



# Expecting Armageddon

ESSENTIAL READINGS IN FAILED PROPHECY

| edited by Jon R. Stone |

# **| Expecting Armageddon**

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# Expecting Armageddon

Essential Readings in  
Failed Prophecy

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**Jon R. Stone**



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**In Memory of My Grandfather:**

**Curtis James Stone, Sr.**

**1909–1999**

**A kind and generous man**



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## Preface

The Romans had a saying that captures in a phrase at least one aspect of human nature that contributes to the persistence of millennial expectation: the fear of death is worse than death. Fear of the unknown makes us all a little nervous, especially when that unknown has to do with the end of time. There is perhaps no better example of this than the current obsession over the coming millennium, which may turn into madness by the latter weeks of December. With predictions of computer malfunctions, power failures, nuclear meltdowns, worldwide economic depression, environmental disasters, famine, disease, and the usual social chaos, the end of time might prove a welcome relief.

A question naturally follows: Why all this importance attached to “time,” which is, after all, a human invention? While some scholars may think that all the doomsaying and endtime predictions surrounding the mere change from year 1999 to year 2000 reveal modern society at its most neurotic, those of us who remain fascinated by the recurrence of such speculations in the face of centuries upon centuries of prophetic disconfirmation find in these and other most recent doomsday scenarios evidence of the persistent human desire to find meaning in time and events. This search for meaning—or for a discernible pattern to human experience—couples with a deep longing to start anew. The world as it appears and as people experience it seems somehow wrong to them. The problems they face are not so easily solved. As with the ancient Greek dramatists, the modern likewise finds him/herself calling upon a *deus ex machina* to intervene and set things right again.

Admittedly, this particular rendering of endtime expectation brings out some of the more benign and optimistic aspects underlying the desire of most millennial movements to see the old world “go up in flames.” As Dick Anthony, Michael Barkun, Thomas Robbins, and Catherine Wessinger have ably pointed out, millennial expectations can sometimes turn violent. Still, one might argue, the emphasis of most endtime predictions is not on cataclysmic destruction for its own sake. Most prophets of doom hold out to their followers the promise of either a heavenly or extraterrestrial world waiting for them beyond this one or a new Eden rising up out of the ashes of the old one.

This present collection of essays takes as its central focus the social-

psychological responses of millennial groups to failed prophecy. First asked in 1956 by Leon Festinger and his team of researchers, the question “What happens when prophecy fails?” has spawned a number of subsequent case studies that have sought either to test their original thesis, to elaborate upon their theory of cognitive dissonance, or, in most instances, to offer new theories to account for the differing or seemingly idiosyncratic responses to failed prophecy.

It must be stressed that the case studies included in this anthology represent only a selection of the research that has appeared in print since the publication of Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter. For practical purposes, this collection includes only reprints, in order of date published, what one might call the “essential” readings in failed prophecy. With the exception of typographical and grammatical corrections—and modest spelling and stylistic changes that bring the various texts into conformity with the publisher’s own stylistic requirements—all the essays in this present work have been republished *in toto*. Although textual references and quoted passages cited in this volume’s introductory essay are keyed to the pages of this volume, for the reader’s benefit, the sources of the original articles have been listed in the bibliography at the end of the introduction. It is my hope that the usefulness of this collection to scholars and interested readers will be found in the variety of case studies and theoretical essays it contains, in its interdisciplinary cast, and—in view of the approaching millennium, beginning 2001 C.E.—in its timeliness.

In addition to the many friends and colleagues who have shown interest in my various projects over the years, I would like to express especial appreciation to Phillip Lucas, Eric Mazur, Gordon Melton, and to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the introduction, which was first presented in a conference in 1997. William Germano, Jennifer Hirshlag, and Julien Devereux of Routledge deserve special credit for keeping this work focused and on track. I would also like to thank Josh Clifton, Matt Reynolds, and Russell Voth—all three Religious Studies majors at UC Berkeley—for their assistance in proofreading the manuscript despite the tedium and strong temptation to lie back in the summer sunshine.

A final word of appreciation should go to the RS majors who enrolled in my seminar on American Millennialism in Spring ’99 and who unsuspectingly “test drove” this anthology. Their interest in this and in the other materials of the course was matched only by their great eagerness to learn. Along with Matt and Josh, they include Sunil Aggarwal, Rich Atalla, Rebecca Birken, Paul Chae, Beth Glick, Sharifa Gulamhussein, Andrew Harper, Colin Holbrook, Louella Jorgensen, Wes Lazara, Jack McHenry, Brian Miller, Julie Mulgrew, Aaron Murdock, Sujata Singhal, and Brad Stoddard. As the line goes: this note of thanks is modest recompense for the difficult but rewarding intellectual journey they were forced to undertake.

Fiat Lux.

Jon R. Stone  
Summer 1999  
University of California, Berkeley

## Introduction

Jon R. Stone

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view. —Festinger et al. 1956:3 [31]

The expectation of an end to time and the yearning for an earthly paradise have been enduring themes in Western religious thought. Seemingly every generation from Adam to Madonna has witnessed the emergence of one type of millennialist group or another, each declaring with renewed urgency the imminent destruction of the world and dawn of a new age. “The millennialists you will have with you always,” Jesus might well have said. But, then, Jesus was himself a millennialist, the four Gospels being a record not only of his sayings and miracles but of his prophetic warnings as well. “Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand,” he boldly preached to those lining the banks of the River Jordan. Many of those who heard his message believed and followed. As a Galilean prophet, Jesus was perhaps unrivaled, but he was not alone. His radical pronouncements against the religious establishment of his day represented but one of a myriad of “apocalyptic”<sup>1</sup> utterings spoken by prophets before and after his time. Since Jesus’ time, many of his followers throughout the world and throughout the ages have eagerly expected his return and, with it, the foretold millennial Kingdom.

There have appeared many differing types of millenarian movements in Western history, and not all of them have been Jewish or Christian.<sup>2</sup> In North America, for example, groups as doctrinally and organizationally diverse as the Shakers, Adventists, Dispensationalists, Pentecostal-Holiness, Rappites, Campbellites, Millerites, Zoarites, Mormons, Ephratans, Oneidans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Nazarenes, Church of God, Children of God, Assemblies of God, Latter Rain, Moonies, Scientologists, British Israelists, Christian Identity, and

countless varieties of New Age movements—to name only a handful—have sprouted and thrived in its culturally rich and welcoming climate. All have sought after human perfection and a paradise on or beyond this Earth.

