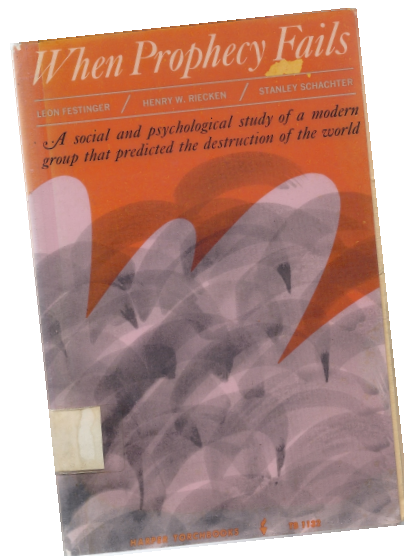


When Prophecy Fails

David Sielaff — March 10, 2009

When Prophecy Fails – David Sielaff, March 10, 2009



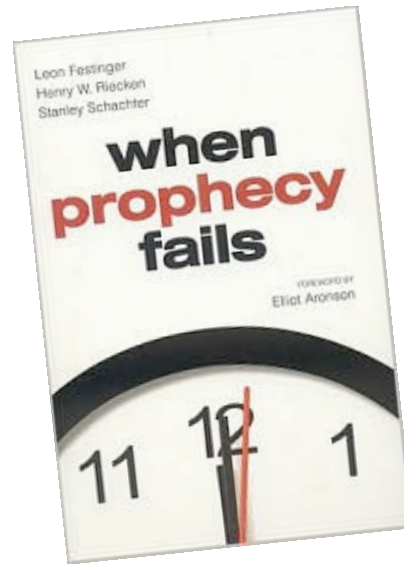
When Prophecy Fails

A social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world

by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schlachter (New York: Harper & Row, 1956)

- Sociological study of a UFO cult
- Coined the term “cognitive dissonance”

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by Leon Festinger (d1989), Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schlachter (d1997)

(Pinter and Martin, 2009)

- New edition 53 years later
- Original research done in 1954 (55 years ago)

Early UFO contactee Group (1950s)

Brotherhood of the Seven Rays (a.k.a. The Seekers)

- Infiltrated a 1950s doomsday cult with interests in UFOs and studied the consequences of unfulfilled prophecies on the faithful.
 - Group predicts the end of the world; they will be rescued by aliens
 - Dated prophecy
 - Prophecy fails to occur
 - Group increases and proselytizes

Five conditions for **increased fervency** of belief

1. Deep conviction of belief
2. Commitment to this conviction
3. Conviction specific and real so it is able to be disconfirmed (proven wrong)
4. The unequivocal disconfirmation must occur.
5. Social support after disconfirmation.

When Prophecy Fails, 2009, p. 4

UFO group infiltrated:

- Team of sociologists
- Interacted with the group
- Influenced the group
- Results of prophecy failure on group
 - Increased fervor of belief
 - Proseletyzing

Problems:

- Sociologists made up a considerable % of the group
- Interacted and influenced the group
- Did this influence their observations?
- Did this influence the results?

When Prophecy Fails – David Sielaff, March 10, 2009

“Festinger’s numerous covert researchers also stimulated the group sufficiently so there is no way of knowing what would have happened without them.”

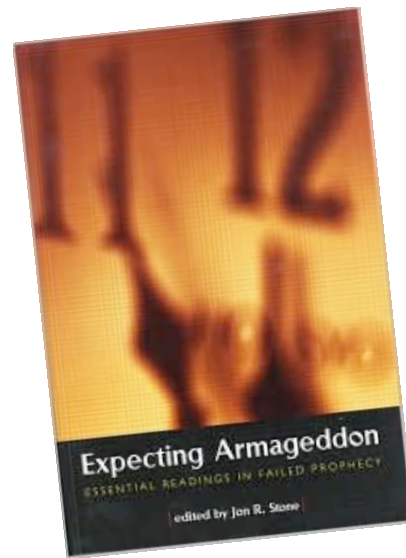
Mathew N. Schmalz,
“When Prophecy Fails and the Watchtower” in
Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy,
ed by Jon Stone (NY: Routledge, 2000), p. 235

