

## Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow so Rapidly: A Theoretical Application

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper applies a general theory of why religious movements succeed or fail to explain why the Jehovah's Witnesses are the most rapidly growing religious movement in the western world. In addition to qualitative assessments of Witness doctrines, organisational structures, internal networks, and socialisation, we utilise quantitative data from a variety of sources to assess such things as the impact of failed prophecies, how "strictness" eliminates free-riders and strengthens congregations, the demographic make-up of the Witness "labor force", and the effects of continuity with local religious cultures on success.*

### Introduction

During the past 75 years the Jehovah's Witnesses have sustained an extraordinary rate of growth—currently more than 5% per year—and have done so on a global scale. In 1995, there were at least a million very active Witnesses in the United States and about 4 million in the other 231 nations in which they conduct missions.

Indicative of the immense effort involved in this achievement is the fact that almost every reader of this essay will have been visited by Jehovah's Witnesses during the past several years. However, if the Witnesses frequently appear on our doorsteps, they are conspicuously absent from our journals. For example, during its 34-year history, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* has published articles devoted to an amazing array of obscure religious movements, but none has been devoted to the Jehovah's Witnesses. When the world did not end in 1975, as many Witnesses expected it to, this did prompt *Social Compass* (1977, No. 1) to devote an issue to the Witnesses and failed prophecies. However, apart from these and several similar articles, especially an essay by Richard Singelenberg (1989), social scientists have produced only two substantial studies of the Witnesses during the past 50 years. One of these is an unpublished<sup>1</sup> dissertation based on several local congregations in Minnesota (Zellner, 1981). The other is James A. Beckford's (1975) fine monograph based on his field work among several British Witness congregations. We shall draw upon Beckford's work often in this essay, but the fact remains that it is now more than 20 years old and no monograph, regardless of merit, can stand as an adequate research literature on one of the most significant religious movements of modern times. The lack of research on the Witnesses is matched by their almost complete omission from textbooks on the sociology of religion, as well as from those devoted to American religious history.<sup>2</sup>

This essay will only begin to make up for the social scientific neglect of the Witnesses, for it is not primarily even a case study. Instead, we focus our attention on a single question about this group: what accounts for its amazing growth? To begin, we offer a very brief summary of the history and doctrinal innovations of the movement, paying attention to the unusual levels of persecution they have faced nearly everywhere. Then we will examine the details of Witnesses growth, noting that in recent decades, despite their continuing rapid growth in the United States, their growth rates have been substantially faster in Europe, Latin America, and in parts of Africa and Asia.

Against this background we apply a theoretical model of why religious movements succeed to see how well it explains Witness growth. We will examine whether (and to what extent) the Witnesses satisfy each element of the theory. Since an entire article devoted to explaining the theoretical model appeared in this journal very recently (Stark, 1996b), we shall not offer extended discussion of the propositions. In addition to illustrative and qualitative materials, we will test major propositions using quantitative data from a variety of sources, including the 1991 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 1993), the merged US General Social Survey (1972–1994), the American National Survey of Religious Identification (Kosmin, 1991), a data set based on the nations of Sub-Saharan Africa, and especially statistics published annually by the Witnesses (we shall first demonstrate their reliability). We also draw upon informal interviews with active witnesses and field observations made over a number of years. In conclusion, we examine alternative projections of future growth.

### A Brief History

All scholarly accounts of the Jehovah's Witnesses trace the movement back to Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) and often through him back to the famous adventist, William Miller (1782–1849). Of course, Russell never actually met a "Jehovah's Witness", since his organisation was called the "Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society", and his followers went by the name of "Bible Students". Moreover, Russell's controversial doctrines, unfulfilled chronologies for the Second Coming, loose organisational style, and failure to appoint a successor led to numerous Bible Student schisms throughout his lifetime and immediately following his death in 1916.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Melton (1989) correctly identifies Russell as the founder of an entire family of denominations, of which the Jehovah's Witnesses are by far the largest. In the power struggle that followed Russell's death, Judge J. F. Rutherford quickly took control of the Watch Tower Society through legal maneuvers that included the ouster of dissident board directors. The subsequent changes in organisation, policy and doctrine were so drastic, and the number of defectors so large that "many scholars now consider the Jehovah's Witnesses to be an offshoot of the original movement which Russell started" (Bergman, 1984: xvii; see also Melton, 1989: 530). There are, to this day, many small Bible Student groups that remain more faithful to Russell's original teachings.

Rutherford's rise to power was aided by government persecution at the end of World War I. The Bible Students were conscientious objectors who refused military service and they widely circulated literature urging others to do likewise. This was regarded as sedition by various Canadian and American

officials. Thus, on March 1, 1918, the Canadian Secretary of State issued a decree making it a crime punishable by a fine up to \$5000 and up to 5 years in prison for being in possession of Bible Student literature. Then, on May 7, 1918, the United States District Court issued warrants for the arrest of Rutherford and seven of his aides for conspiring to promote draft evasion during a time of war. A month later they were sentenced to 20 years in prison on each of four counts. These convictions prompted violent mob actions in many American communities against many local Bible Students. A year later the convictions were overruled and subsequently dropped. However, the episode made Rutherford a martyr, and greatly increased his prestige with the rank and file. As we shall see, martyrdom soon became a common badge of honor, as the movement has been hounded by hostile governments in many corners of the globe.

Throughout the 1920s, Rutherford consolidated his control of the movement and managed to translate his power into an efficient organisation able to sustain effective recruitment efforts. In 1931, at the convention of Bible Students in Columbus, Ohio, a resolution was passed adopting the name "Jehovah's Witnesses".

From the start, the Witnesses have been literal and dedicated Adventists. Under Rutherford they proselytised to the slogan "Millions now living will never die" to awaken the world to the rapid approach of the end of time. Moreover, date-setting has been a frequent aspect of Witness theology and practice. Russell had set 1914 as the date of Armageddon. When World War I broke out that year, Bible Students rejoiced. When the end did not come, Russell postponed Armageddon to 1918, but died before that date arrived. Rutherford continued date-setting, initially committing to 1920, then 1925 and finally to 1940. Following Rutherford's death on January 8, 1942, the Witnesses ceased specific date-setting. However, during the late 1960s the belief that the end would come in 1975 began to circulate and soon gained wide-spread acceptance (although it was never made the official view). As we shall see, the failure of that date caused considerable damage to the Witness mission, but the damage is long since healed because the majority of current members were either very young at the time or had not yet joined. Although the Witnesses continue to proclaim the imminent return of Christ and remain committed to a modified version of Russell's Bible-based chronology of the end times, the Watch Tower leadership now seems determined to avoid setting any new dates. Indeed, the November 1995 issue of the *Watchtower* reinterprets a longstanding teaching concerning the world's last "generation" so as to effectively remove any limit on the number of years that might elapse before the Second Coming.