It is therefore no surprise to find millennial expectation everywhere throughout the globe, as its orientation to time and reality has spread beyond the Western world to the remotest places of Africa, Asia, and the Melanesian Islands (see, for example, Worsley 1968; BurrIDGE 1969; and Smith 1976). However, despite the overwhelming varieties of endtime ideologies and movements, what most millenarian (or chiliastic) groups have had in common has been their conviction that their own age was corrupt and their anticipation that a restoration of an earlier, truer, and purer age was on the horizon. Though, to modern sensibilities, such hopefulness in a coming Elysian paradise might appear hopelessly naive, one certainly cannot fault this strong yearning after a peaceful and harmonious world where all things are set right and where the “dwelling place of God is among men.”

When we speak of “expectation” of the world’s end, we are mindful of the fact that generation after generation of millenarians have been disappointed. Their endtime hopes and prophecies have not come true. Not surprisingly, for some believers, prophetic failure has spelled not only the end of their hopes but the end of their movements as well. Some prophets, to be sure, have taken it upon themselves to fulfill their own predictions. As recent as January 1999, for example, Israeli police arrested fourteen members of a Colorado endtime sect calling itself the Concerned Christians. Their leader, Monte Kim Miller, had prophesied that he would die a bloody death in the streets of the Holy City and be resurrected three days later. This prophesied event, he taught, coming just before millennium’s end, would herald Christ’s Second Coming in the year 2000. Israeli police have already begun to prepare for similar “endtime” incidents that officials expect will erupt throughout the year. In similar fashion, other endtime groups, both Jewish and Christian, have openly predicted the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, the mosque built over the most sacred site in Jerusalem. This endtime prophecy, whether fulfilled through human agency or divine fiat, is believed by some to be the sign that will usher in the messianic age and, with it, the salvation of the Jews.

As a further example, a number of other groups have armed themselves in the belief that they will be joined by the hosts of angelic armies to fight the endtime battle of Armageddon, prophesied in the Apocalypse of John (the Book of Revelation). In the case of one notorious group, the Branch Davidians, their charismatic leader, David Koresh, taught that Christ would establish his Kingdom, the New Jerusalem, in the dry plains of central Texas. As faithful participants in his Second Coming, the Davidians believed that they had been divinely chosen to aid Christ in bringing his Kingdom to this world. As we know from history, after a long standoff with government agents in early 1993, their millennial dream ended in a fiery hell.

Other sensationalized endtime movements, such as Heaven’s Gate, have

turned their hatred of the sinful world inward, withdrawing into small, tightly controlled communities. In demonstration of their chosenness and of their determination to reach a heaven beyond the clouds, the thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate opted for the more drastic and irreversible step of suicide.

No matter their deeply held convictions, when one sees the horrifying images on television of shoot-outs, burning buildings, and then row upon row of pinewood coffins, the questions that naturally come to mind are: How? Why? How could this happen? Why would someone believe this? Such blind conviction and its violent consequences baffle the mind. Indeed, all these senseless deaths through violent self-destruction defy human logic and run counter to the human will to survive. If, as Schopenhauer once wrote, man wills to live ultimately and for all time, what is it about religious belief that in embracing it people are willing to cast aside their very lives and the lives of their children? Is the promise of a new life beyond the stars worth the high price of suicide or violent death?

The answer, as most religions teach, lies with the problem of human perception (or misperception) about reality. That is, perhaps the answer lies with the perception—the belief—that the material world is not really *real* and that beyond this world lies a higher and spiritually more satisfying existence. It was St. Paul who wrote in 2 Corinthians: “for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (4:18).

This is not to say that to reach it religions extol their adherents to kill themselves, but most faiths teach that the doorway to that reality *is* physical death. At death, we are told, the material body is either sloughed off or transformed, and the human soul either enters heaven or continues its upward progression along a spiritual plane. With this in mind, then, it is perhaps understandable that to the believer material existence may hold little charm when compared to the eternal bliss of a spiritual life that awaits in heaven.

To return, then, to the topic of endtime expectation: while it has sometimes been the case that the anticipation of “Kingdom come” has periodically found its fulfillment through violence, what Sartre might have identified as “bad faith,” it is important to stress that historically the turn to violence and self-destruction has been rare. Instead, most human responses to endtime expectation, while no less passionate, have been far more passive and far less dramatic. What is more, despite their lack of sensationalism, these more common and more benign endtime movements have proven no less fascinating to scholars and researchers seeking to understand the social and psychological dynamics of religious conviction and its disappointment.

## Prophetic Failure and Cognitive Dissonance

Endtime expectation and prophetic failure have presented committed believers with an interesting and persistent cognitive challenge: the problem of dissonance. Theoretically, cognitive dissonance arises when the beliefs, values, or

opinions individuals hold (that is, their cognitions) come into conflict with their experience of reality. When dissonance occurs, there tend to arise countervailing psychological pressures within persons that cause them to seek ways of reducing or eliminating dissonance. In most cases, people respond to dissonance by bringing their thoughts in line with their experiences. In some cases, however, the dissonance between beliefs and experience is not so easily resolved, especially if the conflicting beliefs or opinions have arisen from deeply held religious convictions (see Festinger 1957:9–11).

Perhaps one of the most cited examples of cognitive dissonance is that which arises from prophetic disconfirmation, the failure of a predicted event to come true. How individuals and movements respond to failed prophecy is the focus of this present collection of essays. Taking their cue from the now-classic study, *When Prophecy Fails*, by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter (1956), the various case studies that comprise this anthology, all of which have been previously published, address in some specific and theoretical way the social and psychological dynamics of prophecy and its disconfirmation. An interesting aspect of the research that has been conducted into prophecy and dissonance is that, although four decades have passed since Festinger and his colleagues published their seminal study, and despite scathing criticism and determined attempts by some researchers to refute its findings, the central thesis of the Festinger book seems largely to have held true: people tend to respond to failed prophecy in ways that reaffirm their faith.

