

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 17 November 2017



Changing Your Story: Assessing Ex-member narratives

Podcast with **George Chryssides** (20 November 2017).

Interviewed by **Breann Fallon**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/changing-your-story-assessing-ex-member-narratives/>

Breann Fallon (BF): *Ex-member testimony can be difficult to deal with. Such testimony tends to receive privileged treatment in anti-cult literature, while some academics are prone to be sceptical – even suggesting ex-member testimony is worthless. So how do we deal with such testimonies, especially considering the increasing forms of such testimony that now comes with social media? What role do such accounts play in the creation of identity for ex-members? To discuss this topic today, I have with me Dr [George Chryssides](#). George is a long-term friend of the Religious Studies Project and is Honorary Research Fellow at York St John University and the University of Birmingham, having been head of Religious Studies at the University of Wolverhampton from 2001–2008. He has written extensively on New Religious Movements, especially Jehovah's Witnesses. Recent publications include the [Historical Dictionary of Jehovah's Witnesses](#), [The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements](#), co-edited with Benjamin E. Zeller; and [Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change](#). George is Co-Vice Chair of [INFORM](#), the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements, based at the LSE and was founded by Eileen Barker in 1988. George is also on various Editorial boards and panels and is currently co-editing an anthology entitled The Insider-Outsider Debate [together with Stephen Gregg](#). He's also editing an anthology for the Routledge Inform Series entitled [Minority Religions in Europe and the Middle East](#). So thank you very much for joining us today, George.*

George Chryssides (GC): My pleasure, thanks for inviting me.

BF: *So I was wondering if we could just start with a discussion of how different scholars deal with ex-member testimonies, and what your opinion is of different ways of dealing with such testimony.*

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GC: Well, there are inevitably a handful of scholars who support the anti-cult movement – although they don't like it being called the anti-cult movement – but there is a body that is somewhat hostile and they tend to privilege the ex-member. They will say that the ex-member has been inside, now he or she is outside. So they've seen it from both points of view and are in a better position than someone like myself that has never joined a new religious movement. So that's one point of view. There are others like [James Beckford](#), who say: well, if you've come out of a new religious movement, like the Jehovah's witnesses, then your testimony is going to be biased. Maybe you're going to be a bit embarrassed at having been involved in a group that's not very popular and has an unusual worldview. So, you'd devise some kind of explanation about how and why you joined, and how you got disillusioned, and how you were conned into joining, maybe, and how you were deceived and so on. James Beckford thinks that the ex-member “devises a scenario”, as he puts it, to account for entry and exit. There are other scholars like Lonnie Cliver and Brian Wilson who have said their testimony is totally invalid, we should disregard it totally. It's worthless. Now I don't go along with that, either. Because, I think, particularly when you read written ex-members accounts, ok they're biased, but we're always taught to evaluate our sources so it's important to see why they're saying what they do; what it is that might be true; what sounds plausible. You triangulate your information, what other people have said. Very often, you can get unwitting testimony about conditions within an organisation. There's a lot of good material you get, particularly from high-ranking ex-members: people that have for example, in one case, been on the governing body of Jehovah's Witnesses. Now they don't publish their minutes or anything like that, so until [Raymond Franz' book](#) came out I don't think any of us had much of a clue what actually went on, on the governing body: how they voted on things, what sort of topics they discussed. And that's really interesting. We shouldn't just say "Well, that's an ex-member: he got cheesed-off with the movement. We're not going to listen to it." Because that way you would lose a lot of very good information.

BF: *So there's sort-of this element of “the fact that's behind the supposed fiction”, that we can kind-of draw out from testimonies, I guess?*

GC: Yes, well, fact and fiction tend to kind-of blend into each other (**5:00**). Actually, that's some work I would like to do as a piece of follow up research on JW's. Because there are a lot of narratives. And it's a pity I didn't get my act together on this before this particular conference, which is on narratives. Because you get some narratives that claim to be absolutely factual. You get others that are, on their own account, works of fiction. There are stories invented about Jehovah's Witnesses. And then, in between, you get pieces of . . . some people call them “faction”: a cross between fact and fiction.

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They'll say: well this is based on such and such a congregation, but we're not telling the reader who it is because of confidentiality. And actually there is a wealth of literature out there about what it means for a Jehovah's Witness to be out doing house-to-house work, staffing a literature cart and things like that. And, in some cases, how they fudge the statistics that they report back to their elders. I think things like that are really fascinating, because you can't get that in copies of the Watchtower, for example. So that's a future project, reading up on the fiction/faction narrative and seeing what one can get out of it.

BF: *So how do you think that we should be dealing with ex-member testimonies in your opinion?*

GC: Well, what I'm presenting at this conference is the view that ex-member testimony is about one's identity. Because you can have different identities depending on what your interests are. Ok, so maybe you kind-of dabbled in a hobby for a couple of weeks and got fed up with it? That's not part of your identity. And there are some people that actually go along to a new religious movement in that kind of role. They'll maybe go along for a couple of weeks, or maybe just the once, then decide it's not for them. Or decide they don't like being out at night, or something like that. And we don't hear so much of these testimonies, because they're not very interesting. So, when a religion is not part of one's identity you don't need to invent a story about why you came out. I mean, I don't need to invent a story about why I gave up stamp collecting or something like that.

