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Conflicting expectations? Insider and outsider methods of studying Jehovah's Witnesses.

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ABSTRACT

Using personal experience of a scholar's editorial policy, the author discusses problems in researching the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses that arise from the different positionalities of insider and outsider. Past research on new religious movements (NRMs) has tended to place the outsider-author in a privileged and superior position, often to the detriment of the NRMs under discussion. Drawing on W. Cantwell Smith and James L. Cox, the question of whether it is possible or desirable to privilege or accommodate the Jehovah's Witnesses' account is examined. It is argued that Jehovah's Witnesses lack a tradition of scholarship, and place limited value on higher education; hence the Watch Tower Society's methods of compiling its publications differ from those that are expected of scholarly material. In particular, the Society's policies of author anonymity, the use of in-house archival material, the desire to provide spiritually sustaining publications, the need to endorse the Society's doctrines, and the reticence to engage in debate with academic scholars, all militate against producing an insider's account of Watch Tower history which is academically credible. It is concluded that the differences between the respective approaches of the Watch Tower Society and academic scholarship create serious problems in attempting to forge a dialogical relationship between insider and outsider in one's research methodology.

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Scholarship on New Religious Movements (NRMs) has largely, although not exclusively, involved an insider-outsider model, normally (although not always) with the scholar on the "outside" and the NRM members on the "inside". In this article I aim to show, with reference to the Jehovah's Witnesses, how different expectations regarding research can lead to impasse between the insider and outsider.

The ensuing discussion arises from a somewhat extraordinary incident that highlighted some of the problems of the insider-outsider relationships in researching religion. I was recently asked to contribute a chapter on Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain to an anthology on the Watch Tower organisation. I submitted my contribution and, after making a few suggested minor amendments at the editor's request, I was informed that the chapter had been accepted. After nine months, I received a further unexpected email from this editor. It stated that the "proofreader" had found a number of "serious errors" in the text, and would be grateful if I would accept some further amendments. Because time was short, he stated, they had already performed the service of correcting these, suggesting a revised text. Perusal of the altered manuscript revealed some very substantial changes indeed. There were considerable deletions, as well as copious insertions of new text, amounting to some 4000 words in all. The reader complained that I had not referred to *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (Watch Tower 1993), which is the Society's own account of its history. Much of the new material made reference to and quoted from a work entitled *History of Britain Branch*, by an author called Jack Felix, a source quite unknown to me. This volume is not listed in major library catalogues such as the British Library, the Library of Congress, or Copac, and even a wider Google search fails to find any author of that name. The margin contained a number of explanations, which included the comment on a legal case, "Britain Branch would prefer this not to be mentioned". This reader corrected some small points of detail, but there were no major errors.

One deletion in the manuscript related to an incident in Glasgow that I had recounted as part of the Society's Scottish history. The published Watch Tower version is that in 1933 some Witnesses had visited Clydebank in Glasgow in one of their "sound cars" (loudhailer vans), from which they had inadvertently proclaimed their message in the same road as a Roman Catholic church. Despite being at the other end of the street, some hostile Roman Catholics had emerged from the building and physically attacked them. My account, drawing on external sources, was somewhat different: since Glasgow's Clyde Street is very short, the Catholic church would have been clearly visible. Contemporary newspaper reports gave an exact date, and consulting a calendar revealed that the contretemps occurred on a Sunday. A more likely explanation therefore was that the Witnesses decided to broadcast a rival message while a Mass was taking place. Clearly disliking my version, the reader had crossed out the sentence, "This took place on a Sunday." The reader, however, had inadvertently left her name on the revised file's "Properties", and I recognised it as a Watch Tower Bethel staff member whom I had previously met at the British headquarters.

