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Final Draft Chapter 1: How do Religious and Other Ideological Minorities Respond to Uncertainties?

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Abstract

There are many competing and complementary applications of ideas of uncertainty and in this chapter we outline these as well as showing how the key themes arising across the chapters interlink and provide a picture of the impacts of uncertainty on fringe ideological movements. The chapter compares and contrasts themes from the chapters focusing on religious groups with those on secular groups, demonstrating both the similarities in issues and responses as well as what can be seen to be unique about religious responses to uncertainty. It also highlights how uncertainty can be variously conceived, both in the theoretical study and experience of these groups, in the shape of external threats, such as legal pressures, and internal change, such as theological innovation, or the death of a founder. Whilst each of the chapters that follow will stand on their own merits, this chapter both guides the reader through how they contribute to a cohesive whole, whilst also serving as an introductory guide to the problem of uncertainty as an everyday experience for individuals and groups, with a particular focus on minority religions.

Introduction

The release of the poisonous nerve agent, sarin, on the Tokyo subway in March 1995 brought the Japanese new religion, Aum Shinrikyo, to global attention.¹ This was the first known use by a non-state actor of a weapon of mass destruction. The incident led to a lengthy police investigation in Japan itself, an examination by law enforcement agencies elsewhere of how Aum had been able to acquire, develop and use a chemical weapon, and to extensive academic research on how and why Aum had progressed from being a peaceful yoga group in the mid-1980s to a terrorist millennial movement eleven years on. As later became clear, the subway incident turned out to have been the latest in a series of violent acts, beginning with member beatings and the murder of an internal critic, and progressing to the production of biological weapons, the purchase of military hardware, an attempt to acquire the Ebola virus, and the successful manufacture and release of sarin gas.

¹ This account of Aum Shinrikyo is based on a case study by Knott et al (2014), supplemented with information from Reader (2000). See also Baffelli, in this volume.

Aum was one of a number of new Japanese religious movements operating in a competitive religious market in which charismatic leadership, media interest, and apocalyptic teachings were the norm rather than the exception. With Asahara Shoko as its founder and theocratic leader, it had a centralised hierarchical structure based on spiritual accomplishment and, in the early 1990s, a predominantly young, well-educated membership of about 10,000. However, by that time, Asahara's lectures and writings, which had once been optimistic about the group's potential for mass membership and universal salvation, were becoming steadily more pessimistic, world-rejecting, and apocalyptic. His leadership was increasingly fragile, as the goals he had set for the group proved impossible to meet. Failure to expand the movement as planned, public rejection at the 1990 Japanese parliamentary election, and negative media attention, added to mounting hostility to the world at large, and led to increasing feelings of paranoia and perceptions of persecution. Aum's inner core of members had not only renounced their families and isolated themselves from wider society, they were practising extreme asceticism, displaying unswerving commitment to Asahara, and embracing his vision of an imminent cosmic battle between Aum and the forces of evil.

In the context of these structural, social and ideological conditions, only a minor catalyst was needed to trigger a major act of violence. Asahara and his senior members, on becoming aware of an impending police raid and, perhaps in the hope of averting it, made the decision to attack the Tokyo subway, killing thirteen and injuring thousands.

As is often the case for those who decide to join, remain in or defect from religious and other ideological movements, personal uncertainties may be a driving factor. And, within established groups, external and internal conditions and events may create uncertainty for individual members and leaders which may then have significant personal and collective consequences, and even – as in the case of Aum – wider public ramifications. Scholarly accounts of the rise and fall of Aum Shinrikyo and its path to apocalyptic violence have attested to the various ways in which uncertainties affected the beliefs, feelings and actions of individuals and the group as a whole.

What do we mean by uncertainty and minority religions?

Contributors to this volume first came together as participants in a seminar and book symposium in February 2015. These events had been jointly organised by INFORM, the Information Network on Religious Movements, and a team at Lancaster University researching the role of ideologies, beliefs and commitments in decision-making and the move to violence, as part of the 'Global Uncertainties Programme' (funded by the UK Research Councils). Set up to examine the causes of insecurity and

the prediction, prevention and management of security risks and threats, the Programme focused on major areas such as terrorism, organised crime, threats to national infrastructure, natural disasters, and their associated social and cultural drivers and consequences. Although uncertainty was never formally defined, the list of issues to be investigated reflected a view current at the time, that societies, nation states, global institutions and the environment faced unprecedented and unpredictable threats to their order and stability. In the wake of 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, climate change and global migration, individuals were faced with what Zygmunt Bauman (2007) had referred to as ‘endemic uncertainty’, a time of volatility, fear, fragmentation and change, requiring ceaseless adaptability, mobility and creativity from citizens.

A discussion of the scope and meaning of our key concept would be incomplete without mentioning ‘certainty’, a word which simultaneously refers to a quality, a conviction and an event or fact. It is the quality or state of surety, of being reliably true; it is the conviction that something is assuredly the case; and is something that in all probability is going to happen. ‘Uncertainty’ reverses all that assurance, reliability, conviction and probability, and replaces them with instability, ambivalence, unpredictability and the unknown. In this book, we use the terms ‘uncertain’, ‘uncertainty’ and ‘uncertainties’ to refer (a) to situations, contexts and events in which the circumstances and outcomes are unclear, cannot be fully known, or are disputed, and (b) to individuals’ cognitive, affective and practical experiences, feelings and behaviours in the face of the unknown.

