

## WHEN THE BOMBS DROP

### Reactions to Disconfirmed Prophecy in a Millennial Sect

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This article reports the results of an ethnographic study of a millennial Baha'i sect whose leader predicted that the world would be devastated by nuclear war on April 29, 1980. Shortly before that date we began a participant-observer study of the sect, and during the following eight months we supplemented our observations by interviewing members and defectors in the four states where the group's leader had a substantial following. The purpose of the investigation was to replicate the classic study of disconfirmed prophecy reported in *When Prophecy Fails* by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter. They found that prophetic disconfirmation was followed by an increase in conviction and heightened efforts to recruit new believers. We report contrary findings and explore social psychological factors that might account for the difference between our findings and the results of the Festinger et al. study. We argue that reactions to prophetic failure are shaped less by psychological forces than by social circumstances existing at the time of disconfirmation.

**On April 29, 1980**, members of a small Baha'i sect<sup>1</sup> entered fallout shelters to await a thermonuclear war that would fulfill the prophecies of Revelation. In exactly one hour they believed one-third of mankind would perish in the holocaust. During the next 20 years they expected the world to be further ravaged by starvation and disease, worldwide revolution, and natural disasters caused by the Earth's shifting crust. Finally, in the year 2000, God's

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Kingdom would be established on Earth and a thousand years of peace would ensue.

About one month before April 29 we began a participant-observer study of this group. Although the project has become an ongoing affair, our original intent was to replicate the classic study by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) of the reactions to disconfirmed prophecy. Festinger and his colleagues infiltrated a millennial flying saucer cult to test the hypothesis that disconfirmation of the leader's prophecy would result in increased conviction and heightened efforts to recruit new believers. They argued that members of apocalyptic groups experience severe cognitive dissonance when their prophecies fail. If believers have made strong commitments based on their faith, they cannot easily abandon their beliefs. Instead, their only recourse is to seek consonant information, including the social support of fellow believers, and that should entail increased efforts to persuade nonbelievers to accept the faith.

Festinger et al. tested their hypothesis by observing the reactions of a millennial cult (the Lake City group) when the expected catastrophe failed to happen. The group's leader, a woman they called Marian Keech, had received several messages from a space being named Sananda warning her about a devastating flood that would inundate much of North America on a particular date. Even after her prophecy failed, the most committed members maintained their beliefs. Mrs. Keech claimed that the world had been saved by their faith, and she pointed to earthquakes in other parts of the globe to prove that disastrous upheavals had really occurred, although not in the manner she expected. She also made several more predictions in rapid succession, all disconfirmed, in what appeared to be a desperate attempt to save face. Most important, she and her followers began to proselyte almost immediately—a finding that is especially remarkable in view of the fact that Mrs. Keech had been relatively unconcerned about spreading Sananda's messages prior to the disconfirmation.

However, a subsequent study of a millennial Christian sect called the Church of the True Word failed to support the proselyting hypothesis. Hardyck and Braden (1962) found that Church

members did not attempt to win new converts after an expected nuclear attack failed to occur. Out of 135 believers who entered fallout shelters, 103 remained underground for 42 days until Mrs. Shepard, their prophet, told them to come out. Testimonies and follow-up interviews indicated that they remained firm in their beliefs. Members claimed that God had merely been testing their faith and using them as an example to warn an apathetic world. Mrs. Shepard's followers continued to believe that war was imminent, but they made no efforts to proselyte after they emerged from their shelters, even though they had numerous opportunities to do so.

Consequently, the evidence concerning the urge to proselyte after prophetic failure is contradictory. Hardyck and Braden suggested that Festinger et al. failed to specify all the conditions under which proselyting will occur. Here we attempt to build on their conclusion by arguing that reactions to disconfirmed prophecy depend on the social context in which disconfirmation is experienced. Because adaptation to prophetic failure is a collective process (Zygmunt, 1972), any theory that neglects the role of interactional variables will have limited value in explaining how millennial movements react when their prophecies fail.

### DATA COLLECTION

Unfortunately, most accounts of millennial movements do not provide much information about group dynamics at the moment of disconfirmation. The best way to get this information is to be on the scene when prophetic failure occurs, but outsiders rarely have that opportunity. They must rely on after-the-fact interviews, as Hardyck and Braden did, or historical records, which are often unreliable or incomplete. Like Festinger et al., however, we were lucky enough to witness firsthand the moment of truth.

