Violence and New Religious Movements: The Relationship Between Cognitive Dissonance and Perceived Pressure

This article revisits the controversies sparked by two new religious movements (NRMs) in the run up to the millennium—the tragedies that unfolded in Jonestown and Tokyo—which have forever altered discussions on new religions and violence. This paper explores the impact of pressures both external and internal on The Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo and suggests two new points of focus: *perceived pressure* and *cognitive dissonance*. As time progressed, both movements experienced rejection from wider society, leading them to become increasingly world- rejecting (Wallis 1984) and causing dissonance between the teachings of their prophetic leaders and their uncomfortable reality. Actual external pressures such as persecution by social and governmental agencies, as well as the perception of external pressure (the feeling of rejection), strengthened the internal pressures of cognitive dissonance and ultimately to self-destructive violence in such groups. For decades scholars have investigated the impacts of endogenous and exogenous pressures on NRMs, and while this article focuses on events that occurred over twenty years ago, there is still room to explore the dynamic relationship between the perception of pressure and catastrophic violence.

Keywords: violence, cognitive dissonance, exogenous, endogenous, perceived pressure, eschatology, The Peoples Temple, Aum Shinrikyo

Introduction

This discussion explores the role of exogenous (external) and endogenous (internal) pressures on causing the violent demise of certain new religions—The Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo—and will argue that we should shift our focus to, in the first case, the *perception* of such pressures, and in the second, the experience of cognitive dissonance, amongst members of these movements. For both new religious movements dis- cussed here we will see that perceived external pressure, coupled with cognitive dissonance, are key contributors to the fatal denouement of the group. The decision to use as case studies events that occurred over twenty years ago stems from the assumption held by scholars such as Regina Schwartz (1997) and Hector Avalos (2013) amongst others that religion is inherently violent. The chosen movements have been heralded as exemplary of the suggestion that "fringe" movements harbour dangerously violent tendencies. This article challenges this argument and will explore how acts of violence committed by NRMs are potentiated by external factors, impending apocalypse, as well as individual belief, confusion, stress and anger, culminating in the perception of additional pressures that overwhelm the group, causing them to pursue violence as the only solution.

It is true that NRMs are often in tension with society and a limitation of this study is that it is of course difficult to draw lines, especially on the behalf of those group members now deceased, between real and imagined pressures experienced in this undeniable state of tension. An important contribution of the proposed category of perceived pressure is that it productively blurs the lines between endogenous and exogenous factors to show that the categories are not as clear cut as they have been portrayed in the past by scholars like Thomas Robbins (1997), Ian Reader (2000), Christopher Partridge (2008) and others. Considering how perceived pressure is a contributing factor in violent resolutions within NRMs provides a new perspective for well-researched case studies as well as for emerging and future examples.

Violence and Volatility

There are countless definitions of violence and ways in which it can be classified. For this discussion, a basic definition of violence as "intentionally harming another person(s), causing bodily injury or death" (Littman and Paluck 2015, 80) is extended to include harming oneself.

Significantly in the case studies discussed here, violence must also be understood collectively, as that which is carried out as part of and on behalf of the wider group. This occurs in two ways; when violence is inflicted upon other people, or when it is inflicted upon oneself (Hawdon and Chang 2014, 6). There are many forms of violence that are perpetuated in NRMs, but this article is concerned with the extreme type of violence—mass death—that reflected the eschatological and prophetic teachings of each group and resulted in their demise.

In previous scholarship, the relationship between religion, violence, and eschatology has often been explained by focusing on Abrahamic religions, as apocalyptic narratives are well represented in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Schwartz 1997). Particularly since 2001, focus has centred on the relationship between violence and Islam, as scholars such as Juergensmeyer (2003) and Wright (2009) suggest acts of violence are saturated in religious symbolism, imagery and language. Other explanations of religious violence suggest that it is a result of resource scarcity (Avalos 2011, 42) and scholars have looked at the connection between violence and fundamentalism (Armstrong 2000).

