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Uncertainty, reconstruction and resistance: young adults' responses to religious diversity in Spain and the UK

Ruth Woods[a] and Ana Fernández[b]

[a]School of Applied Social Studies, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland; [b]Independent Academic, Canterbury, UK

ABSTRACT

Young people in diverse societies routinely encounter worldviews different from their own, but we know relatively little about how these encounters affect them. This study investigated how young adults in Britain and Spain respond to encounters with other worldviews, focusing on whether and how their existing worldviews were affected. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. Thematic and narrative analyses revealed three main responses: uncertainty, reconstruction and resistance. Encounters with alternative worldviews often led young people to feel uncertain about their own beliefs, particularly those which they understood to be contradicted by the alternative worldview. Reconstruction occurred when participants adopted elements of newly encountered worldviews to create an idiosyncratic religiosity or spirituality. Resistance captured those instances where participants dismissed alternative worldviews as epistemologically or morally problematic. The findings indicate that young people in the UK and Spain are responding in several distinct ways to religious diversity.

KEYWORDS

Religious pluralism; religious diversity; relativisation; syncretism; religion; belief; multiculturalism

Introduction

Increasingly, we are coming into contact with religious beliefs different from our own, thanks to processes of modernisation including urbanisation, migration, mass education, and mass media (Ammerman 2014; Berger 2001, 2012, 2014). Two forms of religious diversity are endemic, to varying degrees, in modern societies: the co-existence of multiple religions, and of religion and secularism (Berger 2012). While religious diversity is not an exclusively modern phenomenon (Berger 2012; Hefner 2016), its scale now is unprecedented, particularly in cities (Berger 2012; Fahy 2018). The current study investigates how people respond to experiences of religious diversity. We are particularly interested in how encounters with other worldviews, defined here as 'comprehensive and integrative frameworks by which we understand ourselves, others, and the world in which we live' (Valk 2009, 6), affect young people's existing beliefs.

Recent studies have revealed that young people growing up in religiously diverse settings such as the UK encounter a complex religious landscape as they grow up. Many are

CONTACT Ruth Woods r.woods3@rgu.ac.uk

raised without religion within the family but encounter religious beliefs in school Religious Education lessons (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan 2020). Others grow up in mixed faith families (Al-Yousuf 2006; Arweck and Nesbitt 2010). Many grow up in multicultural areas where most of their peers are members of a different religion from their own (Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014). And as they get older, many appear to derive more meaning from secular 'pop culture' than from any sort of religious framework (Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin 2010). It is clear that young people in diverse societies are encountering a wide range of worldviews in their everyday lives. Yet we know surprisingly little about how they are affected by these encounters.

To our knowledge, the most detailed theoretical account of how people are affected by religious diversity is provided by prominent sociologist of religion Peter Berger. Berger himself describes the co-existence of multiple religions, and of religion and secularism, as religious pluralism (Berger 2012), but in this article, we use instead the term 'religious diversity'. This is because 'pluralism' is often used in a normative sense (Beckford 2014), whereas the phenomenon under investigation here is the presence in a certain area of a variety of distinct faith traditions, and/or of distinct traditions within faiths, described by Beckford (2014) as religious diversity. Berger asserted that pluralism, as an aspect of modernity, reduced the plausibility of any given religion, leading to secularisation (Berger 1967). He later retracted this claim about secularisation, but remained adamant that experiences of religious diversity erode the certainty with which people hold their existing religious beliefs, while not actually eliminating these beliefs altogether (Berger 2001, 2014). For Berger, diversity and plausibility are linked via his concept of the plausibility structure (Berger and Luckmann 1967), which is the social context in which a given worldview appears plausible (Berger 2014). Non-diverse societies, according to this argument, are composed of a set of plausibility structures that are so coherent that they enable their members to construct a completely convincing, taken for granted understanding of the world. Diverse societies, in contrast, expose their members to plausibility structures supporting *different* worldviews. We would question Berger's assumption that a non-diverse society supports only one possible worldview, because in these circumstances children construct distinct worldviews according to their place in its social structure and hierarchy (Toren 1999). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that worldviews differ more substantially in more diverse societies.

Berger (2012, 2014) argues that when people engage in sustained, meaningful interactions with others who hold a different worldview, they experience relativisation, 'the insight that reality can be perceived and lived differently from what one had thought of as the only way' (Berger 2014, 3). According to Berger, relativisation leads people to revise the plausibility of their existing religious beliefs, from core taken-for-granted assumptions about reality, to a more provisional layer of lightly held opinions (Ammerman 2014; Berger 2001, 2014; Pfadenhauer 2016). Fundamentalist forms of religion (or indeed secularism) are attempts to evade this uncertainty, but because of the relativising process, they cannot achieve the same levels of certainty as that of non-diverse societies (Berger 2014). For Berger (2001, 2012, 2014), although relativisation reduces the *certainty* with which religious beliefs are held, the *content* of those beliefs is unaffected. In other words, after relativisation, one continues to believe in the same things, just not as confidently as before.

Berger's thesis is the clearest theoretical account of how we are affected by encounters with other worldviews. It is thus a valuable place from which to begin to investigate how people's beliefs are affected by religious diversity. However, the thesis has also been subject to a number of criticisms. Firstly, Berger appears to assume that an encounter with another worldview leads one to relativise, and therefore doubt, all of one's existing religious beliefs in equal measure. However, worldviews do not typically differ in every respect. A person may be more likely to selectively relativise their existing beliefs and practices, depending at least partly on the similarities and differences they perceive between the worldviews in question (Schmidt-Leukel 2017). For instance, if a Catholic encounters another denomination of Christianity, certain aspects of their religiosity (such as the practice of confession) may be relativised more than others (such as the belief that Jesus was the son of God).

