves to pioneering service increases. The growing proportion of memorial service attenders to active members may be a sign of an increase in interest on the part of non-members, or it could indicate an increase in less active members as well. Even clearer from statistics the Society publishes is that there is a significant gap in the mobilization of active members. While forty-seven percent of Witnesses in Japan are devoting sixty or ninety hours a month to service work, the average number of hours devoted to proselytizing activities each month by the fifty-three percent who are not pioneers is less than six hours. Defections, nonetheless, as noted above, seem to be relatively low. Further, though studies have shown that religious "belief is firmest among those whose social network and whose religious affiliation are coextensive" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 320), a condition that is certainly evident among Witnesses, this inhibits defections but it can also limit growth. Witnesses are discouraged from too much or too close association with non-members. Yet, a "group's effectiveness in gaining recruits depends greatly on the extent to which its members have, or can enter, social networks outside the group" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 323). If the effectiveness of canvassing efforts are declining, as evidence suggests, and if the teachings of the community, not to mention the intense involvement of members, results in social isolation, it could be that growth is now increasingly coming from intra-family contacts and members having children.

Critics have been quick to point out what may seem like a lot of wasted hours of can-

vassing effort that could be more constructively devoted to social programs or even ministering more to members of the congregations. There have long been tensions in the Watch Tower Society over this issue, with the Society refusing to compromise the primacy of proselytizing. Here critics have accused the Society of a single-minded devotion to numerical growth at the expense of a more holistic development of members. For the Society, proselytizing is the *raison d'être* for members and the experience that separates the truly committed from nominal believers (e.g., Penton 1985, 206, 218).<sup>10</sup> It is an experience that constantly reminds Witnesses of their relation to the world as that of a separated remnant. Continuous training for this task and participation in it serve to maintain a high level of commitment in members. Also, the literature distribution that this service work achieves ends up being the major source of income for the Society. Though literature is distributed free of charge (to avoid charges of profit making), members are encouraged to voluntarily contribute an above cost price for the literature they distribute or read themselves. The difference represents a significant source of financing for the organization. Any curtailment of service work as it is now understood would, therefore, result in the need for alternative means of financial support.

Social programs have never been a priority among Jehovah's Witnesses and, except for occasional literacy classes in some countries in Africa and increasingly well-organized relief programs that respond to the needs of Jehovah's Witnesses in distress, there are no institutionalized social programs sponsored by the Society. Criticism, sometimes bordering on ridicule, is often directed by the Watch Tower Society at other religious groups that make social programs the focus of much of their work, suggesting that such programs serve merely as enticements where clearly recog-

nizable truth is lacking. With the world as it is soon to be destroyed and replaced by a paradise on earth, such efforts are considered to be a waste of resources (e.g., WTBS 1993, 201, 525). Failure to build schools and hospitals and engage in other social welfare programs has at times been taken as a pretext for banning the Watch Tower Society from conducting missionary work in some countries. The Society has, however, been defended for making a significant social contribution wherever it works by the cultivation of moral character in people (Wilson 1973). Members are frequently praised for their honesty and hard-working natures. And the Society's literature, particularly the bimonthly magazine *Awake!*, (sometimes called the *Reader's Digest* of the movement) has increasingly featured articles that commendably address social issues, such as ecology, alcoholism and child abuse. Some of this is intended to portray the decadence and corruption of the age but much of it is also a response to a growing demand from readers for help in coping with these problems (*Watchtower* 1/1/94).

#### *Publishing and Mission Outreach*

Publishing and distribution of literature has always been a central feature of the Watch Tower Society. The Ebina headquarters of the movement in Japan, modeled after the Bethel headquarters of the movement in Brooklyn, New York, has grown into a large publishing operation. Almost all literature is prepared in Brooklyn but is now published in up to twenty languages and braille at the Ebina center and shipped to fifty countries throughout Asia and as far as Eastern Europe. However, the center is much more than just a publishing plant and the headquarters of the movement in Japan. It has become something like a pilgrimage center for Witnesses from throughout Japan who come to attend assemblies or to participate



in guided tours. A community of five hundred and twenty-some volunteers lives at the center and works to keep the operation going. Most of these workers are young men, second-generation Witnesses, who have been recommended by their congregations and approved by their circuit overseers for the privilege of working at the center. They are provided with an apartment and they take their meals in a large communal dining room. In addition, they receive a small stipend to cover personal expenses. They must complete a nine-month training period first, then they can stay as long as they want, provided they faithfully do their assigned tasks and participate in the meetings and service work expected of them. They can be assigned to a variety of tasks, such as maintaining the presses and keeping them rolling, automotive maintenance, carpentry, editing and translating. Thus for most it is an opportunity to learn one or more trades while they serve.

The Japan branch has grown from a foreign mission field for the Watch Tower Society to a missionary-sending arm of the Society. A Ministerial Training School is now located at Ebina for preparing missionaries (single males) for work in foreign countries. Currently, fifty-some missionaries from Japan have been sent to six countries, including Taiwan, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Brazil. Work among foreigners living in Japan is also rapidly growing. Presently there are English (14), Portuguese (11), Spanish (5) and Chinese (2) congregations.

#### *Demographic Characteristics*

There are a number of noteworthy demographic characteristics of the movement in Japan. As in most Japanese new religious movements, women make up a substantial portion of active adult membership, over seventy percent by most estimates. In urban areas women experience most the dislocation

from rural areas, with a lack of neighborhood interaction; religious involvement fills a spiritual and social need. Recruitment of families often begins with the women in the family, then the children, sometimes followed by the husband. In a survey of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tokyo taken nearly twenty years ago, Bryan Wilson (1977, 113) found the socioeconomic standing of members was heavily weighted toward people in clerical work and sales. Among the many housewives, there were some, however, whose husbands were corporation salary men. Since then there seems to have been a rise in the socioeconomic standing of the average Witness and an increase in the proportion of professionals in the group (partly a reflection of changes in the population in general). Sectarian religion demanding discipline and active involvement frequently does lead to an enhancement of economic well-being among members. This in turn can lead to a gradual liberalization of a group's doctrine and practices as increasingly affluent members, particularly second-generation members, seek greater respectability in the broader society (cf. Stark and Bainbridge 1985, ch. 7). The Watch Tower Society has definitely tried to counter such developments by not relaxing the stringent expectations placed on members and by discouraging any single-minded pursuit of upward mobility. A college education is not prohibited by the Society but young people are told to weigh the advantages of higher education for their ministry and not to focus on social or material advantages. Generally young people are encouraged to choose jobs in the vocational sector, technical jobs, construction skills, or computer work, for example, rather than the professions or the corporate world. Few, if any, second-generation Witnesses join corporations. At the same time, the movement does not like dealing with unemployment in its ranks and thus encourages versatility of employ-

ment among members. The membership also serves as a valuable network in assisting people in finding jobs.

#### JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN JAPAN

Bryan Wilson, in his research on the Watch Tower Society in Japan, noted that

Japanese traditional religion, with its emphasis on Buddhist rituals, veneration of ancestors, household shrines and shamanistic performances, is scarcely a seed-bed for radical Christian lay asceticism of a highly rationalistic type. The lifestyle and austere religious practice of the Witnesses is quite remote from the pervasive symbolism, liturgical richness, music, dance, and gesture of traditional Japanese religion (Wilson 1977, 98).

Further, the Watch Tower Society, unlike many Christian missions these days, makes no pretense of encouraging the development of an inculturated version of the faith. The pattern universally promoted involves an ethos that resembles much that originates in Middle America, with an added emphasis on a kingdom-oriented life. Still, more and more Japanese people are finding it an attractive religious option. This can partly be explained by the change in the religious climate in Japan. Statistics reveal a widespread irreligiosity of Japanese people, with two-thirds responding in opinion polls that they are not religious. By being nonreligious, most seem to mean that they are not actively religious as involved members (generally meaning not involved in a new religious group) though many remain open to the possibility of the existence of the supernatural and divine assistance and will make appeals to divine powers in times of crisis (Swyngedouw 1986). This, together with widespread social-cultural changes, has made for a fertile climate for the growth of new religious movements. A significant

decline in the influence of established religious traditions, particularly Shintoism, has given such opportunity for the emergence of these marginal religious groups that the vitality of much religious life in Japan has shifted to new religious movements. Winston Davis (1980, 296) suggests that these groups "seem to represent the cultural mainstream of the country.... Japan's Great Tradition virtually is her Little Tradition." It is these movements that pose the greatest competition for any religious group vying for converts in Japan. The Watch Tower Society has obviously benefited from this new religious climate, even though it has not been able to compete as well as movements that are more culturally continuous with conventional faiths.

#### *Jehovah's Witnesses and Japanese New Religious Movements*

On first observation, popular new religions in Japan present a marked contrast to Witness beliefs and practices. These groups generally draw heavily on folk religious traditions that remain viable to many Japanese people, are often eclectic and inclusive in their beliefs and practices, frequently provide social benefits for members (e.g., day care centers, schools, activities for seniors) and are commonly very this-worldly in their orientation, attracting followers in search of healing and material success. A premium is placed on restoring harmony with oneself, with nature, with the spirits of one's ancestors and in social relations (McFarland 1967; Hardacre 1986, ch. 1). Among the so called "neo-new religions" that have flourished more recently, there is recurrently extensive preoccupation with occult phenomenon and esoteric rituals, accompanied by a decline of confidence in science and technology (e.g., Davis 1980; Reader 1988; Mullins 1992). While these neo-new religions have introduced some innovation,

their popularity and relative success in contemporary Japan is clearly due in part to their effectiveness in relating to the "old" concerns for ancestors, spirits, and magical healing which have dominated folk religion for centuries.... [And they do this while offering] exciting religious experience without the excessive pressures of conformity demanded by the larger social system and without the requirement of adherence to a rigorously defined belief system (Mullins 1992, 240, 244).

The Witnesses, on the other hand, are generally much more ascetic, other-worldly, very exclusive and rigidly doctrinaire. Witnesses are forbidden to participate in indigenous religious festivals or to perform any worshipful acts at Buddhist funerals they may attend. Though Witnesses acknowledge the reality of occult phenomenon, they strictly forbid any participation in such rituals,<sup>11</sup> and, as noted above, there is little that goes on at Kingdom Halls in the way of worship and practices that could be considered esoteric.

Nonetheless, there are common features between the Watch Tower Society and many new religious movements that can account partially for why the Society has shared some of the same success in Japan. Many of these groups, together with the Witnesses, are stridently critical of the traditional religious establishment. There is a widespread view that the traditional religious establishment has lost touch with the genuine sources of spiritual truth, corrupted doctrine and become preoccupied with commercial gain. Witnesses have typically aimed such criticism at "Christendom," particularly the Roman Catholic Church, but have found much to target in Japanese religions as well (e.g., WTBS 1972, 246; 1990).<sup>12</sup>

An emphasis on eschatology is another common feature. A frequent theme is the imminent apocalyptic destruction that will

be followed by a new age of bliss for those who conform to the teachings of the group and devote themselves to accomplishing the momentous tasks that remain to be done before the end can come (Blacker 1971, 584, 599; Ooms 1993; Reader 1988, 252-3; Young 1993, 245). Questioning distinctions made in established religions between religious professionals and the laity is another frequently shared concern. There is typically much more opportunity for and encouragement of lay involvement in many of these movements. Active proselytizing is also common, together with massive assemblies, sometimes held in stadiums, that generate visible displays of the growth and social strength of the individual movements. Many of these groups, like the Watch Tower Society, are tightly administered and have highly centralized authority structures (McFarland 1967). Finally, and here the Watch Tower Society succeeds best, many new religious groups promote themselves as being international movements with a universally relevant message.