This incident does more than highlight problems of editorial policy and academic protocol. Gift authorship, ghost authorship, fudging references, citing sources that one has not read, and lack of transparency in editorial policy are widely

acknowledged as unacceptable practices in academic writing. While there is often much to be gained by the outsider writing in dialogue with insiders, an author can reasonably expect to be told that this is the procedure. However, the episode reveals more than a breach of protocol. It highlights some important differences in research methodology between academic researchers and the Watch Tower organisation, presenting serious difficulties for collaboration and dialogue. Official Watch Tower publications are not written for an academic readership, of course: Jehovah's Witnesses describe them as "spiritual food", and their purpose is to reinforce their understanding and their spirituality, rather than sharpening their intellects. Anyone who has read copies of *The Watchtower*, *Awake!*, or their short books that aim to promote members' biblical understanding will readily recognise obvious – and indeed deliberate – unscholarly features. They are presented in digest form, without critical discussion; authorship is unattributed, in the belief that only Jehovah rather than any human author should receive credit for their work. Any reference to critical biblical scholarship is condemnatory, and critical study of the Bible reinforces their belief that mainstream Christianity is corrupt. The Society seeks to present a unified and agreed view, which it refers to as "the truth".

The study of NRMs has, understandably, lagged behind the study of major religions, and in several respects still has still to come to terms with the methodological issues pertaining to the study of religion more widely. The pioneers of "comparative religion" (as the subject was called in a previous era) were outsiders, who often relied on the written scriptures of the religions under discussion. Many of these scholars were versatile, writing on all of the major traditions, and at times making over-generalisations and presenting stereotypes. As Edward Said (1979) was later to argue, they were part of the phenomenon of "orientalism": just as Western countries, principally Britain and France, colonised much of the Orient, the scholars colonised the religions, assuming intellectual and spiritual superiority, claiming authority over an impossible range of phenomena, often offering stereotypical representations of the religions under study, and "essentialising" them.

Said's criticisms of the alleged orientalism in comparative religious studies remains controversial, but his critique can be plausibly applied to the development of NRM studies. Apart from their own primary texts, the bulk of early writing on NRMs has been almost exclusively by outsiders, and generally has sought to promote mainstream Christianity – most usually in its Protestant evangelical form – over and above the NRMs, or "cults", as they have been called. Christian writers and scholars tended to use terms like "heresy" to characterise the ideas of NRMs. Writing in R. A. Torrey's *The Fundamentals* – the seminal collation of essays written between 1901 and 1915 which pioneered Christian fundamentalism – W. G. Moorehead contributes a chapter entitled "Millennial Dawn: A Counterfeit of Christianity", which itemises Watch Tower beliefs that the author judges to be incompatible with the Christian faith, ending with a "Summary of the False Doctrines of Millennial Dawn". James M. Gray's (1909) *Satan and the Saint* has a chapter on the same theme, bearing the

heading “Old Foes in New Forms”, and structures its exposition around allegedly false teachings, and ending with a section entitled “A Solemn Warning”. Another early piece of writing is Lewis A. Radford’s *Ancient Heresies in Modern Dress* (1913) – a self-explanatory title – critiquing Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and others. More recently, the most popular critique of “cults” is Walter Martin’s *The Kingdom of the Cults*, first published in 1965, and still in print, having undergone several expansions and revisions, encompassing over two dozen so-called “cults”, including Buddhism and Islam. This book is still described as “the leading reference work on the major contemporary cult systems”, notwithstanding the fact that the author appears totally oblivious to the Watch Tower Society’s background in Adventism. Most of these countercult writers have either been members of the clergy or hold posts in institutions that can sound prestigious, but which are sometimes of their own creation, incorporating words like “Research” in their name. The “ownership” of new religious movements is thus asserted by their unsympathetic critics, who claim an encyclopaedic knowledge of NRMs, which ought to defy credibility, often stereotyping and “essentialising” them. The subtitle “Cult Expert” continues to be displayed on television screens as a descriptor of such critics, and this perception of the expert continues to prevail, effectively leaving NRMs themselves substantially without a voice.

It was Wilfred Cantwell Smith who championed the authority of the insider. Claiming that religion was essentially about people, rather than ideas or sacred texts, he asserted that “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers” (Smith; in Eliade and Kitagawa 1959, 42). This claim has been encapsulated more succinctly by Eric J. Sharpe in the aphorism, “The believer is always right” (Sharpe 1977, 81). After all, who understands a religion better – the scholar who writes about it, or the people who practise it?