However, when focusing on violence and NRMs, this article is most influenced by the work of Christopher Partridge (2008) and Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (1995). Rather than highlighting singular causes, Partridge (2008, 206) emphasizes that there are "an enormous amount of variables to consider, which, together, determine volatility." One of those variables, I will argue, is perceived pressure. Drawing on such works, this paper uses the theory of cognitive dissonance coupled with perceived pressure to explain how this dangerous combination can result in the group turning to violence as the final solution. Although other "doomsday" NRMs could have been discussed here, such as Heaven's Gate and The Branch Davidians, it is not within the scope of this article to discuss all relevant groups, however the motivations of other such suicide groups could be explored using the same analytical framework in future studies. The selected cases of Jonestown and Aum Shinrikyo nonetheless uniquely demonstrate the catalytic influence perceived pressure can have on a community. Finally, it is important to emphasize that this article is not categorising new religious movements as especially or inherently prone to violence—indeed "history reminds us that many different religious groups have at one time or another sanctioned violence" (Richardson 2011, 36), but they provide discrete examples of religious groups operating on the margins of society, and so already in tension with the wider world which, along with their particular religious beliefs, primes them for a high degree of conflict.

Internal Conflicts and Cognitive Dissonance

The theory of "cognitive dissonance" as discussed by Leon Festinger in 1957 with relation to the experience of "failed prophecies" in new religious movements, is essential for understanding the unravelling of NRMs that result in violent ends. Cognitive dissonance emerges in humans when individuals recognize discrepancies between belief and actuality; the profound feeling of dissonance or confusion stemming from this misalignment of expectations and reality can be alarming, deeply distressing, and understandably lead to feelings of insecurity. Often such feelings encourage members to "actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance" (Festinger 1957, 3). The individual may want to overcome such dissonance and can try to resolve it either by changing their perception, changing their original belief, or changing their action. But, as Festinger explains "the magnitude of dissonance (and consonance) increases as the importance or value of the elements increases" (1957, 18). In other words, as the degree of dissonance rises, so does the pressure to reduce it (Harmon- Jones and Mills 2019).

In the case of millenarian religious groups centred on charismatic leaders, a failure in the prophecies of the groups' leader, and especially a failure in predicting the end of the world, can cause some members to abandon belief completely and leave the group. Cognitive

dissonance in apocalyptic NRMs inevitably brings eschatological tensions to the fore, requiring efforts to explain why prophecies have failed to come true and what this means for the continued success or failure of the group, their doctrine, and their salvation. The apocalyptic theme of such prophecies can be an essential component in the turn to suicide because it adds pressure to the group to perceive the world's end as imminent, thus changing their perception of violence as something necessary and legitimate. In such circumstances, without death, the end-times cannot become a reality and the prophecy will not be fulfilled. However, failed prophecy does not have to be the reason why violence erupts and some groups who manage to alleviate the pain caused by such dissonance are able to transform the failure into "an affirmation of faith" (Partridge 2008, 198).

To understand how cognitive dissonance relates to violence, we must assess how belief continues when an eschatological prophecy has failed to come true. Millenarian groups possess more of a chance of perceived failure because their claims are about imminent end-times. When groups view the world in a dichotomous way and distinguish between us and them, and good and evil, the millennial goal becomes their ultimate concern (Wessinger and Docherty 2000, 17). The risk of failure in prophesising the near-future date of a possible Armageddon, Festinger has argued, "leads to action to reduce it" (Festinger 1957, 18). Some people continue to pursue the belief in prophecy until they find a rational explanation for its apparent failure (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 1956). In some cases, if cognitive dissonance can be assuaged by turning to violence, this can lead to a rationalization of this means (Partridge 2008, 206). Violence may be rationalized because even if an individual is induced to commit a violent action that may be contrary to their own judgement, the individual will "change [their] opinion as to bring it into correspondence with what [they have] done or said" (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959, 209).

Acknowledging the relationship between cognitive dissonance and perceived pressure is helpful in understanding why some new religions utilize violence, including causing the deaths of members and non-members of the group. For example, if the end of the world is prophesied, but nothing happens, believers might reason that this is because they have been called to be agents of the end. The NRM now becomes the instrument of apocalypse, with death a necessity catalyst for ushering in a period of divine judgement and salvation. The argument posited here regarding the peculiar significance of perceived pressures applies particularly to apocalyptic new religions, each with similar millennial and prophetic beliefs. The additional presence of external pressures and, importantly for this article, *perceived* pressures—that time is running out before the government shuts down the group or world war three begins or Armageddon comes—heighten the sense that drastic measures must be taken to fulfil the group's purpose.

