

John P. Hoffmann.
Japanese Saints: Mormons in the Land of the Rising Sun.
Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007

Reviewed by Henri Gooren

Why Christianity is successful in South Korea and a failure in Japan seems a straightforward story. In Korea, Christian leaders became involved in the nationalist struggle against the Japanese, who occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945. Christianity thus became associated with Korean nationalism, freedom, and foreign support, and some forms of the religion even later tied in with traditional shamanism. Christian growth accelerated after the Korean War (1950–53), until by the year 2000 about 28 percent of South Koreans considered themselves Christians—about 23 percent Protestant and 5 percent Catholic.¹

In Japan, however, Christianity was associated with foreign interventions, especially the American occupation after the disastrous ending of World War II. The perception among the Japanese that Christianity is a religion of foreigners started when Portuguese, English, and Dutch friars and sailors brought the religion to Japan in the sixteenth century. The Tokugawa regime (1603–1868) only tolerated Christians in its early beginnings. After the Christian Shimabara Revolt of 1637–38, Christianity was prohibited and its members executed. In 1639, “under threat of destruction . . . , Iberian ships, seen as the main propagators of Christianity, were prohibited from visiting Japan. In the ensuing years only a few Christian groups survived, mainly by hiding their beliefs and practices from official eyes” (17).

The ban on Christianity remained effective until U.S. gunboats forced the opening of Japan to the outside world in 1853 (18). Catholic and Protestant missionaries arrived in full force in the 1870s, but were unsuccessful for various reasons (20–22). For one, the exclusivist and monotheistic claims of Christianity went against a long Japanese tradition:

Most Japanese people take a highly syncretic approach to religion and spirituality. Various traditions combine into an amalgam of practices and beliefs, most of which stem from selected aspects of Buddhism,

Shintoism, Confucianism, and native folk religion. . . . Normative Japanese religious behavior includes, for example, Buddhist funerals and Shinto weddings; veneration of ancestors through household Buddhist altars (*butsudan*) or Shinto altars (*kamidana*); and the annual pilgrimage to the Shrine in one's hometown at the festival of New Year's. (145)

Japanese took (and obviously continue to take) great pride in their culture and religion and were reluctant to change it for a foreign religion. Additionally, foreigners had to live in isolated settlements until World War II, and Western missionaries found it almost impossible to learn the Japanese language well. Finally, many Japanese who were sympathetic toward Christianity became confused by its internal fragmentation. Inter-denominational squabbles were prominent, especially between liberal and conservative missionaries (21–22). All these reasons explain why Christians nowadays make up at best about 1.5 to 2 percent of the Japanese population.²

Since Mormonism tends to gain new members especially in parts of the world that are already Christian, like the U.S. and Latin America, one would expect the Latter-day Saints to be successful in Korea and not very successful in Japan. According to the *2008 Church Almanac*, Mormons made up 0.15 percent of the population in South Korea (almost 80,000 members), against 0.09 percent in Japan (almost 122,000 members). This means that according to the membership on record, one in every 632 South Koreans is a Latter-day Saint, against one in every 1,060 Japanese.³ The difference is smaller than expected, but still significant.

John P. Hoffman is a sociologist at Brigham Young University studying the sociology of religion. *Japanese Saints: Mormons in the Land of the Rising Sun* is the first book-sized sociological study of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Japan.⁴ The book's guiding concept is identity; the central chapters deal with religious and Japanese identities (chapter 3), the long and gradual conversion process to Mormonism (chapter 4), and "What It Means to Be a Latter-day Saint" (chapter 5). Chapter 6 explores the conflicts arising from attempts by LDS converts to combine Japanese and LDS identities, which most are unable to reconcile.