Moreover, religious beliefs shared between one's existing and newly encountered worldviews might even be strengthened by an encounter (Schmidt-Leukel 2017). There is intriguing ethnographic evidence that some people living in Southall, an area of west London characterised by high levels of religious diversity, construe the locally dominant religions as variations on a theme, apparently assuming that 'all religions converge upon one matrix of defining features and are thus not only comparable but homologous; and each defines its peculiarity by selecting one or another of a limited common stock of injunctions' (Baumann 1994, 110). Kalsky's (2017) interviews with Dutch women who draw on more than one religious tradition revealed a similar construal of all religions sharing common ground, with one participant commenting, 'The heart of all beliefs is love, so why would I have to choose?' (Kalsky 2017, 349). Similar claims are made by offspring of Muslim – Catholic marriages in Italy interviewed by Cerchiaro (2020). These findings suggest that insofar as one identifies similarities across encountered religions, key pan-religious beliefs may be strengthened, while only contrasting beliefs may be relativised. Therefore experiences of religious diversity may typically yield selective rather than wholesale relativisation and doubt.

A second difficulty with Berger's position concerns his assertion that reduced certainty does not actually lead to changes in the content of one's beliefs, and as such does not result in secularisation. Secularisation theory posits that modernity leads to religious decline at both the societal and psychological levels (Brañas Garza, Garcia-Muñoz, and Neuman 2007), and thus, a key tenet of secularisation theory is the weakening of religious conviction (Pollack 2014). Pollack (2014) therefore argues that Berger's pluralism thesis is not sufficiently different from his earlier position on secularisation. Following Pollack's (2014) line of reasoning, we suggest that a plausible psychological endpoint of the erosion of certainty is abandonment of the belief altogether. If relativisation does result in the abandonment of certain beliefs, then the overall content of one's beliefs will have changed. Moreover, if this occurs selectively in response to patterns of similarity and difference between juxtaposed worldviews, as suggested above, then one's worldview may change quite significantly in response to diversity.

A third challenge concerns Berger's focus on erosion of existing belief as the main effect of religious diversity. There is evidence that people sometimes adopt elements of the new worldviews they encounter, thus adding to, and therefore altering, the 'what' of their religious beliefs. We understand this as a form of syncretism, whereby concepts, beliefs and practices from different religious traditions are combined in novel ways

(Lindstrom 1996). This type of syncretism appears to be fairly common in Italy (Cerchiaro 2020), the Netherlands (Berghuijs 2017; Kalsky 2017) and the UK (Woodhead 2016). It occurs in the USA too (Ammerman 2013; Wuthnow 2010), but may be relatively uncommon there (Smith and Denton 2005). The selective adoption of elements of other worldviews can result in a blurring of boundaries between religions, which Woodhead terms 'religious de-differentiation' (2016, 41).

Berger (2001, 2014) appears to acknowledge that this syncretism exists, commenting that many respond to diversity by assembling religious beliefs 'like a child uses Lego pieces to construct an idiosyncratic edifice' (2014, 57). This might appear to contradict his more central argument that diversity changes the 'how' but not the 'what' of religious belief (Berger 2001, 2012, 2014). However, Berger (2014, 57) refers to the practice of 'bracketing' one set of beliefs while fully attending to another, depending on context. Thus, it would appear that for Berger, even though a person might express beliefs drawn from more than one religion, these are not brought together but are rather switched between according to the plausibility structures at hand (Berger 2014). In this sense, his Lego claim above is consistent with his argument that diversity does not alter a person's existing religious beliefs, which remain a coherent whole (Hjelm 2018; Woodhead 2016). Therefore the possibility of combining new beliefs with old is not addressed in his main relativisation thesis.

Thus, there are several reasons to suspect that the effect of religious diversity on worldview may be more complex than Berger's relativisation thesis allows. However, there is little research exploring precisely how people respond to encounters with other worldviews. The current study begins to address this gap in the literature, focusing on the experiences of young adults in Spain and the UK. We considered young adults to be particularly suitable because much identity construction work (including religiosity) goes on during adolescence and early, or emerging, adulthood (Arnett 2004; McAdams 2015; Smith and Denton 2005; Waterman 1982). Moreover, younger generations have typically experienced more religious diversity during this part of their lives than their predecessors.

Both Spain and the UK have witnessed a decrease in the prevalence of Christianity, and an increase in diversity of religious and nonreligious worldviews, in recent years (Bueno et al. 2018; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014; Pérez-Agote 2010; Voas and Crockett 2005). Encounters with other worldviews are now common in both countries, although more so in the UK (Pollack 2016). For instance, around 42% of UK residents, and 16% of Spanish residents, report that at least half of those with whom they have regular contact at work or training belong to a religious group different from their own (Pollack 2016).

In the UK, Religious Education at school primarily involved learning about and from religion, but religious participation (e.g., collective worship) remained important in state-funded faith-based schools (such as Church of England and Catholic schools) (Jackson 2013). Northern Ireland is more religious than the rest of the UK (Barnes 2007), with tensions between two Christian traditions, Protestant Unionists and Catholic nationalists (Connolly and Maginn 1999). Over the same period, schools in Spain were required by law to offer religious instruction (confessional or non-confessional) as an option with the same standing as any core subject of the curriculum. This included state schools, which are by law secular (Martínez-Torrón 2005).

We took a qualitative approach, which is generally better than quantitative methods at revealing the complex, nuanced ways in which people construct their worldviews, and make sense of their experiences (Hackett 2014; Woodhead 2016). We assume that people actively construct their own worldview, inevitably drawing on their experiences of the social world as they do so (Woods 2010). This assumption contrasts with Berger's view that children passively internalise the social processes and institutions in which they are embedded, 'in such a way that the structures of this world come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself' (Berger 1973, 24). While we agree that the objectified social world around a child profoundly affects and constrains their learning, still, each child must make sense of that social world on the basis of their own unique history of experience (Toren 1999; Woods 2010). The connection between plausibility (as a psychological phenomenon) and plausibility structures (as that part of the social world that makes a belief plausible) must be forged anew, and potentially somewhat differently, by each child as they grow up; it is not solely determined by the social structures themselves. The aim of the current study was to investigate whether and how our participants revised their worldviews following encounters with other worldviews. In particular, we were interested in whether Berger's thesis that religious diversity leads to relativisation, which in turn prompts uncertainty, captured all the responses to diversity that our participants described.