*Jehovah's Witnesses and "Christendom" in Japan*

The Watch Tower Society's relationship with other Christian groups in Japan has involved more tension even though they are more closely related. Whereas there has been little hindrance from Japanese new religious groups,<sup>13</sup> there is growing opposition from some Christian quarters. A long history of derogatory, often generalized and unfair, criticism has been hurled in both directions between the Society and other Christian groups in many countries. Distinctive Watch Tower Society doctrines set it apart from most Christian churches: belief that the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ are corruptions of the true faith; a denial of the immortality of the souls of people (i.e., people do not survive death, but they can still be resurrected);

denial of the prospect of eternal punishment in hell for nonbelievers; a strict prohibition on the consumption of blood, including blood transfusions; a belief in a "double destiny" among believers, with an elect group, the 144,000 "anointed class," going to heaven and the "great crowd" either being resurrected to or surviving the apocalypse to enter a paradise on earth. Any ecumenical collaboration with "Christendom" is avoided by Jehovah's Witnesses. The Witnesses do not speak of themselves as a church but as *the* theocratic organization. Tight control is exerted over what gets taught to Witnesses by the leadership that extends from Brooklyn. Biblical interpretation remains very literal and conservative, right down to a biblical chronology that places the creation of Adam a little over 6,000 years ago. This conservative view is probably even more evident in Japan where less is known in the general population about modern developments in critical studies of the Bible and where there are fewer people in the population with competing interpretations of the Bible. In this regard, they share with most other Christian groups a high regard for biblical authority, and their belief in the imminence of the apocalypse (minus the proclivity to make definite predictions of the timetable) has long been a feature of many evangelical groups.<sup>14</sup>

To many Christian groups in Japan that have struggled to secure a foothold and grow, the successes of the Watch Tower Society, considered to be a "heterodox" group at best, have been daunting. The combined memberships of conventional Christian groups makes up only one percent of the population in Japan, but they are proud of the reputation they have earned through contributions they have made to Japanese society in the form of universities, hospitals, schools and other social programs. Concern has been expressed in these quarters that Jehovah's Witnesses capitalize

on this reputation in their proselytizing efforts without contributing to the social programs that have built it. And, given that most Japanese people do not know enough about Christianity to make distinctions between the doctrines of the different groups, it is felt that Witnesses can sully the image of Christianity when their refusal of blood transfusions draws media attention.<sup>15</sup> Since 1979, with the continuing growth of Jehovah's Witnesses and other nonconventional Christian groups (particularly the Mormons and the Unification Church), the interdenominational *Christian Yearbook* has not listed membership statistics on these groups (Swyngedouw 1991, 178-80). Ostensibly, this is because these groups do not conform to the "orthodoxy" recognized by conventional Christian churches. Not wanting to call attention to the fact that their membership increases have greatly exceeded that of conventional organizations over the past decade is probably a factor as well.

More aggressive opposition to the Watch Tower Society is growing in Japan, coming from defectors, some of whom have joined more conventional Christian groups or formed their own Christian organizations. Two former congregational elders who defected have each published several book-length critiques of the Watch Tower Society, focusing mainly on failed apocalyptic predictions along with doctrinal and organizational changes that have occurred in the historical development of the movement.<sup>16</sup> A group in Kobe that calls itself the Remedy for Jehovah's Witnesses Institute sponsors such seminars and has published and distributed books aimed at discrediting the Watch Tower Society. This group has engaged in deprogramming tactics as well, with limited success.<sup>17</sup> It is also becoming increasingly common for conventional Christian groups to sponsor seminars aimed at educating their members about the nature of the Watch Tower Society.

The aggressive proselytizing tactics used by the Watch Tower Society, along with the effective pedagogy and strict discipline, can account for much of its success relative to other Christian groups. Witnesses are very strict in requiring members to maintain high moral standards and severe in their ostracism of defectors and excommunicants. Many Christian groups have been reluctant to engage in such tactics and debate between those who advocate promoting a social witness versus those who emphasize the need for an evangelical witness has been very intense in some circles, further deterring growth (Reid 1991, ch. 4). But also, other Christian groups have suffered from a widespread perception that they are "clergy-centered institutions whose atmosphere is characterized by intellectualism and predictability" (Mullins 1989, 85).

#### JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND JAPANESE SOCIETY

A recently advanced theoretical model (Harper and LeBeau 1993) for understanding relations between a society and marginal religious movements suggests a continuum that stretches from a position of "high accommodation" on one end to "high problemization" on the other end. A "highly accommodated" group faces no opposition and has no negative public definition. An "accommodated" group faces opposition from other religious groups but none from secular actors; its doctrinal differences with more conventional religious groups are generally the only complaint against it. A "problemized" group faces opposition from powerful secular interest groups, which in turn mobilizes popular opposition. Finally, a "highly problemized" group will face both popular antagonism and opposition from the state. The theory further suggests that problemization of a group is most likely to result from the group's attempts to redefine the line between the "sacred" and the "sec-

ular"; deviant doctrine alone generally does not result in problemization, but attempts to change strongly held secular values do.

The prewar, Tōdaisha, period of the Watch Tower Society in Japan can certainly be described as a time of high problemization. This problemization, however, can be said to have resulted not only from the group challenging the line between the sacred and the secular (e.g., disputing the divinity of the emperor; contesting the state's right to wage war) but also from the state redefining this line (particularly in reshaping Shintoism into a civil religion and in extending the state's authority over religious organizations), resulting in clashes not only with Tōdaisha but also with other religious groups that refused to compromise (Hardacre 1989, 26, 126-7; Abe 1970, 241-3).

