

The Insider/Outsider Problem

Podcast with **George Chryssides** (20th February 2012)

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Christopher Cotter (CC): *The insider/outsider distinction is one of the most fundamental distinctions in the study of religions. I'm not going to get into it too much now because here to discuss it with me today is Dr George Chryssides, the honorary research fellow in contemporary religion at the University of Birmingham. He is also the author of, amongst many other things, 'The Historical Dictionary of Jehovah's Witnesses', published in 2008, and the recently published 'Christians in the 21st Century'. So, welcome Dr Chryssides.*

George Chryssides (GC): Thanks, hi.

(CC): *So, insider/outsider. To a lay person, what is an insider, and what is an outsider in the study of religions?*

(GC): Well, there's been a lot of debate about what exactly an insider or an outsider is but basically, in theory, the insider is the person that follows the religion, the outsider is the person like me, most of the time. I can't belong to all the religions I study so I'm looking at it as a non-believer, as a non-practitioner, I'm trying to make sense of it.

(CC): *So, you make two important points there, even in that little brief statement. One is, who does the defining? Is it you as an academic defining who is an insider or who is an outsider, or do you go by the tradition that you are studying at that time?*

(GC): Well, I think it's clear most of the time that I'm the outsider, because most of the time I'm trying to understand but initially I'm having problems working out what the religion believes, and why they do it and what it's based on and what all the various activities are that they follow and what the reasons are for them. So I'm the outsider. It's sometimes said that the outsider tries to make the strange familiar. For instance, it's strange to me but it's my job to make it familiar, first of all to myself, but secondly to the people I'm writing for or lecturing to or whatever. The other side to that is that it's sometimes said that if you're the insider, studying your own religion, you're trying to make the familiar strange. In other words the religion that you follow seems very familiar to you but yet you don't see what's problematic about it. To give you an example that's not to do with New Religious Movements, I was brought up as a Protestant Christian and I could never really understand what the big deal about the Reformation was because it seemed obvious to me that the Bible was the book that you followed and read and based your life on and what on earth was it that Martin Luther did. Just telling people that. But then it's when you try and study a bit more and make it seem a bit more strange to you when you realise that there are Roman Catholics that say it's not just the Bible, actually the Church was there first, it was the Church that defined the Bible and you've actually got two sources of authority then I can understand my own tradition that bit better because of this, kind

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of, strangeness that I've introduced and it's not quite so familiar, not quite so comforting to me. Do you see what I mean?

(CC): *Yes. So you hit on the other key issue, from my perspective anyway, which is what happens if you are an insider trying to be an outsider? And even an outsider is going to bring, implicitly they're going to have their own community or set of ideas which they are an insider of. How does an academic go about juggling those two roles when they come to write?*

(GC): Well, I think there are a lot of difficulties with that. One is that you're trying to empathize, you're trying to get, I suppose ideally, into the insider's mind to see what it means to them, **(5:00)** what it is they do, why they do it and so forth, there's that aspect to it. Sometimes people have said to me there's another aspect, there's faith maintenance. I used to get comments from the Church I belong to when I was researching Unification Church, they would say to me, 'I don't know how you maintain your faith coming into contact with all these religions'. Actually that wasn't a problem for me because I guess I wasn't personally attracted to any of them, I didn't actually think of joining. But again some people might, and maybe that's okay, maybe it's not. I think as the researcher you need to decide that.

(CC): *One of the more recent, I was going to say 'founding fathers' but he's not a founding father, but one of the more recent canonical figures in the phenomenological study of religion is Ninian Smart and one of the key things he's remembered for is the idea of methodological agnosticism, where an outsider will come into a community and study and yet attempt to maintain some sort of agnostic stance on the truth or belief claims of that community. How...do you have any reflections on how this works out in practice?*

(GC): Yes. I sometimes have said to students, and sometimes they've been surprised, I've said there's actually a sense in which we're not interested in truth. So, if I'm working on, let's say the Jehovah's Witnesses, my key question is not "might they be teaching the truth"? What my job is, is to understand them and to get them right and to make sure I'm not misrepresenting them and to raise key questions about them. On the other hand, because the Jehovah's Witnesses talk about "being in the truth", that's often their phrase, for people who have accepted their form of spirituality, they want me to accept the truth. Every so often the city overseer will take me aside and say "You know George, I've really got to say this to you but I'm very concerned that you're still not yet in the truth". And I always notice the word "yet" in what he says because he's still hopeful that I will one day study the religion enough to see that really "what else could be true?!". So we've got a different agenda. Here I am with this methodological agnosticism, I'm not supposed to be asking the question "might they be right?" but from their point of view, they're saying well, "there's no question about it, we are right, we've got the truth and we wish you would accept it". I think we agree to differ but the Jehovah's Witnesses, I think with some of the Unification Churches seminars I used to attend, certainly the last one I found that very high pressure, there was no let up. You know, "what did you think of this lecture?", and "why don't you agree that it's true?" and so on, so you can actually encounter that as someone who studies religion.