In this introduction, I will briefly outline the Festinger thesis and then present a lengthy overview of the major subsequent studies collected in this anthology that have sought to test it. From the outset it must be stated that it is not possible to include all research that has appeared in print since the publication of the Festinger text. In fact, given the overlapping and sometimes contradictory observations and analyses these researchers have made, it will not be possible to discuss all the findings of even this sampling. Indeed, to do so would require far too much space and a far greater nimbleness of mind and pen than even the saints and ascended masters possess. Accordingly, the purpose of this introduction will not be to untangle the knots or reconcile the different findings in this growing body of literature but simply to draw out some of the more useful insights these collected studies have offered in their examination of the social and psychological dynamics of failed prophecy. At the same time, this overview will not present these case studies in strictly chronological order but will attempt to weave their findings together into a coherent survey of theoretical research into prophecy and dissonance. This introduction, then, will serve as an invitation to readers not simply to dip into this fascinating body of research but to ponder additional questions that this introduction and these essays leave unanswered.

In addition, since these are essentially theoretical, not historical, works, readers wishing to inform themselves about the history and beliefs of the various millennial movements mentioned in these essays are encouraged to refer to the long list of references found at the end of this introduction. As before, the central

focus of this introductory essay, indeed of this collection of essays, is on the social, historical, and psychological question: What happens when prophecy fails?

## ***When Prophecy Fails: The Festinger Thesis***

The social and psychological consequences of failed prophecy were first addressed over forty years ago by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter in their landmark case study, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956). In its basic formulation, the thesis Festinger and his colleagues advanced stated that an unequivocal disconfirmation of a prophesied event, in this instance the prediction of a destructive flood and the miraculous rescue of believers by flying saucers, creates a crisis of unbelief. This crisis is especially acute for those who have risked their jobs and reputations in the firm conviction that the prophecy will be fulfilled. As Festinger observed: "The fact that the predicted events did not occur is dissonant with continuing to believe both the prediction and the remainder of the ideology of which the prediction was the central item. The failure of the prediction is also dissonant with all the actions that the believer took in preparation for its fulfillment" (1956:27 [48]). Furthermore, according to Festinger, while the best course of action for shaken believers would be to discard their discredited beliefs and return to their former lives, "frequently the behavioral commitment to the belief system is so strong that almost any other course of action is preferable." Indeed, they noted, "It may even be less painful to tolerate the dissonance than to discard the belief and admit that one had been wrong." At the same time, they also noted that "the dissonance would be reduced or eliminated if the members of a movement effectively blind themselves to the fact that the prediction has not been fulfilled" (1956:27 [49]). But, as they then pointed out, most people are rational enough to recognize, and perhaps admit to themselves, that a disconfirmation had in fact occurred.

To Festinger's surprise, however, in the face of obvious prophetic disconfirmation, the group they studied sought to reduce dissonance by actively proselytizing, that is, by telling people that their prediction had in fact been correct. Thus, as their proposition holds, if believers can convince outsiders the truth of their message, perhaps persuading them to become members or supporters, this will reaffirm their beliefs, thereby serving to reduce the dissonance they feel. To quote Festinger at length on this point:

The dissonance cannot be eliminated completely by denying or rationalizing the disconfirmation. But there is a way in which the remaining dissonance can be reduced. *If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct. . . .* If the proselytizing proves successful, then by gathering more adherents and effectively surrounding himself with supporters, the believer reduces dissonance to the point where he can live with it. (1956:28 [49])

But while the Festinger thesis placed emphasis on a heightening of evangelistic fervor as the primary means by which shaken believers assuage dissonance,



successful conversion of all nonbelievers does not seem to be a necessary component of dissonance reduction. As Festinger and his team seem to imply, whether outsiders actually accept or reject the group's message, it is the proselytizing activity itself—the proclamation of their beliefs to outsiders—that serves to confirm the faith members have in their prophet-leader and in the truth of his or her teachings. Not everyone who hears the message will believe it, of course. Most will reject it out of hand. But, as Festinger stressed, in the minds of believers, rejection itself may become a type of confirmation. The reasoning becomes circular: those who hear and believe will be saved, but those who do not believe are already lost.

In this way, evangelism might be said to hold a greater benefit to the evangelist than to the ones he or she evangelizes. For, as Festinger pointed out, “If the proselytizing proves successful then by gathering more adherents and effectively surrounding himself with supporters, the believer reduces dissonance to the point where he can live with it” (1956:28 [49]). Evangelism, then, as a response to cognitive dissonance, serves a function somewhat akin to a motivational pep rally that a team of athletes (or politicians) holds in the wake of a stunning defeat: it boosts flagging morale and restores confidence in the truth of the message and the messenger. Festinger and his colleagues found this same dynamic to be true of the Lake City flying saucer group they studied. It is to this case study, the story of Mrs. Keech and her group of “Seekers,” that this essay will now briefly turn.

## Prophecies from Outer Space

The story begins in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a spiritual seeker, Mrs. Keech (her real name was Dorothy Martin), began receiving messages from higher beings through means of spirit-inspired writing. Long a student of the occult, Mrs. Keech believed that she had been chosen as the medium for a Guardian, called Elder Brother, and for a certain Sananda who in his earthly form had been the historical Jesus.

According to the messages she received, a new age of light had begun, and the Guardians were reaching out to awaken the world and bring it light. In a previous age, they taught, Jesus had appeared on Earth to reclaim humanity from the Prince of Darkness. While many had heard him and responded, spiritual darkness had once again enveloped the Earth. “It is ignorance of the Universal Laws that makes all the misery of the Earth,” the Guardians told her. “We see and know that you struggle in darkness and want to bring real light, for yours is the only planet that has war and hatred” (Festinger 1956:45). The Guardians then charged Mrs. Keech to bear witness to the world and to help bring down the light. To testify to the truth of their message, the Guardians told her that flying saucers from Venus would appear in various major cities throughout the world. None did.

Not many months after these first contacts, Mrs. Keech and her small group of followers were warned that a great flood would soon befall the Earth, a flood

so strong that it would destroy much of the inhabited areas of Western Europe and North America. But just before the flood would occur, she was told, flying saucers would appear to rescue her and her faithfully waiting followers.

Festinger recounts in some detail the story of the long wait by the "Seekers" in the late December cold and of the disappointment they felt when the space-ships—and the flood—failed to come. Without retelling their entire account, it is enough to say that after a brief period of doubt and confusion, Mrs. Keech received a message from her spirit guide congratulating the group for remaining true to the message. Their faith had saved the world from certain destruction. "Not since the beginning of time upon this Earth," praised the Guardians in their "Christmas Message to the People of the Earth," "has there been such a force of Good and light as now floods this room and that which has been loosed within this room now floods the entire Earth" (1956:169). As Festinger then noted, the Seekers' next action was evangelistic: they told their message to whomever would listen.