Method

Design

The authors conducted individual semi-structured interviews with young adults who had grown up in either Spain or the UK. Transcripts were analysed using a form of thematic analysis similar in many respects to the step-by-step process outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), but incorporating checks for rigour (Barbour 2001), detailed below under *Analytic Strategy*. This analysis took a partially deductive approach, in that it focused on extracts which concerned religious diversity. We also conducted a narrative analysis of each interview, so as to understand how participants' encounters with other worldviews related to their overall religious life story (Hards 2012).

Epistemologically, we assumed that participants' narratives are not objective accounts of their encounters with other worldviews nor of how they made sense of them at the time. We understand our participants' accounts as dialogic, produced in response to and towards other people as part of a conversation (Bakhtin 1986; Hart 2002). Therefore, we reflected on how we as researchers have informed participants' accounts (Hiles and Čermák 2012). Nevertheless, we argue that participants' religious narratives were not solely a product of our conversation, and thus that interviews shed some light on participants' enduring understanding of their religiosity (McAdams 1993). Their accounts provide insights into how they interpret and draw on encounters with other worldviews in order to structure, explain and justify their current worldview (Miller and Glassner 2004). We report participants' accounts of events as they present them, thus employing a realist style of narrative. This is in order to capture the perspective of the participant as closely as possible, and does not indicate that we accept it as true in any simple way.

Recruitment and participants

Twenty young adults were recruited for the study, 10 of whom grew up in Spain and 10 in the UK (9 in England, 1 in Northern Ireland). Evidence suggests that typically, around 12 participants are needed for saturation of main themes in a thematic analysis (Ando, Cousins, and Young 2014; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006), therefore this sample size was considered adequate. Participants were recruited mainly through opportunity sampling, via posters placed around a university campus in South East England, with two Spanish participants living in Spain recruited through acquaintances of the second author. Spanish and British adults aged between 18 and 30 years (later extended slightly to aid recruitment) were invited to take part in research on the development of religious belief (or lack of). Participants were 19–32 years old, and there were twelve women and eight men. At the start of each interview, participants were asked whether they had a religion and if so, which religion it was; or if not, whether they identified as atheist, agnostic or spiritual. In response to these questions, participants identified as Catholic (4 Spain, 2 UK), Christian (2 UK), Protestant (1 UK), Methodist (1 UK), religious (1 UK), spiritual (3 Spain, 1 UK), atheist (2 Spain, 2 UK), and atheist but spiritual (1 Spain). See Table 1 for more information about participants. The lack of representation of non-Christian religions is likely a consequence of our opportunity sampling in an area of the UK which is not particularly religiously diverse. Our own national and religious identities were British and atheist (first author), and Spanish and atheist (second author). We did not disclose our religious beliefs or identities to participants, but did interrogate transcripts for evidence of how participants understood our religiosity, and included such insights in our analysis.

Procedure and materials

Ethical approval was gained from the authors' university. The second author interviewed participants who grew up in Spain in Spanish; the first author interviewed participants

Table 1. Participants' background information and pseudonyms.

Pseudonym	Religiosity given in interview	Country of upbringing	Age (years)	Gender
Marta	Atheist	Spain	29	Female
Paula	Atheist (sometimes agnostic)	Spain	22	Female
Javier	Atheist but spiritual	Spain	27	Male
Sara	Catholic	Spain	23	Female
Patricia	Catholic	Spain	24	Female
Carlos	Catholic	Spain	28	Male
Maria	Catholic	Spain	21	Female
Andrea	Spiritual	Spain	23	Female
David	Spiritual, not religious	Spain	32	Male
Cristina	Spiritual	Spain	26	Female
Hannah	Protestant	UK	20	Female
Helena	'Technically Catholic'	UK	19	Female
Jason	Christian	UK	21	Male
Robert	Christian Methodist	UK	21	Male
Leah	Christian	UK	20	Female
Paul	Catholic	UK	21	Male
Daniel	Atheist	UK	20	Male
Amy	Religious	UK	21	Female
Sunaj	Atheist	UK	24	Male
Claire	Spiritual, not religious	UK	29	Female

who grew up in the UK in English. Having viewed an information sheet and signed consent forms, participants completed a short survey providing background information on their religiosity, followed by a semi-structured interview. We used a topic-oriented style of open questioning (Hiles and Čermák 2012), covering four areas: (1) participants' current religious beliefs and practices; (2) childhood experiences of religion; (3) whether and how their religiosity had changed since childhood; (4) the place of religion in their friendships and relationships. Participants were not asked directly about religious diversity, but frequently mentioned such experiences in all four topic areas. Participants were debriefed and thanked with a small financial payment. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original language, with pseudonyms used to protect anonymity. Spanish transcripts were later translated into English by the second author.

Analytic strategy

The authors began by familiarising themselves with the data, rereading all transcripts. First, a narrative analysis was conducted for each transcript in its original language: The second author analysed all Spanish transcripts, and the first author analysed all English transcripts. A narrative summary was produced for each transcript, covering religiosity and social context during childhood, early adolescence, late adolescence, and early adulthood, as well as an overview of that participant's religious journey including recurrent themes. This enabled us to contextualise the extracts in the thematic analysis within participants' overall narratives.

Second, we conducted a thematic analysis using Braun and Clark's (2006) step-by-step guide, with checks for rigour added (Barbour 2001). For the thematic analysis, the second author translated all Spanish transcripts into English. The first author reviewed every transcript, and extracted all sections in which participants referred to any encounter between different worldviews. Following Berger (2001, 2014), we included denominations within Christianity as separate worldviews. Extracts were kept as large as possible, to aid interpretation. For example, a short conversation about an encounter with another worldview was considered a single extract, and was not separated into speech turns. The first author reviewed the extracts and developed a set of codes, which addressed only religious diversity in the data.

The first author then coded all extracts. To assess and improve the rigour of the analysis, the second author reviewed the coding of all extracts from a random selection of four English and four Spanish transcripts, focusing on three issues: whether extract selection from the transcript was appropriate; whether codes were applied appropriately; and whether codes were clear and sufficient (Barbour 2001). In total, 74 extracts were reviewed in this way, and all disagreements were discussed between the first and second author. While this was not intended to be a quantified statistical test of inter-rater reliability, nevertheless the figures were reassuring, with an agreement rate of 91% on relevance of extract, and 89% on appropriateness of codings. Discussion of the coding scheme led to the minor revision of one code, and the addition of one new code.