Much of the postwar period can be characterized as a time of moderate accommodation for the Watch Tower Society in Japan. New constitutionally guaranteed religious freedoms have enhanced the climate for marginal religious groups. And the Watch Tower Society, under new leadership, has moderated its stance toward the world and adopted less militant tactics. It has moved from its prewar confrontational and provocative stance to a position of "political neutrality" and has cultivated tactfulness among its members. Doctrinally, discontinuity with the world is still emphasized but "impression-management" has been increasingly employed in relations with that world. Criticism of the state has been very limited. Unlike some other religious groups in postwar Japan that have strongly protested perceived violations by the government of the constitutionally guaranteed separation of religion and state, the Watch Tower Society has not entered the fray. In the wake of the late emperor's death, the Society's criticism of his role in history was guarded, carefully couched in quotes taken from leading newspapers (*Awake!* 12/22/

89, 1–12). A lengthy critique of Japanese values and social habits in *Awake!* (5/8/85, 3–11) merely reflected what one frequently encounters in the Japanese media and in American analyses. Still, accommodation is only partial. Like other Christian groups, the Watch Tower Society is still widely viewed as a foreign religion. In addition, people often find the repeated canvassing efforts of Witnesses to be annoying; they associate any active proselytizing with new religions, which are frequently spoken of disparagingly. This, together with the connection many people make between the Watch Tower Society and the refusal of members to accept blood transfusions, has prolonged the stigmatizing of Witnesses as a “cult.”

#### *The Blood Transfusion Issue*

The blood transfusion issue is one area in which the Watch Tower Society in Japan has been threatened with becoming problematized. The worst crisis the Society has faced in the postwar period began on June 6, 1985, in Kawasaki, when a ten-year-old Witness boy, riding his bicycle, was caught between the rear wheels of a turning dump truck and a guard rail. With tourniquets applied to his crushed legs, he was rushed to St. Marianna Hospital. The child's parents were active Witnesses, though not yet baptized members. When summoned to the hospital and asked to sign consent forms for emergency surgical procedures, they agreed on condition that blood transfusions not be given. Doctors persisted in attempts to convince them that the transfusion of blood would be essential to save their son's life. At one point, the father was taken to the emergency operating room to see the condition of his son. Efforts were made to communicate with the, by then, nearly unconscious child and to have the son request the father to allow the doctors to do what they thought was necessary. Exactly what was said and

what happened in those crucial moments has remained a matter of debate. Shortly thereafter, the child became completely unconscious and was hooked up to an artificial breathing apparatus. The police were notified and they came to the hospital and screamed threats at the parents, telling them that they would be arrested if they did not consent to a blood transfusion for their son. The parents remained calm yet adamant in their refusal.<sup>18</sup>

A reporter for the *Asahi Shinbun* picked up on a lead at the local police station and arrived at the hospital shortly after the child died, five hours after the accident. His report, said to have been confirmed by the father and based on interviews with doctors and others on the scene, suggested that the son had expressed to his father a desire to live when the father was taken in to the operating room (*Asahi Shinbun*, June 7, 1985). It is this element that the media sensationalized in days and weeks that followed. A theme that dominated much of the reporting portrayed the parents as fanatical members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who were willing to disregard the desire of their child to live and sacrifice his life for the sake of their religious belief. Television talk shows featured an angry public expressing incomprehension. Medical experts lamented the intrusion on the freedom of doctors to do what was best for a patient and legal experts cited the guarantees of freedom of religion that would make it difficult to prosecute the parents (Oizumi 1992, 23). One tabloid, targeted toward women, emblazoned a two-page spread with the title, “I don't want to die; I want to live.” The story featured a medical commentator who was quoted as saying that doctors should have the courage to take action in such cases. He contended that the parents probably really wanted the doctors to act, as it would have relieved them (the parents) of responsibility for violating a religious injunction (*Shukan Josei*, June 7, 1985; quoted in Oizumi 1992, 52–3).

A freelance researcher, Oizumi Mitsunari, who had been involved as a child in Kingdom Hall meetings under his grandmother's guidance, became intrigued with this story and has attempted to give a more accurate portrayal of events.<sup>19</sup> In investigating this case, he interviewed doctors at St. Marianna Hospital and the reporter who had been present at the scene. Of particular interest to him was finding out the truth about the deceased boy's words in the operating room. These words had so frequently been used to malign the parents and the beliefs they stood on, suggesting that the parents had overridden the child's desire to live because of their religious convictions. A rather ambiguous picture emerged from his findings. The doctors reported that they had not heard anything intelligible from the child, though they had eagerly listened. The *Asahi Shinbun* reporter had received his version from the child's father who, though he subsequently repeated what he originally reported, may have, Oizumi reasons, projected his own desperate feelings. It might be best to conclude, Oizumi submits, that the dying child did not say anything intelligible (Oizumi 1992, 112, 214). Subsequent autopsy reports revealed that a blood transfusion probably would not have saved the child's life (Oizumi 1992, 368-9; *Asahi Shinbun* 3/31/86).<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, it is the sensationalized media version of these events that remains associated with Jehovah's Witnesses in the minds of many Japanese.

It is clear that on this issue Jehovah's Witnesses have come up against religious and secular values in Japan and have been threatened with problemization as a result. Both the perceived restriction on the value of human life and the challenging of medical authorities does not fit in with conventional behavior in Japan. In the wake of the above case, some hospitals made public announcements that patients in dire need of blood transfusions would be treated in accordance with the decisions of the medical

staff. The Watch Tower Society continues to maintain that their teachings on blood transfusions are nonnegotiable.<sup>21</sup> Articles on the topic frequently appear in the Society's publications. However, changes are occurring regarding this issue. The AIDS epidemic, Witnesses will acknowledge, has greatly benefited them by accentuating the dangers that can be associated with blood transfusions. The danger of HIV contamination, together with a growing willingness on the part of many doctors in some countries to work with Jehovah's Witnesses in developing alternative treatment methods, has led to new forms of cooperation where earlier there had been much confrontation. This has been capitalized on by the Watch Tower Society through the formation of "liaison committees," beginning in the United States in 1979 and in Japan in 1990, to further the cooperativeness (*Awake!* 11/22/90, 21-2; 11/22/93, 24-7). Committee members endeavor to inform hospitals of their views and of alternative treatments that have been successfully used elsewhere. Articles from leading medical journals documenting alternative procedures are made available in Japanese translations on request for mediating between Witness patients and doctors. Names of cooperating hospitals and doctors are circulated among Witnesses. The results of these efforts in Japan are beginning to pay off for Witnesses, with a growing number of hospitals expressing a willingness to cooperate with members of the Watch Tower Society in offering the best available alternatives to blood transfusions.<sup>22</sup>