We first heard about the apocalyptic sect known as the Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant (BUPC) about two months before the impending cataclysm.<sup>2</sup> The little-known sect based in Missoula, Montana, was catapulted into the headlines when the

local paper exposed a nuclear preparedness group as a BUPC organization. Known as SAFE, standing for Shelter and Fall-Out Education, the group has been organized by the BUPC to upgrade Missoula's fallout shelters and educate Missoulians about nuclear survival.

With the permission of the sect's leader, Dr. Leland Jensen (known as "Doc" to his followers), we began participating in all manner of BUPC activities. These included "feasts" held every 19 days according to the Baha'i calendar, "firesides" where the BUPC teach the faith to "prospective members," and "deepenings" intended to explore Baha'i writings in greater depth. In the hectic days before April 29 we spent long hours collating pages for Doc's latest manuscript (Jensen, 1980) and helping members prepare their fallout shelters. When the fateful day finally arrived, we joined believers in three different underground shelters, and we returned on May 7 after Doc reset the date for the catastrophe. During the next six months we interviewed 41 of Doc's followers, including believers in Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas. In addition to these formal contacts, we have spent a considerable amount of time with the BUPC in more casual settings.

### **A CLOSER LOOK AT THE BAHA'IS UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF THE COVENENT**

Any discussion of the BUPC must begin with Doc, the jovial 67-year-old chiropractor who predicted the cataclysm for April 29. Once an internationally known Baha'i teacher, Doc was expelled from Baha'i Faith in 1960 for aligning himself with a schismatic leader named Mason Remey. Believing that a catastrophic flood was about to inundate much of the United States, Mason urged his followers to move to high ground in the Rocky Mountains, and in 1964 Doc opened a chiropractic office in Missoula. Because of opposition within Mason's following stemming from a 1963 doctrinal dispute, he became discouraged with the human side of the faith and stopped teaching altogether shortly after moving to Montana.

In 1969 Doc was convicted of performing a “lewd and lascivious act” on a 15-year-old patient, and despite his claims of a frame-up, he was sentenced to 20 years in the state penitentiary. Not long after his arrival, Doc says he was visited in his cell by an angel who informed him of his spiritual identity. Drawing on a remarkable set of parallels between events in his life and certain Biblical prophecies, Doc issued a proclamation in 1971 claiming to be Joshua, the high priest prophesied in Zechariah 3. According to Doc, Joshua is the return of Jesus who will establish the Kingdom after the holocaust. Eventually Doc claimed several other Biblical identities, including the Lamb and the Seventh Angel described in Revelation.

Once the angel lifted the veil from his eyes, Doc was able to comprehend the symbolism of the Scriptures. He began tying together diverse strands of Biblical prophecy, Baha’i teachings, and pyramidology, a fascination dating from his childhood. All the evidence pointed to the same inescapable conclusion that nuclear catastrophe was imminent. As early as 1971 Doc predicted that the war would begin in 1980, caused by a conflict between the superpowers over Middle East oil. After the four waves of destruction (Revelation 7:1) had cleansed the world of evil and apostasy, Doc believed that the remainder of mankind would embrace the BUPC faith and peace and harmony would prevail for the next thousand years.

Shortly after his visitation, Doc began holding firesides for his fellow inmates. Twice a week 20 to 30 attended his meetings, and by the time he was paroled in 1973 Doc had recruited a small group of highly committed believers. Some of his converts became effective teachers in their own right. One of Doc’s first recruits was largely responsible for establishing a branch of the faith in Sheridan, Wyoming, where about 15 people eventually became followers.

After his release Doc began spreading his message outside the prison walls. In 1978 he took an extended trip throughout the midwestern and Rocky Mountain states trying to convert many of Mason Remey’s followers, and his efforts led to the establishment of small BUPC groups in Durango, Colorado and Ft. Smith,

Arkansas. It is impossible to say how many believers there were on the eve of April 29, 1980, but roughly 150 people in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas made plans to enter fallout shelters "when the bombs dropped" (one of Doc's favorite expressions).<sup>3</sup>

Prior to April 29 the BUPC were a recruitment-oriented group whose lives revolved around teaching the faith. Teaching was expected and Doc claimed that proselyting would be rewarded with a high station in God's kingdom. To that end the BUPC organized the Communications Club, a group modeled after Toastmasters, to improve public speaking skills, and they compiled a "teacher's manual" explaining how to teach the faith to nonbelievers. Recruitment proceeded almost entirely through friendship networks and family ties (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). Persons interested in learning about the faith were invited to a series of firesides, usually held in a member's home, where they were systematically introduced to Doc's teachings as well as the basic principles of the Baha'i faith. Although we have no reliable figures, it appears that most of those who completed the fireside sequence became believers.