Cantwell Smith’s recommendation to involve the insider in authenticating the scholar’s account of a religion is certainly commendable, but it is not altogether clear what “acknowledgement by the believer” entails. If it means that a scholar’s account should secure the believer’s assent, this is problematical for a variety of reasons. Believers do not know everything about their religion, they may be under misapprehensions, or they may be less than critical about the tenets of their faith. The book *Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom* has with some justification been described as a “sugar coated version” of the Society’s history (Reed 1994, 1), and hence insiders may subscribe to a version of their faith which the outsider-researcher may believe does not stand critical scrutiny, and cannot be endorsed. I might wish, for example, to challenge assumptions which, in my judgment, conflate hagiography with history. In common with traditional religions, NRMs are often internally complex, and it is possible that in the course of his or her research an outsider may come to know details of their beliefs and practices that are not widely known to insiders. For example, while researching the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ end-time chronology, it soon became clear that the calculations involved

were of such complexity that I could find no single informant who could explain them to me.

These considerations suggest that a dialogical model, along the lines proposed by James L. Cox, might be more fruitful. Using a model based on phenomenology, Cox recommends attempting to bracket one's assumptions ("performing the epoché") while entering into a community, creatively interacting, but at the same time gauging the relative importance of its various beliefs and practices, and adopting terminology – both emic and etic – that does justice to the phenomenon (Cox 2006, 160).

In view of the hostility of the countercult literature, it is not surprising that Jehovah's Witnesses have been wary of outside commentators, including academics. They are singularly unimpressed with scholarship that has been carried out on the Bible and on the Christian faith. The "higher criticism", initiated by scholars like Karl H. Graf and Julius Wellhausen, has, they believe, done a great disservice to true biblical understanding, calling into question the Bible's veracity. Theories of evolution, which are promoted by the academy, accepted by most biblical scholars, and even proclaimed from the pulpits, shock them. Higher education is reckoned to be morally harmful, since the Society continues to believe that it involves "bad associations" (1 Corinthians 15:33): students are reckoned to have a lifestyle of alcohol, tobacco, promiscuous sex, and false ideas. Such reservations about higher education are reinforced by the belief that that Armageddon is near, and that there is no point in gaining qualifications or amassing wealth, when it is unlikely to be needed. Even seemingly necessary skills like medicine will be unnecessary in the world that is soon to come, in which all suffering and disease will be eliminated by Jehovah's power.

As James Beckford noted, the majority of Witnesses tend to be manual workers or clerical staff, with just over a quarter in professional, managerial or technical posts, and since Jehovah's Witnesses have always been a lay movement, without clergy, office bearers receive no more than the Society's basic in-house training (Beckford 1975, 136-146). The Society therefore tends to lack any tradition of scholarship, and only a small handful of publications have been written independently of the organisation. Rolf Furuli, a Jehovah's Witness, lectures in Semitic languages at the University of Oslo and has written in defence of the Society's New World Translation of the Bible (Furuli 1999). Greg Stafford (2001) and Anthony Byatt (2004) have written reasoned defences of the Society's policies on blood and on the translation of the Bible, among other topics, but have incurred suspicion, not to say hostility, and Stafford finally left the Society to found his own movement, Christian Witnesses of Jah. Carl O. Jonsson, some time previously, found himself disfellowshipped for circulating ideas on biblical chronology that differed from the Society's official view. One article that appears in an academic journal, authored by Carolyn Wah (2001), the Society's Associate General Counsel, simply itemises internal Watch Tower publications, with suggestions about how one might obtain those that are out of print.

Unlike academia, which thrives on diversity of opinion, the Watch Tower Society seeks consensus. These authors have never appeared at any of the numerous academic conferences which I have attended, and hence their ideas are not subjected to the kind of academic scrutiny and debate that is characteristic of scholars of religion. The Society also directs its supporters exclusively to its own literature, and controls what is available, since some literature is for restricted circulation, such as for congregational elders exclusively, and the organisation has declined to supply me with at least one such text on request.