External Conflicts and Perceived Pressures

In Aum Shinrikyo and the Peoples Temple, the NRMs studied here, a series of mainly external circumstances or exogenous pressures exerted themselves on the groups and prophecies of their successes failed to materialize. These pressures were felt deeply, especially by their leaders, thus causing a paradigmatic shift in their teachings and direction to overcome the sense of dissonance experienced not just by themselves, but by their followers. Increasing cognitive dissonance amongst members could lead to disbelief and ultimately the implosion of the movement if people were to leave. Leaders like Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple and Shoko Asahara of Aum Shinrikyo can "play a crucial role, not only in leading the faithful through the confusing and frightening last days and ultimately through Armageddon, but also in relieving cognitive dis sonance and affirming the faith in the face of rejection" (Partridge 2008, 207). It is the argument of this paper that, in an effort to alleviate cognitive dissonance and bring about a final and successful fulfilment of their teachings, these leaders utilized catastrophic violence. While other violent measures, even the possibility of death by suicide,

may have been part of previous teachings or plans, it seems that the mounting sense of rejection and failure persuaded these leaders that extreme violence was the only solution.

The interaction between perceived pressures and millenarian eschatology could explain why violence occurs in some movements and cognitive dissonance allows us to understand why such eschatological beliefs continue following failure. Not all NRMs resort to violence, nor are they equally influenced by perceived pressure. Some groups may disband or change their prophecies, but for the Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo, as we will see, the perceived pressure became overwhelming and contributed to their turn to violence as the ultimate step in becoming "world- rejecting" (Wallis 1984). As shall be seen, the relationship between cognitive dissonance and violence is a productive one in the study of the following case studies of The Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo.

The Peoples Temple

The Peoples Temple was founded by James Warren Jones (1931–1978), better known as Jim Jones, in the 1950s in Indianapolis, United States (Moore 2011, 96). The context of 1950s America, against the background of the Civil Rights Movement, is central to the growth of the Peoples Temple as a new religion. The Peoples Temple offered an escape from the "heartless and unjust system of capitalism that existed in the United States" (Moore 2011, 95) by integrating communities of different race. Jones wanted to steer away from the discriminatory attitudes of Christianity and broader American society by styling himself as a revival minister with a new Christian message of racial harmony (Chidester 2003, 1). In essence, the very formation of the Peoples Temple was a response to the exogenous pressures of American society and a rejection of main- stream attitudes.

In the 1960s Jones prophesied an imminent nuclear disaster, temporarily taking his family to Brazil to escape, then moving with 80 members of his congregation to Redwood Valley, California (Chryssides 2001, 181). The Temple then had centres in San Francisco, Redwood Valley, and Los Angeles, and by the early 1970s, it is estimated The Peoples Temple membership total was an average of 20,000 people (Chidester 2003, 8). The group focused on welfare outreach and encouraged communal living (Moore 2011, 97). The success of The Peoples Temple can be accredited to the social divide in society, and the increasing number of deprived adults who were looking for ways to improve their disadvantaged status, escape from marginalization, or simply because they were in pursuit of a sense of belonging (Saliba 2003, 79). All of these factors influenced the growth of The Peoples Temple and added to its legitimacy as an established Christian denomination with a socialist bent. However, none of this would have been possible without the charismatic leader- ship of Jones (Moore 2011, 96).

Jones' charisma may have contributed to his volatile personality, acting as an internal pressure upon the stability of the group. It is understandable that people remained under his charismatic leadership, as Keith Ward (2006, 42) points out, "there is a sort of pseudo-goodness, in which hatred, the desire for power, and indifference to others are disguised as moral goods." Yet, as David Bromley and Gordon Melton (2002, 46) warn, it "is problematic to assert a direct causal relationship between charismatic leadership and violence," and charismatic leader- ship is, of course, not inherently dangerous, and exists in settings out-side of the religious. It cannot alone explain the catastrophic outcome that occurred in Jonestown, but as still an essential component.