Later in the chapter, we will discuss the uncertainties experienced by religious and other ideological minorities and develop a model of their responses to them. In doing so we will draw on other relevant attempts at categorisation. Both Wessinger (2000a) and Walliss (2004) offer models for distinguishing between millennial groups (those that hope for imminent salvation in the face of worldly suffering) and the factors that inform their beliefs and, in some cases violent, actions. We will return to these below. By contrast, Tannert et al (2007: 893-894), in their work on the ethics of research and decision-making, offer a taxonomy of uncertainty. They distinguish between objective and subjective types of uncertainty, further sub-dividing the former into epistemological and ontological uncertainties, and the latter into moral and rule uncertainties. Each of these sub-types, they write, ‘describes a particular type of mismatch between the knowledge required and the knowledge available for rational decision-making’ (Tannert et al 2007: 893). Their taxonomy is useful in showing how uncertainty can be further sub-divided, although, as will become evident, other authors and contributors to the book have their own ways of doing so.

In their accounts of how groups and the individuals within them have acted, thought and felt as a consequence of uncertainty, these authors and those writing for this volume have brought other terms into play. They have used concepts relating to structural issues, such as ‘instability’ and

‘unpredictability’; and to others relating to existential and physical conditions, such as ‘insecurity’, ‘precarity’, ‘volatility’ and ‘fragility’. With reference to decision-making, ‘risk’ and ‘riskiness’ make an appearance, with synonyms for uncertainty such as ‘ambivalence’, ‘doubt’ and ‘dilemma’ also employed. On the affective side, uncertainty is often bound up with, and thus hard to differentiate from, feelings such as fear, confusion and anxiety. ‘Dissonance’ is used by several authors, drawing on Leon Festinger’s (1957) concept of ‘cognitive dissonance’, the psychological stress experienced by someone who attempts to hold together inconsistent or contradictory beliefs or views. In this sense, dissonance may be both a manifestation of the experience of uncertainty as well as a cause of further doubt. In some cases, authors have referred to ‘failure’, to the breakdown or fragmentation of a group, its inability to achieve its goals or expectations, the demise of a leader, or the non-fulfilment of prophecy. On the one hand, such failures are likely to have been brought about by uncertainty; on the other, they then generate further uncertainties in the group that lead to other unforeseen consequences.

In the book’s title, we refer to ‘minority religions’, with due deference to the title of the Inform book series in which this volume appears. However, a quick scan of the contents page will reveal the presence of apparently non-religious groups alongside religious ones. We have taken the view that religious and non-religious ideological minorities have more in common than not. Like Wessinger (2000b: 7-8), whose edited volume on millennialism includes revolutionary political movements as well as avowedly religious ones, we assert that valuable comparisons can be made between different types of groups which nevertheless display a commitment to a mission or ultimate concern. They all hold deeply-embedded, non-negotiable beliefs, ideals and values (Francis 2011, Knott 2013). They ascribe objects, events, places and sources of knowledge or tradition with sacred status, though their understanding of the sacred will depend on their own ideological context (for example, of nationalism, secularism, Buddhism, environmentalism or Islam). They experience and respond to uncertainties, and find solutions to them.

Following the precedent set by Inform and by earlier volumes in its book series, in this collection we have included chapters by scholars with current or prior personal experience of minority religions as well as those who research them as informed outsiders. Martin Weightman, Francis Stewart and Angela Burt have reflected insider knowledge and insights on Scientology, Straight Edge Punk and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in their contributions.

In the remainder of this introduction, with reference to the sociological and psychological literature and to the findings offered by the book’s contributors, we will answer the following overarching question: What happens when individuals and groups face uncertainties, and how do they go about resolving them? We will give due consideration to individuals who join religious and other

ideological groups and to the groups themselves. With reference to a range of historical and contemporary cases, we will address a series of subsidiary questions.

- Are individuals whose circumstances are uncertain, who experience doubts or feel anxious about their identities or place in the world, attracted to religious or other ideological groups, and if so what kinds of groups attract them?
- What happens when religious and other ideological groups are confronted by uncertainties, whether external or internal? What is the nature of those uncertainties? How do groups and their members respond?
- What types of solutions do they come up with? Is there a relationship between the type of uncertainty faced and the solutions sought?

In the following pages we make the case for using the frame of uncertainty for an analysis of religious and other ideological minorities and the decisions, thoughts, feelings and actions of their leaders and members. Although it is impossible for us to treat these issues with the time and space they deserve, we make a start by mapping the relevant terrain. In the next section we discuss several areas in sociology and social psychology in which religion, meaning-making and extremism have been discussed in relation to certainty and uncertainty, before turning to the contents of the book and the contribution of its authors.

Uncertainty and religion: the literature

As Kim Knibbe (2014: 538) notes in an article on certainty and uncertainty in contemporary spirituality and Catholicism, ‘religion is popularly seen as the site par excellence where people look for certainties and solutions, even where none seem possible’.

In the sociology of religion, religion is often interpreted as a reaction to social and cultural change: whether it is a fundamentalist type of religion, where certainty and authority are, at least ostensibly, located in ancient texts that provide a defence against modernity and globalization [...] or a ‘subjectified’ religion, where truth is anchored in personal experiences of whatever is considered to be sacred [...] Both are interpreted as strategies for re-creating a basis of religious knowledge and authority and dealing with uncertainty. (Knibbe 2014: 538)

Knibbe (2014; cf. Claverie & Fedele 2014) goes on to counter such claims in a comparative study of a spiritualist group and liberal Catholic pastoral centre in the Netherlands. Her critical point is apposite, however. Religion is more often than not taken to be a site of refuge from personal and collective uncertainties, a haven apart from society’s increasing fragmentation and unpredictability.

However, seen from the perspective of some religious insiders, what religions and spiritualities may offer is not so much certainty in and of itself as the opportunity to make sense of uncertainty and to learn to live with it. As Knibbe (2014: 547) concluded in her Dutch study, spiritualists and liberal Catholics were primarily concerned to understand and work with the boundary between what could be known and controlled and what could not. The former, however, veered more towards the need for certainty than the latter, through an active interest in obtaining scientific evidence of ‘the other side’.

The search for identity and meaning has been seen by sociologists and psychologists as a period during which individuals grapple with a range of uncertainties in their personal lives and social worlds. The flight to political or religious stability, certainty or resolution may, for some, form part of this quest. We will consider this below, in relation to conversion to Islam. Taking a step back, it is important first to situate the spiritual and ideological quest in the broader theoretical context of social research on uncertainty.