In 1979 Doc determined that the bombs would drop at precisely 5:55 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time. As the date approached, his followers stepped up their efforts to prepare for the holocaust. Their most ambitious undertaking was SAFE. Recognizing that the organization might be discredited if it became identified with a group of "religious fanatics," they preferred to keep its connection with Doc a secret. Under the auspices of SAFE members taught classes on shelter management and radiological monitoring, and they printed thousands of leaflets explaining what to do in the event of a nuclear attack.

SAFE disbanded after it was exposed as a BUPC project, and because of lack of public support, its members abandoned their plans to improve the community's shelters. With the date less than two months away, even teaching the faith diminished as Doc's followers turned their energies to building and stocking their private shelters. There were eight in the Missoula area, including a "community shelter" for members who could not afford their

own. The major focus of group activity during the last month was the print shop. Doc owned a small printing business that printed commercial work by day and Doc's manuscripts by night. Day after day the BUPC assembled pages until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. in a frantic effort to publish 10,000 copies of Doc's latest book before April 29.

Meanwhile, the public was at least vaguely aware that the Baha'is were preparing for Armageddon. Doc received considerable local newspaper and TV coverage, and the Associated Press carried several stories about his predictions. Although members occasionally complained about media bias, they generally believed the coverage was fair. In Missoula there was some ridicule in the form of jokes on the radio, impromptu doomsday parties, and a few crank calls to believers, but overall the atmosphere could best be described as indifferent.

Finally, on the night of April 28, about 80 believers met at a potluck feast in Missoula for the last time before Armageddon. They joked and laughed and enjoyed their meal as if nothing unusual were about to happen. Were it not for the speeches that followed, an outsider would not have guessed that these cheerful people were expecting nuclear warheads to strike within 24 hours. The festivities concluded around 10:00 p.m. and then the faithful dispersed to their respective shelters to await the missiles that would usher in the new age.

### **SUITABILITY OF THE BAHAI SECT FOR TESTING THE FESTINGER HYPOTHESIS**

Festinger et al. specified five conditions that must be met before prophetic failure can be expected to be followed by increased conviction and vigorous proselyting. According to the first, a belief must be held with deep conviction and it must have some relevance for action. Although the BUPC included many fringe members who were skeptical about Doc's prediction, the vast majority took it very seriously. Only a few expressed doubts to any of us, and interviews with ex-members who left the group before April 29

confirm our impression that the level of belief was very high. Doc's prediction obviously had direct implications for their behavior. Even true believers would perish if they did not prepare for the holocaust, and the fact that they made extensive preparations is strong evidence that members expected the bombs to drop on April 29.

The second condition is closely tied to the first. Believers must make irreversible commitments based on their conviction. Doc was so confident that he staked the validity of all his teachings on the accuracy of his prediction. For example, in a small book entitled *The Most Mighty Document* (1979: 61-62) he posed the following question:

DOES YOUR RELIGION (sect or denomination) tell you the "Day and the Hour" for the oncoming *thermo-nuclear holocaust* in which *a third of mankind are to be killed*, so that you can be 100 miles from a thermo-nuclear blast (Rev. 14:20)? If it doesn't it lacks Divine Guidance to save you [italics in original].

There is no doubt most believers made enormous commitments. They organized SAFE to alert the community to the dangers of radioactive fallout, and they built their own shelters at great expense, often running up huge bills which they had trouble paying after the 29th. Virtually all of them attempted to persuade friends and relatives to accept the faith or at least take precautions. Some wrote to the local paper explaining their beliefs; a few wrote pamphlets about the faith, which Doc printed and distributed along with his own manuscripts. Many believers had moved to Missoula, in some cases from almost 2000 miles away, just to be near Doc when the war began.

The third condition is that the prediction must be sufficiently specific to be refuted unequivocally. By specifying that the bombs would drop at precisely 5:55 p.m. Mountain Daylight Time on April 29, 1980, Doc clearly left no room for hedging.

The fourth condition requires undeniable evidence that the predicted events did not occur. This, too, was quite clear. No bombs fell on April 29; Doc's followers were well aware that the day passed without incident.