The Watch Tower Society has begun to place more emphasis on establishing legal protection in Japan for their beliefs and practices.<sup>23</sup> A legal team has been assembled to pursue cases more persistently. Several cases dealing with blood transfusion issues have arisen. In 1986 a case in the Ōita District Court resulted in a favorable ruling

for Witnesses. The parents of a thirty-four-year-old male Witness had sued to overrule his objections to having a blood transfusion administered. The parents contended that their son's family obligations to care for them in their old age took precedence over his religious beliefs (*Watchtower* 6/15/86, 14). More recently, a suit has been heard in the Tokyo District Court regarding a sixty-three-year-old female Witness who was repeatedly assured by doctors at Tokyo University Hospital that surgery on her for a liver ailment would be performed without a blood transfusion. When complications arose during surgery, however, a blood transfusion was given and medical records were allegedly falsified to hide the fact. (This may well be a frequent occurrence in Japan.) After the cover-up was discovered by a journalist, one of the attending physicians acknowledged that a transfusion had indeed been given. The patient, with support of the Watch Tower Society, filed suit against the state, as the hospital is a state facility, and the doctors who performed the surgery.<sup>24</sup> A decision is pending in this case.

Despite the immense amount of negative publicity the Watch Tower Society receives because of its stand on blood transfusions, a position that is unique among religious groups, it clearly intends to remain firm on this issue. Rather than making compromises (as it has in the past in reversing its prohibitions on vaccinations containing blood products and on organ transplants) and risk shaking the faith of a constituency that has long been galvanized by this issue, the Society seems to hope to be vindicated for its stand. Witnesses are proud of the legal precedents they have established in many countries of protecting and extending religious liberties for marginal religious groups through struggles in the courts. It seems that now the Society hopes to some day be seen as having contributed to the development of

safer alternatives to blood transfusions while remaining firm in its beliefs.

#### *Freedom of Religion in the Schools*

Another issue that has been pursued in the courts by the Watch Tower Society is the right of Witness students to refrain from participation in martial arts classes at school. Kendō, in particular, is considered by Witnesses to be more than a form of self-defense; it is associated with military training. Most prefectural Education Ministries have been understanding and have accommodated this protest by a religious group against what it considers militaristic activity. An exception has occurred at the Kobe Municipal Technical College (offering grades 10–14). Fourteen Witness students were not promoted to the next higher grade because of their unwillingness to participate in the kendō portion of their physical education classes. Four of the students filed suit in the Kobe District Court. The ruling handed down on February 22, 1993, was not favorable for them, stating that the requirement of the school constituted a negligible infringement on their religious beliefs. The case has been appealed to the Osaka High Court (*Awake!* 4/8/93, 27; 2/8/94; *Japan Times* 2/24/93). Nonetheless, unlike the blood transfusion issue, it seems less likely that this matter will result in any significant problemization of the Watch Tower Society in Japan, even if the higher court upholds the ruling of the Kobe District Court. There have been newspaper editorials expressing support for the Witnesses in this case, reflecting the anti-militarism that remains popular in the country. And given that most school districts have chosen to accommodate Witness students, there does not seem to be widespread backing for taking the kind of measures against them that the school in Kobe has. In addition, recent efforts to mandate the participation of school children in flag



salute ceremonies, something Witness children would be obliged to refuse to do, have not succeeded in getting approval in the Diet (*Japan Times* 10/15/94, 2).

### *Gender Issues*

The most severe ongoing conflict faced by Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan occurs on the domestic level. With around seventy percent of adult Witnesses being women, there are many families divided over the issue of the female spouse's dedicated involvement in the Watch Tower Society. Testimonies of "persecution" in the home are common among Witnesses, frequently involving verbal and physical abuse. Problems seem to occur more where the extended family is still functioning as a unit than in strictly nuclear families. Cases where a female spouse is a "foreigner," and thus has less legal protection and less likely to win custody of her children if she files for divorce, can result in prolonged, hostile marriages with considerable abuse.<sup>25</sup> Unbelieving husbands complain of spouses not being home with meals prepared at the end of the work day and of the rest of the family being more involved in proselytizing and meetings on weekends than in family life. Some complain of their wives being somewhat deceptive in attempting to hide the extent of their involvement after it becomes an issue in the home.<sup>26</sup>

This involvement on the part of women against the wishes of their husbands is an interesting reflection of changing roles of women in Japanese society. Women seem to find in the Watch Tower Society's ideology a legitimization of their self-assertion in the face of male domination. Opposition from their husbands generally deepens their commitment to their new faith. At the same time they accept the Watch Tower Society's teachings that interpret the Bible as relegating women to positions of subjection to men. Women are not permitted to hold

leadership positions in the organization and can occupy teaching roles in group meetings only if there is no qualified male in the congregation. The authority of the scriptural text and the religious organization is stronger to them than traditional Japanese cultural patterns in defining gender relations. This is particularly evident in the lack of any emphasis on the extended family unit, the *ie*, that includes the ancestors. As an influential traditional ideology of the family, this model places severe limitations on women (Hardacre 1994). Thus women find in the Society an avenue for gaining greater independence for themselves vis-à-vis their husbands and extended families but, at the same time, accept a limitation placed on their own self-assertion. Something akin to a traditional Japanese ethos regarding gender relations still prevails. Women are not likely to soon begin demanding leadership roles in the Watch Tower Society but many seem to feel that their status as women is elevated. They are proud of their service to Jehovah at the front of the proselytizing efforts that have made the Watch Tower Society what it is. And their behind-the-scenes contributions to the ongoing functioning of local congregations are very evident. With the roles of women in Japan in transition, and with the Watch Tower Society generally remaining very conservative in its definition of gender relations, the likelihood of this matter contributing to any significant problemization of the Watch Tower Society seems remote. Domestic conflicts will no doubt continue, but the challenge to secular values on this matter remains very much within the broader changes that are occurring in Japanese society.<sup>27</sup> Even the views on women's roles promoted among new religious movements founded by Japanese women are generally very conservative despite the phenomenal participation of women in these movements (Hardacre 1994).