Over the years, Jones became increasingly convinced that the outside world was an evil place, doomed for destruction, and wanted his followers to withdraw from it, which only increased scrutiny and negative allegations by media outlets (Reiterman and Jacobs 1982, 315). This encouraged his final decision to create the settlement of Jonestown in Guyana, South America, a supposed communitarian haven where they would be safe from nuclear calamity

and nefarious influences. However, Jones' concerns were not alleviated by moving to Guyana, rather his dystopian visions, dictatorial teachings, and erratic behaviour increased and became more worrying and volatile.

In Jonestown, Jones' leadership was tainted by a constant aura of paranoia about the outside world (Richardson 2011, 39). This paranoia, coupled with the way he repeatedly reminded his followers of impending doom, only added to his own fear of catastrophe. His health deteriorated, possibly as a result of addiction to amphetamines and prescription drugs, somewhat ironic since, according to survivor testimony, Jones moved the congregation from California to Guyana partly to "get away from all the drugs and alcohol" (quoted in Rannard and Cooper 2018). As his drug abuse escalated from legal over-the-counter medicines to major stimulants such as amphetamines and barbiturates like pentobarbital (Moore 2018), Jones became increasingly assured and vocal about an impending attack from the outside world (Richardson 2011, 39). He also became concerned that members of his flock had begun to stray and used methods of terror and behaviour control to discipline them (Moore 2011, 100). Ex-members tell of living in constant fear of Jones: they believed he could "cast spells" and suffered from his unrelenting reminders of torment for those who failed to comply with his demands (quoted in Gritz 2011).

Jones' mounting suspicions about both members of the group and the outside world generated new perceived pressures. Amongst his flock, Jones disseminated paranoid theories that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) would invade the compound, saying "they'll [CIA] torture some of our children here. They'll torture our people" (Jonestown Institute 2001). Arguably a worse threat of terror came from Jones himself, who demanded that the group rehearse their simultaneous suicide in the case of invasion and as a show of loyalty, as well as displaying his degree of control over their lives (Bromley and Melton 2002, 92). During these so-called "White Nights" members were called up randomly in the middle of the night to gather and practice taking their own lives (Moore 2011, 109) with Jones instructed the group to kill the children first so that they would not be enslaved and tortured by the government (Jonestown Institute 2001).

It seems a turning point was reached when Congressman Leo Ryan arrived at Jonestown to investigate suspected abuses on 17 November, 1978 (Chryssides 2001, 253). Jones was gaining attention from the US government for his use of violence, especially when a member attempted to leave the group, but died in suspicious circumstances (Moore 2011, 97). Leo Ryan entered Jonestown with little knowledge about the fragile mental state of Jones or the perceived feeling of threat from outsiders amidst the community. At the same time, many members of the group were experiencing cognitive dissonance as Jones' predictions were rapidly changing with little explanation or justification, leading them to confusion and a loss of faith in their leader. Although conditions seemed relatively stable when Ryan was there, his departure and the departure of some members of the congregation led quickly to the escalation of violence. When Ryan and other members arrived at the airport, they had been followed. Under orders of Jones, members of the Peoples Temple began shooting at Ryan and those accompanying him (Moore 2011, 98) resulting in Ryan's death as well as the death of three journalists with him and one Peoples Temple member.

It seems that Jones' perception of these events, and the humiliation caused by members wanting to flee with Ryan, was not in accordance with his eschatological teachings. Jones appears to have interpreted the visit from Ryan as a sign of the disintegration of his plans or control over his timeline of the end times as external influences were undermining his authority. The suspicions Jones already had towards his own movement and his paranoia of the outside world may have made it very difficult for Jones to re-interpret the events that had occurred into a new prophetic teaching. Instead, the lack of faith the members now had in his

leadership became a sign for Jones to end the group's existence as he believed "the best testimony we can make is to leave this goddamn world" (Jonestown Institute 2001).

If he was already practicing white nights, the arrival of Congressman Leo would seem to be a fulfilment of Jones' prophecy. However, suicide was a contradiction to the original utopian mission of the group. It seems Jones felt the only way to assuage the cognitive dissonance that had occurred was to endorse further violence, resulting in his order to the Peoples Temple community to collectively commit suicide and, in the case of the children, homicide (Chryssides 2001, 253). Jones felt an immediate need for the suicide to occur, pleading to his followers "get movin'," and so, on 18 November, 1978, he gathered the majority of the group into a building at the heart of the community and provided a fruit punch laced with tranquilizers and potassium cyanide (Moore 2011, 98). Although the statistics are contested, Moore (2011, 98) states, that 909 people died in Jonestown, after taking the toxic fruit punch. This was one of the largest instances of violence carried out by a NRM the world had ever seen and indeed the most violence causing death to American civilians in history until 11 September, 2001.

