

The Jehovah Witnesses

"Russellites," as the Jehovah's Witnesses were once called, are one of America's original contributions to the multiple variety of sects and cults. We have met their evangelists at our door - offering literature, negating the beliefs of others and openly attacking the basic doctrines of Scripture. We have seen salesmen on street corners with the *Watchtower* or *Awake!* magazines. The Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) are known for their vivid and fanciful interpretations of the signs of the times, their refusal to accept blood transfusions and to salute the flag.

Growth

The JW experienced phenomenal growth. In 1918, their membership increased from 3,868 believers in the U.S. to more than 2 million today in 210 countries. Statistics don't tell the whole story, but they are certainly mind-boggling. In 1975, the JW conducted 1,351,404 Bible studies and baptized 297,872 new members. They spent a total of 371,132,570 hours in evangelism and distributed 273,238,018 magazines. The U.S. membership is about 520,000, meeting in some 7,500 congregations. In Canada, the postwar growth swelled from about 30,000 in 1955 to its present membership of 175,000.

One third of the JW in the world are in Europe. While the Roman Catholics and Protestants are in decline, the Witnesses seem to be successful. In secular France, baptism by JW increased from 6,476 in 1973 to 8,679 in 1974. Spain also saw dramatic growth. In 1950, there were only 93 members. By 1973 it was estimated that the JW had 40,000 Spanish members, compared with 30,000 for the Protestants. They are the second-largest "denomination" in the country since religious liberty was granted in 1970.

Though the growth has been fantastic, it also represents hard and persistent work. Joachim Heldt reports that the JW spent 1700 hours to make one convert. Still, their number of "publishers" (lay missionaries) nearly tripled between 1950 and 1965 from a substantial 26,805 to 76,393.

Persecution

JW have grown despite severe persecutions. In his survey of Eastern Europe, Trevor Beeson said, "Persecution seems not to curb the activities of the Witnesses. Astonishingly, in the circumstances, they still engage in door-to-door visiting and even publish and distribute literature containing criticism of the government." In the 1940s the JW were harassed in Quebec under Premier Maurice Duplessis. This led to the Supreme Court rulings which abolished the notorious Padlock Law there, and upheld the right of any religious group to worship and to distribute literature.

In 1973, an estimated 22,000 JW were driven from Malawi, after the government banned the sect. The U.S. headquarters reported that 60 Witnesses died during the rout. The president of Malawi explained: "The Jehovah's Witnesses asked for it. They

would not pay taxes, recognize the flag, or sing the national anthem. So we just prohibited them because they were a nuisance. And they were rude. They don't believe in government at all, only in God."

Decline

Will the JW be able to maintain their spectacular growth rate? All signs point to a decline. There is no indication of an organized schismatic movement in the JW Society. "I wouldn't say a reform movement is growing ... but definitely something is happening," said Duane Magnani, a converted JW who heads a San, Francisco-based research and evangelism ministry to JW, called Witness, Incorporated.

For the first time since World War II the Society has declined in membership. The Society's 1978 Yearbook reveals a drop of 2.6 per cent from 1977 in the U.S. Also the number of convert baptisms in the U.S. dropped 65 per cent during the years 1976-77. The causes for this phenomenon appear to be twofold.

First, the *Watchtower* and *Awake!* had pinpointed 1975 as the year the world would end. When this predicted end was not fulfilled, many Witnesses became disillusioned. Second, internal dissension has contributed to membership losses.