If, on the one hand, the Witnesses have always proclaimed (and often dated) the world's end, they were from the start even more notorious for what they did *not* believe. Russell emphatically denied many orthodox Christian doctrines including the Trinity, eternal torment and the immortality of the soul. Based on his reading of the Bible and his rejection of post-biblical theological statements, such as the Nicene creed, Russell argued that there is but one God, the Father "Jehovah". The Holy Spirit is not a separate "person", but rather God's energising spirit or force. Jesus is not himself God, but rather God's only begotten Son, the divine Word through whom the rest of the world was created. According to Russell, the dead do not now inhabit heaven or hell, but rather "sleep" until the resurrection which will usher in God's millennial Kingdom. Those who reject

God's grace and remain incorrigibly wicked even after this period will be consigned to a "second death" of total annihilation, but not an eternity of torment.<sup>4</sup>

The day-to-day practices of Witnesses are no less distinctive than their beliefs, and mostly these, too, date back to Russell. To remain a Witness in good standing one must be a "publisher" of God's word, which, generally speaking, means attending several hours of meetings each week and devoting another 4 hours or so to distributing Witness literature door-to-door every week. Witnesses are expected to maintain strict rules of sexual conduct and to avoid smoking, drugs and blood transfusions. They celebrate neither birthdays, nor Christmas, nor any other holidays. College education is discouraged. They must not vote, hold political office, salute the flag or serve in the military; nor are they permitted to have any contact with former Witnesses. Above all, they are to remain faithful to the authority of the Watch Tower Society (which, except at its highest levels, is a lay organisation that employs no clergy, and relies entirely upon volunteer labor and leadership). Those who fail to comply with these requirements can be disfellowshipped, but more typically they defect of their own accord.

The Witnesses' door-to-door activities and staunch refusal to salute any nation's flag or serve in its military have been a constant source of conflict and persecution. Since the prosecution of Rutherford and his associates during World War I, the American courts have heard innumerable cases involving the Witnesses. Between 1938 and 1955 the Witnesses were involved in 45 cases before the United States Supreme Court, and have been forced into court battles repeatedly since then (Penton, 1985). During World War II, Witnesses were prosecuted for their refusal to serve in the armed forces. In the United States thousands of male Witnesses spent World War II in federal prisons, and it is a matter of public record that American judges gave them longer sentences than they did to conscientious objectors of other religions (Conway, 1968). Similar prosecution of Witnesses took place in Canada and Australia (Kaplan, 1989). Surprisingly, hundreds of male Witnesses were sent to prison in neutral Sweden for refusing to serve. Since Swedish law provided for only relatively short sentences, the government drafted the Witnesses again and again, and resented them each time. Prosecution of Witnesses for draft evasion continued in Sweden long after the end of the war. Finally, in 1964, the Swedish Government exempted the Witnesses from military service, but not by recognising them as pacifists. Instead, the Swedish government declared them "unfit" for service according to the same rules as are applied to certain alcoholics or asocial individuals" (*Yearbook*, 1991:161—166).

Things were, of course, much worse in Nazi Germany where a number of Witnesses were executed for their pacifism. Of the others, a few were confined to mental hospitals, while thousands were sent to concentration camps, such as Dachau, where many died (Conway, 1968).

Even today, the Witnesses continue to face restrictions and government opposition in many nations—as of 1995 the Witnesses reported that they were banned outright (but carrying on underground) in 26 nations. These no longer include the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe. However, the Witnesses remain illegal throughout most of the Islamic world—we shall return to this topic. Even where the Witnesses have gained the right to exist, they continue to

have trouble, some of it quite serious. For example, in Zambia, the nation with the highest Witness membership rate in the world, it is illegal for them to go house-to-house or to proselytise anyone whom they do not know personally (Penton, 1985). Only recently did Belgium lift a government-imposed ban against transporting Witness publications, including Bibles, via the postal and rail systems (*Yearbook*, 1984: 110). For decades the police in Portugal routinely confiscated Bibles and tracts from the Witnesses, and often beat them severely as well. Lisbon's newspaper *Diario Popular* greeted their recent legalisation with the admission that until that time "To be one of Jehovah's Witnesses ... was dangerous and even subversive. But times have changed. Now it is possible not only to be a Witness in Portugal but also to assemble in public" (quoted in *Yearbook*, 1983: 235). However legal it may now be to assemble, Portuguese Witnesses still fear mob violence. On August 12, 1993, the government of Malawi revoked its 20-year ban on the movement, thus freeing thousands of Witnesses from refugee camps across the border in Mozambique (*Yearbook*, 1995: 43). Less serious, but representative of the chronic bureaucratic interference the Witnesses face, on May 16, 1991, after many appeals, the Witnesses finally received permission from the government of France to print religious materials in color, rather than only in black-and-white (*Yearbook*, 1992: 15).

M. James Penton (1985: 41) summed up the human side of all this persecution:

In many parts of the world, they have been assaulted, mobbed, beaten, tarred and feathered, castrated, raped, and murdered ... Few long-time Witnesses of Jehovah have escaped threats to their persons with clubs, knives, guns, or fists; and many have had boiling water, offal, or stones thrown at them. Others have had dogs turned on them, and almost all have been subjected to verbal abuse.

### Publishers and Pioneers

As noted, a Witness in good standing is referred to as a *publisher*. The name reflects the immense commitment of the movement to distributing the written word. To qualify as a publisher a member must devote a number of hours per month to missionary activities. For years, the minimum number of hours was specified, but recently informal quotas have been used. During the past several years, the average American publisher devoted about 17 hours a month to missionary activities. In addition, each publisher attends several meetings and services a week. Moreover, publishers are expected to keep very careful records and to report every month to the congregational secretary their total number of hours of missionising, the specific amounts of literature placed, the number of return visits made to those who showed interest, and the number of home Bible study sessions conducted. From these reports the local leaders are able to rate the commitment of each member as well as keep the headquarters in Brooklyn fully informed of local activity. Members who routinely fail to meet the average levels of publisher performance soon lose the respect of other members, can expect to be rebuked by the leadership and perhaps will be disfellowshipped. Moreover, they will not be included in the group's membership statistics, for these are limited to publishers.

A substantial number of Witnesses are additionally classified as *pioneers*. Pioneers devote many more hours than publishers to missionary effort in addition to serving as a lay clergy. Despite this level of commitment, most pioneers are self-supporting. However, some special pioneers receive expenses and some earn tiny salaries in return for full-time activities. Pioneers are required to keep even more elaborate records of their work. All these reports generate a mountain of statistics.

### Witness Statistics

The Witnesses are extremely statistically-minded. Their annual *Yearbooks*, which date back to 1927, are bursting with numbers. Paging through the 1995 edition, one reads:

- that seven new Kingdom Halls were built in Panama during 1994;
- that the German branch is now able to print and bind 1.6 million magazines and 80,000 books per *day* (in 42 languages);
- that during the past 5 years 1,514,287 persons were baptised by the Witnesses;
- that they spent \$50,126,004.05 to sustain special pioneers, missionaries, and travelling overseers in 1994;
- that during 1994 they put in 1,096,065,354 hours of missionary work.