The Seekers' evangelistic response to failed prophecy was by no means expected. Logically, as Festinger had stressed, one would expect most people to abandon a disproven cognition in favor of a proven one. Instead, after a brief period of uncertainty, Mrs. Keech and her followers experienced a "recovery of conviction" (1956:10–11 [36–37]): they reaffirmed their belief in the prophecy and became all the more fervent in their faith. Moreover, Mrs. Keech and her Seekers actively, even aggressively, sought out ways to publicize their beliefs through all available media channels. As Festinger reported, the message Mrs. Keech brought to the press was this: "The cataclysm had been called off. The little group, sitting all night long, had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction" (1956:169). As before, for Festinger it was not enough for the group to believe that this disconfirmation was instead an affirmation of their faith; to reduce dissonance completely, members felt compelled to convince others that their faith in God had been tested by a divine ordeal (*judicium Dei*), and that their message was therefore worthy of acceptance.

Recognizing that not all groups experiencing dissonance seek to reduce it through proselytizing, Festinger and his team put forth five conditions under which, in similar cases, their thesis would hold true. These five conditions include the following:

1. A belief must be held with deep conviction and it must have some relevance to action, that is, to what the believer does or how he behaves.
2. The person holding the belief must have committed himself to it; that is, for the sake of his belief, he must have taken some important action that is difficult to undo. . . .
3. The belief must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world that events may unequivocally refute the belief.
4. Such undeniable disconfirmatory evidence must occur and must be recognized by the individual holding the belief.
5. The individual must have social support. . . . (1956:4 [31–32])

The emphasis that Festinger had placed in these conditions was on the level of a believer's personal commitment to the message, on the believer's recognition that the prophecy failed unequivocally, and on the level of social support available to a believer, the latter condition being perhaps the most critical to dissonance reduction and to group survival.

Not surprisingly, at the time of its publication the Festinger thesis created a stir among researchers, and not simply from those in the behavioral sciences. Festinger's work soon spawned a number of historical, sociological, and psychological as well as religious and literary studies, all of which sought either to test the reliability of Festinger's central thesis or to use its findings to explain the survival, growth, and success of a number of messianic and millenarian movements throughout Western history (see, for example, Holloway 1966; Zenner 1966; Cohn 1970, 1993; Gager 1975; Carroll 1979; and McGinn 1979).

What these and other subsequent studies have shown is that while most end-time groups tend to respond to failed prophecy in ways similar to that of Festinger's test case, not all groups respond by actively proselytizing others. Some have, most have not. Groups that predict catastrophe do experience dissonance in the face of disconfirmation, especially if they have committed themselves to the point where failure would open them up to embarrassment and ridicule. It has also been the case that the level of dissonance, and the corresponding effort by members to reduce it, has varied depending upon the severity and the specificity of the prophesied event. Which failure is more embarrassing, we might ask rhetorically, to predict an earthquake that does not happen or to predict a timely rescue by Venusians before that same predicted earthquake strikes? The former misprediction might be excused by society with a sigh of relief. But no geophysicist, hazarding to predict the latter, would likely escape cognitive dissonance or a straitjacket. In the latter instance, the credibility and sanity of the prophet and of her message is very much at stake. Even so, what the following highlighted studies tend to show is that, as a response to failed prophecy, active proselytizing—the Festinger thesis—is but one of a range of ways by which believers attempt to reduce dissonance, and not the only way.

## Testing the Festinger Thesis

Seeking to test the Festinger thesis, Jane Hardyck and Marcia Braden (1962) studied a group of Pentecostal Christians that, like the Seekers, had also predicted imminent destruction of the world and had likewise taken irreversible steps to prepare for it. In this case, however, the threat was a nuclear attack, and the group's salvation would be found in bomb shelters. But while the conditions had been similar to those found in Festinger's case, Hardyck and Braden noted that their group's response to prophetic failure had not been the same. When the 135 members emerged from their shelters after forty-two days together, they showed little sign of dissonance and little inclination to evangelize. In fact, the "True Word" members did not aggressively seek to publicize their beliefs and

took some pains to avoid proselytizing, even to the point of ignoring a contingent of tourists.

As Hardyck and Braden speculated, the reason the Festinger model had failed to replicate might have been owing to the high level of social support church members experienced before, during, and after the failed prophecy. To account for the difference between Festinger's test case and theirs, Hardyck and Braden offered two additional conditions to the five proposed by Festinger: "The two suggestions we have made for further conditions are that the group provide only minimal social support for its members and that the group receive ridicule from the outside world" (1962:141 [63]). Both conditions were true for the Seekers but they were not the case for the True Word group, perhaps explaining the need for the Seekers to convince unbelievers that they had been right in their conviction.

Interestingly, one can discern two similarities in the responses of both groups studied that Hardyck and Braden did not notice or mention. In fact, in their findings, neither Festinger nor Hardyck and Braden seem aware of the possible effect these overlooked post-disconfirmation responses might have exerted in reducing dissonance. The first response was to declare that the exercise had served to strengthen group ties and increase personal faith. As Mrs. Shepard, leader of the True Word group, is reported to have said the very morning her people emerged from their shelters: " 'Did you have victory? . . . The Lord has brought the people closer to Him, there is not division, there's a fellowship here and we are the holiness people.' " Then, as Hardyck and Braden related further, "Many other church members gave testimonies as to how their stay in the shelters had both strengthened their Christian fellowship and increased their belief" (1962:138 [59]). The prophecy was a test. Indeed, its fulfillment had never been intended, only its faith-strengthening result. As both Mrs. Keech and Mrs. Shepard had declared to their followers, through this experience their messages and the faith of their respective groups had been affirmed.

The second response relates to the first. The testing of faith through a predicted disaster becomes necessary not simply to affirm personal faith but to impress upon others the truth of the message. The prophecy serves as a warning to nonbelievers. It is meant to open their eyes to the fate that lies ahead for them if they continue in unbelief. This was true for the Seekers and it was also true for Mrs. Shepard's True Word group. As Hardyck and Braden pointed out, members of the True Word church "had discovered by looking back over all of their messages that it had never been stated that an attack was imminent; they had simply misinterpreted God's purposes. Really, God had just been using them to warn a world that was asleep, while at the same time he was testing their faith" (1962:139 [59]).