The German scholar, Monica Wohlrab-Sahr (1992, 1993), placed the concept of *Biographische Unsicherheit* or biographical uncertainty on the sociological agenda in the early 1990s, giving it a new twist in the context of reflexive modernity (Beck 1992). Deinstitutionalization, she suggested, had contributed to the individualizing of biographies, placing the onus on individuals to make sense of a life-course which may no longer go according to plan. Zinn (2004) then explored this further in an examination of the drive for certainty and the expectations and action strategies adopted in pursuit of it. Focusing on health, risk and the life-course, he distinguished between ‘certainty constructions’ and the ‘protective actions’ undertaken in response to them (Zinn 2004: 202-203). In research on young people entering an increasingly uncertain labour market, Reiter (2010: 2) then turned from the life-course as a whole to transitions within it: ‘Transitions are (extended) moments of biographical change where individuals within certain biographical, social and material situations establish expectations on the basis of their experiences and other forms of knowledge available to them.’ Uncertainties, he suggested, are generated when such expectations are confounded, especially in times of rapid change or upheaval such as the financial crisis. In an empirically-grounded model of biographical uncertainty, he (2010: 12-13) distinguished three dimensions: the uncertainty of knowledge; the uncertainty of outcomes; and recognition uncertainty (assessing one’s biographical actions relationally, on the basis of recognised norms). He concluded that ‘the observable core of biographical uncertainty consists of the negotiation of biographical action and

projection by meaningfully linking experience (PAST) to expectations (FUTURE) [...] within a changeable biographical situation (TRANSITION)'.²

Key to Reiter's (2010) understanding of biographical uncertainty is the notion of a 'biographical time perspective', that sense of time progression that individuals draw on as they consider past, present and future, and that leads them to deploy concepts of biographical cause and effect. In research on conversion to Islam, scholars have drawn attention to converts' narration of past experiences, present expectations and future hopes. Reference is often made to biographical crises of one kind or another, in relation to drug dependency, family break-up, professional insecurity, and deaths of friends and family members (e.g. Suleiman 2015, van Nieuwkerk 2012, Wohlrab-Sahr 1999, 2006).

Wohlrab-Sahr (2006: 80) builds on her earlier work in arguing for the importance of biographical background for an understanding of 'conversion as a change of worldview and life-orientation'. In a study of Western women who convert to Islam, she offers a tripartite typology of the problem areas they face: gender and sexual relations; social mobility; and nationality and ethnicity (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006: 80-81). Conversion to Islam enables women to deal with the uncertainties arising from these issues, and helps them find solutions. For example, for those who experience personal devaluation in relation to issues of gender or sexuality, conversion offers new boundaries and modes of conduct, and thereby a potential revaluation of the self. Similarly, for those who struggle to make social, economic or professional progress, conversion to Islam may bring stabilization through an 'alternative career' and, for those experiencing 'precarious belonging', conversion may sweep away old affiliations and identities and offer connection to the global *umma* (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006: 81). Conversion, writes Wohlrab-Sahr (1999: 359) 'deals with a biographically relevant problem and presents a specific form of solution'.

In her study of young Muslim and Christian women in London who turn to Salafism, a conservative form of Islam, Anabel Inge (2017) discusses both the precipitating factors and the positive features that Salafism is thought to offer. She does not restrict her discussion to the biographical uncertainties arising from past personal experiences, however, but considers those faced during the transition process that relate to Islam itself, its internal divisions, theological teachings and cultural forms. As emerging adults in the process of going to university, making new friends and carving out new identities, the young women interviewed by Inge spoke of their confusion about different sects, sources of information, authority figures and rulings, and what was prohibited or permitted (Inge 2017: 62-99). It was difficult to know who could be trusted, they said, especially as their

² Author's own capitalization.

journey into Salafism led to an increasing gulf between new acquaintances and old friends and family. Commenting on their present experiences of what Salafism offered them (Inge 2017: 90-96), many young women referred positively to the benefits of a strong scriptural stance, an uncompromising approach, soteriological assurance, and clear guidance and purpose in life. They mentioned purity, truth, and authenticity. One ‘no longer felt lost’ (Inge 2016: 95); another stated, ‘the truth is so clear [...] – this is it’ (Inge 2017: 93). A third said she experienced ‘calmness’: now she had found the correct path, she no longer felt confused (Inge 2017: 95).

Following Wohlrab-Sahr (1999), we might say that, for these women, accepting Salafism had solved the biographical problems of ideological confusion and sectarian indeterminacy. They were not limited by the solace of present certainties, however, but looked forward to the promise of the future: ‘I just wanna get to *janna*, I just wanna get to paradise’ (Inge 2017: 98): ‘the best thing about *Salafiyya* is knowing that the way I’m trying to practise Islam isn’t going [to be] in vain.’ (Inge 2017: 94) Converts to Salafism also found uncertainties about mortality and immortality addressed.

Whilst in the sociology of religion it is generally uncertainties arising from social change that are thought to lead people to take refuge in the certainty and authority of religion, the dominant position in social psychology is that individuals turn to religion to reduce personal uncertainty. In line with this, researchers have focused in particular on uncertainty and religious zeal, paths to moral certainty, ideology and the need for cognitive closure, religious leadership and uncertainty reduction, and religious groups and uncertainty-identity theory.