And much, much more.

The heart of these annual statistics consists of complete data on the peak number and average number of publishers, the number of baptisms, number of congregations, total hours of missionising, and several other facts for each nation in which their work is public. For the set of nations in which they are operating illegally, only grand totals are published.

The question is: are Witness statistics reliable? There are three excellent and independent reasons to trust them. First, as will be seen, they often report “bad news”—declines as well as increases in membership. A second reason is that even very critical ex-members, who accuse Witness leaders of many sins, accept and publish these statistics (cf. Penton, 1985; Botting & Botting, 1984). Finally, the statistics stand up very solidly when compared with the Canadian Census and the American National Survey of Religious Identification.

The Witnesses claimed their average number of publishers in Canada was 100,991 for 1991. In contrast, the 1991 Canadian Census found 168,375 self-identified Witnesses. What this shows is that there are many Canadians who report themselves to be Witnesses, but who are not counted as publishers. Consequently, membership statistics based on the average number of publishers offer a very conservative estimate.

In 1990, Barry Kosmin (1991) and his associates conducted a huge survey of American households inquiring about each member’s religious affiliation—a total of 113,000 Americans. The results, projected to the American population age 18 and over, placed Jehovah’s Witness membership at 1,381,000. The official church statistics put the average number of American publishers at 816,417 for 1990, or only 59% of the membership based on self-identification. Once again, the official statistics are shown to be very conservative. Moreover, the official

Table 1. Jehovah's Witness Growth, World-Wide: 1928—1995

Year	Average number of publishers <sup>1</sup>	Percentage increase
1928	44,080	
1935	56,153	28%
1940	96,418	72%
1945	127,478	32%
1950	328,572	158%
1955	570,694	74%
1960	851,378	49%
1965	1,034,268	22%
1970	1,384,782	34%
1975	2,062,449	49%
		Failed prophecy
1980	2,175,403	5%
1985	2,865,183	33%
1990	3,846,311	34%
1995	4,950,344	29%

<sup>1</sup>Throughout, membership is limited to those qualified as publishers, which omits most people under age 17 and all who fail to engage in a substantial amount of missionary activity each month (see text).

and survey-based statistics mesh perfectly once we take account of their different definitions of membership. According to the General Social Surveys, only 62% of self-identified Jehovah's Witnesses attend church once a week or more often. Applying this percentage to Kosmin's estimate of the total number of self-identified Witnesses in the United States, we obtain an active membership of 856,220, which is very close to the Watch Tower Society's official count of 816,000 publishers.

Given these reasons to trust the numbers, what do they show?

### Patterns of Growth

Table 1 shows that by 1928, Rutherford had recruited more than 40,000 Witnesses, although they weren't yet using that name. The Witnesses grew slowly during the first half of the Depression, having more than 56,000 members by 1935. Growth speeded up during the latter half of the Depression and by 1940 there were nearly 100,000 Witnesses. In the aftermath of World War II, the Witnesses experienced explosive growth, interrupted only briefly in the middle 1970s by a failed prophecy concerning the Second Coming, which we discuss in a later section. By 1995, there were 4,950,344 publishers world-wide and this number has been growing by more than 5% per year.

Again one must recognise that these numbers count only the active *publishers*, members whose levels of commitment and participation far exceed those of the typical Christian adherent. To meaningfully compare the number of Witnesses to the membership of some other denomination, we must either shrink the latter group's membership statistics so as to eliminate inactive members or we must magnify the Witness numbers to include their nominal members. We must also take account of the fact that most denominations count their children as

Table 2. Growth of Jehovah's Witnesses, 1980—1994

	Publishers per million population	Number of publishers	Percentage increase 1980-1994
United States	3436	889,570	64%
Canada	3678	106,664	69%
Western Europe	2485	945,053	78%
Eastern Europe	1364	246,974	*
Latin America	2812	1,261,878	239%
Asia	1581	384,103	174%
Pacific	3321	76,058	96%
Sub-Saharan Africa	1201	588,879	141%

\*Data only recently available.

members, whereas relatively few Witnesses under the age of 16 qualify as publishers.

To inflate Witness membership appropriately so as to make proper comparisons with other groups, we calculated that the number of publishers should be doubled.<sup>5</sup> This implies a 1994 “membership” statistic around 9.4 million. Alternatively, we can look to the Witnesses own count of people attending their annual memorial service (which commemorates the death of Jesus and which, according to our Witness and ex-Witness sources, is attended by virtually all active Witnesses, their children, and interested affiliates). In 1995, the total number in attendance on that single night exceeded 13 million.

In short, the Jehovah's Witnesses are now as least as large as the Mormons, and probably larger. Moreover, except for the years immediately following the prophetic disappointment of 1975, Witnesses growth has consistently out-paced Mormon growth. In 1945, there were 7.7 Mormons per Witness *publisher*. By 1994, this had been reduced to 1.9. Given that the Mormons are generally viewed as the world's most successful new religion and had about an 80-year start on the Witnesses, this is an astonishing achievement.

In addition, the Witnesses have become far more “globalised” than the Mormons. While nearly half of all Mormons reside in the United States, only 19% of Jehovah's Witnesses do so. Indeed, as data for 1994 shown in Table 2, American Witnesses (889,570) are outnumbered by their co-religionists in Western Europe (945,053) and Latin America (1,199,936). Each of the following nations has a higher Jehovah's Witness membership rate than does the United States: Canada, Portugal, Luxembourg, Finland, Italy, French Guyana, Barbados, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, Costa Rica, Jamaica, El Salvador, Tahiti, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Zambia and Malawi. Moreover, the Witnesses are growing much more rapidly in scores of nations than they are in the United States—although they grew by 64% in the US from 1980 through 1994.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Witnesses no longer operate underground there. Table 3 shows their growth in the nations of the former Soviet Union since 1990—they have been growing at the remarkable rate of about 30% per year. The *Yearbook* (1996:51) reports that there was only one congregation in Moscow in 1990, compared with 40 in 1995. Moreover, these congregations are far larger than the Witnesses prefer, as the *Yearbook* explained



Table 3. Growth in the nations of the former Soviet Union: 1990-1995

	Average number of publishers	Percentage increase
1990	39,306	—
1991	45,887	16.7%
1992	58,823	28.2%
1993	78,186	32.9%
1994	103,093	31.9%
1995	137,764	33.6%

“almost all of these could be divided into 2 or 3 congregations if more elders were available”. The *Yearbook* noted that in Murmansk, a congregation having 800 publishers cannot be divided “because there is only one elder”. This is because no one else has been a member for more than a year and the Witnesses are reluctant to place leadership responsibilities on someone with so little experience.