In order to address our aim, which was to examine whether and how participants altered their worldviews when they encountered alternative worldviews, our analysis focuses only on those codes which captured the various responses to diversity articulated by participants. We organised these codes into three overarching themes, each of which

represented a distinct response to religious diversity: Uncertainty, Reconstruction and Resistance. Extracts were organised into these themes and used to illustrate each theme in the next section. The narrative analysis was drawn upon in order to present each extract in the context of the participant's overall narrative.

Findings

All participants reported encounters with other worldviews. These took place in various contexts, including the family (for instance, parents with different religious beliefs from one another), peers and friends, entering a relationship with a person with a different worldview, study at school or university (e.g., of theology, biology), own reading and documentaries, and travel to countries where different worldviews were common. Participants encountered diversity at different times of life, from early childhood to adulthood. In addition, there were differences in the type of diversity that participants described, with some mainly encountering other denominations of their own religion; others focusing on cross-religion encounters, and still others for whom encounters between religious and non-religious worldviews took precedence.

Our three themes capture the three main responses to religious diversity articulated by our participants: Uncertainty, Reconstruction, and Resistance. Most participants' narratives included more than one of these; in other words, they did not always respond to encounters with other worldviews in the same way. We consider each response in more detail below.

Uncertainty

As predicted by Berger, uncertainty was a common response to encounters with other worldviews. Some participants conveyed vividly how these encounters challenged their existing beliefs, such as Robert (Christian Methodist, UK), who was studying for a theology degree:

> RW: (…) Do you feel that your beliefs are still developing? Or do you think that they will stay pretty much the same from now on?
>
> Robert: I think my beliefs are constant, are constantly changing. So certainly at the moment, I mean especially in studying theology, you're having, I've found that you have to deal head on with some of your core beliefs and things that you previously thought there wasn't a problem with, and the things that you've firmly believed suddenly become challenged and so you have to deal head on with these things. I mean it's not just in the lectures but it can also be, um, meeting up with people from the different faiths, from different denominational churches, where they've come from, some of them have come from very strict or been from very fervent homes where they believe one thing and you kind of get at loggerheads with two different belief systems. And trying to actually realise that what you believe isn't necessarily what everyone believes. And trying to, trying to find that happy medium between the two and sometimes when it seems that you might not necessarily agree with, trying to work out well maybe there is some truth in that.

Robert describes not only how encounters with other worldviews led him to relativise his own beliefs – 'trying to actually realise that what you believe isn't necessarily what

everyone believes' – but also how this led him to question what is true. His use of the verb 'trying' twice in the extract suggests an ongoing struggle to reconcile his existing beliefs with others' views. In rather different circumstances, Helena (technically Catholic, UK) also described relativisation and doubt in response to diversity. Helena experienced a Catholic upbringing from her Polish mother, along with the Polish side of her family whom she describes as 'very religious' and 'churchy', but later encountered non-religious worldviews, including the 'completely atheist' views of her English father and his side of the family, and through her study of science at university. Helena identified as Catholic but expressed considerable doubts about her Catholic beliefs:

> Helena: (…) I'm fairly sort of, I don't believe in one thing or another thing, I just believe that there's sort of something, sort of taking what everybody's said to me and sort of not really knowing, um, because obviously I have been brought up as a Catholic part of my, so the Catholic part of my brain is saying you should believe in this and then the atheist part of my brain saying no it's a load of rubbish so I'm settling somewhere in between that's not really anywhere.
>
> RW: And does that feel OK or does it feel sort of quite unsettling or confusing?
>
> Helena: I used to, I used to be a bit confused about it when I was getting into those views but because I've had those views now for about ten years then I'm sort of fairly settled in it. I can quite happily have a conversation with somebody and they say what do you believe in, and I just go well, something but I don't, I'm not sure what.

Helena's doubting of her Catholic beliefs is grounded in her awareness of an alternative, atheist worldview, according to which Catholicism is 'a load of rubbish'. In this extract, she appears to dissociate her atheist and Catholic worldviews, but elsewhere she represents them as the two extremes of a continuum along which she moves back and forth. For example, when asked whether she thought her views might change in the future, she explained, 'I think I'll stay sort of where I am generally, some views about some things might get (…) more towards the Catholic end or towards the more atheist end'. She exists in a perpetual state of uncertainty, which creates tension with her mother, who 'still wants me to be religious. Properly believing in Catholicism'. Her account here fits well with Berger's argument that encounters with alternative worldviews trigger generalised doubts about existing beliefs. However, elsewhere in the interview Helena appears to doubt some aspects of Catholicism more than others. When asked what she believed, she explained:

> Helena: I don't believe everything that like the Bible has said. Like with everything that's happened. I believe there is something. There is a God somewhere or there is an afterlife (…) but not necessarily, there is God and there is Jesus, and there is the twelve disciples and all of that. I just think, because I am obviously, quite science, towards the science end, and so I believe in evolution rather than the Adam and Eve apple story.

Here, Helena draws on her experience of science to question certain aspects of Catholicism (such as the story of creation) whilst retaining others (such as a belief in God). She appears to have experienced uncertainty that is somewhat selective in response to her exposure to alternative worldviews.

Selective uncertainty was commonly reported in the interviews. This meant that participants doubted some beliefs and not others, or that they doubted some beliefs more

than others. Take for example Maria (Catholic, Spain), who experienced a Catholic upbringing, but encountered an alternative, scientific worldview, first in school science lessons, and then while studying Biology at university. In this extract she draws on science to question certain aspects of Catholicism:

> Maria: I don't believe everything the Bible says by the letter, that is, I believe in God, erm, but I don't think, I don't know, I don't think He created Adam and Eve, that there is an apple and a snake, and it is actually funny because I am studying Biology and it seems very contradictory because I believe in evolution and, I don't know, yes I, I believe that God exists and that He has created in some way, I don't know if you can call it, I mean, I don't know, I have a slightly different belief to Catholic belief, so maybe I don't, I'm not very consistent when I say that I'm Catholic, really because I'm a Catholic in inverted commas, right? Erm because, well, I think that God exists, but I don't think it's exactly as it's described there [in the Bible]. I think there's something, and that something can be called God, and that's it. But well, I believe in evolution …

Like Helena, Maria expresses more confidence in some aspects of her Catholic worldview (such as the existence of God) than in others (for instance regarding the origins of humans). For both Helena and Maria, the extent of doubt is not uniform but rather patterned in relation to an alternative, in this case scientific, worldview. Both retain an identity as Catholic, but appear to view that identity as undermined by their selective doubt, describing themselves as 'technically Catholic', 'not very consistent', and 'a Catholic in inverted commas'.