In a wide-ranging and authoritative article on religion and uncertainty, Hogg et al (2010: 76) draw on a variety of social psychological research evidence to support claims that ‘people turn to religion when times are uncertain or when they feel uncertain about themselves and their worldviews’, that ‘religious identification and adherence to a religious ideology help “believers” deal with stress, anxiety, and trauma’, and further that there is ‘neural evidence of an association between religiousness and reduced uncertainty’. Their specific contribution concerns religions as social groups that offer individuals the means of uncertainty reduction. The substance of their argument is that,

[...] religions have attributes that make them well suited to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty. According to uncertainty-identity theory, people are motivated to reduce feelings of uncertainty about or reflecting on self; and identification with groups, particularly highly entitative groups, is a very effective way to reduce uncertainty. All groups provide belief systems and normative prescriptions related to everyday life. However, religions also address the nature of existence, invoking sacred entities and

associated rituals and ceremonies. They are entitative groups that provide a moral compass and rules for living that pervade a person's life, making them particularly attractive in times of uncertainty. (Hogg et al 2010: 72)³

Hogg et al also consider the impact of 'strong' religious identification and extreme behaviours and beliefs, citing Dunn's (1998) argument that 'rigid ideological systems are particularly attractive in a postmodern world of moral and behavioral relativities and "limitless" choice' (Hogg et al 2010: 77). They do not rely on the research of others, however; for the link between uncertainty, religion and extremism, they cite experiments by Hogg and associates in which 'participants showed greater support for and identification with the radical group under elevated uncertainty, and endorsed more extreme group behaviors' (Hogg et al 2010: 78). They acknowledge that all groups may be prone to extremism when faced with increased uncertainty, but suggest that religious groups may be more so because their structure and 'normative and ideological reach' provide them with the tools to deal effectively with the uncertainties they face (Hogg et al 2010: 79).

The relationship between extremism and the psychology of uncertainty is addressed explicitly in a volume edited by Hogg & Blaylock (2012a). In their introduction, the editors ask whether 'uncertainty might psychologically cause extremism' (Hogg & Blaylock 2012b: xxv). Finding that it can, they stipulate the need for a better understanding of the types of uncertainty involved, the different forms of extremism and the psychological process that links the two. A useful distinction is made between 'the cold-cognitive epistemic dimension' of uncertainty, associated with meaning making, planning and prediction, and 'the hot-cognitive affective dimension' involving anxieties about self-identity and the future (Hogg & Blaylock 2012b: xxiii), although it is not yet clear to the authors which contributes most in terms of motivation.

The social psychologists who contribute to *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (Hogg & Blaylock 2012a) draw a range of interconnected conclusions from their research. Although we do not have the space to discuss them in depth or engage with them critically, there is some value in summarising their views: goal frustration and uncertainty lead to religious zeal (McGregor et al 2012); identity uncertainty leads to extremism (Hogg 2012); the need for cognitive closure contributes to 'group centrism' and is linked to personality traits that lead to extremist views (Kruglanski and Orehek 2012); extremist ideological systems reduce uncertainty and leaders play a key role (Hogg 2012); leaders use group uncertainty to consolidate their control (Seyranian 2012); moral certainty contributes to violent extremist acts in which victims are removed from moral consideration (Giner-Sorolla et al 2012); and reducing uncertainty helps prevent group violence

³ By 'entitativity', Hogg (2012: 23) means those properties of a group which make it 'groupy': 'resting on clear boundaries, internal homogeneity, social interaction, clear internal structure, common goals, and common fate'.

(Staub 2012). Drawing the volume to a close, Staub (2012: 277) concludes that ‘it is reducing uncertainty and fulfilling basic needs by constructive means, such as effectively addressing difficult life conditions and group conflict, constructive ideologies, and membership in constructive groups, that help prevent group violence’.

Sociologists of religion have also deliberated on the link between religious extremism and uncertainty, especially in relation to minority movements and the move to violence. Following a series of violent events involving new religious movements in the 1990s, scholars asked what led groups such as the Branch Davidians, the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven’s Gate to resort either to collective suicide or to acts of violence against outsiders. As well as offering detailed case studies (e.g. Lifton 2000, Mayer 1996, Tabor & Gallagher 1995, Zeller 2014), some compared cases or developed frameworks and typologies to identify and distinguish between precipitating factors or ideological types (e.g. Bromley & Melton 2002, Walliss 2004, Wessinger 2000a). Historical cases – including the Mormons, Nazism and the People’s Temple – were also considered, both as precedents and as comparative examples (Hunt 2001, Wessinger 2000b).

It is important to situate ‘uncertainty’ in the sociological worldview of those scholars who discussed such cases, given that they exploited alternative concepts to frame or focus their research: some utilised ideological perspectives such as apocalypticism or millenarianism, others used political concepts such as persecution or conspiracy, or explanatory terms associated with modernity, such as fragmentation or alienation. Returning to the case of Aum Shinrikyo, whilst scholars have clearly favoured their own analytical frameworks, we suggest that using the framework of uncertainty/certainty can help illuminate how both individual members and the group as a whole interpreted and sought to cope with internal and external challenges.

Aum scholars (e.g. Lifton 2000, Reader 2000, Shimazono 1995) have diagnosed the push factors that drove young, well-educated seekers to join as dissatisfaction with the materialism and values of Japanese society, doubts about scientific rationalism, and alienation from a highly competitive education system and working environment. Simultaneously, they have noted the social and spiritual certainties that drew followers to Aum: strong leadership, a disciplined path, a clear message of salvation and ‘solace in the face of the final war which, it was prophesied, would engulf the world’ (Reader 2000: 103). These authors have also referred to the volatility and increasing instability of Asahara and his leadership, from 1988 onwards. Reader (2000: 184), in particular, has used the concept of failure, to signal that the group’s expectations – of growth, legal status and political power – were not being met. He and others have described how perceptions of persecution and tensions inside Aum ‘grew virtually to breaking point’ (Reader 2000), with the term

‘Armageddon’ repeatedly used to convey the sense of emergency experienced within the group (Francis 2011, Shimazono 1995).