However, despite their recent breakthrough in the former Communist bloc nations, the Witnesses are not everywhere. Only a few brave pioneers are to be found in the Islamic world. Thus, there are only 37 Witnesses in Bangladesh (compared with 13,686 in India) and 344 in Pakistan. In 1992 there were 58 in Algeria, 34 in Morocco, 31 in Tunisia and eight in Libya. Since then the Witnesses have stopped reporting membership for these nations—a tactic they adopt whenever persecution becomes too great (presumably they do this in order not to inform local officials how many are yet to be discovered). When the Shah ruled Iran, the Witnesses maintained a mission, but they never reported more than 35 publishers. When the Shah was overthrown, the Witnesses were expelled. Elsewhere in the Islamic world, the Witnesses have never reported any members in Algeria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Oman, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Morocco or the Sudan. Keep in mind that it is against the law to seek converts from Islam in these countries. Of course, it was illegal until quite recently for the Witnesses to function in Spain and Italy, and they were prohibited in much of eastern Europe until the last several years. Nevertheless, they functioned effectively as a secret underground, as their substantial current membership in many of these nations reveals. Consequently, it is certain that there are secret Witness cells functioning in each of these Muslim nations today. However, the first proposition in the theory of why religious movements succeed suggests that these cells will have little success and that even if it one day becomes legal for the Witnesses to proselytise in these nations, they will not achieve much growth here. The same applies to most Asian nations, especially those with a relatively strong traditional faith, such as Hinduism, as opposed to Asian societies dominated by an array of weak, non-exclusive faiths (Iannaccone, 1995c; Stark, 1996a).

Table 4. Correlations ( $r$ ) among rates of religious membership in sub-Saharan Africa

	Witnesses <sup>1</sup>	Muslims	Christians <sup>2</sup>
Witnesses	—	— 0.42** (37)	0.43** (37)
Muslims		—	— 0.86** (38)

\*\* $P < 0.01$ .

<sup>1</sup>Zambia was excluded as an outlier from correlations involving Jehovah's Witness Membership.

<sup>2</sup>Witness membership not included.

## Cultural Continuity

The first proposition in the model is:

1. New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that they retain cultural continuity with the conventional faith(s) of the societies in which they seek converts.

That means that a Christian sect, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, will do best where most people are familiar with Christian culture and will do least well where most people are familiar with another religious culture. This is a testable hypothesis, *if* we can identify a reasonably comparable set of societies that vary sufficiently in terms of religious culture and within which the Witnesses have missions. After some consideration, we settled upon the 38 continental nations of Sub-Saharan Africa because they offer non-trivial variations in their mix of Christians and Muslims. For each we determined its percentage Christian and Muslim as reported by Barrett (1982). These two rates are not merely reciprocals, since there are very substantial numbers of followers of traditional tribal religions in many of these nations. To avoid any possibility of auto-correlation we subtracted Jehovah's Witnesses from the percentage Christian.

Table 4 confirms the hypothesis. The Witnesses do better in nations where there are more Christians and worse in nations where there are more Muslims. The correlations are very robust, highly statistically significant and (with Zambia removed) the correlations are not distorted by any outlying case or cases.

## If Prophecy Fails

Other things being equal, failed prophecies are harmful for religious movements. Although prophecies may arouse a great deal of excitement and attract many new followers beforehand (see below), the subsequent disappointment usually offsets these benefits. Contrary to textbook summaries, cognitive dissonance theory does not propose that failed prophecies typically strengthen a religious group. Nor is it established that religious groups respond initially to a failed prophecy with increased levels of proselytising. A careful reading of the

Table 5. Anatomy of the failed prophecy, USA 1973—1984

	Percentage growth	No. baptisms	Hours per publisher
1973	5.1%	55,775	179.3
1974	15.2%	71,300	196.8
1975	5.6%	81,588	173.8
Prophecy fails			
1976	1.8%	43,900	156.0
1977	- 2.6%	27,995	143.4
1978	- 3.1%	20,471	140.3
1979	1.5%	26,958	146.7
1980	4.2%	27,811	150.4
1981	3.7%	28,496	153.9
1982	3.3%	33,734	159.6
1983	5.8%	35,303	168.8
1984	5.3%	35,618	177.3

famous initial example (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter, 1956) reveals no such group effect actually occurred, nor have any subsequent studies found it (Bainbridge, 1997).

This discussion leads to the second proposition in the theory:

2. New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that their doctrines are non-empirical.

This must not be interpreted to mean that religious movements can't survive empirical disconfirmations. Indeed, the Witnesses have done so a number of times. However, these failed predictions did need to be *overcome*, they were not beneficial. The harm done by the most recent of these failed prophecies to Witness activity in Holland is well-documented statistically in the fine study by Richard Singelenberg (1989). During the late 1960s the belief began to spread among Witnesses that the world would end in 1975. By the early 1970s, most Witnesses were eagerly anticipating the end. Table 4 shows that this excitement caused them to increase their efforts. The number of American publishers rose by 15.2% between 1973 and 1974 (see Table 5). Baptisms of adults into the church shot up from about 55,000 in 1973 to more than 80,000 in 1975. In 1974 the average annual number of hours put in by publishers peaked at 196.8 hours for the year.

All through 1975 the Witnesses waited for Judgment Day. However, as the year passed, Witness activity began to droop slightly. Then, 1976 inaugurated a 3-year slide. Although the total number of American publishers actually declined in 1977 and 1978, the average publisher put in fewer hours, only 140.3 in 1978. In 1978 only 20,471 persons were baptised into the church, a quarter as many as in 1975. Then, in 1979, the Witnesses began to recover their morale and the trends turned upward. The total number of publishers ceased declining and increased slightly. The number of baptisms rose and publishers put in more hours. By 1980, things were getting back to normal and by 1983, rapid growth had resumed.

The substantial decline in the average number of hours worked by publishers is inconsistent with the claim that believers respond to a failed prophecy by

increasing their effort to convince others that their beliefs are valid—efforts motivated by their need to reduce their cognitive dissonance. The Witnesses knew they had been wrong and they dealt with their disappointment with *reduced* effort.

### Medium Tension (Strictness)

In order to grow, a religious movement must offer religious culture that sets it apart from the general, secular culture. That is, movements must be distinctive and impose relatively strict moral standards.

3. New religious movements are likely to succeed to the extent that they maintain a medium level of tension with their surrounding environment—are strict, but not too strict.

Strictness refers to the degree that a religious group maintains “a separate and distinctive life style or morality in personal and family life, in such areas as dress, diet, drinking, entertainment, uses of time, sex, child rearing, and the like”. Or a group is not strict to the degree that it affirms “the current ... mainline life style in these respects” (Iannaccone, 1994: 1190).

To summarise the basis for this proposition, strictness makes religious groups strong by screening out free-riders and thereby increasing the average level of commitment in the group. This, in turn, greatly increases the credibility of the religious culture (especially promises concerning future benefits, since credibility is the result of high levels of consensus), as well as generating a high degree of resource mobilisation (see below). Put another way, high costs tend to *increase* participation among those who do join by increasing the rewards derived from participation. It may seem paradoxical that when the cost of membership increases, the net gains of membership increase too. However, this is necessarily the case with collectively produced goods. For example, an individual’s positive experience of a worship service increases to the degree that the church is full, the members participate enthusiastically (everyone joins in the songs and prayers), and others express very positive evaluations of what is taking place. Thus, as each member *pays* the costs of membership, each *gains* from higher levels of production of collective goods.