For some other participants too, selective uncertainty appeared to follow from their understanding of the similarities and differences between their existing worldview and the one(s) that they had encountered. We describe this phenomenon as a 'common denominator' approach, whereby beliefs that were understood to be similar across worldviews were retained, while those that were relatively unique were questioned. Consider this example from Paul (Catholic, UK), who experienced little diversity during his childhood in England. He was brought up as Catholic by his parents, and attended Catholic church and schools, but explained that his beliefs changed in adolescence:

> Paul: (…) I started thinking about it [his religious beliefs] I suppose at the end of the secondary school. As I got a lot older it completely changed, over a good few years I suppose, I thought about it and then my ideas completely changed.
> RW: So in what ways did they change?
> Paul: Er, I suppose I believed everything about, that was written in the Bible. I believed in Jesus, I believed in all the stories that were told. As I got older read more, watched a lot more TV which may be true or not, documentaries. Just questioned it completely. I always, always thought that how could every religion be correct. And the only thing they all have in common is that there is a higher being, a God. That seems to be the only aspect I have kept.

Paul describes a blanket process of questioning, but emerges from this with a selective belief in God which is based on the common denominator he identifies across the worldviews he has encountered. Other participants voiced a similar logic. Sara (Catholic, Spain) commented that 'in fact I also believe that the God I pray to is the same God that everyone prays to, it's just that the teachings, so to speak, of each [religion] are

different, but I think that we all pray to the same God'. Similarly, Amy (religious, UK) explained:

> Amy: Um, I believe in God. I'm quite happy with that higher power out there. Erm, I just don't believe in like the little bits of religion, like the whole Jesus I'm not a big believer in. That sounds stupid. Um, I just think with all the religions out there deep down in the roots of them all is essentially the same aspect of it all and that's what I believe in, that basic, really just, you know, the higher power that someone's looking out for us. Angels, the devil, that stuff, good people going good place, bad people go bad place.'

Amy, Sara and Paul each articulate a 'common denominator' approach to diversity, whereby elements of their worldview that they understood to overlap with other worldview(s) were retained with relative certainty, while those elements that conflicted were eroded. When applied across several religious worldviews, this process typically resulted in the retention of a small number of generic religious truths, such as the belief in some kind of higher power and afterlife. Note that this process of selective uncertainty led in some cases (such as Paul's) not just to doubting but also to rejecting certain formerly held beliefs, thus altering the worldview's content.

Reconstruction

Some participants adopted new beliefs, or transformed their existing beliefs, in response to encounters with other worldviews. In the words of Hannah (Protestant, UK), 'I'd say I have my own personal religion now which suits me rather than sticking to what other people have set before me … . I take you know my thoughts from all different aspects of Christianity, so that's probably what's different. Like before I was like set on the rules but now I sort of do my own thing, [laughter] I'm my own little church'.

While Hannah drew mainly on Christianity, in some cases, the adoption of new elements drew on a more diverse set of worldviews. After a Catholic start to life, Cristina (Spiritual, Spain) rejected religion in her teens and entered what she described as her 'agnostic phase'. However, she was not entirely comfortable with this position, finding it 'too hard' to think 'that you're alone in this world, that you have X years to live and then you die and that's the end'. She eventually abandoned her agnosticism as a result of experiences in various religious spaces while travelling in South America:

> Cristina: Sometimes, when you go travelling and you experience certain places, I don't know, you can feel a certain magnetism. So, I don't know if it's energy but it's happened to me, when I was in South America, I was in Argentina and I travelled around Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and really, in some places, like Inca cemeteries, for example, you feel something different. It's also happened in some churches, not in all, but as you enter you feel something, something special. So for me that's spirituality, to feel balanced with yourself, in yourself, yes [laughter].

Cristina is not alone in experiencing 'energy' in religious spaces as a tourist (Stausberg 2011). Here she draws on her experiences of a special energy and balance in places associated with a plurality of different religions to formulate her current belief; 'I'd like to think there's something else. I don't know what it is, but I don't believe there's a God, I don't think there's anyone pulling the strings'. She accompanies this belief with private practice

of meditation and personal reflection. This idiosyncratic adoption of diverse religious spaces as a source of spirituality represents a substantive departure from both her previous agnostic belief, and the Catholicism of her childhood.

David (Spiritual but not religious, Spain) followed quite a similar trajectory. He grew up in a non-religious family, although he attended a Catholic school. From a very young age he felt uncomfortable around religion, which led him to reject it altogether in favour of atheism. In his 20s, David moved to Latin America, where he lived for almost a decade and where he encountered a different type of religiosity, which he found more spiritual than the Catholicism he knew in Spain. While he had previously seen religion and spirituality as inextricable, his experiences in Latin America changed his mind, and he proceeded to construct a rich spiritual worldview whilst continuing to eschew formal religion. When asked to describe his spiritual belief and practice, he referred to several monotheistic and polytheistic traditions including Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. He understood elements of all to represent particular energies, with which he could connect:

David: (…) I feel that each saint also expresses different energies, that is, what the different Gods once represented or in, in polytheist religions, so the saints are a bit like representations of those energies.
AF: Uhmm.
David: Saint Francis of Assisi, because of the animals, is a saint that I like very much, ermm [gives name of patron saint of his city in Spain] I also like a lot [laughter].
AF: And-
David: So yes, it's like, just like in Hindu mythology, because there are several, like several figures that also represent various energies and I also feel connected with them and it's like, more than anything, it's like, that that represents a concrete energy and it makes you, it allows you to connect with that energy.