Finally, there must be social support for the apocalyptic belief. Festinger et al. added this provision because they felt that believers would be unable to withstand the devastating impact of disconfirmation if they did not have at least some degree of support from others. The BUPC met this condition as well. They were a close-knit group, bound by a single undisputed leader, a shared set of beliefs, family and friendship ties, and regular social interaction. The believers referred to themselves as “the friends” or “the community,” and some compared themselves to an extended family, an analogy that we found quite appropriate. The sect constituted a relatively exclusive social world where close ties with nonbelievers were unusual.

In short, the BUPC met all five conditions specified by Festinger et al. How well, then, did their behavior following April 29 conform to the hypothesis that conviction and recruitment efforts would increase after disconfirmation?

### REACTIONS TO DISCONFIRMATION

Contrary to the hypothesis, the failure of Doc’s prediction did not strengthen the believers’ convictions, nor did it produce an increase in proselyting. In fact, just the opposite occurred. It took several months before some members would admit to us just how badly shaken they had been when the bombs did not drop on April 29.

Although reactions varied from shelter to shelter, most believers at first appeared relatively unconcerned, as if the 29th had not been an important event. Events in the community shelter provide a good example. The appointed time appeared to pass unnoticed even though there had been a high degree of tension earlier in the day. Members continued to work on last-minute projects, but the atmosphere became increasingly subdued as 5:55 approached and passed without incident. Since the shelter door still was not securely in place, it was easy for believers to slip out quietly, and many took advantage of the opportunity. Those who remained said little. Around 8:30 p.m. a large group, including

the senior author, went out for dinner at a nearby restaurant. No one seemed concerned about the possibility that Doc's prediction might have been off by a few hours. In fact, no one said anything about the bombs. Much of the meal was spent in silence broken only by occasional small talk. Back in the shelter they watched television or read quietly, saying almost nothing until 12:15 a.m., when the shelter manager casually asked a small group of believers what they thought about the unexpected turn of events. However, there was little discussion, and by 1:00 a.m. the lights were out and the shelter was completely silent.

The next few days were undoubtedly the most anomic the BUPC had ever experienced. The situation could best be described as an informational vacuum. Doc's followers were scattered over four states, and even in the Missoula area there were several shelters, three of them about 30 miles out of town. Members were even more widely dispersed than this implies because many stayed at home on the assumption that they would have about eight hours to seek shelter before the fallout arrived from West Coast target areas like Portland and Seattle. Although their shelters were equipped with CB radios, Doc had not bothered to make specific plans for keeping in contact with his followers, nor had he specified any particular length of time that members should remain underground. He merely assumed that they would need to stay there about two weeks. In Missoula some of the believers stayed for as long as three days, but most had come out by the evening of April 30. In the community shelter about two-thirds of those who had been there before 5:55 p.m. on the 29th had left by midnight.

Doc's first response to disconfirmation was to reset the time for 6:11 a.m. on May 7. Citing a passage in Revelation, he claimed the reason for the delay was "to give the peoples of the world a chance to hear the voice of their savior and be saved, or to condemn him and go into the fire." However, word of the new prediction circulated informally by word of mouth because Doc made no systematic effort to get the message out. In fact, the BUPC did not meet again as a group until May 16.

During this period group activities stopped almost completely. We never saw more than two or three people at the print shop,

and work on the community shelter was halfhearted at best. The shelter committee met at least twice, but most of the enthusiastic volunteers we had observed before April 29 had disappeared. The group became decidedly less visible as believers withdrew into their private spaces, and observation suddenly became very difficult. Members who had once been extremely open to us cooled noticeably. For example, on the senior author's first visit to the community shelter after the 29th, most of the believers avoided eye contact, gave brief, businesslike replies to questions, and generally acted as if he were not there. Although Doc remained friendly and open, we generally felt like intruders.

By May 4 Doc had added a four-page addendum, printed in red, to his manuscript explaining what really happened on April 29. Citing numerous phone calls from reporters as far away as Australia, he claimed to have fulfilled the prophecy of Revelation 16:17 and 18 in which the Seventh Angel pours his "bowl of wrath" into the air. This, he said, refers to the worldwide media coverage his message received on the 29th. In this addendum Doc also drew a parallel between himself and Noah, claiming that the Old Testament prophet had been similarly mistaken the first time he predicted the deluge. He cited the Koran, which says that Noah made three predictions before the flood finally occurred, and Matthew 24:37, which prophesies that "The coming of the Son of Man will repeat what happened in Noah's time." This explanation quickly became the most widely cited reason for the disconfirmation.