Table 6 demonstrates this point rather dramatically. The data are based on all 202 self-identified Witnesses included in all of the General Social Surveys (1972–1994). However, as we already have seen, a substantial number of self-identified Witnesses are only nominal members and are so regarded by the group. An authentic Witness qualifies as a publisher and hence attends church several times a week. Of GSS Witness respondents, 52% reported attending church more than once a week. It seems appropriate to use attendance to separate the active from the merely nominal Witnesses. Thus, the table lets us compare the two groups and the combined group allows us to see what a Witness congregation would be like, if all the nominal members were permitted to hang around and “free ride”.

It is obvious that if the nominal members hung around, the average level of commitment would decline greatly in Witnesses congregations. There would be an immense decline in the proportion who strongly identified with the denomination: from 93 to 61%. There would be a lot less praying. Among the married,

Table 6. Publishers and nominal witnesses, GSS 1972—1994

	Publishers (105)	Nominal (97)	Combined (202)	US population
% "Strong" identification with denomination	93%	27%	61%	39%
% Pray daily	100%	59%	83%	56%
% Spouse is a Witness <sup>1</sup>	80%	21%	61%	
	(74)	(57)	(117)	
% Who smoke	0%	48%	24%	35%
% Who drink	76%	85%	81%	71%
% Who go to a bar at least once a year	14%	49%	30%	49%

<sup>1</sup> Married persons only.

the incidence of non-Witness spouses would increase from 20 to 39%. The Witnesses would shift from a group wherein everyone observes the ban on smoking, to a group in which many would be taking smoke breaks. While there would be little change in the percentage who drink (drinking is not prohibited because the Bible teaches that Christ and the Apostles drank wine), there would be a very substantial increase in the proportion of Witnesses to be found in bars and taverns. It seems clear that only because the Witnesses do not allow free riding, are they able to generate the commitment needed to put publishers on millions of doorsteps every year.

Furthermore, for a religious group, as with any organisation, *commitment is energy*. That is, when commitment levels are high, groups can undertake all manner of collective actions and these are in no way limited to the psychic realm. For example, Witnesses whose homes are damaged or destroyed by natural disasters often have them repaired or completely rebuilt by volunteer crews of their co-religionists.

This line of analysis leads to a critical insight, perhaps *the* critical insight: membership in a strict (costly) religion is, for many people, a "good bargain"? Conventional cost-benefit analysis alone suffices to explain the continued attraction of strict religions.

Obviously, there are limits to how much tension or strictness is beneficial. One easily notices groups too strict to expect growth. Strictness must be sufficient to exclude potential free-riders and doubters, but it must also be sufficiently low so as not to drive away everyone except a few misfits and fanatics.

Applied to the Witnesses, the issue is not whether they are sufficiently strict, but whether they aren't too strict. Their stormy relations with outsiders, especially governments, make it clear that they are in considerable tension with their environment. The very high expectations concerning religious and missionary activity, their unbending pacifism, rejection of flag-saluting and anthem-singing, and their refusal to have blood transfusions all demonstrate considerable "strictness". On the other hand, the Witnesses are comfortable with much of the general culture. Although they prohibit smoking, they do not prohibit drinking—and most of them do. They have no distinctive dress requirements and female Witnesses do not stint on cosmetics—publishers are expected to be nicely dressed and well-groomed, when they go calling. They do not

prohibit going to sporting events, movies, plays, or watching television—although many believe this is a waste of precious time better devoted to missionary work. Consequently, it is impossible to identify a Witness, unless he or she volunteers the information. *Visibility* may, in fact, be the crucial factor for identifying when groups impose too much tension or strictness.

### Legitimate Authority

The fourth proposition is:

Religious movements will succeed to the extent they have legitimate leaders with adequate authority to be effective.

This, in turn, will depend upon two factors:

- 4a. Adequate authority requires clear doctrinal justifications for an effective and legitimate leadership.
- 4b. Authority is regarded as more legitimate and gains in effectiveness to the degree that members perceive themselves as participants in the system of authority.

There are many bases for legitimate authority within organisations, depending on factors, such as whether members are paid to participate and/or whether special skills and experience are recognised as vital qualifications to lead. However, when organisations stress doctrines, as all religious movements do, these doctrines must define the basis for leadership. Who may lead and how is leadership obtained? What powers are granted to leaders? What sanctions may leaders impose? These are vital matters, brought into clear relief by the many examples of groups that failed (or are failing) for lack of doctrines defining a legitimate basis for effective leadership—New Age groups are a pertinent example.

The principle of “theocracy” defines the basis of leadership for Jehovah’s Witnesses. As James Beckford (1975: 38) explained: “the major premise [is] that since Jesus Christ was actually working at the head of the Society through the medium of its earthly leaders, it would therefore be blasphemous to disagree with their directives.”

Whatever the doctrinal basis of authority, an important additional source of legitimacy is the extent to which the rank-and-file feel enfranchised—believe that they have some impact on the decisions. Because the Witnesses depend upon lay clergy and leaders (as do the Mormons), the usual model of authority based on a distinction between clergy and laity does not apply. In an important sense, everyone is a lay member and, in another sense, everyone belongs among the clergy. Leaders (called elders) of a given congregation are selected from within and there is routine and frequent turnover. Given that the average size of congregations is kept small and the number of leadership roles is relatively large, not only are many members active leaders, many more have served as leaders and many more soon will. Moreover, all members serve as clergy to the world. This has several interesting consequences. For one, Witness meetings resemble seminars or professional meetings far more than they do religious services. Things are discussed and everyone is expected to take part. For example, because members are missionaries to the world, they must prepare

themselves to present the correct theological interpretation of the latest events. Therefore, one night each week, active Witnesses gather at church for "theocratic ministry school" where they hone their missionary skills by practicing on one another. Typically, a number of members will give brief talks and others will demonstrate how to conduct home Bible study sessions with potential converts. After several years of this, even rather shy and inarticulate converts (or teenage children of members) become surprisingly skillful.

A second factor influencing a sense of empowerment is that, although Witnesses are expected to conform to rather strict standards, enforcement tends to be very informal, sustained by the close bonds of friendship within the group. That is, while Witness elders can impose rather severe sanctions (such as expulsion and shunning) on deviant members, they seldom need to do so and when they do, the reasons for their actions will be widely-known and understood within the group. Moreover, even if leaders are not always very democratic, the path to leadership is. As a result, Witnesses tend to see themselves as part of the power structure, rather than subjected to it. It is this, not "blind fanaticism" (as is so often claimed by outsiders and defectors), that is the real basis of authority among Witnesses.

Keep in mind that strictness will also result in a high average level of the perceived legitimacy of leaders by causing those members who are most inclined to question authority to withdraw. In this way a relatively high rate of defection can be good for a group!