(CC): *Yes, I mean how often are you aware of this, of the fact that perhaps what you're being presented with by the community that you're studying is actually what's going on, or if it's their*

attempt to present themselves in a certain way to the academic? Have you ever had any experiences of that dynamic?

(GC): Obviously, any religious organisation will want to show themselves up in the best favourable light. I think one has got to make a point of reading the critics as well as the exponents and to ask whether things are as good as they say. And I think we're used to that actually in any form of religion, old and new. There's the ideal and the real, and you will get vicars pushing sermons about how Christians show love to each other and so on, and if you compare that with what goes on in the average church there's usually a big difference. If you read the media you read a lot about the paedophile priests and so on, but of course that doesn't get into the textbooks because that's not the ideal. So you've got to match up ideality and reality. As somebody who's studying **(10:00)** religion I think I've got to reflect on both.

(CC): *It was the...another phenomenologist of religion, it was William Brede Kristensen, to paraphrase him, who had the idea that the believer is always right. So that everything you do as a scholar of religion you bring back to the believer and if they can't accept it, then it isn't a true representation. This was also, I think it was Cantwell Smith elaborated on that, saying that a depiction of a religion must be true to, if it was Christianity, a Christian, but also to a Muslim, or to someone who didn't have that believe at all. I'm wondering if you've ever had experience of that or any thoughts on that, taking your writing back to the community that has been studied?*

(GC): Yes, I will usually do that if it's at all possible because you often pick up a lot of your own misconceptions or the odd error, or sometimes it's not even an error, it might be the way that you've put something that really just gives it a wrong slant. I don't think that the believer is always right because that seems to give a kind of an infallibility to the believer, and we all make mistakes. Believers can give you information that is wrong simply because maybe they've forgotten or they haven't checked themselves. I mean, if the Jehovah's Witnesses were to tell me that their annual memorial is on the 10th of April when in fact when it was on the 17th, that would just be a mistake and hopefully I would sort that out to make a point of going along on the correct night. So I think one has got to allow that there can be mistakes. Sometimes even the believer may not understand their own tradition fully. Sometimes you do get to the point where a follower of a new religious movement will say to you, "gosh, how do you know all that about us, we didn't know that". I have had that comment from members of the unification church and sometimes from the Jehovah's Witnesses. I suppose one shouldn't be surprised because you wouldn't expect a Sunday school teacher to know as much as someone who is studying Christianity. I think one has got to bear in mind the phrase "the believer is always right", meaning that you check things against the believer's account. If believers do make mistakes of course then the fact that they've made a mistake is part of the phenomenon as well. So there is that to bring in. I remember Eileen Barker once saying "everything is data". She actually said that apropos of Susan Palmer being excluded from an event organised by the Raelians. Evidently Susan was disappointed about this and she had asked Eileen Barker what she should do and how she should respond and Eileen's comment was "everything is data". So if you are excluded or I suppose even if you were chucked out of a meeting that ought to be an interesting fact in itself. So yes, the believer is not always right but you should always take the believer very seriously.

(CC): *As far as scholars who are insiders and scholars who are outsiders, I've certainly been involved in many a heated debate about which is the better position or which is more valid, so I'm going to sort of rhetorically ask, insider or outsider scholar?*

(GC): You can't pick one or the other. I think really you've got say there are outsiders that bring to bear certain things that the insider can't and vice versa. The insider might be over enthusiastic about their own religion and they may privilege their own particular tradition. But at least the insider will know what religion means and that can be a problem if you're the outsider. There are probably some outsiders that aren't really very sure of why people follow a religion or what it means to them and so on. On the other hand they've got, one hopes, some kind of objectivity. So an outsider studying Christianity might be more likely to take aboard the fact that **(15:00)** there are three major traditions in Christianity for example whereas someone who is inside may see just Evangelical Protestantism as the only version. So I think one has got to say that different stances have got their own pros and cons. But it's also not that simple because I think scholars talk about insiders as if there's only one kind of insider. When you think about it there are different traditions within a religion so, am I an insider to Christianity? Well the answer is, yes, I am, but I'm not an insider to Eastern Orthodoxy or to the Salvation Army or to Roman Catholicism. So there are a whole lot of, well there not even concentric circles here, I might be in some things in my own religion but excluded from others. Or what about the role of women for example, I'm not sure I can speak totally from a woman's point of view because I'm not an insider to that and I can't be. I think we've got to watch we don't make it kind of black and white. Also I think that you're not just in or out, you can be thinking about joining a religion, so you're kind of moving in. You can make the decision to come in, to be the enthusiastic new convert, you can get to the next stage where maybe you're going to get a bit complacent as the insider, but then you can go out the other end. So there's the ex-member perhaps at the end of that, and they've got something to tell as well that is worth taking seriously. I don't think we've done enough study of ex-members either, of all the new religions, because actually they're very difficult to find, apart from the ones that tell you what a horrible experience it's been belonging to the religion they've just left.