While the red pages were being added to the book, Doc received a phone call that provided him with still another explanation for April 29. The caller, a formal Naval officer, claimed that the Soviet Union had launched a spy satellite armed with nuclear warheads at the precise moment Doc had predicted.<sup>4</sup> Believing that the United States considered this an act of war, Doc announced that this action would set in motion a chain of events that would culminate in the holocaust, now set for May 7.

In spite of Doc's explanation, the BUPC appeared very demoralized. Most members we interviewed expressed skepticism about Doc's account of the spy satellite, although none would rule it out entirely, and we rarely heard anyone mention it in casual

conversations. The parallel with Noah continued to be the most popular explanation for the disconfirmation, but some members who had once presented themselves to us as true believers now insisted that they had always been skeptical about Doc's prediction. Many of them cited Matthew 25:13, which says that no man knows the day or the hour when the Son of Man will return.

The May 7 date failed to rekindle enthusiasm. Most members told us they did not believe the bombs would drop then, and hardly anyone volunteered to work in the print shop or community shelter. Fewer people made plans to reenter a shelter, and the community shelter was almost empty when the date arrived. After the 7th also passed uneventfully Doc tried one last time, suggesting that the bombs might drop on either May 22 or 23, but by then no one (to our knowledge) believed him, and even Doc later admitted to us that he had been "grasping at straws."

Within a few days after April 29 we began hearing comments about increasing quarrels and family problems in the group, including a brief fight between two members of the shelter committee. We witnessed several flareups ourselves. Most were triggered by minor incidents like borrowing a tool without permission, not returning something to its proper place, or leaving a shelter door open.

On May 16 the Missoula group finally gathered for their first feast since April 29. Normally the responsibility for feasts fell to Doc's followers, but this time no one volunteered, so Doc organized the gathering himself. Thirty-six believers attended, not counting Doc and his wife, and almost all of them were core members who had been extremely active in the faith prior to the 29th. Superficially there was no evidence of the tension and demoralization we have described. The atmosphere was friendly and cheerful, and not once did we hear anyone mention April 29 or the thermonuclear war, even though the third date was only one week away.

After a few prayers about persecution, suffering, and standing fast in the faith, Doc addressed the group. Besides explaining what happened on April 29, he criticized his followers for bickering and shirking their responsibilities. Using himself as an example

of courage in the face of adversity, he exhorted them to remain true to the faith, but we failed to observe any signs of enthusiasm during his talk. Of particular significance were Doc's comments on proselyting. As if even he did not think the bombs would drop on May 22 or 23, he declared that the war would not begin until the BUPC had recruited the 144,000 prophesied in Revelation. To help spread the message he had brought a box of his books and urged members to distribute copies all over town. Doc was more forceful about proselyting than we had ever seen him. In some of this strongest language he exhorted them to "Rise and shine! Establish the Kingdom! Teach as you never have before!"

Despite Doc's pep talk, no one took any books and hardly any teaching occurred throughout the summer. To our knowledge none of Doc's followers was ever approached by the press, and none of them sought media attention. Firesides were discontinued, and most believers kept a low profile in town. Usually they told us that they did not mention the faith to anyone unless someone asked them about it. Even Doc's efforts at spreading the faith were subdued. He issued a press release, composed a lengthy letter to the local paper which was never published, and answered questions from dozens of reporters who called after the 29th; but otherwise he did nothing to get his message out to the world.

Attendance at feasts continued to drop over the summer until it hit an all-time low of 11 on September 27. The BUPC even missed two feast dates because, again, no one volunteered. There were three major reasons for the small attendance figures. First, some of the 80 who attended the April 29 feast were not committed believers, but friends and relatives who knew relatively little about Doc and his teachings. None of these people ever returned. Second, several members moved out of town, ostensibly to find work, but often to escape what they described as an oppressive atmosphere within the group poisoned by internal conflict. Even though the BUPC strongly condemned the practice of backbiting, the amount of malicious gossip that circulated after the 29th was considerable. Doc himself contributed to the problem. For example, during a feast we attended, he openly questioned his followers about alleged drug use by three members who were

rumored to have joined a rival sect. The third reason for poor attendance at feasts is what some members characterized as "burn-out." They had worked feverishly and exhausted their resources preparing for the 29th, and now with the date postponed indefinitely, they preferred to return to some semblance of normalcy.