However, the mass death at Jonestown was a significant departure from the methods of violence that The Peoples Temple had been involved in previously. Before, the killing of individuals, including Ryan, could have been seen as a necessity for the survival of the group to continue its mission. The terror tactics that Jones endorsed previously were in preparation for an external threat that would, he had foretold, be torturous, cruel, and perilous. Jones' move towards collective suicide can be seen as the outcome of the pressures that were building up, coupled with the poor mental health of Jones and increased anxiety within the group, leading him to perceive the end-times as having begun. For Jones this was not suicide merely to escape punishment, rather it was a "revolutionary act" and his followers were to become part of the "revolutionary suicide council" (Jonestown Institute 2001). But since Jones' ultimate prophecy, to create a utopian commune in Guyana, failed to secure the group from outside interference and was not able to maintain the sup- port of his own followers it was, indeed, a failure. Unable to assuage this dissonance through a reinterpretation of prophecy, Jones instead turned to extreme violence.

Aum Shinrikyo

Aum Shinrikyo began in 1984 and were a catastrophic millennial group who became increasingly fragile in the face of pressure from the outside world (Wessinger and Docherty 2000, 17). In a similar way to the Peoples Temple, Aum Shinrikyo were formed in response to the exogenous pressures and social norms of Japanese society (Kogo 2002, 83). The Sanskrit term *aum*, is a sacred sound in Hinduism that represents the energy of divinity (Frazier 2015, 5). It symbolizes "the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe" (Mullins 1997, 315). Like the leader of The Peoples Temple the leader of Aum, Matsumoto Chizuo, adopted the holy name of Shoko Asahara as a result of time spent seeking enlightenment (Mullins 1997, 315). Asahara grew up disadvantaged, being both blind and poor, and came to reject the materialistic nature of Japanese society. His experience of rejection was thus two-fold: already an outsider in his own society by turning away from it he only furthered his alienation since, "in Japanese society, if one fails to adjust oneself to the social norms, one will become isolated" (Kogo 2002, 83). Asahara studied acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine after twice failing entrance exams to Tokyo University and began to study religion, taking an esoteric interpretation of a range of discourses from Daoism to the Book of Revelation (Reader 2000, 45; Mullins 1997, 316). Asahara began to believe that was at the centre of humanity's spiritual destiny and that he had a duty to change the world by overcoming the evil it possesses through a "final cosmic war" (Reader 2016, 474).

Asahara's ideas gained appeal amongst other Japanese, who were often young and similarly felt disenfranchised, at a time when other new religious movements were emerging in Japan,

often termed “new new religions.” From 1984, a few years after being arrested and fined for the fraudulent practice of medicine as part of his alternative healing business, he began to form a group of followers attracted to his Buddhist- inspired teachings which promised the attainment of higher conscious- ness, knowledge of past lives (where one could have been rich, powerful, and beloved), and access to emancipatory revelations (Reader 2000, 53).

The ideology of Aum became focused on the imminence of Armageddon and eventually gained worldwide media coverage when followers carried out a sarin gas attack. On 20 March, 1995 at around 7:45am, five members of Aum boarded subway trains in Tokyo including Hibiya, Chiyoda, and Marunouchi (Mullins 1997, 314). The five members punctured bags containing poisonous sarin nerve gas, before disembarking the trains (Juergensmeyer and Kitts 2011, 75). The toxic fumes caused people to cough, choke, collapse, and vomit, subsequently killing a total of thirteen people as well as injuring thousands (Reader 2016, 474). It was the country’s “largest incident of terrorism on Japanese soil in history” (Hardacre 2007, 171). As we will see, the purpose of the attack was to bring about Armageddon, rather than wait for the apocalypse to arrive, and occurred after years of escalating tensions between the group and their surrounds.