Influenced by Eastern traditions, David practiced yoga and meditation, while also marking Pagan seasonal festivals. In stark contrast with his previously held views, he now eschews atheism, saying, 'lack of spirituality almost shocks me, I find it strange'. In David's case, religious diversity has facilitated a major transition from atheism to a rich spirituality informed by diverse traditions. While less common than the other responses we document, in certain circumstances religious diversity clearly prompts substantial, creative and idiosyncratic reconstruction of one's worldview.

Resistance

The themes of Uncertainty and Reconstruction describe different ways in which religious diversity altered participants' worldviews. However, most participants also mentioned encounters with an alternative worldview which did not appear to affect their existing beliefs. In these instances, participants typically expressed a sense of implausibility or moral inappropriateness regarding the newly encountered worldview, which appeared to limit its ability to impact their existing beliefs.

For instance, Hannah's (Protestant, UK) parents raised her in the Baptist tradition and the family attended a Baptist Church. However, she attended a Catholic school where she encountered some contrasting beliefs and practices. She expressed resistance to these, commenting, 'I don't agree with the whole um worshipping Mary and I don't feel

comfortable saying the Hail Mary or things like that' because 'I was just told as a child that you shouldn't do it and that you should only worship God so then I said at school that I didn't want to do it and I didn't and I was also told not to make the sign of the cross because obviously you can't bless yourself'. She was similarly critical of the Catholic understanding of holy communion – '[A]ll my friends are Catholics cos obviously I went to Catholic school and then we just disagree on things um like they actually believe like in communion that it's actually like eating the body and I just thought that's ridiculous' – and the practice of confession – '[W]e were told to go to confession when we were about eleven years old. I don't know what on earth an eleven-year-old has to confess but I just thought that was bizarre'.

Hannah's use of the strongly dismissing terms 'obviously', 'ridiculous' and 'bizarre' frames the new beliefs and practices she encountered at school as inherently unreasonable (perhaps suggesting that she assumed agreement from the interviewer), and this appears to inoculate her from their potential to undermine her existing beliefs. Cristina (Spain, spiritual) also conveys a sense of implausibility concerning certain newly encountered worldviews. As noted earlier, Cristina grew up in a Catholic family but did not consider herself 'a believer' as a child. Here, she recalls encounters with other religions as a teen:

> Cristina: I also remember that at that time I met my friend Martina, who is a Jehovah's Witness and sometimes we would have philosophical conversations and she says to me, "Ah, you should come to a meeting." That's when I started to find out that there were other things. Erm, the Mormons, yes. But I started reading, asking, talking and saying, "No. I'm not convinced". I mean, someone trying to sell you a bike in a room and you have to pay them, no, I, no, no, I don't trust you. There's something dodgy.

Cristina acknowledges that other worldviews exist but does not convey any felt need to re-appraise or adjust her own beliefs in response, since she finds these new worldviews implausible; 'I'm not convinced'. She uses the Spanish phrase 'someone trying to sell you a bike' which implies deception in the same way as the English phrase 'pulling the wool over your eyes'.

A strong sense of implausibility was also evident in the account of Sunaj (atheist, UK), who grew up with his Hindu mother and atheist father in Northern Ireland. Although he did not hold any religious beliefs as a child, he recalls taking an agnostic position, because 'being an Asian in a mostly white community I was standing out enough. Having an English accent I was standing out enough. Um, and [pause] I needed to kind of fit in, in a way'. His agnosticism coalesced into a growing conviction in atheism in his teens. Here he reflects on his experiences of studying science and religion at school during this period:

> Sunaj: […] I guess when we did experiments in physics and chemistry, um, seeing how things reacted when you, um, did certain things and put certain chemicals together er, looking at in physics, er, various laws and um trying to understand the science between them and seeing the fact that this was all documented and that, well, I guess, I guess I could say this now looking back and knowing that it's all been documented and actually been rigorously tested kind of thing as opposed to what I see as someone who's written a book that has been, may have been passed down for years that people are now sort of seeing as the one and the

kind of end-all and be-all of everything, which is as I say to me farcical but, um because there's no proof, there's no testing of this that and the other.

RW: Did science give you really another way of thinking about how to gain knowledge perhaps?

Sunaj: Well, I don't know about another way, I suppose the only way […]

In this extract, Sunaj's science-based epistemology enabled him to dismiss the religious truth claims he encountered in his education as 'farcical'. As an adult, he continued to show strong resistance to religious worldviews. For example, he recounted an incident in which two Christian housemates challenged his atheism: 'I could see from where they were coming from that it would be, er, it wouldn't be sensible for me to engage them on this because they have their belief, I have mine and (…) as far as I could see we weren't going to come to a kind of agreement on this. So I just said we'll agree to disagree and we just left it at that'. For Sunaj, then, even repeated exposure to an alternative worldview did not appear to undermine his own beliefs.

While Sunaj's rejection of religious worldviews was largely grounded in scientific epistemology, some participants, such as Jason (Christian, UK), appeared to set epistemological concerns to one side, and to dismiss alternative worldviews on more pragmatic grounds. He was one of a small number of participants who appeared to manage, offset or dismiss epistemological uncertainty in the face of diversity by shifting their focus from truth to action:

Jason: Um, I suppose it's like, with speaking about the friend [mentioned earlier in interview] who's completely against religion and he was like oh there's evidence showing this, there's evidence showing that about thousands and two thousands and millions and millions of years ago, how can you still state that there is a God, how can you still believe in, in a religion? And I was just like 'cos putting it all back to just the faith aspects of it all and just taking, taking the good because there's a lot, there's a lot, a lot, a lot of good aspects about religion […]

Jason spoke several times in his interview of the value of his Christian faith in his life, and how it had helped him at difficult times. His Ghanian parents were committed Christians, who drew on their own faith to support their son through personal challenges including teenage pregnancy. Here he draws on these experiences of the 'good aspects about religion', accompanied by the concept of faith, to ward off an epistemological challenge from a friend. Maria (Catholic, Spain) appeared to take a similar approach:

Maria: And so, Jesus was a person who existed, that - well, that is historically proven- and who did good things and who left us a message that I think is good for people because I don't know, in some way, having these beliefs, to me at least, it makes me a better person or I try to, to do things right, to help people, I don't know, because I believe in that too. And maybe what sets us apart from Protestants is, is that I may believe in, well this is [inaudible] it's *difficult* isn't it? Because the fact that, whether the Virgin Mary existed or didn't exist and whether she is a virgin and whether she is holy and all that, well, erm, or that she had Jesus by the deed and grace of the Holy Spirit [laughter], well, I don't know, it's just that there are things, it's really not, it doesn't make sense nowadays because, well, we know how things are, right? But, but well it doesn't stop being, I don't know, I don't think it's something that influences whether I believe or not.