However, the poor turnout at feasts did not reflect widespread defection from the faith. For our purposes defection can be defined as rejection of the formerly held belief that Doc is the "promised one" prophesied in Zechariah. Since some of those who made plans to enter a shelter did not even know much about Doc, they could hardly be classified as defectors when they failed to attend the feasts after April 29. If we restrict our attention to those who genuinely believed in Doc, two patterns become apparent. In the Missoula group we found only four members who could be classified as defectors six months after the 29th. Three of them had been central figures and their defection came as a shock to the rest of the group. While the defectors refused to reject the possibility that Doc might ultimately be right, they each expressed serious reservations about his messianic claims. Otherwise, everyone in the Missoula group continued to profess belief in Doc, although many admitted that they occasionally entertained doubts. It appears that even those who failed to attend feasts over the summer continued to believe. On the other hand, almost all the believers outside Montana eventually rejected Doc's teachings. Everyone in the Arkansas group defected, as did most of the believers in Colorado and Wyoming. To our knowledge only three members of the Colorado group remained steadfast by the end of the summer, and possibly two in Wyoming.<sup>5</sup>

During the summer we began to hear a new theme in both formal interviews and casual conversations with believers. The BUPC explained that the community had been so preoccupied with preparations for the war before April 29 that they had neglected the basic Baha'i teachings. They spoke less and less about Doc and his predictions and increasingly about the need to live their lives according to Baha'i principles. The best way to teach the faith, they claimed, was to become a living example for others. As one woman explained, "I think we all made a mistake.

We got too caught up in the physical. We weren't ready for the war because spiritually none of us were strong enough." As early as May 14 we noticed that hardly anyone still used the familiar expression, "when the bombs drop." Although they all continued to believe that war was inevitable, their personal predictions varied from "within a year" to "the turn of the century."

We also detected a new fatalistic trend. Once obsessed with preparedness, many believers adopted the attitude that they would survive if God meant them to. They lost the community shelter when they could no longer pay the rent on the warehouse basement where it was located, and most of the group's private shelters, including Doc's, were at least partly dismantled. Only two BUPC in Wyoming remained active in civil defense work, but one of them claimed she no longer believed in Doc.

For his part, Doc continued to revise his explanations for the failure of the April 29 prediction, and in a lengthy new introduction to his book he declared that the seven-year Tribulation described in Revelation had commenced on the predicted date. Although he continued to insist that war was imminent, Doc claimed that the four winds of destruction (Revelation 7:1) were being held back until the 144,000 had been recruited. However, he set no new date for the catastrophe and refused to be pinned down even to an approximate time.

Despite Doc's concern for teaching the faith, he dismissed his followers' inactivity as a temporary period of "quiescence," and subsequent observations of the group in 1982 have borne out his assessment. Teaching has gradually resumed, and a few of Doc's new generation of believers have become energetic proselyters. Nevertheless, the size of Doc's active following remains small, and the new members generally appear far more enthusiastic about teaching than those who accepted the faith prior to April 29.

## DISCUSSION

Contrary to the theory advanced by Festinger et al., we found no evidence of increased conviction or proselyting in the first six

months after disconfirmation. Instead, there is considerable evidence that the BUPC's faith was badly shaken by the failure of Doc's prediction. Defection was widespread in the out-of-state groups; and even in Missoula, where virtually everyone continued to profess belief, members resisted Doc's efforts to resume proselyting. This finding is especially devastating for the Festinger hypothesis because the Missoula group had a long tradition of active recruitment before April 29.

In an attempt to explain why members of the True Word sect did not proselyte after Mrs. Shepard's prophecy was disconfirmed, Hardyk and Braden suggested that two additional variables need to be considered in order to understand a group's reaction to prophetic failure. The first is the degree of public ridicule. According to Hardyk and Braden, the more a group is berated for its beliefs by outsiders, the more its members should feel the need to justify their position by proselyting. Compared with the Lake City group, which was ridiculed unmercifully by pranksters and the local papers, the BUPC and True Word group had an easy time with nonbelievers. In both cases the press was generally fair and the public seemed indifferent to the episode.

The second variable is the level of social support enjoyed by believers. While Festinger et al. argued that some degree of support is essential to prevent defection, Hardyk and Braden contended that the consensual validation provided by a strong community of believers could reduce dissonance to the point where it would be unnecessary to recruit additional members. That is, the urge to proselyte following disconfirmation should be greater in groups providing weak support than in groups that are highly supportive. Marian Keech's Lake City cult was a relatively new, loose-knit group that lacked a well-integrated set of beliefs. For awhile Mrs. Keech even had to vie for leadership with another member who claimed to receive messages from none other than the Creator Himself. By contrast, the True Word sect was a highly cohesive group with undisputed leaders and a coherent belief system, so it should have provided greater social support in the face of disconfirmation.