One important difference between these two case studies that might account for their contrasting analyses is the manner in which the two research teams had collected their data. Festinger's team had participated with the Seekers in the nonevent, while Hardyck and Braden relied on post-disconfirmation interviews

and reports. It has been said that the Festinger team's presence during the non-event might have unduly influenced the results of their research (Bainbridge 1997:137). But, at the same time, what Hardyck and Braden might have missed by not being in the shelters and by not remaining with True Word members for the forty-two-day waiting period was the *process* by which group members slowly transformed real or potential doubt (dissonance) into a reaffirmation of faith (cf. Palmer and Finn 1992).

## **"When the Bombs Drop"**

In a much later study, published by Robert Balch, Gwen Farnsworth, and Sue Wilkins (1983), we find a test case whose circumstances are similar to that found in Hardyck and Braden but whose research is conducted in a way similar to Festinger. That is, the group Balch and his colleagues selected to study predicted imminent nuclear holocaust, built bomb shelters, and waited in them on the predicted days; and, when the time came, Balch and his team of researchers entered the shelters and observed firsthand the members' responses to failed prophecy. Given this, we would expect the insights of Balch to complement or perhaps mediate the contradictory findings of these two earlier studies. In fact, they do not. Their findings seem to offer a third possible option.

As early as 1971, a renegade Baha'i teacher, Leland Jensen, had predicted that the prophesied Battle of Armageddon would begin in 1980. Soon after gathering a small group of believers in 1973, Doc, as he was called, began publishing the details of his predictions through his own small printing business. His followers actively spread the message and began building bomb shelters in preparation of the coming event.

According to Doc, the Bible had foretold a coming thermonuclear destruction and that that event would take place on April 29, 1980. What is more, Jensen believed that twenty years after this devastating nuclear holocaust, in the year 2000, Christ would return to Earth to usher in his Kingdom. Between 1980 and the dawning of the Millennium, it would be the task of his group, Baha'i Under the Provisions of the Covenant (or BUPC), to minister to the needs of survivors and prepare the world for Christ's arrival.

As with Hardyck and Braden, whose group held similar beliefs and undertook similar preparations, the responses Balch and his colleagues recorded did not follow Festinger. But neither did they accord with Hardyck and Braden. The Baha'i sect Balch observed had met most of the five conditions put forth by Festinger as well as the two additional conditions offered by Hardyck and Braden. But in the wake of disconfirmation they failed to rally together as a group and did not actively proselytize. The leader's first, but not immediate, response to failure was to reset his prediction. But by the time the new date was circulated among Doc's followers, most of his group's members had already become completely demoralized by the prophecy's failure. In fact, when the second predicted time arrived, few members became as enthusiastic as before and

even fewer entered the bomb shelters. A third time was set, but no one, not even Doc, held out hope that the bombs would drop. As a result, a movement of 150 members quickly dwindled down to a core group of about thirty-six. What is more, although after the disconfirmation Doc had encouraged members to renew their publishing activities, few, if any, did so.

But Balch and his colleagues did not leave it there. Something more interesting had taken place. While many members left the group, at the same time little defection took place among the ranks of “genuine believers” (1983:150 [138]). Also, a shift had taken place from talk about “when the bombs drop” to the need for members to be more dedicated to the teachings of their faith. As Balch and his team observed, “most believers had strong *identities* as BUPC that transcended their commitment to Doc’s prediction. . . . While most had been attracted to the faith by its apocalyptic orientation, they subsequently acquired a firm grounding in a coherent body of Baha’i teachings dating back over 100 years” (1983:153 [140], emphasis added). This point becomes their most helpful insight. Unlike the Seekers group in Festinger, then, which had been formed around Mrs. Keech’s prophecy, the beliefs and the collective identity of BUPC members had not been defined by one specific prophetic event. Though the prediction had energized them and its failure had shocked and saddened them, core members came to see that their faith as members of BUPC was not defined by the fulfillment of one prophesied event. In effect, Doc’s prophecy was judged by core members as nonessential to the group’s central message. This insight held true in a subsequent study that Balch (1997) and a new team of researchers conducted on Doc’s BUPC movement over the next fifteen years.

## When the Bombs Still Haven’t Dropped

The BUPC’s embarrassing 1980 miscalculation would not be the only series of failed predictions its leader (or his successor) would make concerning the end of the world. In fact, as Robert Balch, John Domitrovich, Barbara Lynn Mahnke, and Vanessa Morrison reported in a follow-up study of the BUPC, “Between 1980 and 1995 the group’s leader, Dr. Leland Jensen [Doc], set twenty dates for the Battle of Armageddon or lesser disasters that would lead up to the Apocalypse” (1997:74 [269]). What they found true for the first series of predictions before 1980 did not hold true during or after Doc’s subsequent predictions. In fact, as time went on and as Jensen continued to utter prediction after prediction, “hardly anyone in the BUPC except for Jensen and a few members of his inner circle met [Festinger’s] first condition of deep conviction, and the commitments specified in [Festinger’s] second condition were minimal compared to those that members had made in 1980” (1997:75 [270]).

As a modification of the Festinger thesis, Balch and his colleagues suggested that if groups survive the trauma of failed prophecy with their belief in a coming millennial age still intact, in time, the group will develop what they termed an “underground culture of dissonance-reduction” that serves to reduce “the

impact of the predictions and subsequent disconfirmations” through “disclaimers and *post facto* rationalizations” and other face-saving strategies. As they put it: “This culture enabled [BUPC] members to dismiss the predictions and move on with their everyday lives while still claiming allegiance to Jensen and the Baha’i faith.” In addition, their “goal of preparing for the holocaust ultimately was displaced by more immediate concerns, despite the fact that the group’s rhetoric remained as apocalyptic as ever” (1997:75 [270]).

An additional element of the modification Balch and his colleagues offered is their analysis of the differing responses of Jensen and his successor prophet, Neal Chase, and those of their followers. Before and after each prophecy failed, Jensen and Chase had responded in ways consistent with the Festinger thesis, but BUPC lay members had not. For instance, after the failure of Jensen’s prediction that on April 29, 1986, Halley’s comet would be pulled into the Earth’s orbit, break up, and wreak year-long havoc on the planet, “members quietly resumed their lives . . . as if it were just another day” (1997:84 [278]). By August of that year, when it had become patent that Halley’s comet would pass by the Earth without incident, members no longer openly talked about when, specifically, the world would end but how to be spiritually ready when the end does come. As Balch and his colleagues observed:

After each failed prediction, life for the BUPC continued on course. There were few traces of disillusionment among either new or old members. . . . Proselytizing continued unabated, but few members stressed the predictions when teaching the Faith. Instead they focused more on Jensen’s mission and the importance of being spiritually prepared when the prophecies of Revelation ultimately would be fulfilled. (1997:85 [279])

Thus, unlike their enthusiastic leaders, who continued to prophesy doom despite repeated failures to predict exact endtime catastrophes, BUPC members had become increasingly desensitized to repeated endtime predictions and preferred instead to continue expecting the end in *theory* while advancing their Baha’i faith in *practice*.