Clearly, the Witnesses do have many defectors. This can be inferred from the contrasts between the average number of publishers and the peak number for any given year. For example, the peak number of publishers in the United States in 1994 was 46,697 greater than the average number for the year. So a lot of people must have come and gone from the ranks of publishers during the year. A second basis for inferring high rates of defection is that when the number of baptisms are aggregated across years, the total soon greatly surpasses the reported increase in the number of publishers. For example, the average number of publishers increased by 848,800 between 1990 and 1994. However, there were 1,250,434 baptisms during this same period. This is entirely in keeping with James Beckford's (1975: 61) report of a high drop-out rate in Britain.

However, as noted, it would be quite wrong to interpret this as a sign of weakness. On the contrary, by excluding those with less commitment, the Witnesses so maximise their proportion of devoted publishers that even substantial rates of defection are offset by far more substantial rates of conversion.

### A Religious Labor Force

In order to grow, religious movements need missionaries. Other things being equal, the more missionaries seeking converts, and the harder these missionaries work, the faster a religious movement will grow. Hence this proposition:

5. Religious movements will grow to the extent that they can generate a highly motivated, volunteer religious labor force, including many willing to proselytise.

In 1992, the combined efforts of the Protestant churches of the United States and Canada sustained 41,142 overseas missionaries at a cost of more than \$2 billion

a year (Siewert & Kenyon, 1993). That same year, there were 3,279,270 “overseas” Jehovah’s Witness publishers (nearly all of whom were native-speakers of the language of their mission area) operating on a total budget of \$45 million (*Yearbook*, 1993: 33, 40). That is 80 times as many missionaries for a tiny fraction of the cost.

Does it matter? Each year the Witnesses publish the total number of hours of missionary work they performed. Dividing hours of effort by the total number of baptisms achieved, shows that in recent years it has required about 3300 hours of publishers’ time to produce a baptism. Dividing the total number of hours by the average number of publishers, we find that each is putting in about 20 hours of missionary work each month and, thus, it requires an average of 14 publishers to gain one baptism per year. This might not seem impressive, but it comes to a growth rate of about 7% per year. In the last section of this essay we will show that even far lower rates of annual growth must result in a huge Witness population in a relatively short time.

In addition to missionising, a large volunteer religious labor force contributes to the strength of religious movements in other important ways (Iannaccone *et al.*, 1996). For example, labor can often be substituted for capital. Thus, while the Methodists must not only pay their clergy, but also pay for all their clerical, cleaning and maintenance services, and hire contractors to build new churches, the Witnesses rely on volunteer labor to provide all these things, including the construction of their meeting halls. Indeed, the Witnesses rely on volunteer “rapid-building” crews to construct a new Kingdom Hall from the ground up over a single weekend.

It is worth pausing to assess the “qualifications” of this labor force. It has been widely assumed that the Witnesses are a “proletarian” movement (cf. Cohn, 1955). Of course, this is asserted about most religious movements and frequently, this has been found not to be true (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; Stark, 1996a). Here, too, it seems not to be true. Thus, James Beckford’s (1975) data showed that British Witnesses rarely came from the working class. While the upper classes were also rarely represented, the British Witnesses were essentially a middle-class movement.

This conclusion must be qualified by the fact that, at least in Canada and the United States, Witnesses are substantially less likely to attend college. The Canadian Census reported that only 3% of Witnesses had college degrees, compared with 17% of the general population (the figures for both groups are based on the population 25–44). The American National Survey of Religious Identification (ANSRI) reported that, of Witnesses age 25 and older, 4% of whites and 8% of blacks were college graduates, or just over 5% overall. The combined GSS data reveal that 5% of Witnesses had attended college.

This is entirely to be expected since the Witnesses express very negative opinions about the worth of higher education. They much prefer that their children become publishers upon the completion of high school, and to pursue skilled crafts and trades. However, as Penton pointed out (1985: 274), the average Witness with only a high school education is probably better educated than others with similar amounts of schooling, because Witness children are very shaped-up, and are expected to study and get good grades. This is supported by performances on the 10-word vocabulary test included in the General Social Surveys. Active Witnesses score as well on this test as do



members of the general population who have attended college and almost as well as those who have graduated—inactive Witnesses do not perform nearly as well. In addition to being better students when they are in school, this may also reflect the emphasis the Witnesses place on speaking and writing. Observers believe that Witnesses in Africa and Latin America are substantially better-educated, and more apt to have technical training than the average citizen (Penton, 1985: 273).

It is true that the mean household income for American Witnesses—about \$27,500 based on ANSRI data—is slightly below the national mean (\$29,943 in 1990, the year for which the ANSRI data apply). However, this income figure seems remarkably high, when we take several factors into account. First, the Witnesses are far less likely to be employed full-time—47% in the ANSRI data, compared with 63% of the general population. Some Witnesses (especially pioneers) choose to support themselves by working only part-time in order to devote more time to church work. Moreover, half of all female respondents in the ANSRI data reported themselves as full-time housewives. Given that many of the other Witness females are single, widowed or divorced, relatively few Witness families have two earners. In addition, as will be seen, white non-Hispanics make up less than half of American Witnesses and still the average Witness household income is close to the national average. Indeed, Witnesses are precisely as likely as the general population to own their own home (63% in the GSS data). Despite having few college graduates among them and despite giving their primary attention to religious work, the Witnesses seem remarkably well-off economically.

### Adequate Fertility

In order to succeed,

6. Religious movements must maintain a level of fertility sufficient to offset member mortality.

Many religious movements have been doomed, because they had such low levels of fertility that very high rates of conversion soon were necessary merely to offset high rates of mortality.

No such problems confront the Witnesses. The Canadian Census reveals them to be slightly younger than Canadians in general. Table 7 shows the same is true in the United States—Witnesses are more likely to be under 30 and less likely to be over 65 than is the general population. Moreover, active American Witnesses are more apt to be married than is the general population, which is confirmed by the American National Survey of Religious Identification (ANSRI). They also are far more likely to have large families—about a third have four or more children. The ANSRI failed to ask adults how many children they had, but it did obtain complete data on the composition of the household, which allowed the calculation that the mean household size (3.4) of Jehovah's Witnesses is exceeded only by Mormons (3.8) among major religious groups (the general population figure is 2.6). However, Witnesses are disproportionately female, less so among the active members, less so according to the ANSRI, and even less so in Canada (55% female). It is typical for religious movements to over-recruit women (Miller & Hoffman, 1995), but this is not important so long as it does not result in too

Table 7. Demographics of American Witnesses

	GSS 1972—1994			ANSRI 1990 (720)	USA (GSS) 1972—1994 (32,380)
	Publishers (105)	Nominal (97)	Combined (202)		
<b>Marital life</b>					
% Married	78%	52%	65%	65%	60%
% Ever Divorced	16%	25%	20%	—	18%
<b>Fertility</b>					
% 2 or more kids	65%	58%	61%	2	57%
% 4 or more kids	31%	23%	27%	2	18%
<b>Age</b>					
% 18-29	31%	32%	32%	27%	24%
% Over 65	10%	11%	10%	11%	19%
<b>Sex</b>					
% Female	67%	75%	71%	64%	56%
<b>Race</b>					
% African-American	29%	36%	32%	40%	14%
% Asian-American	9%	6%	7%	4%	2%
% Hispanic-American	13%	11%	12%	12%	5%
% White, Non-Hispanic	49%	47%	49%	44%	79%

little fertility. It is of interest that the Witnesses are about as likely as other Americans to have been divorced.