Within a framework of millennialism, millenarianism or apocalypticism, other authors have noted similar factors regarding the external uncertainties and internal fragmentation and doubt experienced by members of minority religions (and have often narrated these in similar ways). Some have focused on the significance of external factors as the drivers of paranoia, a sense of persecution and extreme actions in a fragile group (Bromley & Melton 2002, Walliss 2004, Wessinger 2000a). Mayer (2001: 366), however, placed more stress on internal dissent and protest as potential triggers for violence, suggesting that the very ‘structure of plausibility’ might be called into question once members began to have doubts about the beliefs or activities of their leader or other members.

Group responses to internal and external uncertainties are reflected in the models and typologies developed by scholars for analysing millennial movements. Wessinger (2000a; 2000b), for example, distinguishes between progressive and catastrophic millennialism to reflect differences in beliefs about how the ‘millennial kingdom is expected to be accomplished’ (2000b: 8), with catastrophic millennialism focused around a ‘dramatic denouement’ (Bromley and Melton 2002: 4) that will destroy the world and allow the elect to be saved. Wessinger (2000a: 17-24, 2000b: 3-39) identifies three group types according to the nature of their engagement with violence.

‘Revolutionary millennial movements’, both political and religious, believe that violence is justified as a response to persecution and as a means to liberation and the hastening of right government and an ideal society. ‘Assaulted millennial groups’ are marked out by the fact that it is external agents that initiate the cycle of violence (though they share many of the same features as the other types in terms of their convictions, sense of persecution, rejection of the current order and preparation for conflict). The third type – which includes Aum and most of the major cases mentioned earlier – is ‘fragile millennial groups’, noted for acting violently in response to external opposition, internal failings and tensions, or both. They display chaotic millennialist beliefs, are radically dualistic and prone to conspiratorial thinking; they exercise a growing inwardness and a high degree of internal control. It is in this last group that the impact of external and internal uncertainties seems to be most marked.

An alternative framework for understanding the ‘apocalyptic trajectories’ pursued by religious minorities which turn violent is provided by Walliss (2004: 231-232). Focusing specifically on violent groups with apocalyptic beliefs and a theology of the End Times, he identifies exogenous and endogenous precipitating factors, mapping these in terms of (a) the actions of cultural opponents, (b) challenges to the leader’s authority and charisma, and (c) internal challenges to the

millennial goal (e.g. defection and dissent leading to an inability to fulfil the group's ambitions). Of the six groups examined by Walliss (2004: 242-243), four 'have been made fragile by either a combination of internal pressures and external opposition [...] or by internal factors alone'.

Walliss (2004: 245) draws attention to an important point, that 'real violence [...] can result from imagined opposition and perceived persecution' as much as from actual external pressures. This is critical for understanding how uncertainties, especially those arising from the outside world, impact on a group's identity, beliefs and actions. Uncertainties are experienced and felt in the minds and bodies of individuals; they then thrive in the social and cultural life of the collective. Groups project uncertainties – in the form of conspiracies, dualistic oppositions, and persecution – onto outsiders and their intentions.

Wessinger's typology is backward-looking, whereas Walliss's has more of a future orientation. Whilst it is only possible to assign a group to one of Wessinger's three types *after* violence has been triggered (either by the group itself or by its opponents); the focus on precipitating factors in Walliss's typology has some potential for identifying warning signs in real time. As we will see below, the contributors to this volume, whilst identifying similar factors, go beyond the identification of causes to examining how individuals and groups respond to the uncertainties they face and develop relevant solutions.

Interpreting minority religions and their problems, responses and solutions through the frame of uncertainty

In the invitation to contribute to this volume and the INFORM seminar and book symposium which preceded it, we asked what happens when groups lose control of their own destiny, noting that uncertainty can lead to change in the mission and even in the teachings of religious and other ideological groups. We drew attention to the variety of uncertainties faced by groups, some external, for example legal challenges to religious status; some ideological, such as an imminent apocalyptic event; and some internal, such as the defection of members or challenges to leadership. In order to gain an understanding of the variety of causes and responses to uncertainty we invited contributors to consider historical as well as contemporary, and non-religious as well as religious cases, and where appropriate to compare or contrast them. We were interested in how groups resolved uncertainties, and in what strategies or innovations they adopted to stabilize the situation or reassert a collective sense of certainty or success. Were they adaptable or resilient in the face of change? Did uncertainties lead to expulsions, schism, acts of violence, or to world-rejection? Or did groups respond by reforming, engaging with outsiders or reinterpreting events?

Case studies and issues

Of the minorities examined in this volume, the majority are religious or spiritual, though several are ideological subcultures operating in volatile political contexts, including British Fascists in the Second World War in Britain (Macklin), the punk movement in the Northern Ireland troubles (Stewart), and MOVE – an environmental movement – in 1980s Philadelphia (Fiscella). Ardovini examines the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group that also operated as a political organisation. Beliefs, values, commitments and emotions are no less evident in the responses of these groups to uncertainty than in the religious cases. The religious minorities treated here span a range of religious traditions (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam) as well as old and new spiritual formations such as esotericism, New Age, and organised new religious movements (including Scientology, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness or ISKCON, and Japanese new religions). A network of religious organisations, the Inter Faith Network (IFN) for the UK is also treated (van Twist). The chapters deal with a variety of contexts, from the UK and US, to Japan and Egypt, with others discussing global movements.

Whilst all the authors deal with twentieth and twenty-first century movements and issues, several focus explicitly on historical cases or change over time (Ardovini, Barrett, Macklin, Stewart, Weightman). As they suggest, responses to uncertainty at an early stage may differ to those at a later one, as political circumstances, public attitudes and a group's internal conditions change. Several authors discuss how particular religious minorities deal with profound internal challenges, such as the death of the founder (Burt on ISKCON) and dramatic doctrinal change (Barrett on the Worldwide Church of God and its various splinter groups). Others focus on those that have faced significant external problems, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Ardovini), which had to weather the ongoing storm of challenges to its legal status and from wider state repression, and Kofuku no kagaku, a Japanese new religion (Baffelli) that, like Aum Shinrikyo, had to cope with the failure of its various political, social and educational projects. The practical and policy responses of the Church of Scientology to its legal, charitable and media controversies are explored by Weightman, himself a member and previous Director of European Human Rights for the Church.

