Victor Spiegel, 37, a Florida native, performing a mock wedding ceremony at the New Otani Hotel in Tokyo as potential customers look on.

Tokyo Journal

*Here Comes the Japanese Bride, Looking Very Western*
TOkyo, July 1 — As a soprano sings "Ave Maria," a Japanese couple marches down the center aisle of a hotel chapel, past white trumpet lilies, to the altar where an American "pastor" stands, gold cross gleaming on white robes.

"Before God and these witnesses, I pronounce you husband and wife," intones Damon Mackey, a California native who took a two-day course to perform weddings on weekends, supplementing his income as an English teacher and part-time actor.

In Japan, where a love affair with Western "white weddings" is leading to a collapse in Shinto ceremonies, a new figure is taking over the altar: the gaijin, or foreign, "pastor."

Only 1.4 percent of Japan's 127 million people are Christians, but Christian-style ceremonies now account for three-quarters of Japanese weddings. To meet market demand, bridal companies in recent years have largely dispensed with the niceties of providing a pastor with a seminary education, keeping the requirements simple: a man from an English-speaking country who will show up on time, remember his lines, not mix up names and perform the ceremony in 20 minutes.

From a small beginning a few years ago, the Western wedding "pastor" has suddenly become an established part of modern Japan's cultural tableau. The lure of easy money has prompted hundreds of foreign men to respond to newspaper advertisements here, like the one that read: "North Americans, Europeans wanted to conduct wedding ceremonies."

"Now all the hotels have chapels with someone dressed up as a priest," said William J. Grimm, a Maryknoll priest who edits The Catholic Weekly of Japan.

In fact, the less overtly religious the pastor, the better. Hotel managers generally discourage proselytizing by authentic Christian pastors.

"The companies like the nonreligious guy who just follows the script," said Mike Clark, a Japanese language student who performed weddings before moving home to Canada last fall.

The boom in what some Japanese magazines call "foreign fake pas-

White weddings with a 'pastor' are crowding out Shinto ceremonies.

sisted that the Christian "pastor" had to be a foreigner. Youshi Hirohara, a 27-year-old civil servant, said: "It would seem very unreal and fake if there was a Japanese person conducting the ceremony. Very shady actually."

Among foreigners, competition has depressed the pay for a wedding ceremony to $120, from $200 five years ago. In a society that revolves around business cards, the card of one part-time "pastor" reads: "Max von Schub," Kobayashi: Performer, Actor, MC, Wedding Minister."

While the prime motivator for the Western wedding ministers is cash, many take an extra pride in their work.

"My goal was to make at least one person cry at each ceremony," said Mr. Clark, the Canadian student. He said performing weddings was a great part-time job "but kind of kooky, kind of surreal."

"There was the whole factory aspect of it, the 20-minute turnaround," he said. "All icing, no cake. Then, there I was, an atheist, reading and reciting these Japanese Christian scripts that I barely understood."

Reg Hackshaw, 42, a New Zealander who performs weddings, said he was "raised as a Catholic, but got fed up with the hypocrisy." Asked if spending his holidays as a priest and marrying non-Japanese at a hotel chapel conflicted with his agnosticism, Mr. Hackshaw answered: "O.K., I am dressing up in a robe, but it's not a religious ceremony. It's a performance."

"The number of times someone has asked what church I belong to I can count on one hand," added Mr. Hackshaw, who teaches English and works as a disc jockey during the week.

Noting that he had conducted over 2,000 wedding ceremonies, Mr. Hackshaw said that Japanese brides demanded foreign ministers, saying: "They identify Christianity as something foreign. And, because it is foreign, they want a foreign pastor."

At the hotel lobby here, where Mr. Sakamoto and his fiancée were planning their wedding with a foreign pastor, a similar view was heard.

"You don't see a foreign person doing a Shinto wedding, do you?" he asked. "Now that would be strange."

Models hired for a bridal fair rehearsal in the chapel of the Intercontinental Hotel, Tokyo Bay. Christian-style weddings now predominate.