In summary, the relation between the Watch Tower Society and Japanese society will probably move more and more toward a position of accommodation, without ever achieving a high accommodation. It will, along with other Christian groups, remain a foreign religion amidst the traditional religious heritages of Japan. The aggressive proselytizing efforts of the Witnesses will keep it stigmatized as a new religious movement. Growing opposition from other Christian groups and from defectors, along with frequent media attacks on new religions in general, will probably intensify this stigma. The Watch Tower Society is definitely making efforts to counter this impression by attempting to project an image of the Society as a immense international movement that attracts people of all walks of life and employs state-of-the-art equipment in carrying out its mission. Being labeled a cult or a sect is something Witnesses resent and have attempted to counter (*Watchtower* 2/15/94). (It certainly impedes their proselytizing efforts when, as often happens, people are apprehensive about even letting them explain their views.) Promoting Jehovah's Witnesses as responsible and morally upright people, whose struggles have won legal rights for oppressed religious minorities and whose beliefs and practices have challenged racial and class distinctions in the places they have worked, is also part of this impression management.<sup>28</sup> The likelihood of more intense negative publicity regarding the Witnesses' position on blood transfusions remains, particularly if cases involving children arise. This is still the greatest source of possible problemization. Further legal definition of this issue could either allay or intensify this threat. The Society's increased effort to establish legitimacy for the beliefs and practices of the group are well warranted in light of this. The formation of liaison committees promoting alternative treatments may prove to be even more

beneficial by decreasing the likelihood of deaths and diminishing the potential of public exposure on the issue. The political neutrality of Jehovah's Witnesses and the stand taken by Witness students regarding kendō training is unlikely to lead to problemization, given the lack of political empowerment many Japanese experience and the widespread antimilitarism that remains. And conflicts over the roles of women that Witnesses frequently face both reflect broader changes that are occurring in Japanese society and contribute to those changes. With more and more Japanese women working outside the home, these kinds of conflicts are not seen as being unique to Jehovah's Witnesses.

#### THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF JEHOVAH'S JAPANESE WITNESSES

In summarizing what has been presented and in assessing the achievement of the Watch Tower Society in Japan, ideas suggested by Rodney Stark in an article entitled "How New Religions Succeed" (1987) can serve as a useful profile. Stark has outlined eight conditions that he claims a new religion must realize and sustain, or find present in the surrounding social context, to achieve lasting success. It is evident that Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan have either achieved or found themselves in an environment that meets five of these conditions of success. With the three other criteria, the signs of success are more ambiguous.

Where the group has succeeded, first of all, is in maintaining a medium tension with the surrounding society. In the terminology used in the previous section of this essay, they have not reached a high level of accommodation or a high problemization or even too much moderate problemization. Being a Christian group in a overwhelmingly non-Christian environment guarantees that a high accommodation will not be achieved, a factor further accentuated by

the noncumenical stance taken by the Watch Tower Society. As has been shown, in the postwar period, media focus on the blood transfusion position taken by Witnesses has been the one issue that has most threatened them with damaging problemization. Steps being taken by the movement on this issue are clearly intended to minimize critical exposure on this point and to move the group to a low level of accommodation. The Watch Tower Society has benefited as well from a favorable ecology for the development of marginal religious groups in postwar Japan, another essential criteria suggested by Stark. The new guarantees of freedom of religion have given rise to hundreds of new religious movements. As a result the Watch Tower Society has been able to develop with little interference from government regulations.

Three other conditions of success that Witnesses have achieved are effective mobilization of members, resistance to secularization and effective socialization of young people in the group. As has already been shown, the success the Watch Tower Society has had in mobilizing membership in Japan has been rather phenomenal. Resistance to secularization can be attributed to a number of factors. There remains tight control from the center in Brooklyn of what gets taught to congregations in Kingdom Halls and there has been little recent liberalization of Witness theology. The practice of dissuading Witness youth from pursuing college educations certainly is an ingredient here as well. And, as Stark points out, a high proportion of first-generation members in a movement generally contributes to a resistance to secularization, a factor that is still at work among Witnesses in Japan. On top of this, there is an effective socialization of Witness youth by means of the pedagogical methods used and their involvement in proselytizing that is required from a young age. Altogether, it is probably one of the most intense religious

socialization programs in operation among religious groups in Japan.

There remain, however, three conditions for lasting success that have only been partially achieved by the Watch Tower Society in Japan. The first of these, continuity with the dominant culture, particularly the religious traditions of the dominant culture, goes against the teachings of the Watch Tower Society, which views the world's systems as controlled by demonic forces bent on destruction. Obviously, Witnesses have not enjoyed the kind of success realized by some of the indigenous new religious movements because of their discontinuity. Nonetheless, continuity with a cultural tradition becomes a much more complex issue when one is dealing with a culture that has undergone as much transformation as Japanese culture has over the last one hundred years. The Watch Tower Society can be said to be succeeding as well as it is partly because it *is* continuous, not with a so-called "traditional" culture and weakening conventional faiths but with the more modern, rapidly evolving culture. Wilson noted that it is the Western quality of the movement that appeals to many people, as well as the promotion of a greater egalitarian spirit, the seemingly rational approach (lacking mysticism and magic), the pragmatic orientation and the easily understood teachings (Wilson 1977, 101, 104). It is also, as noted above, "with it" just as other new religious movements are popular because there is plenty of opportunity for the participation of the laity; there is also a strident criticism of the failures of the religious establishment to provide spiritual guidance to the people. Even the apocalypticism that has been so prominent in the Watch Tower Society is a feature of many of the faster growing new religions.