Several authors consider more than one group, with Newcombe examining the conflict within contemporary Tibetan Buddhism between Shugden activists and Dalai Lama supporters, Robertson comparing the use of conspiracy narratives as a prevention strategy by two new religious movements, and Fiscella contrasting the uncertainty diffusion strategies of a religious group (the Unitarian Universalist Association or UUA) with those of a state actor (the City of Philadelphia). Sieg considers how different esoteric minority religions respond to uncertainty and change, compares them with exoteric religions, and seeks to identify the conditions that lead a group to react

violently. Van Twist, focusing on a network founded to respond to the uncertainties of religious legitimacy in an age of increasing secularization and pluralization, examines the reaction of the IFN and its member bodies (local interfaith groups and religious organisations) to a new equality agenda and to challenges to its membership policy and criteria.

In the remainder of this final section, we will build on the conceptual and theoretical developments identified in the literature with evidence from the book's case studies. We will advance the sociology of uncertainty by examining how ideological minorities respond to external and internal challenges and, in many cases, find tailored solutions.

External and internal uncertainties faced by groups

A major area addressed in the chapters that follow is the nature and source of the external and internal uncertainties faced by religious and other ideological groups (rather than the types of uncertainty, though Newcombe notes existential challenges, Macklin, psychological uncertainty, and Robertson, epistemic seclusion; cf. Tannert et al 2007). This makes sense in the context of empirical case studies where specificity is more important than generalisation. What is clear though is that certain sources are evident in multiple case studies – something we can attribute to the pattern of public responses to new and minority religions more generally. These sources include the state (Ardovini, Fiscella), the legal and charity sectors (Weightman, van Twist), security and intelligence agencies (Fiscella, Macklin, Robertson, Stewart), the media (Baffelli, Weightman), churches (Weightman), politics and politicians (Ardovini, Baffelli, Stewart), other cognate groups (Barrett, Newcombe, van Twist), ex-members, families and anti-cult groups (Barrett, Stewart, Weightman), and even aliens (Robertson). Walliss (2004: 231) refers to such sources as a group's 'cultural opponents'.

Minority religions and other ideological groups often find themselves in opposition – ideologically, theologically, morally or socially – to public authorities and interest groups, and such opposition may well contribute to feelings of uncertainty, pressure, persecution and a loss of control of the group's future (Baffelli). Like Walliss (2004) and Reader (2000), Robertson, writing on conspiracy narratives, notes that what is important is how groups understand the threats and counter-agents working against them, not whether such threats or agents are a reality. Perceived persecution and a mounting sense of paranoia may be more important than actual attitudes or attacks, though the latter can also be deeply felt (e.g. the stigma of disloyalty experienced by British fascists, in Macklin). Sieg, however, in his chapter on esotericism, stresses that in the late-modern West, few esoteric groups experience significant opposition from society or construct narratives of such opposition.

The uncertainties they experience tend to be those that result from time and context, that is, the anomie and global uncertainties common to the age (cf. Bauman 2007).

Burt and Barrett, in particular, consider the internal uncertainties faced by groups. Burt comprehensively examines challenges and anxieties within ISKCON following the death of the founder and a subsequent period of leadership by senior figures (zonal gurus). She sets these within the context of the movement's 'foundations of certainty' (the legacy of tradition together with a modern managerial structure), showing that, although these foundations did not prevent problems arising, they did form the basis for members to bring about their eventual resolution. In Barrett's case, disagreements arose within the Worldwide Church of God following the death of the founder and the imposition of drastic doctrinal changes that more or less reversed the Church's theological position and challenged its 'structure of plausibility' (Mayer 2001: 366). These led members to break away and create new groups, generating a cycle of defection and re-affiliation.

These two cases expose the uncertainties that arise around leadership issues within minority religions, especially following the death of the founder. The authors also recognise that the instability caused by such a transition is dynamic: it shifts and changes over time as members of the group respond and seek a solution. As Reiter noted (2010: 13) of biographical uncertainty, people negotiate challenging transitions by linking their past experience to what they expect in future. As the cases of ISKCON and the Worldwide Church of God suggest, members drew on existing knowledge (e.g. from tradition, teachings, institutions) in order to establish expectations; they then sought to bring the future under control in line with their expected outcomes (e.g. through institutional reform, schism or defection).

Individual and group level responses to uncertainty

Many of those who have written about uncertainty have not only been interested in how individuals and groups experience it, but in how they respond to it (e.g. Hogg et al 2010, Hogg 2012, McGregor et al 2012, Walliss 2004, Wessinger 2000a), especially if their response involves extremism or violence. Reader (2000), Lifton (2000) and others dissected how, over a period of time, antipathy towards cultural opponents and the failure of its objectives led Aum Shinrikyo into a cycle of paranoia, world-rejection, severe asceticism and violence. As we will see, however, groups do not always respond to uncertainties by adopting such strategies.

Although the case studies that follow do not prioritize individual actors, they nevertheless illustrate some of the affective, cognitive and behavioural responses of individuals to uncertainty. For example, in his historical analysis of British Fascism, Macklin argues that 'the psychological impact of internment is thus only readily comprehensible if one takes seriously the emotional aspects of the

experience for fascist activists through which they sought to interpret, mitigate and overcome’ the impact of uncertainty. He describes the effect on the mental health of internees, noting complaints of disorientation, isolation and powerlessness. Others felt frustrated or defiant. He also notes that, whilst many dissociated themselves from the British Union of Fascists, others ‘intensified their beliefs, a process accompanied by a sense of spiritual cleansing or personal rebirth of the activist himself’.