It should be noted that the main themes advanced by Balch in the above studies—the marginalization of prophecy, a developing “culture of dissonance reduction,” and the noticeable distinction between leader/member responses to failed prophecy—were not altogether original with him. In fact, a number of earlier case studies, those examining the multiple prophetic failures of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, had pointed to responses similar to those in the BUPC. Without too much duplication, it might therefore be helpful to consider the Festinger-related research that has centered on the history of this career prophecy movement, a movement whose founder and his successors have made no fewer than six major and perhaps a dozen or more minor endtime predictions since 1870.

## Failed Prophecy as Partial Fulfillment

As Joseph Zygmunt (1970) found in his social-historical study of recurring prophetic failures among the Jehovah's Witnesses over the period of a century, when prophecies fail, disappointed believers tend to adjust their predictions and beliefs both to fit such disconfirmations and to fit changing empirical conditions. Zygmunt referred to this dynamic as the "collective identity change" in career prophecy movements. As Zygmunt argued, a major reason for this change arises when a group derives its self-identity from predictive prophecy and makes endtime expectation central to its success as a movement. As a consequence, the group institutionalizes its prophetic outlook and its membership begins to derive its sense of purpose from endtime expectation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are perhaps the best example of this interesting social-psychological dynamic. From their founding by Charles Russell in the 1870s, the Jehovah's Witnesses have believed that God has chosen them from among the churches to fill a special role in the consummation of prophetic history. As spiritual elites, they had been given not only insight into the true meaning of the Bible but also the unique ability to discern the signs of the times that would herald Christ's second coming. Interestingly, the advent of his first failed prophecy—that Christ would come in 1878—or even later exact predictions did not shake Russell's or his followers' belief in their chosenness but renewed their sense of urgency and mission. Indeed, as Zygmunt pointed out, to shake off such belief in the face of a momentary or seeming disconfirmation would have spelled an end to the movement. To assuage dissonance, the Jehovah's Witnesses have tended to view prophetic disconfirmation as *delayed* confirmation, or rather, as a temporary reprieve. That is, in one sense, delayed fulfillment has been interpreted as an opportunity for Witnesses to redouble their efforts toward awakening other "saints" to their coming salvation. But in another sense, every nonfulfillment has been understood by Witnesses as an invitation to search the Scriptures and rethink only specific components of prophecy, not their general prophetic outlook. Since chosenness had already been established as part of their *identity*, one would assume that no failed prophecy could be devastating enough to weaken their firmly fixed sense of self.

Accordingly, after every nonfulfillment, Witnesses have discovered retrospectively through a closer reading of the Bible that a fulfillment had in fact occurred, albeit in a spiritual, not a physical, sense (Zygmunt 1970:934 [72]). In this way, the Witnesses have been able to escape the trauma of repeated prophetic failures by reinterpreting empirically stated prophecies into nonempirical fulfillments. In fact, Russell and his successors were able to argue convincingly for the nonempirical fulfillment of their prophecies by pointing out that some significant event in God's endtime calendar had actually taken place (1970:934 [72]).

For instance, though Christ's Second Coming had been predicted to occur in 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, and 1925 (and later, 1975), for Witnesses, each failure came instead to mark a partial fulfillment of God's plan. Accordingly, the year



1878 “marked the point at which the ‘nominal Christian Churches were cast off from God’s favor’”; the year 1881 “marked the time when ‘death became a blessing’” to the saints; the year 1914, the start of the Great War, marked the “‘End of the Time of the Gentiles [that is, the Christian nations]’”; the year 1918 marked the moment “Christ ‘entered the temple for the purpose of judgment’”; and the year 1925 marked the establishment of a “New Nation” with Christ as its head (Zygmunt 1970:934 [72]).

We might add that because the Plan of God was, for Russell and his successors, something similar to a puzzle, its complete picture would be revealed slowly and only as each piece of the puzzle was fitted into place. In a sense, there was not simply one event upon which the entire system hanged but what one might call a “prophetic cluster” of events that formed the endtime picture. In this way, the Witnesses were already prepared for repeated prophetic “failure,” since in some spiritual sense every event—every prophetic event—pointed to Christ’s Coming. Though no one knew the precise day or hour of the coming Kingdom, it was therefore sufficient for Witnesses simply to know that each passing day would bring them and the world closer to the long-awaited realization of the Millennium.

## The Prophecy Failure of 1975

With its well-earned notoriety as an evangelistic movement, one would expect that the Jehovah’s Witnesses would provide the best support for the Festinger thesis. But contrary to Festinger, after each failed prophecy, evangelistic activities among Witnesses declined. In fact, as Richard Singelenberg (1989) noted in his study of Dutch Witnesses, most of the movement’s evangelistic fervor occurred in anticipation of predicted events, not after their failures. This pattern was most in evidence before and after the prophecy failure of 1975 (cf. Wilson 1978). Moreover, as Mathew Schmalz (1994) has argued, not only did Witnesses fail to proselytize after 1975, but the leaders of the movement first denied that they had ever authorized the prophecy and then, to regain control and stem further losses, removed those discontented individuals who might undermine their authority.

Taken together, the findings offered by Singelenberg and Schmalz, while openly challenging the Festinger thesis, present a fuller picture of the adaptive strategies of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Because of its importance to an understanding of prophecy and dissonance, the failure of 1975 merits further examination.

In 1966, fifty years after the death of Russell, interest among Witnesses in the coming Millennium began to pique once more. It was at this point, Schmalz observed, that the Jehovah’s Witnesses, then about three million strong worldwide, experienced a heightening of expectation in the coming millennial kingdom. To quote Schmalz directly: “many Witnesses expected something significant in June of that year because of the association of the date 6/66 with 666, the mark of the beast in Revelation 13:18” (1994:298 [239]). In that same month, *The Watchtower* published a tract which outlined the chronological events that, as it

argued, pointed to 1975 as the beginning of the seventh thousand-year period of human history, the Millennium. When 1974 passed into 1975 and Witnesses realized that their hoped-for millennial age had not come, disappointment was widespread. Yet another prediction had failed to come to pass, they collectively sighed.