Characters:

- Mrs. Keech = [Marion Dorothy Martin](#) (who later founded the Association of Sananda and Sanat Kumara)
- Dr. Armstrong = [Dr. Charles Laughead](#) (occultist with connections to Adamski, Puharich, Geller)
- [George Hunt Williamson](#)

<http://www.excludedmiddle.com/tracks%20in%20desert.html>

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Expecting Armageddon:

Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy

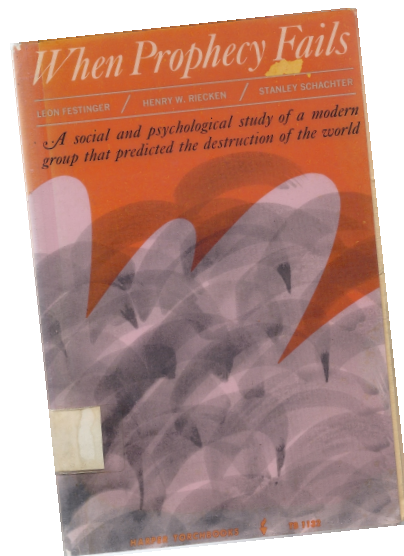
ed. by Jon Stone (NY: Routledge, 2000),

article, "When Prophecy Fails and the Watchtower" by Mathew N. Schmalz, p. 235

Three flaws in method:

1. Too many researchers involved
2. influenced group actions
3. Faulty history

When Prophecy Fails – David SIELAFF, March 10, 2009



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(New York: Harper & Row, 1956)

- Sociological study of a UFO cult
- **Coined the term “cognitive dissonance”**

Cognitive dissonance, *noun*.

“Two opinions, or beliefs, or items of knowledge are dissonant with each other if they do not fit together.”

Festinger, 1956, p. 25

“A theory of human motivation that asserts it is psychologically uncomfortable to hold contradictory cognitions.”

<http://skepdic.com/cognitivedissonance.html>

Cognitive dissonance

- “*Cognitive dissonance* theory is one of the most influential and extensively studied theories in social psychology.”
- In psychology & sociology *cognitive dissonance* relates to “good and bad” self perception
 - a UFO sighting makes a person suddenly question their place in the world

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

Cognitive dissonance and UFOs

Prevention of cognitive dissonance may contribute to

1. confirmation bias or
 2. denial of discomfoting evidence
- a UFO sighting may strengthen prior beliefs or cause denial

Cognitive dissonance and UFOs

The theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance

- by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, or
- by justifying or rationalizing their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

- *Cognitive dissonance* is experienced as [anxiety, guilt, shame, anger, embarrassment, stress, and other negative emotional states](#).
- Witnessing a UFO could cause
 - [Anxiety](#) (about being helpless)
 - [Guilt](#) as to helplessness (“Why me?”)
 - [Shame](#) (unable to cope w/experience)
 - [Anger](#) (they are intruders)
 - [Embarrassment](#) (can tell no one)
 - [Stress](#) (fear about their return)
 - [Preoccupation / obsession](#)
 - [Threaten relationships](#)

(When people's ideas are consistent with each other, they are in harmony or “in consonance.”)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance

Result of cognitive dissonance

“... when an individual’s strong belief encounters unequivocal refutation, that person will defend the position with increased fervor.”

Mathew N. Schmalz,
“When Prophecy Fails and the Watchtower” in
Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy,
ed by Jon Stone (NY: Routledge, 2000), p. 235

Or, ... they will flip their belief.

Cognitive dissonance and UFOs

UFO events

- do not “fit” with ordinary life events
- “intrude” into one’s life (and worldview)
- cause anxiety
- force unpleasant memories to surface

Cognitive dissonance and UFOs

- In psychology & sociology *cognitive dissonance* relates to “good and bad” self perception
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