BF: (laughs)

GC: So, on the other hand, if the religion has been a big part of your identity – maybe it's been your paid employment even – then you're going to have problems coming out. You're going to have to think: how do I shape a new identity? And it can be even practical things that are involved, like: how do I get a job? Where will live? Who are my friends going to be? Because maybe some of them will keep up with you, but probably most of them won't. So it's a whole new life that you're inventing, in that sort of case. So people have to find ways of doing that. In some extreme cases the ex-member has made ex-membership part of his or her own identity, perhaps being a so-called cult counsellor. There are people that have made their professions out of that – not all that many, but you tend to hear about them more than the others, because they're prominent. They've got a lot to say about the movement. And there is a saying: “You can get the member out of the cult, but you can't get the cult out of the member.”

BF: *That's very interesting.*

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GC: So that's true about these people. Actually, they're very good informants, some of them, if you can get them tamed and talking to you. There are a couple that will send me lots of extremely good information about the Unification Church. So usually, if I want to know something, I will write to them to say, "I've heard about so-and-so, what do you know about it?" And then I'll get back a lot of good information. Kind-of mentally they're still in the movement, even though – in terms of what they believe and what they practise – they're out of it.

BF: *So, in that sort of way, you're finding these testimonies really useful. Do you think there's a difference between different types of testimony? We've already talked about fact and fiction, but you know: a biography as opposed to writing to your ex-members that you are familiar with, as opposed to perhaps something on social media (10:00)? Is there a difference between using those different types, do you think? Is there one you prefer?*

GC: Absolutely. I think a lot of stuff that's not terribly worthwhile is the stuff you get on bulletin boards from ex-Jehovah's Witnesses. A lot of it is misinformation. A lot of it is actually very hostile. And even the treatment that they're getting in Russia, which is quite appalling. I don't know if you've been following that at all? The authorities have closed them down and confiscated all their properties. And on some of these anti-JW sites you're getting people saying "I wish they had done it sooner."

BF: *Oh, wow!*

GC: Yes, there's no kind-of sympathy for these people, whatever their beliefs might be. So there's not a lot of point in reading much of that kind of stuff. Except that it tells you more about the person that's writing than it does about the movement itself. But, on the other hand, there are some very good ex-members that can give you some good information.

BF: *Definitely. I think we should delve more into this idea of identity and creating that- I don't know what you would call it. Do you think they would create an "ex-member persona"?*

GC: Some of them do. I can decide, if I'm an ex-member, whether I want to make a feature out of that: whether I want to tell people, "Yes I was a Jehovah's Witness and this is very much a part of my life having been one." Now, actually, I do know of one former JW elder who has actually become a Church of Scotland minister. Now, I don't know much about him, but I can see that somebody could make a feature out of that and say, "Well, that's been my past life and now I've kind-of seen the light", or however he wants to put it. I have heard of one other Church of Scotland minister who served a

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long prison sentence as a murderer and then he repented and made good, and evidently he makes a feature out of that. Because it's got a good Biblical message about conversion – you know, Paul writing to the Romans: he lists a whole lot of misdeeds that people committed and then he says “and some of such were you”. So it's all very Biblical, if you want to do it that way and say, “Well, that's my past life but now it's all changed thanks to Jesus Christ”, or whatever. That's one way of creating your new identity. Another way of changing your identity is simply to conceal it and say, “Well I'm not going to talk about this. I'm just going to get on with my new life.” So there are different ways of creating this new identity, but one way or another, if religion has been a major part of your life and you're coming out, then there is an identity problem and you do need to think, well: Who am I? What do I want to be? And how do I want to shape up his new life that's lying ahead?

BF: *Do you think that as scholars we need to be aware of this identity change when we're looking at ex-member testimonies: how they've come out of whatever movement they were a part of; and how they've transitioned into (a new life); whether they've been really open about it; whether they've concealed it and then been open about it. Is that something we need to take into consideration when looking at these testimonies, which ones we really should be looking at for evidence?*

GC: Well absolutely, because evaluating your sources means asking questions like: who is telling me this? What is their motivation? How much knowledge do they have? Sometimes people can pretend to have more knowledge than they really do about the movement that they're in. A lot of ex-JWs will say “Well, the society has got a history of field prophecy.” Now I don't think that's true; that's a popular myth that is propagated by ex-members. I'm not saying they've never ever revised a date or given it a new meaning. But there's one website that goes through every year from 1877, when I think the society was first getting going, and then giving some kind of prophetic statement they've made and how it failed. And that's not really correct exposition of what they're saying (15:00). So I think we really do need to ask, what is the degree of knowledge that this person has? Because there can be a view that if you've been inside you know all about it. And I think anyone that follows a religion doesn't know *all* about it. You can't know all about your religion, it's just too big a subject.