The first important exogenous pressure to discuss is Aum’s ambition to change society democratically. In January 1990, Asahara announced in public that he would be participating in the upcoming elections. He and twenty-five of his followers formed the Shinrito Party, “The Party of Truth” (Hall 2000, 86). Although Asahara’s ambitions were high and he made bold promises, he lacked a concise political agenda and the result the Shinrito Party received was a “conspicuous failure” (Partridge 2008, 202). Consequently, as Asahara tried to overcome his political failure, his attitude to the outside world became increasingly pessimistic and hostile. The rejection from wider society was signified further through Aum’s failure to reform it through politics. Indeed, the cognitive dissonance that followed this failure was not dealt with by explaining why the group did not succeed in the political domain. Instead, there occurred an increasing emphasis on society as evil and Armageddon was brought into the near future. That is to say, Aum Shinrikyo were no longer concerned about saving society by democratic means because society could not recognize the truth, and so their soteriological trajectory shifted from wanting to achieve universal salvation, to membership-specific salvation.

In 1989, Aum experienced confrontations with the Japanese media. The newspaper *Sunday Mainichi* and other outlets were not reluctant to depict Asahara as a “madman” who wanted to possess control of his “brainwashed” followers (Hardacre 2007, 184). The growing hostility between Aum and the media thus fed into Asahara’s narrative of persecution. He believed he was “the Lamb of God who was sure to be sacrificed” (Hardacre 2007, 186). Enquiries made by the media to investigate new religions are not uncommon, especially in Japan. However, the media fed into Aum’s conspiratorial narrative that external influences were against him, and certainly “exacerbated the impulses toward violence” (Reader 2002, 206). This sense of persecution influenced the group to become increasingly pessimistic and further reject the outside world (Walliss 2004, 170). This rejection resulted in the group becoming even more exclusive by living on a compound, reducing contact with the outside world, and keeping their practices secretive.

Internally, Aum had specific deadlines they had to meet in order to succeed in time for the millennium. In 1991, Asahara “started announcing prophecies” (Kogo 2002, 88) concerning the groups future, the legitimacy of his own leadership, and the overall divine status of Aum Shinrikyo. In accordance with Asahara’s apocalyptic directives, Aum needed to establish at least two centres in every country to achieve a total following of 30,000 people (Melton and Bromley 2009, 34). The group’s inability to recruit such numbers of followers was another example of failed prophecy and resulted in escalating tensions with the state (Melton and Bromley 2009, 35). Dwindling numbers was understood as yet another sign of society’s

inability to recognize the importance of Aum, and thus their rejection of “the truth.” Failure to thrive is a potent example of perceived pressure because it reveals the pattern of failure, dissonance, and resolving dissonance by deepening the divide between the group and the outside world. Wessinger (1999, 172) explains, “Aum had developed a rhetoric that linked salvation and the avoidance of disaster to Aum’s success and growth.” Therefore, when Aum failed to achieve institutional growth despite their leader’s alleged prophetic prowess, Asahara felt the need to mitigate such cognitive dissonance by shifting his ideology to guarantee the salvation of his loyal followers (Wessinger and Docherty 2000, 18). However, such discordances between the message preached by Asahara and the reality of the group’s lack of acceptance in Japan and globally still placed doubt on his enlightened status, and increased pessimism regarding the group’s original mission to change the world.

It is important to note that violence was not isolated to the subway attack and there were reports of the mistreatment of members, extreme ascetic practices, starvation and others. Acts of violence were committed within the group in which The Sakamoto family were murdered to prevent an investigation (Wessinger and Docherty 2000, 123). This had the opposite effect as the murders inevitably aroused suspicion, forming an exogenous pressure deriving from police and media inquiries as well as the concerned friends and relatives of Aum devotees who created groups such as The Victims of Aum Shinrikyo (Watanabe 1998, 88) and The Aum Shinrikyo Victims’ Association (Hall 2000, 79) to discover more about this elusive new religion and called for the group to provide answers to their questions. This contributed to Asahara’s paranoia of the outside world and his desire to withdraw from its gaze.