As for the last two conditions of success, achieving a normal age and sex ratio in the movement to assure intra-group growth and maintaining close network ties within and

without the group, the achievement of these remain limited but not out of reach. Though there is a disproportionate number of women in the movement (as is typical of many of the more successful new religious groups in Japan) there does seem to be a healthy ratio of young people and children of both sexes. The more limited number of male role models in Witness congregations together with the number of young males whose fathers are not involved probably results in a greater defection rate among young men. But with congregational leadership limited to men in the movement, opportunities for leadership do attract young men to stay. And with a growing number of second- and third-generation members, intra-group growth is certainly increasing. As for the maintenance of close network ties within and without the group, too great an emphasis on internal ties—to the point of discouraging close association with people outside the movement—can limit effectiveness in achieving growth. It is the ability of a group to access new social networks, families for example, not just individuals, that broadens recruitment potential. Canvassing efforts combined with the cultivation of new relationships in Bible studies has worked well for the Witnesses in the past. With the decline in the effectiveness of these tactics, Witnesses may find themselves increasingly isolated from the kind of close associations with outsiders that leads to conversions and membership increase. New strategies will have to be developed to maintain current growth rates.

Long-term success goals in the present world system are inconsistent with Witness ideology that continues to stress the imminence of the apocalypse. But given the emphasis on proselytizing efforts and statistical progress, as well as the development of modern printing facilities in places like Japan, it is obvious that they are not inattentive to organizational success. Having weathered failed apocalyptic predictions in

the past, it is likely that the organization will find novel interpretations of biblical prophecy to justify extending their efforts further. In the meantime, in Japan, the movement's discontinuity with conventional religious traditions will probably prevent it from enjoying widespread popularity. Success, nonetheless, is a relative notion. In terms of numerical growth, the Watch Tower Society has achieved a respectable measure of success in Japan. They are unlikely to become a dominant religious force and the effectiveness of their proselytizing efforts will probably continue to decline. Increased opposition from defectors and other Christian groups may be a growing factor here. More significant is probably a general trend toward the popularity of religious groups that offer more esoteric experiences and make fewer demands. Still, a continuing growth rate of seven to eight percent would be welcomed by most religious groups. In terms of achieving a permanence in Japanese society, it is probably safe to say that this group's continued existence and increasing influence seems guaranteed. As for changes made by Jehovah's Witnesses on the wider society, these remain negligible, though they have certainly made themselves widely known. The success that has been achieved has come as a result of effective strategy and much hard work on the part of members, as well as far-reaching changes in Japanese society that have led to the accommodation of marginal religious groups and have opened up a market niche for the kinds of beliefs and activities offered by the Watch Tower Society.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A number of people are deserving of recognition for their assistance on this research project. Assistance with the translation and summarizing of texts was provided by Nakai Satsuki and Nakajima Takashi of Temple University, Japan. Special thanks goes to Oizumi Mitsunari for sharing

his research insights with me. Feedback on earlier drafts came from Mark Mullins and Joanna Nelson. Financial support was provided by the Center for East Asian Studies, Temple University.

<sup>2</sup> This figure is taken from the *Watchtower* (1/1/1995, 13). General reliability of Watch Tower Society statistics has been supported by Bryan Wilson (1978, 163) and James Penton (1965).

<sup>3</sup> The Spirit of Jesus Church has claimed membership in excess of 400,000. More recently the active membership has been put at 23,283 (Mullins 1990, 357). Membership in the Roman Catholic Church is around 433,000 members. The Kyōdan (the United Church of Christ in Japan), the largest Protestant group in Japan, has a membership of about 207,000 (Kelleher 1994, 153). The membership of the more than 160 Protestant groups is around 600,000.

<sup>4</sup> These figures are extrapolated from monthly statistical reports given in "Our Kingdom Ministry." There is generally a significant increase in pioneers during the months of April and May when vacationing school children are encouraged to devote extra hours to service work.

<sup>5</sup> Descriptions of these early efforts are based on the Watch Tower version of events (WTBTS 1972, 222–52; 1993, 490–1) and on an interview (2/26/94) with Mrs. Adrian Thompson, a missionary in Japan since 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson (1977, 107), in a limited survey of Witness congregations in the Tokyo area, found that nearly sixty percent of Witnesses were initially introduced to the movement through a house call, nearly thirty percent via parents or relatives and only fifteen percent through friends and acquaintances. House calls, however, are recognized by Witnesses to be much less effective in rural areas.

<sup>7</sup> The Watch Tower Society does not regularly publish figures on defections. The method used here is one suggested by former Watch Tower Society President Nathan Knorr (1973, 254), comparing growth in publishers over a period of years with the number of baptisms in those years (minus one percent for deaths and minus twenty percent of the membership increase for those who remain unbaptized). The results in Japan show that in recent years an average of about 3,000 a year have either become inactive, dissociated themselves, or been excommunicated.

<sup>8</sup> Iwamura Yoshio, who defected in 1988, told me that he knew of only five people who had defected for reasons of conscience and made their views

known during the thirteen years of his involvement in the Watch Tower Society.

<sup>9</sup> Penton (1985, 243) estimated that only twenty percent of new recruits in Canada join as a result of door-to-door canvassing efforts; he cites Beckford's findings of forty-six percent in Britain.

<sup>10</sup> Iwamura Yoshio of Kobe, a former presiding elder, said he was most disturbed by the training given to congregational elders on how to "keep sheep in line," i.e., active in proselytizing, by scolding them and conditioning their participation at meeting on activeness in canvassing. This is what most disillusioned him about the movement before his defection in 1988 (Interview 4/1/94).

<sup>11</sup> Occult phenomenon are defined by the Watch Tower Society as being demonic in origin, and contact with deceased ancestors is said to be impossible in terms of Witnesses' disbelief in the immortality of the soul. Questions on these issues are frequently encountered by Japanese Witnesses in their work because of many people's exposure to religious groups or other sources that promote such explanations.

<sup>12</sup> *Awake!* (4/22/82, 18–20; 8/22/85, 12–13) has featured articles on the limitations of Japanese religions. A concerted effort was made by Jehovah's Witnesses in May 1989, the month when many vacationing school children joined the pioneering effort, to distribute *Watchtower* magazines (4/1/89, 4/15/89) featuring articles on the imminent destruction of the "world empire of false religion."