Although insider-outsider collaboration may have worked in some areas of the study of religion, major problems therefore exist for the possibility of collaborative ventures with the Watch Tower organisation. In fairness to my “proofreader”, Watch Tower methods of authoring their publications differ markedly from those of academia. While it is in the nature of academic writing for authors to identify themselves to their readers, Watch Tower publications are invariably of undisclosed authorship. Founder-leader Charles Taze Russell indicated in his will that no authors of articles in *The Watch Tower* were to be identified by name, and this has been the practice since his death in 1916. From 1942 the third president, Nathan H. Knorr, introduced the policy of total name anonymity on all Watch Tower publications – books, brochures and articles in *Awake!* magazine. This has the consequence of minimising the importance of authorship, and regarding the finished written product as supremely important. Former Governing Body member Raymond V. Franz describes the process of writing *Watchtower* articles, while he was in office during the 1960s. Various writers submitted material, from which the president selected, and these were passed to the Writing Department “for proof reading and any necessary editing or polishing”, and Franz adds that “the President by then had given the department considerable latitude as to the reworking of such material” (Franz 2000, 72). In some cases the reworking of material for publication was evidently quite substantial (Franz, 2000, 303). Franz also mentions the lack of qualifications of authors, who were often invited to write as a consequence of their administrative positions, rather than writing experience or capability (Franz 2000, 22). In all probability, the reader from the Watch Tower Bethel, in line with the Society’s writing policy, was aiming at a good final piece of writing, even if it involved a measure of gift authorship.

The Watch Tower Society’s own research methods differ markedly from those of academia. I am told that a writer must produce at least four sources by way of substantiation of any submitted article. However, since branch offices house archives relating to the society, this rule has the consequence that their own internal material counts as substantiation, and thus it may not always be necessary to cite external sources. A certain quantity of external material can be found in Bethel libraries, but a visitor to a Bethel would probably be unimpressed by its size, although the availability of online material has now greatly expanded the range of sources available to Watch Tower authors. Since Jehovah’s Witnesses’ publications are aimed at a popular rather than academic readership, understandably articles do

not cite the sources to anything like the extent that is expected of scholarly writing. Some articles have drawn on mainstream Bible commentaries – although this practice has evidently aroused controversy in the past – but these tend to be outmoded and conservative, and are only employed when they support the position of the article. I would imagine (although I have been unable to verify it) that sources such as Jack Felix are compilations of information on given themes – in this instance the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain – and they are quarried for information rather than critically evaluated. Further, because Watch Tower articles are commissioned, and because they are expected to promote the Society's stance, fresh research and innovation are not expected, and are no doubt unwanted. My discovery that the Glasgow fracas took place on a Sunday was not only something that told against the Watch Tower Society of that era; I had independently ascertained a piece of information that was not previously in the literature. It could not be backed up by a written source as such, but was a correct inference based on the available evidence. Drawing conclusions that are independent of the organisation is not something that is expected of the Society's own researchers.

It is also in the nature of the Watch Tower organisation that it encourages its members to read exclusively from its own writings. Witnesses are not totally unamenable to studying other faiths, but they should do so through the Society's own literature, one item of which – *Mankind's Search for God* – provides an overview of various world religions, and a number of *Watchtower* articles have sought to promote one's understanding of these faiths. However, the purpose is not to advance members' knowledge, but rather to enable them to converse about their own faith with various types of householder, who may well espouse a faith other than mainstream Christianity. It is therefore understandable that, presented with an outsider account, they are unaware of its purpose, and the protocols involved in its creation. Members should work to bring in the new kingdom, rather than study ideas that are opposed to Jehovah.

In sum, it may be useful to highlight the differences between the expectations of the "insider" Jehovah's Witnesses, and the "outsider" academic scholar. The scholar seeks to be critical, whereas the Witness will value faith maintenance and the provision of "spiritual food" for its members. This involves the aim of achieving consensus, in contrast with academic study, which thrives on diversity, debate and controversy, in competing hypotheses are championed by known exponents and are essential to the flourishing of scholarship. Researching Jehovah's Witnesses serves to highlight an important tension between how Watch Tower researchers approach their subject matter and how the outsider academic treats it. The policy of unattributed authorship entails that Watch Tower authors can never put forward their own positions, but must only write on behalf of the Society. This largely inhibits them from entering the realms of academia, and it presents serious difficulties for the scholarly outsider who might wish to contemplate any kind of collaborative venture. The different approaches of the insider and the outsider reflect their different goals:

the Jehovah's Witnesses seeks everlasting life, in contrast with the researcher, who has embarked on a quest which can never end with the unassailable belief that one has arrived at "the truth".

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