Upon failure to thoroughly investigate the murders of the Sakamoto family, the police conducted raids on Aum compounds. Police raids occurred three days prior to the subway attack and such intrusions would have been seen as a grave threat to the movement (Repp 2011, 158). Police found materials with the potential to produce 5.6 tons of sarin gas, enough to murder ten million people (Hall 2000, 80). The raids also added pressure on Aum in which they would not await Armageddon, rather, it would use “violence to create one” (Hall 2000, 77). Evidently, the raids are not responsible for directing Aum on a path of violence because they had been violent in the past: over a period of seven years thirty-one people were killed by Aum devotees (Wessinger and Docherty 2000, 25). The theological concept of *poa*, based on the Buddhist notion of transferring merit from the living to the dead, was utilized by Asahara to legitimize murder (Wessinger 1999, 174). This notion persuaded members of the group that their actions were helping those who were considered spiritually inferior to them. Thus, by killing others they are helping them along their path to a higher state of existence, a concept that Lifton (2000, 67) views as being “a convenient rationalization for murderous acts.” The murders show that violence was in the group’s nature prior to the events in the Tokyo subway. This violence was strategic but also anarchic since Japan has a famously low homicide rate. But it seems that for Asahara that the ultimate rejection of the world, through the embrace of death, was deemed necessary for the group to gain a position of control which had been repeatedly undermined by their failings, mounting external pressures, and additional perceptions (and realities) of efforts to shut them down.

Wessinger (1999, 179) believes the “external pressures Aum received were hardly extreme.” However, Asahara’s perception of the outside world is responsible not only for the extent of violence carried out by the movement, but also the cause of internal dilemmas. As Juergensmeyer (2003, 116) explains, “Asahara’s concept of Armageddon went hand in hand with a history of rejection.” This history of rejection included political rejection, embarrassing media portrayals, attempts to cover up murders, failure to attract enough members, interventions from concerned friends and families, and police raids. We could also take into account Asahara’s own personal life does Added to this were Asahara’s own beliefs that the apocalypse was nigh, leaving little time to prepare for salvation, and at the same time local and global schemes were at work to stop his success. The combination of apocalyptic

teachings and perceived threats became the key ingredients for disaster. Ultimately, exogenous pressures “fed into a culture of paranoia, wherein any real or perceived threat from the outside world, or from amongst its own ranks, was responded to with great vehemence” (Walliss 2004, 201). Each pressure significantly contributed to Aum committing large-scale violence against society. There- fore, although violence may have been adopted in earlier days of the movement, the perceived pressure became the catalyst that resulted in the subway attack, which itself was supposed to spark the apocalypse.

Concluding Remarks

External pressures on new religious movements, whether real or perceived, often correlate to or encourage internal issues, resulting frequently in cognitive dissonance as the salvific message of the group’s leaders increasingly clashes with the group’s failure to achieve success and harmony in the world. This article has traced some of the pressures that have led movements to resort to violence as a way to alleviate these negative experiences and bring the prophecies of their founders to quick, though fatal, fulfilment. The apocalyptic teachings of Jim Jones and Shoko Asahara were reactionary from the beginning, but responded also to the external events around them, including the real and perceived speculation and judgment of the government, police, media, and other citizens. As time progressed, both movements became world-rejecting (Wallis 1984). As is clear from this analysis, such pressures have primed such groups for a violent eruption. A similar pattern of feeling threatened by the outside world individually impacted both groups in a way that encouraged their isolation, secrecy and mystery. Perhaps, with the amounting perceived pressure on both groups, violence became the last resort. It may be argued that the violence was not a result of exogenous pressures, coupled with cognitive dissonance, but instead was caused by internal issues. This could be the case, but even if internal pressures pushed the group to turn to violence, it is because of the ways in which the leader(s) of the group has perceived such pressures and how they have overcome the cognitive dissonance that has occurred.

To conclude, this article does not provide a full picture of each new religion, but it does aim to highlight reasons that these groups turned to violence. It is important to note that other NRMs face similar challenges and never turn to violence. Therefore, the perception of pressure clearly impacts upon some groups more than others. In the examples of The Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo, the tense relationship between the movement and the outside world and the way this tension was perceived by the groups’ leaders were catalytic factor in their turn to violence (Melton and Bromley 2009, 30). Although not all new religions utilize or end in violence these instances influence the already negative portrayal of NRMs in modern society. Such events tend to reach the headlines before we can begin to understand their causes (Jones 2012, 29), but through careful analysis, even well after the events, we can per- haps better understand the conditions that lead to catastrophic ends prior to their occurrence.

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