<sup>13</sup> Up to about ten years ago there were what seemed like organized efforts on the part of Sōka Gakkai to dissuade Witnesses from continuing with the Watch Tower Society. Witnesses were invited into homes, expecting to conduct studies with individuals, only to find themselves "ambushed" by a group of ten or more people who would employ verbal abuse and interrogation methods to try to dissuade them.

<sup>14</sup> The Watch Tower Society acknowledges that misjudgments have been made in such predictions but denies that these were prophetic pronouncements made by the organizational leadership. The Society contends that the only real failure on the part of Witnesses has been in being too eager in anticipating the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. It is interesting that the Society has recently warned against prophetic utterance that predicts exact dates for the apocalypse (*Awake!* 3/22/93, 2; also WTBTS 1993, 36–37; cf. Zygmunt 1977).

<sup>15</sup> More pointed criticism has come from William Wood, an American missionary who has

spearheaded opposition to the Watch Tower Society by evangelical groups. He accuses the Society of spreading a "false, distorted view of Christianity," enticing members away from conventional Christian groups (he estimates thirty percent of Witnesses have converted from other Christian groups), destroying family units (by dividing husbands and wives when only one converts) and contributing to the unnecessary deaths by teaching people to refuse blood transfusions (telephone interview 1/26/94; also Wood 1990). Nakazawa Keisuke, a Baptist pastor in Sagamihara has also been active in organizing "Jehovah's Witnesses to Christ" seminars.

<sup>16</sup> Kanozawa Tsukasa, from near Sapporo, Hokkaidō, defected in 1985 and took sixty congregational members with him. He has published three books critical of the Watch Tower Society. Iwamura Yoshio, from Kobe, who as a rising star in the organization in the mid-1980s was featured in the *Watchtower* (2/1/87) for his active pioneering, defected in 1988, followed by thirty members of the congregation he then belonged to. He has published two books critical of the Society.

<sup>17</sup> Charging up to a million yen to parents and/or relatives, this group has used methods involving holding a person against his/her will for extended lengths of time (nearly two months in one case). Only two out of eight attempts have resulted in defections (as of April 1994). (Interview with Iwamura Yoshio 4/24/94. Iwamura disclaimed association with this group and criticized its tactics.) A group in Kobe called Kusai Taisaku Kyōgikai providing deprogramming services suspended operations in the fall of 1994 after a woman attempted to jump out of a fourth-floor windows to escape a deprogramming ordeal.

<sup>18</sup> The above, and what follows, is taken from summaries of news articles in Oizumi Mitsunari's study (1992, 5-9, 27-28). Initial news stories were featured in the *Asahi Shinbun* (6/7/85) and *Shukan Bunshu* (1/20/85), among others. See also *Awake!* 1/8/86, 22-3; *Watchtower* 11/1/89; 25.

<sup>19</sup> Oizumi's concern grew out of questioning what he might have wanted done if he had been injured as a boy of ten when he was involved with the Society. This interest in the case has grown into an effort to resolve unsettled questions that remained after the media had its heyday and to provide people with a better understanding of a religious movement that remains too little understood by the general public. He views his ongoing research, as well as the book he has published, the hotline he maintains and the newsletter he distributes as an effort

to diffuse a growing misunderstanding of Jehovah's Witnesses, whose membership includes many of his own relatives, in Japanese society.

<sup>20</sup> Oizumi's reporting on this case was the basis for a television docu-drama entitled *Settoku* (Persuasion), starring Beat Takeshi, a well-known Japanese actor, as the boy's father. The movie version is embellished and sensationalized, but it ends on an open-minded note, not expressing an opinion regarding the decision made by the parents.

<sup>21</sup> The Watch Tower Society's position on blood transfusions has been detailed in a number of publications: *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Question of Blood* (1977) and *How Can Blood Save Your Life?* (1990). The most thorough critique of the Watch Tower Society's position on blood transfusions, to my mind, is that of Jerry Bergman (1990).

<sup>22</sup> This includes St. Marianna Hospital in Kawasaki, which in wake of the incident in 1986 made known that it would administer blood to patients in life-threatening conditions that required it. (Interview with Mrs. Adrian Thompson, 2/26/94). However, the ethics committee of Nagoya University School of Medicine has issued a manual regarding Jehovah's Witnesses and blood transfusions stating that the wishes of adults should be respected but minors should be treated in life-threatening situations (*Mainichi Shinbun* 12/28/93).

<sup>23</sup> In the United States, Jehovah's Witnesses have succeeded in winning widespread legal protection for their position on blood transfusions when the lives of adults are at stake, and hospitals have generally come to respect these rights and to cooperate with patients. In the case of minors, court orders can still be obtained to over-rule the wishes of parents. However, with liaison committees appealing to judges to consider new developments in alternative treatment methods, it is becoming increasing common for judges to place conditions on court orders, demanding that alternatives be exhausted before blood transfusions can be administered.

<sup>24</sup> This information is taken from a copy of the official complaint submitted to the Tokyo District Court by the prosecution.

<sup>25</sup> There does not yet seem to be any clear legal precedent established in Japan on deciding child custody issues when one parent is a Jehovah's Witness. Most cases are settled out of court in negotiations between family members. Younger children generally remain with the mother, while older children can sometimes influence the decision regarding their custody (Interviews with Oizumi, 1/12/94, and Richard Lauch, 1/31/94).

<sup>26</sup> Anecdotal evidence for these points comes from telephone calls received by Oizumi on his hotline. Oizumi told me that he frequently recommends to men who call that they attend Kingdom Hall meetings to get a better informed impression of what it is their spouses are involved in (Interview 1/17/94).

<sup>27</sup> The insights of Oizumi Mitsunari on this issue are reflected in this paragraph (Interview 1/12/94).

<sup>28</sup> The Society's recent publication, *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of the Kingdom* (1993), along with a number of videos, *Jehovah's Witnesses: The Organization Behind the Name* and *The Purple Triangle*, are examples of efforts to counter the stigma.

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