The BUPC case is less clear-cut but still consistent with Hardyk and Braden's hypothesis. Although the Missoula group had been relatively "tight" before April 29, it was quickly splintered by gossip and hostility, and most members withdrew from organized group activities. Is it accurate to say, then, that the BUPC enjoyed a high degree of mutual support? We think it is, but only with some clarification. First, despite the quarreling, most members had formed strong ties with other believers that were not affected by the group's internal disputes. Second, and perhaps more important, most believers had strong identities as BUPC that transcended their commitment to Doc's prediction. For them the faith offered both an all-embracing theodicy and an eminently desirable plan for living. 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. As a result, Doc's followers were able to cope with disconfirmation by shifting the focus of their lives away from Doc and placing greater emphasis on the fundamentals of the BUPC faith. Members of the Lake City group lacked this option because their belief in Mrs. Keech's prediction was the sole basis for their identity as members.

Thus Hardyk and Braden's post factum hypotheses appear to explain why both the True Word group and the BUPC failed to proselyte after disconfirmation. Yet there remains a puzzling anomaly in our finding. Doc's followers were severely demoralized by disconfirmation, while members of the other two groups proclaimed great victories for their faith. In both the Lake City and True Word groups, testimonies and follow-up interviews indicated that disconfirmation may have even strengthened belief.<sup>6</sup> What accounts for the difference? Comparison of the three groups suggests that the social context in which disconfirmation is experienced might be the critical factor determining the reaction to prophetic failure.

In the Festinger study Mrs. Keech and most of her followers were together in the same house when disconfirmation occurred. Within hours after her prophecy failed Mrs. Keech offered what became the group's "official" explanation. The world had been

spared from destruction because of their faith. The next day members confronted numerous reporters and other visitors who came to the house to hear how Mrs. Keech would explain the failure of her prediction.

The situation was very similar in the True Word group. Although there were several shelters, each group had a strong leader and the shelters were connected by an intercom system that allowed the leaders to deal with questions, doubts, and dissent as soon as they appeared. We are not told how long it took Mrs. Shepard to rationalize the failure of her prophecy, but her explanation obviously could have been communicated to all of her followers very rapidly. When members of the True Word sect finally emerged from their shelters, they also confronted the press as a group, and the leaders held an impromptu news conference to explain why the attack had not occurred.

On the other hand, the BUPC experienced disconfirmation as a widely dispersed collection of small groups that lacked a well-thought-out plan for staying in contact with each other. Doc made no systematic effort to communicate with his followers immediately after disconfirmation, and his explanations — suggested and revised over a period of months — were disseminated haphazardly by word of mouth. Members never confronted representatives of the outside world as a group; even in Missoula they did not meet again for over two weeks after the 29th.

What we have here are three groups with enormous material and psychological investments in a millennial dream which suddenly collapsed. It is hard to imagine a more ambiguous situation than the first uneasy moments after disconfirmation. It is a well-established principle that the more ambiguous the situation, the greater the demand for information in the form of rational explanations and guidelines for behavior, especially when the situation has important implications for action (Allport and Postman, 1974; Festinger, 1954; Shibutani, 1966; Turner and Killian, 1972). In his early theory of social comparison Festinger (1954) postulated that there is a basic drive in human beings to evaluate their opinions and beliefs. When objective reality checks are unavailable, people tend to rely on others as points of reference.

Since Doc was the undisputed spiritual authority for the BUPC, his followers naturally turned to him for guidance, but he did little to fill the void.

Doc's failure to act decisively and the group's lack of organized communication channels conspired to perpetuate the ambiguity caused by prophetic failure. Without the imminence of catastrophe to focus their lives, the goal of establishing God's Kingdom suddenly seemed remote and the means for achieving it unclear. Under those circumstances it is not surprising that the membership became demoralized. Small-group studies (e.g., Cohen, 1959; Raven and Rietsema, 1956) have demonstrated that ambiguous goals and uncertainty about how to achieve them are related to personal insecurity, emotional tension, weakened attraction to the group, loss of motivation to accomplish collective tasks, and declining conformity to group norms. Compared to the Lake City and True Word groups, the BUPC experienced the ambiguity of disconfirmation for a longer period, and also appeared far more discouraged by the failure of their prophecy. Significantly, the Lake City believers who were most likely to defect were those who experienced disconfirmation alone. Much like Doc's followers, they had to endure the ambiguity of prophetic failure longer than the believers who were in the company of Mrs. Keech.