It has long been noticed that the Witnesses are very unusual for their degree of racial and ethnic integration, not only among the rank and file, but among leaders as well. Witness literature has always been quite militant in its stand against all forms of prejudice and discrimination. The data fully support these perceptions. Both the GSS data and the ANSRI data reveal that white, non-Hispanic Americans make up less than half of self-identified American Witnesses. African- Hispanic- and Asian-Americans form the majority. This may greatly facilitate the appeal of the movement in Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia.

### A Favorable Ecology

To the extent that a religious economy is crowded with effective and successful firms, it will be harder for new firms to make headway (Stark & Bainbridge 1985; 1987; 1997; Stark & Iannaccone 1994, 1996). Stated as a proposition:

7. Other things being equal, new and unconventional religious organisations will prosper to the extent that they compete against weak, local conventional religious organisations within a relatively unregulated religious economy.

Put another way, new religious organisations will do best where conventional religious mobilisation is low—at least to the degree that the state gives such groups a chance to exist. Thus, we ought to find that where conventional church membership and church attendance rates are low, the incidence of unconventional religious movements will be high.

Table 8. Where the Witnesses grow  
25 Canadian metropolitan areas (1991)

Membership rates	Correlations ( <i>r</i> ) with % giving their religious affiliation as none
Jehovah's Witnesses	0.61**
Para-religions	0.82**

48 American states (1990)

Membership rates	Correlations ( <i>r</i> ) with:	
	% Giving their religious affiliation as none	Church membership rate per 1000
Jehovah's Witnesses	0.39**	- 0.48**
Cult centers	0.52**	- 0.32*

\**P* < 0.05; \*\**P* < 0.01.

Applied to the Jehovah's Witnesses this suggests that their growth will be more rapid where there is a relatively larger population of the unchurched and inactive. It is possible to test this hypothesis (see Table 8). First, we use data based on the 25 Metropolitan Areas of Canada. Data on Witness membership come from the 1991 Census and the independent variable is measured by the percent of the population responding "None" to the 1991 census question about religious preference. For the sake of comparison, para-religious groups were included. These are identified by the census as persons who gave their affiliation as Scientology, New Age, New Thought, Metaphysical, Kalabarian, Pagan, Rastafarian, Theosophical, Satanic or other smaller groups of similar nature. Table 8 shows that all of the correlations are as hypothesised: positive, substantial and significant.

The second test of the hypothesis is based on the 48 states. The data on Jehovah's Witness membership comes from the American National Survey of Religious Identification. The percentage reporting their affiliation as "None" comes from the same survey. Church membership rates come from *Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1990* (Bradley *et al.*, 1992). The measure of cult headquarters is based on coding all such groups<sup>9</sup> included in *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 3rd edn (Melton, 1989). Here too, the correlations are as hypothesised and highly significant.

### Network Ties

The discussion of missionary activity above ignored the role of interpersonal attachments in the conversion process. It is by now well-established that people rarely convert, unless or until they form close personal relationships with persons who already belong (Lofland & Stark, 1965; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980; Kox, Meeus & Hart, 1991). To a considerable extent, conversion occurs when people align their religious behavior with that of their friends. This means that:

8. Religious movements will succeed to the extent that they sustain strong internal attachments, while remaining an open social network, able to maintain and form close ties to outsiders.

Many religious movements fail because they soon “implode socially” (Bainbridge, 1978), in that members begin to restrict their personal relationships to one another. By forcing members to knock on the doors of strangers the Witnesses combat the tendency to implode. This is not to ignore the finding that “cold calls” by missionaries very seldom lead to a conversion because of the lack of a prior personal relationship (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980). However, persistent missionaries may encounter people who are sufficiently receptive that such a relationship can be built up over a series of visits—especially if the person is lacking in other attachments. That many Witness converts may have been deficient in attachments when they first encountered the movement, is consistent with Beckford’s finding that they tend to be in their late thirties and forties, in contrast with most groups whose converts are mainly in their late teens or early twenties. That it takes time to build new relationships with strangers may also explain why so many hours of missionary work are needed to gain one baptism. However, the fact remains that even for a group so dedicated to cold calls, the Witnesses are quite reliant on pre-existing social networks for their converts, too. Beckford found that the majority of his British Witnesses had encountered the movement through a family member, friend, or workmate.

### Staying Strict

If strictness is the key to high morale and rapid growth, then

9. Religious movements will continue to grow only to the extent that they maintain sufficient tension with their environment—remain sufficiently strict.

Speaking precisely to this proposition, the leader of a rapidly growing evangelical Protestant group noted that it was not only necessary to keep the front door of the church open, but that it was necessary to keep the back door open, too. That is, continuing growth not only depends upon bringing people in, but in letting go of those who do not fit in. The alternative is to modify the movement in an effort to satisfy those who are discontented, which invariably means to reduce strictness. People whose retention depends on reduced costs are “latent free-riders” and to see the full implications of accommodating them, simply reverse the discussion of strictness developed earlier in this essay.

The Witnesses have never compromised with the world. One factor that helps them maintain their strictness is a wide open back door, as the previous discussion of their high rate of defection demonstrates. However, a second factor is simply rapid growth, because even were there no defectors, the majority of Witnesses at any given moment would be recent converts. For example, between 1974 and 1994 the Witnesses grew by 150% which means, roughly, that three of every five witnesses will have joined during the past 20 years. Similarly, only 33% of the Witnesses included in the GSS reported having been members when they were 16. Obviously, the proportion of recent converts will vary across congregations, but the overall impact of recent converts will be to keep the movement strict.

Studies of the transformation of sects from higher to lower tension have long recognised the central role played by second and third generation members in this process. As Bryan Wilson (1966: 207) put it, "There is certainly a difference between those who are converted to a sect, and those who accept adventist teachings at their mother's knee." When groups do not grow, or grow very slowly, they will soon be made up primarily of those who did not choose to belong, but simply grew up belonging. Conversion selects people who find the current level of a movement's "strictness" to be satisfactory. However, socialisation will not "select" nearly so narrowly. Therefore, unless most who desire reduced costs defect (which tends to be the case for encapsulated groups, such as the Amish), the larger the proportion of socialised members, the larger the proportion who wish to reduce strictness.

### Effective Socialisation

To succeed,

10. Religious movements must socialise the young sufficiently well as to minimise both defection and the appeal of reduced strictness.