Cognitive responses to uncertainty are discussed by Robertson who, drawing on examples of New Age writers, illustrates how conspiracy narratives are developed as a means of explaining the failure of prophecy: ‘For some, the New Age is still imminent, but held at bay by a malevolent hidden hand.’ Whilst these New Agers deal with uncertainty through narrative innovation, the Tibetan Buddhists in Newcombe’s account cope with it by hardening their attitudes, making claims and counter-claims, and participating in rhetorical amplification. Supporters and detractors of Shugden materialize their opposing beliefs in public protest and at times material violence.

Other forms of individual behavioural reaction to uncertainty include negative responses such as disengagement from spiritual practice or defection. Barrett, for example, notes that ex-members of the Worldwide Church of God developed a pattern of disaffiliation: once they had rebelled against Church authorities once, they were less concerned about doing so a second time. Positive responses are also noted, such as the use of ritual or magic to regain control and stabilize the situation (Burt, Sieg), or desistance from drugs and alcohol, and participation in community and social activism (Stewart) in order to find meaning through personal commitment and shared values.

It is group level responses to uncertainty that feature most prominently in the book’s case studies. In the following grid we have clustered these by responses to internal or external uncertainties and the open or closed nature of a group’s response.

	Responses to internal uncertainties	Responses to external uncertainties
Open responses that are outward facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnosis of problems • Self-correction (by group) • Flexible and innovative approaches to goals • Reformist impulses • Dealing with existential challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public acceptance of problems • Focus on external communications • Seeking to work with others • Development of external facing bodies • Representation on external organisations

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticism of leaders by members • Counselling of members • Open defections • Fission/schism <p style="text-align: right;">OI</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in dialogue • Inviting outsiders in (e.g. media, parents) • Community and social activism • Legal registration/charitable status <p style="text-align: right;">OE</p>
Closed responses that are inward facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group denial • Failure to respond or change • Inflexible approach to goals • Authoritarian crackdown • Intensification of ascetic practices • Violence within the group • Failure to deal with trauma of members • Development of inner circle • Targeting of critical members • Secrecy • Hidden defections <p style="text-align: right;">CI</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly dualistic rhetoric • Development of conspiracy narratives • Issuing of public threats • Eventual cessation of communications • Withdrawing from external bodies • Cutting links with outsiders (e.g. family members) • Turning inward; increasing world-rejection • Exclusionary practices • Breaking the law • Weapons stock-piling • Violence against outsiders <p style="text-align: right;">CE</p>

Table 1: Open and closed responses by minority religions and other ideological groups to internal and external uncertainties

The four cells in the table represent open responses to internal uncertainties (OI), open responses to external uncertainties (OE), closed responses to external uncertainties (CE) and closed responses to internal uncertainties (CI). We will illustrate each of these with reference to the responses of one or more of the groups featured in the book.

Earlier, we drew attention to Burt’s and Barrett’s studies of ISKCON and the Worldwide Church of God which featured internal uncertainties. These new religious movements exemplify the first of

these clusters (OI, top left quadrant), because they offer open responses to internal problems (see also Macklin, and Fiscella on the UUA). In the case of ISKCON, Burt explains a responsive process of ‘self-correction’ in which the organisation was able to draw on its traditions and well-established management structure to move forward after the death of the founder. Although this process was contested, leaders did take responsibility and eventually listened to members who successfully organised themselves and pressed for change. Although a minority left, this was not on the scale experienced over several decades by the Worldwide Church of God. Barrett records that ministers and members responded to enforced doctrinal changes, brought in by the new leader after the death of the founder, by leaving and setting up alternative churches which maintained the old teachings rather than adopting the new ones. Defection and schism became the accepted response to doctrinal differences.

Moving now to open responses to external uncertainties (OE, top right quadrant), Van Twist, writing on the UK’s Inter Faith Network (IFN), and Stewart, on the punk movement, provide the clearest examples (but see also Ardovini, Baffelli). With the ear of Government and support from mainstream religious denominations in the UK, the IFN was, for several decades, the voice of authority on issues of religious diversity and interfaith engagement. However, in a context of political and legal change, flexibility was required as equality issues came to the fore, new religious voices demanded a hearing, and controversies occurred over issues of inclusion and representation. The IFN had to find ways to tackle membership issues and respond to allegations of extremism. Allowing in new member bodies and refreshing the Trustee Board helped to conciliate existing members, whilst embracing rather than alienating critics.

Turning now to a very different example from the social and political periphery rather than centre of UK public life, Straight Edge was a punk response to the political and social uncertainties experienced by young people growing up in Northern Ireland in the 1980s. As Stewart suggests, although it was marked by ‘hardcore’ music and extreme beliefs and identities, and could hardly be said to represent the ideological mainstream, it nevertheless established itself as ‘a direct challenge to the bitter sectarian division and lack of choice within the country’. It responded with a commitment to communal engagement and social change rather than participation in violent action. Here was an outwardly extreme movement that sought change through an alternative, critical politics of music and activism rather than via the paramilitary route adopted by others.

In terms of closed responses to internal and external uncertainties (CI, bottom left quadrant, and CE, bottom right quadrant), Sieg and Baffelli illustrate these through cross comparisons. Sieg distinguishes between esoteric groups on the basis to whether or not they respond with violence, and whether that violence is internal or external. Most esoteric groups which exhibit moral dualism

resist the path of external violence (CE), unless they also adhere to eschatological or apocalyptic dualism. He cites Scientology as an example of the former, though he suggests that it has used what he refers to as ‘personal or organisational violence’ internally (CI); the Church of the Latter-day Saints is offered as an example of a group that at one stage combined moral and eschatological dualism and resorted to external violence through armed resistance to perceived US federal government persecution (CE). Baffelli juxtaposes Kofuku no kagaku, a Japanese new religion which adopted a broadly open response to the external challenges it faced (OE), to Aum Shinrikyo, a group which responded by turning inwards and countenancing violence towards both insiders and outsiders (CI, CE). Closed responses to external uncertainties are also discussed by Robertson and Newcombe. We will return to their analyses in the final section below.

