

When prophecy fails and faith persists: A theoretical and empirical overview – *Lorne L. Dawson (Sociology), University of Waterloo, Ontario (Canada)*

Scholars are coming to appreciate that apocalyptic prophecies are quite common in new religious movements. Overwhelmingly, these prophecies fail to come true, empirically. Yet the record shows that these failures rarely have the dire consequences common sense suggests. Counter-intuitively the majority of groups survive the disconfirmation of the predictions, and the norm is for faith in the prophetic leaders and their systems of beliefs to persist or even intensify, at least for a time.

Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter first drew attention to this unusual state of affairs in their classic study, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), postulating the theory of cognitive dissonance to explain it. In the face of evidence contradicting a strongly held belief, Festinger and his colleagues hypothesized, people will be more inclined to find a means to discount the evidence than surrender their beliefs and commitments. They will resolve the cognitive tension they are experiencing by seeking to change the way the world is perceived, in line with their expectations, rather than abandon their cherished convictions. More specifically, Festinger et al. argue, people will attempt to convince others of the veracity of their views, on the premise that their ability to persuade others testifies to the continued worth of their beliefs. Festinger et al. based this surprising conclusion on a field study of a small American religious group, dubbed the Seekers. The leader of this group, Mrs. Marion Keech, had predicted the destruction of much of the United States in a great flood, but not before the faithful few would be rescued by alien space ships. Participant observation of the repeated failure of Keech's prophecy led Festinger et al. to specify five conditions under which we can "expect to observe increased fervor following the disconfirmation of a belief" (1956: 3-4). This paper systematically assesses the veracity of these conditions in the light of the comparative analysis of a growing body of case studies. In recent years students of the phenomenon have called for a conceptual reorientation away from the specifics of Festinger's theory to the study of the more generic social-psychological processes of dissonance management in religious groups, but given the concerns of this symposium, a more specific analysis of the legacy of *When Prophecy Fails* is warranted.

The paper has three parts: (1) I will provide a comprehensive, yet schematic, overview of the existing case literature, both historical and sociological; (2) I will systematically examine each of the five conditions, pointing to some of the pertinent issues that have arisen in the study of specific instances of prophetic failure; (3) I will sketch one of the key features of any new theory of how groups survive the failure of prophecy: the role of actions taken by the leaders themselves. This analysis helps to establish a set of empirical sub-issues that should be the foci of further research. In the end, while the case literature broadly confirms the expectations of cognitive dissonance theory, it is clear that the survival of groups depends on a more complex set of interdependent social variables than anticipated.