(CC): *The ones who feel they've got something to say will say it but the ones who maybe don't feel they've got anything to say, don't... so how on earth do you find them?*

(GC): I don't know whether you want me to say a bit more about that because I can do. I think there are –

(CC): Yes

(GC): -different kinds of ex member that we ought to be interested in. There's certainly the kind that goes and tells the media how bad it was. That's certainly one kind, and then the other question is "why do they do that?" I mean, maybe they have had a bad experience, I'm sure some of them have, but equally there may be people who feel "well I've come out, I've wasted years of my life, how do I justify that?" As Jim Beckford says in one of his books, they devise story, they devise a scenario, to account for the entry and exit. So you get brainwashing stories. But equally you get people like the woman who cut my hair recently, we got on to talking, and it transpired that she had belonged to the Soka Gakkai, and I said "Well, why did you leave?" and she said "well I actually didn't like being out late at night" which is when they had their meetings. "I thought I was being followed by

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somebody who was going to rob me so I didn't go back". So her reason for not going back was totally nothing to do with the religion but we don't hear that story and I find that really interesting that there are these stories out there that we haven't actually taken aboard as students of religion.

(CC): *Definitely. Two more things that I'd like to ask and then I think we're getting near wrapping up.*

(GC): Okay.

(CC): *One is, how does this understanding of insiders and outsiders, how does that impact upon the media, and when the media get in an expert on a religion, or a religious leader and you know, ask them questions about "what does your religion think about this?" or "What is your religion's response to this?" What's going on there? What issues does that bring up?*

(GC): I think there would be all sorts of things that go on there. It depends on what they're after, it depends on who the interviewer is. There is a YouTube clip of Sun Myung Moon being interviewed and all the questions that are asked by that interviewer are designed to embarrass him and show what a hypocrite he is and so on. So it depends on what stance you have. Equally, there have been interviews where the follower or a leader of a new religion has been taken very seriously and it has been a genuine attempt to find out what's going on. So I think maybe it can have different motives at different times.

(CC): *Mmm.*

(GC): (20:00) I would hope they would go for the model of finding out what the believer or leader thinks rather than try to have a sensationalist story about the religion in question.

(CC): *And the final one is bringing in my own research, which is into non-religion. We've been talking about different sorts of insiders and outsiders, but I've wonder specifically about the non-religious outsider trying to study a religion and if there's any dynamic going on there? Is, I guess I'm asking, is a religion of some description necessary to understand another religion?*

(GC): So the question is if you've got no religion what- why are you studying religion at all, or-?

(CC): *how – is it possible for you to understand someone else's religious experience if you have never had a religious experience to gauge that against?*

(GC): Well, I don't know. My mother was very religious and she brought us up to be very religious and to have this kind of interest in religion as something that was really important, so I'm not sure what it's like myself, to be in a situation where I just don't know what religion is about and why people join. Sometimes students have said "I've never been in a church in my life" and I really don't know what that's like to be honest. So I don't know how they kind of, get in on religion. I imagine they may find some of it somewhat difficult to understand. So yes, I've been an insider to religion and that certainly gives me an advantage in some respects but maybe that makes me, kind of, too prone to see it as something important. Whereas other people have said things like "religion is poison", I think it was Mao Zedong that said that.

(CC): *Mmm.*

(GC): So yeah, I don't know what it's like to be coming from that point of view. So yes, we all have our starting points. I guess we've got to recognise what that starting point is and to realise that there are other people that are outsiders to religion and they themselves, I'm sure, have got a valid perspective to offer that is an interest to all of us.

(CC): *Lots of very fascinating issues there, Dr Chryssides, that we could go on about for a lot longer.*

(GC): We certainly could, and thanks for talking to me.

(CC): *And thanks for talking to us!*

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