But, as one might have expected, the result of this prophetic nonevent was disastrous for the Witnesses. As Singelenberg observed, "After 1975 the picture totally reversed: decreasing activities, low recruitment, and high defection" (1989:34). In response, its leaders, who denied that the prophecy had ever taken place, blamed the membership for its failure, quickly instituted a purge of its leadership, and then set about winnowing its membership more generally, especially white-collar professionals and the college-educated (Schmalz 1994:299 [240]; Singelenberg 1989:34 [201–202]; Penton 1985:103–108; cf. Zygmunt 1972:260–261 [97–99]; and van Fossen 1988). This strategy, Schmalz reported, turned attention away from the failure of the 1975 prophecy and essentially saved the organization from certain collapse. As he related, "Watchtower reactions to disconfirmation seem primarily directed toward reestablishing group cohesion through revision, denial, and purge" (Schmalz 1994:304 [246]; cf. Penton 1985:99–126).

While Singelenberg's and Schmalz's intended aims were to show the inadequacies of the Festinger thesis, it should be pointed out that what their papers seem also to have vividly underscored was not only that disconfirmation results in dissonance but that a prediction can sometimes relieve dissonance. This point seems to hold especially true for groups that experience repeated cycles of expectation and disappointment. It is true that Witnesses were certainly eager to accept their leaders' intimations of Christ's soon-coming because such predictions were in keeping with their endtime orientation. But, at the same time, the prediction, such as the one for 1975, also provided momentary relief from the "pent-up" dissonance created by nearly a century of unresolved anticipation. Over time, the Witnesses' watchword, "perhaps today," was threatening to become "perhaps never." Indeed, as the years wore on, Judge Rutherford's oft-quoted refrain, "Millions now living will never die," coined in 1920, was slowly losing its poignancy. The leaders found that they needed some way to renew the immediacy and excitement Witnesses once brought to the task of witnessing. The 1975 prediction served these purposes perfectly.

Thus, as Witnesses worldwide confidently embraced the 1975 prediction, it seemed to have relieved their slowly building dissonance. As Schmalz affirmed: "This prophecy galvanized the movement and proselytism increased substantially" (1994:298 [239]). Even so, though the 1975 prophecy may have provided momentary relief from built-up dissonance, its failure brought with it even greater disappointment, heightened dissonance, inner turmoil, and eventual decline.

## Adapting to Failed Prophecy

In trying to account for these differing responses to failed prophecy, subsequent studies have pointed to various strategies that groups have adopted as a means of adapting to empirical disconfirmation. As with the Jehovah's Witnesses discussed above, whose 1975 disconfirmation brought with it denials, finger-pointing, and purges, other movements have responded similarly to failed prophecies. Interestingly, for the Witnesses it was these tactics, plus an existing organizational structure, that helped prevent disintegration of the movement as a whole. Other groups, such as Mrs. Keech's Seekers, were not as creative or enterprising in managing the dissonance of their followers.<sup>3</sup> As Joseph Zygmunt has observed: "The disintegration and collapse of many millenarian movements are traceable to their failure to cope effectively with the strains induced by prophetic disconfirmations or nonconfirmations, generally because they have not developed the requisite organizational resources" (1972:259 [97]). The Witnesses are not unique in their successful use of adaptive strategies.<sup>4</sup>

According to Zygmunt, when movements experience a heightening of dissonance caused by prophetic failure, they tend to draw upon existing organizational resources. These organizational resources include "adaptive patterns of response," or what Zygmunt called three "modes of adaptation" (1972:259–260 [97]; see Prus 1976 on "management of dissonance"). These adaptive strategies underscore the resilience of a group's ideological structure and of the beliefs its members embrace. This seems especially true when those beliefs are largely non-empirical and when a prophet's empirical predictions are ambiguous. Briefly summarized, Zygmunt's three possible modes of adaptation include either: (1) acknowledgment of error and a restructuring of the group along more modified lines of expectation; (2) the assignment of blame, either internal or external, and a redirection of organizational resources toward either purification or revival of the group, greater evangelistic activities, or critique of the nonbelieving social order; or (3) a refusal to accept the failure of the prophecy and the reinterpretation of the group's beliefs along more symbolic and hence more unfalsifiable lines (1972:259–265 [97–100]). Not surprisingly, in subsequent studies on responses to failed prophecy, Zygmunt's pathbreaking approach to addressing the question of prophecy and dissonance has tended to supersede that offered by Festinger. As a result, in a few later cases the Festinger thesis has been relegated to the place of an obligatory footnote (see, for example, Dien 1997).

Zygmunt's third adaptive response—denial of disconfirmation—was developed further in a perceptive essay by J. Gordon Melton (1985). In his article, Melton took issue with the Festinger thesis for its assumption that the entire belief system of a millennial movement hangs on one prophesied event. As Melton put it: "Though one or more prophecies may be important to a group, they will be set within a complex set of beliefs and interpersonal relationships. They may serve as one of several important sources determining group activity, but the prediction is only one support device for the group, not the essential

rafter" (1985:19 [147]). To understand this critical element, Melton argued, is to understand a dynamic central to endtime movements: "*prophecy seldom fails*" (1985:20 [147]). Melton challenged the notion that prophecies fail for the group, arguing instead that predictive prophecy is simply part of a larger system of beliefs (what Melton called the "total gestalt" of a movement). As Melton reiterated further, "the denial of failure is not just another option, but the common mode of adaptation of millennial groups following the failure of a prophecy" (1985:21 [149]).

Given this fact, prophetic disconfirmation, while dissonant in itself, will be seen to exert only modest influence over the stability of the group's overall beliefs. As Melton went on to explain: "In the face of dissonance, believers are able to rely upon the broader context of faith, on the unfalsifiable beliefs out of which religious thought-worlds are constructed." Therefore, Melton then noted, alluding to Zygmunt, it is within such a broader context that "believers can engage in a reaffirmation of basic faith and make a reappraisal of their predicament" (1985:20 [148]). In this way, denial of disconfirmation can be seen as an appropriate and expectable cognitive response to failure (cf. Tumminia 1998). As Neil Weiser had stressed a decade earlier, "Prophecies cannot and do not fail *for the committed*." Core beliefs "will remain intact," he noted, because a group's post-disconfirmation behavior is aimed at reaffirming such beliefs (Weiser 1974:20 [105], emphasis added). But unlike Zygmunt and Melton, Weiser argued that proselytism is itself a mode of adaptation in that it provides believers the means by which "to ascertain social support." Indeed, in his comparative study on dissonance, Weiser pointed to certain rationalizations and diversions that believers use to deny disconfirmation so as to reduce the effects of dissonance. The strategies Weiser offered, many of which are similar to those offered by Zygmunt and Melton, point to the "flexibility and ability of the millennial belief to adapt to new events" that might otherwise undermine a believer's convictions (1974:24 [110]; for an insightful historical example, see Foster 1987).