In this extract, Maria acknowledges the epistemological challenge that secular views on reproduction pose to her Catholic beliefs. Maria's ambivalence here is evident in her choice of words ('it's *difficult*') and frequent hesitations. Her wording suggests that she assumes that the interviewer takes a secular view ('we know how things are, right?'), perhaps amplifying her need to justify her religious beliefs. She expresses belief in the Virgin Mary, immediately followed by a more secular scepticism: 'By deed and grace of the Holy Spirit' is a Spanish phrase referring to Jesus's immaculate conception, often used sarcastically to question the veracity of an account. Yet her conflicted talk suggests that she maintains some religious beliefs that she thinks she *should* reject from a scientific point of view. Later, she comments, 'I guess it's also something you can't explain with reason and, well in the end it's religion and, well, you also have to take into account your faith, where you believe things that have no explanation'.

Maria thus retains Catholic beliefs that she understands to clash with science and reason. This is perhaps a function of her overarching view of her religiosity as primarily a morality of care; active sharing and giving to others. She emphasised several times in the interview her understanding of Catholicism as ultimately a moral way of life. In her words, 'if you have a belief but you don't share it, or don't live it, well, in the end it's not much use'. Her prioritisation of practice over belief may enable her to retain Catholic beliefs which she cannot defend epistemologically.

These extracts suggest that encounters with other worldviews do not inevitably undermine certainty or prompt reconstruction. They can result in the rejection of the newly encountered worldview as implausible or morally inappropriate. For some of our participants, the epistemological stance implicit in their existing worldview yielded a sense of implausibility regarding the new worldview. For others, new worldviews were eschewed for more pragmatic reasons. Participants' immunity to the conflicting worldview appeared in various forms, including Hannah's active resistance to Catholic norms and assumptions, Cristina's scepticism and suspicion of Mormonism, Maria's avoidance of conflicts between Catholicism and science, and Jason's indifference to science-based arguments against religion. In sum, the 'resistance' theme suggests that in some circumstances, encounters with other worldviews do not reduce the certainty with which one holds one's existing beliefs.

Discussion

Increasing numbers of people are experiencing religious diversity (Ammerman 2014; Berger 2001, 2012, 2014; Hefner 2016), yet much remains unknown regarding its impact on one's beliefs. A useful starting point is Berger's (2001, 2012, 2014) thesis, which contains two main claims. Firstly, sustained engagement with other worldviews leads to relativisation, the realisation that there are other ways of understanding reality apart from one's own worldview. Secondly, relativisation causes a reduction in the certainty with which one's worldview is held, but not to the abandonment of that worldview. The current study sought to assess whether this thesis adequately described how young people growing up in Spain and the UK respond to religious diversity.

In support of Berger's thesis, the young people we interviewed frequently described relativisation of their own worldview in response to religious diversity, in the sense that they showed awareness that their own worldview differed from that of others.

Moreover, this often prompted them to question their existing beliefs. However, while Berger appeared to assume a blanket uncertainty applied to all religious beliefs equally, our participants typically described a more selective response, with certain beliefs doubted more than others. To some extent, the pattern of belief and doubt mapped onto the similarities and differences respectively that they perceived between the original and newly encountered worldviews – just as Schmidt-Leukel (2017) suggested. Participants construed plausibility through the active identification of a 'common denominator', with only those beliefs understood to be shared across existing and novel worldviews exempt from questioning. This identification of a core set of pan-religious beliefs has been observed in other studies (e.g., Baumann 1994; Cerchiaro 2020; Kalsky 2017) and in some cases, the beliefs that our participants articulated bore some resemblance to the 'moralistic therapeutic deism' that is prevalent among young Americans of various religions (Smith 2010; Smith and Denton 2005). Our study suggests that selective uncertainty according to a perceived common denominator is an important psychological pathway via which people arrive at this type of belief. However, the common denominator approach presumably only works when a person can perceive common ground between the worldviews concerned. In cases where no overlap can be discerned (which may be more typical in religion – secular than in religion – religion juxtapositions), blanket uncertainty may be more common.

Berger (2001, 2012, 2014) was adamant that the doubt that follows relativisation did not lead people to abandon their beliefs, thus breaking the link he made in his earlier work between diversity and secularisation. Building on Pollack (2014), we have suggested that abandonment of belief appears to be a logically possible outcome of relativisation and doubt. Our findings support this suggestion, as some participants who experienced selective uncertainty appeared to have fully relinquished a range of beliefs specific to their religion, retaining only those they understood to be shared with, or at least not contradicted by, other worldviews. Selective rejection of beliefs sometimes led to substantial changes to the content of participants' beliefs, motivating some to attach disclaimers to their religious labels ('technically Catholic'; 'Catholic in inverted commas').

While our evidence suggests that people sometimes reject, rather than merely doubt, relativised beliefs, this process does not necessarily lead to a complete rejection of religion. This is because as noted above, relativisation was often a partial process, applied to some aspects of a given worldview more than to others. Consequently, where beliefs were rejected, this was typically on a selective rather than wholesale basis, leading not to secularisation, but rather to more generic religious beliefs.

While doubt was a common and important response to diversity, our study documented two additional responses. Some participants reconstructed their existing worldviews in response to diversity, adopting elements of different worldviews to create a syncretic religiosity or spirituality. Similar examples of reconstruction have been observed in Italy (Cerchiaro 2020), the Netherlands (Berghuijs 2017; Kalsky 2017), the UK (Woodhead 2016), and the USA (Ammerman 2013; Wuthnow 2010). As we noted earlier, Berger (2014) does appear to acknowledge that people may selectively adopt beliefs and practices across religions. However, for Berger (2014), this is achieved not by psychologically synthesising these into a meaningful whole, but rather switching between them according to context (Berger 2014; Woodhead 2016). Contra Berger (2014), some of our participants appeared to have integrated aspects of different

religions into a single worldview which they applied across diverse contexts (such as different religious spaces).