BF: *Yes. I'm going to throw a bit of a left-field question at you that I didn't tell you I was going to ask.*

GC: Oh dear!

BF: *We always get this sort-of image of ex-members coming together, and then forming an ex-member group. Has that come across in your work?*

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GC: Oh yes, absolutely. There's a lot of that. And I think that's part of forming a new identity because you need to have friends. Friends need to have things in common. And the obvious thing in common that you've got if you're an ex-member is being an ex-member. So yes, there are JW groups. I've been invited to go to one or two different events, but I feel I'd be gate-crashing!

BF: *Yes!*

GC: But they get together from time to time. And I'd be interested to know what they talk about, because they often say, "You don't have to talk about Jehovah's Witnesses if you come to our meet." Now, whether they actually talk about JWs or whether they talk about some other interests that they've got, I don't know. But that would be interesting. But yes that's part of shaping your identity, to get an ex-member group going. Of course I think the ex-member group is more a kind of phenomenon in itself that's worth noting if you're a scholar. I suspect that in the ex-member group you get a kind of snowball effect of all the kind of moans that they've got about the Watchtower Society. I see some of their stuff on Facebook and that seems to be how it works. Somebody will put something on, maybe about Russia, and then somebody will add a rude comment about it. And it tends to kind-of further a lack of sympathy.

BF: *It would be interesting to look at how social media have played a role in creating those new ex-member groups. Because of course, with social media, people from all over the globe can come together and sort of share their stories. Do you think social media has had a big part in ex-member testimony and getting that out there?*

GC: Absolutely, yes. There are one or two well-known websites, or are they websites or . . . I never know what the right terminology is about cyber space . . . but I think it's a Facebook Group about [How Well Do You Know Your Moon?](#) And that's about the Unification Church. That's actually got a lot of good information there. It's not just people slagging them off. But, yes, the obvious thing about social media is that we don't need to have our friends sitting opposite each other the way we're sitting opposite. You can get them from any part of the globe and you don't have to meet up with them, physically. But then again, the fact that you've got this group enables you to organise these physical meetings, which they do.

BF: *It would be interesting to know, with the advent of social media, if that is encouraging more people to go to groups – people who may have, without social media, sort-of concealed it on their own. But that idea that social media can bring so many people together. It would be interesting to*

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know whether there had been more people willing to join an ex-member group because of social media. Because you can kind-of dip your toe in with Facebook, before you go to a meeting. It's almost the complete reverse of joining the movement in the first place.

GC: Yes, I think that's probably right. The other question is whether it might actually encourage people to join a group by giving publicity. I remember when I was researching the Unification Church in the early days, there were two kind-of improbable people who had come along to this seminar. In fact, the Unification Church didn't seem to want these people to join. Because they weren't very bright, I think they were unemployed, looking for somewhere to live and that's not what they were after. And I think they may even have been psychologically disturbed. So, a new religion won't want to get a reputation for attracting the wrong people. But they had come along and I asked them, "What brought you here? (20:00) Weren't you put off by the bad publicity the Unification Church was getting?" And they said, "Oh no. What we had heard actually made us interested and want to come." So there can be this kind-of reverse effect. You might think, "Well, I wonder what this is about?"

BF: *Yes. I just think social media has taken a completely different road for so much of our study, particularly with testimony and people being able to share their voice and share their opinion. Before we finish up – you're presenting today at BASR – is there anything from your paper that you'd like to add to the talk, that we haven't discussed so far?*

GC: Well I think we've been, how long have we been talking now? It's been a lot more than 20 minutes and my talk is only 20 minutes, so I think I've probably added quite a bit. It's actually going to be part of a chapter in the Anthology on the Insider and Outsider debate that Stephen Gregg and I are getting together. So there will be a kind-of longer discussion. What I will be saying in the paper also – which we didn't cover, but it's a bit more technical – is about the kind of typologies of ex-members. People like [David Bromley](#) and [Massimo Introvigne](#) distinguish between different types. And they distinguish on the basis of how the person came out of the movement and what sort of conditions made them come out. What I'm suggesting is that these typologies have got their limitations. Sociologists talk about "ideal types" and I think that's one of the problems about sociology: when have you got an ideal type and when have you just got a model that's too crude for the purposes that you're using it? So I think an account of ex-members has got to go beyond distinctions like "the defector", "the ordinary leave-taker", "the apostate". There are all sorts of types of leaver, depending on the identity that they've created for themselves within the movement. So whether they're just an [unbaptised publisher](#) as the rank is called in the Jehovah's witnesses, or whether you're one of the

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144,000 in the governing body, right at the top, these kinds of the distinctions of the type of member you are will affect the way you leave. It will also affect the story you give about leaving and about life in the organisation.

BF: *It's almost sort-of an identity wave. You know: I was this, and then that's affected how my identity has come out of the movement. I think your talk is going to be so interesting, I'm very excited.*

GC: I hope so.

BF: *Thank you so much for joining us today. And I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.*

GC: Well, thanks very much. And thanks again for the invitation.

BF: *It's our pleasure.*

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