From Melton's observations one might also add that the social and cultural responses to prophetic failure work in tandem in virtually all successful cases of dissonance reduction. In addition, the spiritualizing of a "failed" prophecy does not take hold or work until there are the necessary social supports upon which disappointed and discouraged members can lean. In the same way, social support, while critical, is not sufficient to assuage disappointment unless the failed prophecy, in turn, can be reinterpreted within the context of the group's overall system of beliefs. The process appears to build upon itself.

What happens when prophecy fails? According to Melton, since the group does not acknowledge empirical disconfirmation in the way an outsider might, the question makes little sense. As before, for endtime movements, whose prophecies are "set within a complex set of beliefs and interpersonal relationships," prophecy as such seldom, if ever, fails (1985:19 [147]). Successful reinterpretation of prophecy and simultaneous reintegration of group members appear to lessen significantly, if not altogether relieve, the sting of a failed prophecy.

Additionally, predictive prophecy might be said to serve purposes beyond simply the fulfillment of the prophecy itself. For instance, a prophecy might be used to motivate group members to achieve certain collective goals (Prus 1976), to relieve dissonance brought about by unresolved expectations (Zygmunt 1970 and Schmalz 1994), or to reassert a prophet's legitimate authority when challenged by a rival (Festinger et al. 1956:92–114). As in the case of Doc and the BUPC (Balch et al. 1997), one might also argue that a series of endtime predictions might simply be a means by which, through trial and error, prophet-leaders slowly work out their cosmologies. In this respect, the prophet is very much like a ship's captain who takes frequent soundings while slowly navigating his vessel through uncharted waters: prophecy becomes a way by which the prophet maps his or her way through a spiritual *terra incognita*, through unknown cosmic time and space.

## Ritualizing Prophetic Failure

What these studies tend to assume is the natural receptivity of members to predictive prophecy as well as a willing acceptance by followers of its reinterpretation after failure. While Susan Palmer and Natalie Finn (1992) found some of the same reinterpretive dynamics as Zygmunt and Melton, in comparing the responses of two Canadian groups that had experienced failed prophecy, however, they noted that prophecy can fail if not received within a context already receptive to it. As they found, one group completely disintegrated after the experience of disconfirmation, while the other was strengthened by it. How, they asked, does one account for these differing results? In answering this question, Palmer and Finn looked to the prophesied moment itself and examined how groups pass through what they termed the "rite of apocalypse." What they discovered was that though the leaders of both millennial movements had prophesied an end to the world, the manner in which the groups received the prophecy and then experienced the endtime event differed.

For example, in the case of La Mission de l'Esprit Saint (MES), Emmanuel Robitaille, its young leader, foretold the coming Battle of Armageddon but gave no further instructions to his followers as to how they should prepare for it. Without guidance, the membership eventually scattered in confusion. In the second case, that of the Institute of Applied Metaphysics (IAM), its leader, Winifred Barton, had predicted an extraterrestrial visitation that would change the world "as we know it" (Palmer and Finn 1992:397 [211]). But in contrast to Robitaille, Barton led her followers through a process from preparation to fulfillment much as a priest leads parishioners through the liturgy. As Palmer and Finn explained, "waiting for world's end is a symbolic act . . . and it requires the presence of ritual actors and the organization of sacred time and sacred space" (1992:409 [226–227]). As they went on to note, drawing on Victor Turner's concept of the ritual process, the "rite of apocalypse" is a transformative process, a communal reordering of time and space. Though "improvised," the rite of apocalypse com-

bines elements of initiation, meditation, and purification found in other types of ritual behavior (1992:409 [225]).<sup>5</sup> In effect, the acting out of a predicted event represents a ritualized reaffirmation of belief. Thus, they concluded, as evidenced in the differing results of the MES and IAM movements, to be successful, the process—reception, separation, and fulfillment—must include both the gathering together of members who witness the endtime event and a collective experience of its symbolic fulfillment as mediated by their prophet-leader.

In this way, the ritual dimension of prophetic expectation, a ritual in which members participate in its fulfillment through symbolic acts, aids our understanding of how some millennial groups succeed or fail to pass through the period of crisis that arises following prophetic disconfirmation. As Palmer and Finn skillfully demonstrate, ritual fulfillment seems to provide disappointed members with the necessary social and psychological supports to make such an experience less cognitively distressing.

## **Regaining Lost Credibility through Prophetic Reinterpretation**

In all the studies considered thus far, to a greater or lesser extent the analyses offered by Zygmunt (1970 and 1972) and Melton (1985) have tended to add the most theoretical depth to our understanding. In each of the cases, including Festinger's, when faced with unequivocal disconfirmation, the prophets have offered their followers a spiritualized (nonempirical) reinterpretation of their failed prophecies. In some cases, we might also note, the reinterpretation has been preemptive: it appeared in the form of a qualification given just before or just in case the prediction failed or fails. But in the main, prophets have encouraged their followers to see the apparent nonfulfillment of prophecy through the spiritual eyes of faith. Indeed, it is through eyes of faith that the real meaning and intended purpose of the prophecy come into greater focus. Such is the case in the two final studies to be discussed below, one that examined the spiritualizing activities of the leader of a Japanese sect, the other the spiritualizing activities of the followers of the New York rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the late spiritual leader of Lubavitch Habad.

In the case examined by Takaaki Sanada and Edward Norbeck (1975), that of a small postwar Japanese sect, the focus of failed prophecy shifts from reactions of the followers to the responses of the dishonored prophet. Indeed, for Sanada and Norbeck, dishonor becomes the key to understanding the spiritualizing of disconfirmation. Thus, though certainly presenting a serious challenge to the Festinger thesis, the case presented by Sanada and Norbeck also provides a cross-cultural comparative look at how prophets and their followers respond to and reinterpret prophetic failure.

As they related, Katsuichi Motoki, the prophet-healer of the sect Ichigen-no-Miya, The Shrine of the Fundamental Truth, informed his followers in January 1974 that the Spirit had told him that a devastating earthquake would strike the