Hoffman found that the minority of converts who remained active in the LDS Church—informally estimated at only 15 to 25 percent (105)—were mostly young people, especially women (172–73). They managed to turn the many forms of "Church work" (callings, meetings, missionary work, and other forms of assistance) into a central part of their primary identity. This still meant they had to juggle their Japanese identity, for instance, by continuing to go to the New Year's festival in their hometown with their family. Moreover, many converts were reluctant to give up a calling they

really liked after a few years. When they did not like their new calling, many would drop out (161–62). Other disaffiliation factors were the ascetic behavioral restrictions of Mormonism, perceived insults by other members, or anti-Church pressure by spouses or other relatives (191). Many Japanese husbands, for instance, will not accept that their LDS wives want to spend over three hours in church on Sunday, the only day the family can be together.

Hoffmann's book provides fascinating insights on the conversion process among LDS members in Japan:

Conversions were processual and might be likened to a personal journey with numerous fits and starts. There was also a lack of dramatic emotion or immediacy to their LDS conversion narratives. Thus, adopting a Mormon identity tended to be gradual and develop along with interpersonal linkages to Church members, learning the narratives of the group, and balancing presumed interpersonal opposition from family members and friends against interpersonal comfort with members of the Church. (190)

The book has many wonderful interview quotes to bring these issues to life, which show how important the LDS missionaries are in the conversion process.

However, I do wonder about the selection of the interviewees and about the way these interviews were conducted by “two native Japanese women (non-Mormons)” (199). The informants all came from one LDS branch near Hokkaido University in Sapporo, where Hoffman spent time in 1998. Although Hoffman provides ample data on the branch members (199–201), there is no way to compare it to other branches and thus gauge whether they are representative of LDS branches throughout Japan. Hoffman also interviewed twenty-five Americans who had served as LDS missionaries in Japan, but he was unable to interview any Japanese ex-members. This is unfortunate, but drawing from my own research experiences in Central America, I can understand this omission. Hoffmann used sophisticated software to code and cross-reference his different data sets. I can accept the book's methodology and its limitations, because the author is frank about them (197–206).

The book sometimes tends to essentialize social and cultural identities, like in this quote: “Western forms of spirituality . . . tend to be conceptually grounded, experiential, and focus on univariate truths; and Eastern forms . . . are more syncretic, multifaceted, this-worldly, practically beneficial, and centered on kinship ties” (175). This reduction should be more nuanced: Hoffmann's “Western” spirituality here is obviously derived from Protestant Christianity, because Catholic and New Age spiritualities are much closer to the supposed “Eastern” one.

I very much enjoyed this fascinating and highly readable book, as it does not just give insights into the Mormon Church in Japan but also sketches its members and organization against the wider Japanese religious and political context. Hoffmann offers many new insights into the LDS conversion experience in a country that is rarely studied and is, to Western sensibilities, sometimes difficult to fathom. Part of the Japanese self-image is a sense of being inscrutable and uniquely different from the rest of the world; Hoffman is to be commended for bridging those differences.

Henri Gooren (gooren@oakland.edu) is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, and received his PhD in anthropology from Utrecht University. His forthcoming book is entitled *Conversion Careers: Why People Become and Remain Religiously Active*. Gooren's many publications include "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala, 1948-1998," *Dialogue* 34, no. 3 and 4 (Fall-Winter): 55-75; and "The Religious Market in Nicaragua: The Paradoxes of Catholicism and Protestantism," *Exchange* 32, no. 4 (Winter): 340-60.

1. Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: When We Pray God Works* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001), 387. To arrive at these numbers, I subtracted proportional shares of double counting. The inflated raw population percentages for Protestants and Catholics in South Korea are 36.2 and 8.1 percent.
2. Johnstone and Mandryk, *Operation World*, 370.
3. *2008 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Morning News, 2008), 398, 450.
4. Primarily a history, *Taking the Gospel to the Japanese: 1901 to 2001*, edited by Reid L. Neilson and Van C. Gessel (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), was published a year earlier. In that work, a chapter is devoted to John P. Hoffman's qualitative analysis of Japanese members and the LDS Church.