We have noted how groups have perished for lack of fertility. A sufficiently high rate of defection by those born into the faith amounts to the same thing as low fertility. That is, much conversion is needed simply to offset mortality. Yet, the retention of offspring is not favorable to continued growth, if it causes the group to reduce its strictness, as noted above.

It seems instructive that two of the most successful religious movements of modern times—the Mormons and the Witnesses—both achieve very effective socialisation by giving young people important roles to perform. Mormon religious education is predicated on the assumption that it is preparing teenagers to be missionaries, thereby being able to send more than 40,000 young men and women off each year to be full-time missionaries (at their own expense). Nothing builds more intense commitment than the act of being a missionary, and for Mormons this experience comes at precisely the age when people are the most susceptible to doubt and defection.

The Witnesses do not train their children to spend 2 years as full-time missionaries, but they do train them, from their early teens, to spend a lifetime as a part-time missionary—a publisher. Most Witness children begin to knock on doors by the time they complete high school (and many begin younger). Being thus exposed to rejection, ridicule and even abuse may cause some young Witnesses to withdraw. However, it appears that rejection binds most of them ever more strongly to the movement, to the community of special believers who have overcome "Satan's power". Consequently, the Witnesses seem quite successful in retaining their children—Beckford (1975) found that about two-thirds of those over 16 with Witness parents remained active members. Through 1994, the GSS data include 67 persons who reported that at age 16 they were Witnesses and 47 (or 70%) of them reported they still were.

### Future Prospects

Recently, Gerald Marwell (1996: 1099) rhetorically dismissed the Jehovah's Witnesses as unlikely to be around 100 years from now. In our view, not only

Table 9. Projected Jehovah's Witness growth 1990-2090

	2% per year	4% per year	Actual
1991	3,923,237	4,000,163	4,071,954
1992	4,001,702	4,160,170	4,289,737
1993	4,081,736	4,326,577	4,483,900
1994	4,163,371	4,499,640	4,695,111
1995	4,246,630	4,679,625	4,950,344
2000	4,688,631	5,693,480	
2010	5,715,416	8,427,741	
2020	6,967,060	12,475,115	
2030	8,492,807	18,466,218	
2040	10,352,684	27,334,513	
2050	12,619,865	40,461,757	
2060	15,383,544	59,893,283	
2070	18,752,454	88,656,690	
2080	22,859,137	131,233,557	
2090	27,865,161	194,257,721	

will they still be around, but it seems very likely that by then, they will be a very large religious body. Because the properties of exponential growth are not intuitive, it is useful to examine straight-line projections of the *possible* futures of rapidly growing movements.

In recent years the Witnesses have been growing in excess of 5% per year. To be conservative, let us suppose that over the next century they are able to grow by 4% per year. To be even less optimistic about their prospects, let us base a second projection on only half that rate. Both results are shown in Table 9. If the Witnesses grow by a mere 2% per year, they will number almost 28 million in the year 2090. If they grow by 4% per year, they will number nearly 200 million in 2090—and keep in mind that these projections are based only on publishers.

Thus far, as can be seen in the column at the far right in Table 9, actual Witness growth substantially exceeds even the 4% projections. Granted that many things can invalidate projections, when a movement has maintained a substantial rate of growth for a long time, it takes a lot to slow it down. Consider that if social scientists back in 1950 had projected Witness growth for the next 40 years at the rate of 6% per year, their membership prediction for 1990 would have been nearly 500,000 too low.

In any event, while we cannot be sure at what rate the Witnesses will grow during the next century, in our judgment the least plausible assumption is that they will quit growing or begin to decline in the near future. Continued growth is the most plausible assumption and we favor the 4% projection.

## Conclusion

This essay has combined very general theoretical aims with an extensive description of a major religious movement. The model is an attempt to state the necessary and (hopefully) the sufficient conditions for the success of religious movements. By applying this model to the Jehovah's Witnesses we have tried not only to test it, but to explain why a movement that most social scientific

observers seem to have found uninteresting or unattractive, has achieved such remarkable success. We propose that the Jehovah's Witnesses have grown and will continue to grow to the extent that they satisfy these propositions—other things being equal.

Whatever the eventual fate of the theory, we would hope that our descriptive materials would help to convince other scholars that their time is *not* better spent documenting the rites of a coven of 13 Dutch witches. Far better that they should contribute to understanding a movement that is changing millions of lives.

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## NOTES

1. Fortunately, the American study was summarised in a chapter (Kephart & Zellner, 1994).
2. One of the more widely used sociology texts devotes 12 pages, fully or partially, to the Moonies, even greater coverage to the Shakers and the Mormons, but mentions the Witnesses only twice (Roberts, 1995). The first mention consists of one sentence and the second mention merely includes them in a list of “conservative churches”. A second widely-used text (Johnstone, 1992) also makes only two trivial mentions of the Witnesses, while also devoting substantial coverage to far less significant groups. The same pattern holds among historians. The most popular textbook on American religion (Albanese, 1992) includes many pages on Baha'i, Theosophy, Christian Science, New Thought, New Age, the Shakers and Father Divine, but makes only two very passing mentions of the Witnesses (the author devotes three-and-a-half pages and two additional references to Elvis Presley!). As for the most recent history of American religion written for the popular market, the index of Martin Marty's *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (1984) includes two page references to the Witnesses, one of which is actually devoted to the Bible Student movement from which the Witnesses emerged, the other merely mentioning that President Dwight Eisenhower had Witness relatives. Such brevity could not have been governed by lack of space, since Marty included substantial discussions of far smaller and less significant groups including the Moonies, Christian Science, Baha'i, Oneida, Shakers, Transcendental Meditation and Yoga.
3. See Bergman (1984) for a short history of the Bible Student Movement and its schisms, together with a comprehensive bibliography of all Bible Student writings.
4. Ironically, most “mainline” Christians currently view the Trinity as an unfathomable mystery and many doubt that all non-Christians are destined for the fires of hell. Yet, it is for lack of belief in these traditional doctrines that Christian writers commonly classify the Witnesses as a “cult”.
5. Both Kosmin's survey and the General Social Surveys suggest that about 40% of self-identified American Witnesses do not attend church regularly. Given that about 20% of the American population is under age 14 and about 28% is under 18, it seems likely that 15–20% of Witness children are not counted as publishers. Finally, the category of “interested” affiliates is large, because newcomers are not encouraged to formally join the Jehovah's Witnesses until they have been involved for a year or two. Based on the Witnesses 5% annual growth rate, we may infer that the number of interested affiliates is perhaps 10%, as large as the total number of publishers.
6. This marked tendency to marry within the group is also confirmed by Canadian census data (Heaton, 1990).
7. For a formal derivation of these propositions, see Iannaccone (1992).
8. For a game-theoretic model of this principle, see Iannaccone (1992, 1994).
9. For a definition of these groups and an analysis based on an earlier edition of Melton's encyclopedia, see Stark & Bainbridge, 1985.

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