This study also found that relativisation does not inevitably affect people's worldview at all. Many participants described encounters with other worldviews which they disregarded. Some participants downplayed contradictions between their own and other worldviews by focusing on the value of faith and on the pragmatic aspects of their religious worldview, which were more concerned with ethical action than with truth. Others drew on the epistemological assumptions of their own worldview to discredit the truth claims of the competing worldview, rendering them implausible and thus powerless over them. There are glimpses in the literature of similar processes of dismissal. For instance, Arweck and Nesbitt (2011) quote a teenage girl growing up in a mixed religion (Sikh – Christian) household in the UK, who used the sentence structure 'I don't understand [novel belief or practice] because [contradicts existing belief]' to critique Muslim and Buddhist beliefs and practices she learned about at school. While Berger (2014) did allow that alternative worldviews might be rejected, particularly through subscription to fundamentalist forms of religiosity, he saw this rejection as a *response* to uncertainty (9). In contrast, some of our participants appeared to *bypass* uncertainty in their rejection of alternative worldviews as implausible or morally inadequate.

Critical here is the capacity of the existing worldview to render the other worldview unconvincing. Power and ideology are implicated here, both of which are relatively neglected in Berger's work (see e.g., Hjelm 2019). In contemporary Britain, the secular appears to be hegemonic in many young people's experiences (Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin 2010). British survey data indicates that children raised as nonreligious are much more likely to retain the worldview implicit in their upbringing than are those raised as Christian (Woodhead 2017). Children growing up in nonreligious families in Britain typically encounter religious worldviews mainly in school Religious Education lessons (Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). These encounters may encourage reflection on and strengthening of non-religious identity (Shillitoe and Strhan 2020). Nonreligious worldviews therefore appear to be more 'sticky' than Christian worldviews in Britain today (Woodhead 2017, 252), such that those with nonreligious worldviews may be more successful at dismissing religious worldviews than the other way around.

Thus, a person's epistemological, moral and pragmatic judgements about plausibility are likely to reflect contemporary tensions and hierarchies regarding religious and nonreligious worldviews and identities. Of course, the position of the judging person with respect to these tensions and hierarchies is also critical. For instance, Cerchiaro (2020) describes how offspring of Catholic – Muslim marriages in Italy inevitably grappled with the stigmatisation of Islam in Italian society in the formation of their religious beliefs and identities.

The range of responses to diversity even in our relatively narrow sample of young adults in two European countries leads us to ask: Under what conditions do people doubt, reconstruct or resist in response to religious diversity? Many of our participants described more than one of these responses in the course of their interviews, pointing to the importance of historical and contextual factors. As noted above, societal tensions and hierarchies go some way to helping us to understand how young people respond to diversity. However, we suggest that other factors may also be important. We were struck by the variety of settings, relationships and life phases in which our participants encountered

other worldviews. For some, these encounters began in childhood; for others, as young adults. Some, like Paul, learned about alternative worldviews mainly through study or books, while others, like Helena, encountered diversity in their most intimate relationships. For some, differences in worldview mapped onto ethnic markers of difference and status in their lives and communities – like Helena's experiences of Catholicism as Polish, and Sunaj's sense of distinctiveness as an Asian atheist with an English accent in Northern Ireland. These are all domains of experience which are known to be important to children and young people developing their own worldview (Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019). Moreover, participants experienced different types of diversity: religion-religion, denomination-denomination, and religion-secular.

The timing of encounters with other worldviews, the relationships and places in which these encounters occur, their ethnic and cultural associations, societal hierarchies, and the type of diversity involved are all likely to inform people's responses to diversity (Edwards, Caballero, and Puthussery 2010; Pollack 2014; Cerchiaro 2020). For instance, we have suggested that religion-secular encounters may affect certainty more widely than religion-religion ones, because a 'common denominator' of shared beliefs is harder to identify in the former than the latter. This brings us to the key limitation of the current study, which is its relatively small sample of a narrow subset of young people. Our participants were mostly students, and all grew up in either Spain or the UK. Their responses may not be typical of young people in other countries, or within these countries but of other socioeconomic groups. As a result of our opportunity sampling in areas which were predominantly Christian, the main religion represented in our sample was Christianity. The research also cannot tell us how older people respond to diversity. We also do not have enough data to comment on how the status of one's worldview, both locally and nationally, informs the credibility of alternatives. These limitations make it difficult to comment on the typicality of each response to diversity described here, and also on the conditions which favour each type of response. Moreover, other responses to diversity may exist that were not captured in this research, for instance amongst members of minority religious groups, who were not well represented in our sample. There is a need for larger-scale research to establish the conditions under which different responses are more likely to emerge. Such research might contribute to ongoing efforts to understand why diversity appears to have distinct effects on religiosity in different societies (Pollack 2014).

In conclusion, these findings suggest that some additions might be made to Berger's main thesis concerning the effects of religious diversity. Berger's key claim, that sustained engagement with other worldviews leads to relativisation and uncertainty, is strongly supported by our data. However, that uncertainty is often selective, confined largely to those beliefs which differ from the newly encountered worldview. In addition, uncertainty sometimes results in beliefs being rejected altogether. Moreover, Berger's thesis should be extended to acknowledge that reduced certainty is not the only possible outcome of encounters with other worldviews. In some cases, completely new beliefs are adopted, drawn from alternative worldviews often in creative ways. In other cases, the very opposite occurs: the alternative worldview is rejected and therefore does not appear to impact existing beliefs at all. Berger's key concepts of relativisation and uncertainty are therefore necessary, but not sufficient, to understand how people respond to religious diversity.

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Notes on contributors

Dr Ruth Woods is a Lecturer in Psychology in the School of Applied Social Studies at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland. Her research interests include psychological aspects of living in diverse societies; children's peer relations; and human responses to climate change.

Dr Ana Fernández is an independent academic based in the UK. She's a psychologist whose research interests include the development of religious (non)belief through the lifespan, and attitudes and behaviours related to sustainability and climate change.

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