The case studies in this volume illustrate the importance of two other factors in assessing responses to uncertainty. One is change over time, and the other is the active role of cultural opponents (Walliss 2004). In terms of the former, studies by Weightman, Robertson and Seig of Scientology show that the group has responded to external uncertainties in different ways at different times, moving backwards and forwards between closed and open responses (CE, OE): the development of conspiracy narratives and a growing sense of persecution are examples of closed responses; the establishment of an external affairs department and the pursuit of legal legitimacy are examples of open responses.

Regarding the impact of cultural opponents on groups and their capacity to respond to uncertainty, Fiscella explores the interaction between MOVE and the City of Philadelphia which, following a series of losses (deaths of police officers and failure to prosecute MOVE), eventually led to the City’s violent intervention. Ardovini, who also tracks how the Muslim Brotherhood’s responses change over time, charts the role of the state in repressing the group and in withdrawing its legal status. As she makes clear, the responses of a group to such uncertainties do not occur in a vacuum. They are affected by public interactions and the actions and threats of others, whether by cognate groups (Barrett, Newcombe), the media and other cultural critics (Baffelli, Van Twist, Weightman), families (Stewart), external advisors (Burt), or the state (Ardovini, Fiscella).

Solutions to the problem of uncertainty

As our earlier review showed, sociologists and social psychologists have considered the impact of uncertainty on both individuals and groups, and the contributors to this book have added examples and further insights. Although at times there has been clear evidence from earlier research of a relationship between religion and the need for certainty (e.g. Hogg 2010; Inge 2017), other researchers have found that living with doubt and uncertainty, and understanding the limits of what

can be known and controlled, can be just as important (Claverie & Fedele 2014, Knibbe 2014). In this volume, although there are no cases as explicit as Knibbe's (2014) liberal Catholics, for whom embracing uncertainty had proved liberating, there were cases of religious or political actors individually or collectively addressing uncertainties with ritual (ISKCON), magic (esoteric practitioners), communal action (punks), mediation (Unitarian Universalist Association), or structural change (the Inter Faith Network). As Claverie and Fedele (2014: 490) stated, 'uncertainty and doubt are inherent in lived religion and play an important role in the ongoing process of construction of religious rituals and narratives.' Contributors to this volume have confirmed that.

The punks in Stewart's study are a prime example. By deliberately resisting the destinies expected of them – of addiction, sectarian politics or paramilitary activity – a small group forged an alternative path and made a conscious commitment to 'Straight Edge'. They responded to the familiar uncertainties of drug and alcohol abuse, communal hostilities and routine violence by claiming a marginal lifestyle: no drink, no drugs, no casual sex, in a context where these were the norm, and the pursuit of an alternative, authentic self in an environment of established sectarian identities. Like Islam for Wohlrab-Sahr's converts, Straight Edge culture was

[...] a means for the public dramatization of problems of social disintegration and distinction. But it also functions as a means of individual problem-solving, because it re-evaluates the former weak points in the biography, and replaces the old relations by a new, absolute commitment. (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999: 321)

As this case shows, the art of dealing successfully with uncertainties is to identify a fitting solution that works for the group and the individuals involved. But not all solutions are rational, that is, related to the problems or uncertainties they are designed to address (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006). Sometimes uncertainty responses are denials, blind alleys or simply off target. In these cases, the problems deriving from uncertainty may not be resolved.

Newcombe, for example, concludes that, for the two opposing Tibetan Buddhist groups in her study, socio-political accusations and protest are a distraction from their existential concerns: 'For both groups, their experience of Shugden and/or the Dalai Lama is central to their Buddhist faith and understanding of their place in the world.' Neither can afford to give up their position as to do so would endanger the very beliefs and rituals which anchor them in the present and future. They are trapped in a reciprocal cycle of ideological claims and counter-claims. Attempts at dialogue have been made, but, according to Newcombe, the two sides remain interlocked in a rhetorical struggle from which they cannot escape.

This example of ‘no solution’ can be juxtaposed by another in which rhetoric, or more properly narrative, becomes part of the solution. Building on Festinger et al’s (1956) fourfold analysis of how groups seek to reduce cognitive dissonance when prophecy fails, Robertson offers a fifth strategy, that of prevention. He suggests that groups deal with the uncertainties of epistemic seclusion by developing conspiracy narratives which explain how and why an expected event was prevented from happening, and by whom. An internal failure can then be turned outwards and blamed upon others. This offers an innovative solution to problems that might otherwise result in an internal leadership challenge, defections or a loss of group cohesion.

Finally we return to the case of Aum. In her analysis of the Japanese new religions, Aum Shinrikyo and Kofuku no kagaku, Baffelli (cf. Baffelli & Reader 2011) shows how the two reacted to a similar set of external circumstances with differing psychological and ideological responses and practical strategies. She compares how they explained their failures. Whilst Kofuku no Kagaku was able ‘to drop its aggressive millennialism and reorient itself into a more optimistic view of the world, Aum Shinrikyo became increasingly isolated and its apocalyptic prophecies even more dramatic’. The solution adopted by the former was to meet its political and educational failures with success, by setting achievable goals, being flexible, pursuing the ‘science of happiness’, and adjusting its rhetorical strategy to suit the situation. Aum’s approach to its public failures was very different.

As scholars have noted, uncertainty is often generated when goals are frustrated and expectations are not met. Instead of resetting its predictions, goals and expectations, Aum’s leader, Asahara, laid the blame for the group’s failures on outsiders. Rather than seeing external criticisms as temporary setbacks, he interpreted them as evidence of persecution. Aum turned inwards, and developed a theology that justified violence. Far from resolving its uncertainties, Aum’s trajectory led not only to violence and the use of a weapon of mass destruction, but also to the ultimate failure of the group and its mission.

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