When Doc finally made a strong pitch for proselyting 17 days after April 29, his followers were already demoralized and a pattern of resignation, withdrawal, and internal conflict had been established, so it is easy to understand why they failed to respond. Mrs. Keech, on the other hand, immediately provided a clear example for the others by calling a reporter to explain what had happened. Given the susceptibility to social influence of people caught in highly ambiguous situations, it is possible that the leader's initial reaction to disconfirmation could determine whether or not the group engaged in proselyting regardless of social support or public ridicule.

Not only did the BUPC endure more uncertainty, but they never had to confront the press as a group. This is a significant difference, because this kind of public meeting is likely to elicit a strong reaffirmation of faith. Members are, in effect, on stage

in the company of fellow believers before an audience of skeptics, and in that situation they are likely to play the role of believer regardless of their real feelings (Balch, 1980). By enacting the role, especially before reporters, press photographers, and TV cameramen, they are recommitting themselves to their beliefs. Except for Doc, none of the BUPC was ever induced to recommit himself or herself in this manner.

In conclusion, we believe the data discussed here suggest that reactions to disconfirmed prophecy depend on the nature of the social situation in which prophetic failure occurs. The example of the BUPC reveals the inadequacy of the psychological model used by Festinger et al. The theory of cognitive dissonance is simply unable to account for the complexities we observed in the wake of disconfirmation.

Although our conclusions are tentative, three hypotheses appear to be warranted by the data. First, the more central the prediction is to one's identity as a believer, the greater the need to convince others after disconfirmation. Second, members are most likely to suffer severe demoralization when their leader fails to provide a quick explanation for their predicament and take decisive steps to restore the group's integrity. Third, believers who are forced to explain the failure of their prediction to nonbelievers in public settings are more likely to profess strong convictions and attempt to persuade others after disconfirmation. As these hypotheses suggest, future research on disconfirmed prophecy should explore the nature of the believer's identity as a member, the reactions of the group's leadership to prophetic failure, and the kind of contact the group has with outsiders immediately after disconfirmation.

## NOTES

1. In this article we follow the definitions of "cult" and "sect" offered by Stark and Bainbridge (1979). A sect has a prior tie with another religious organization, while a cult is a nonschismatic group that lies outside established religious traditions. A millennial movement may be either a cult or a sect. It is a religious group that promises imminent

collective salvation for the faithful in an earthy paradise that will rise in the wake of apocalyptic destruction brought about by supernatural means (Cohn, 1970: 15).

2. This is the group's real name, and members refer to themselves as Baha'is despite the fact that the Baha'i Faith disavows any connection with the sect and objects to its use of the Baha'i name. At the request of a spokesman for the Baha'i Faith, we have used the abbreviation BUPC to prevent confusion. The Baha'i name has been used only in connection with the international Baha'i Faith or Baha'i writings that are fundamental to both groups.

3. With few exceptions, Doc's followers are young working-class adults. Typical occupations in the Missoula group include gardener, mechanic, tree thinner, mill worker, bus driver, electrician, printer, and welder. Although a few members hold white-collar positions, only two in Missoula could be classified as professionals. Doc's wife, an elder in the faith, is also a chiropractor, and another woman is a speech therapist. Overall their living standards are quite modest. Most own relatively few material possessions and hardly any of them are homeowners. All but a few are in their twenties, and roughly a third of the active believers are married.

4. In fact, the local paper reported that the Soviets did launch a spy satellite on April 29, but we have been unable to verify the time of day. The caller claimed to have received his information "from the Holy Spirit."

5. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the out-of-state groups is based on just eight interviews. While we have no doubts about the overall direction of the results in these groups, the exact numbers are open to question.

6. We are not entirely convinced by Hardyck and Braden's data. Rather than observing the True Word group directly, they relied entirely on after-the-fact interviews, which are highly subject to retrospective interpretation and social desirability effects. Members of deviant religious groups often misrepresent their true feelings to outsiders (e.g., Balch, 1980), and without built-in validity checks, especially direct observation, these distortions can easily pass unnoticed. In our study of the BUPC we found numerous instances where members' recollections of their reactions to disconfirmation did not jibe with our observations or the reports of others. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that Hardyck and Braden attempted to verify the accuracy of their findings.

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