

From *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (Routledge, NY, 1997), pp. 73-90. Later reprinted in *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy*, ed. Jon R. Stone (Routledge, 2000), pp. 269-282.

Fifteen Years of Failed Prophecy **Coping with cognitive dissonance in a Baha'i sect**

by

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On April 29, 1980, members of the Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant (BUPC) entered fallout shelters to await a nuclear holocaust that they believed would fulfill the prophecies of Revelation. In the first hour, they expected a third of the world's population to perish, and they claimed that over the next twenty years, the planet would be ravaged by starvation, disease, revolutions, and natural disasters. They believed that by the year 2000

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God's kingdom would be established on earth and a thousand years of peace would ensue.

This prediction was only the first in a long series of failed prophecies that would test the faith of the BUPC. Between 1980 and 1995 the group's leader, Dr. Leland Jensen, set twenty dates for the battle of Armageddon or lesser disasters that would lead up to the Apocalypse. In this paper we will examine the long-term effects of these failed prophecies on the BUPC.

Our analysis is based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, which Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) used to analyze reactions to failed prophecy in a millennial flying saucer cult. The group's leader, Marian Keech, was a medium who claimed an extraterrestrial being named Sananda had warned her that much of the Midwest would be inundated by a catastrophic flood on December 21, 1954.

Paradoxically, Festinger et al. predicted that the failure of Mrs. Keech's prophecy would result in increased conviction and heightened efforts to recruit new believers. They argued that Mrs. Keech and her followers would experience severe cognitive dissonance when the prophecy failed, but that it would be extremely difficult for them to abandon their beliefs because they had made numerous public and private commitments to the prediction. To reduce the dissonance they would invent rationalizations to explain away the disconfirmation, and more importantly they would try to gain social support for their beliefs by increasing their efforts to recruit new believers.

The study by Festinger et al. supported these hypothesis. Mrs. Keech responded to the failure of her prophecy by proclaiming that the catastrophe had been

called off because her group “had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction” (1956, 169). She eagerly granted interviews to reporters and invited curiosity seekers into her home to explain Sananda’s latest revelation. Most of her followers were equally enthusiastic about publicizing Sananda’s message, which was remarkable because the group had never shown much interest in proselytizing.

Festinger et al. specified five conditions that must be met before prophetic failure will be followed by increased conviction and vigorous proselytizing:

1. Belief in the prediction must be held with deep conviction.
2. Members must have committed themselves to the prediction by engaging in important actions that are difficult to undo.
3. The prediction must be specified enough that it can be clearly disconfirmed.

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4. There must be undeniable evidence that the prediction was wrong.
5. Members must have social support from fellow believers.

The BUPC clearly met these conditions in 1980, but less so when Jensen made his second prediction a few years later. By the 1990s, when Jensen and a few members of his inner circle met the first condition of deep conviction, and the commitments specified in the second condition were minimal compared to those that members had made in 1980. Our data suggest that the diminishing relevance of the Festinger et al. theory reflects the emergence of an underground *culture of dissonance-reduction* consisting of disclaimers and *post factum* rationalizations that reduced the impact of the predictions and subsequent disconfirmations. This culture enabled members to dismiss the predictions and move on with their everyday lives while still claiming allegiance to Jensen and the Baha’i faith. The goal of preparing for the holocaust ultimately was displaced by more immediate, mundane concerns, despite the fact that the group’s rhetoric remained as apocalyptic as ever.

DATA COLLECTION

Our data on the BUPC come from four participant-observer studies we conducted between 1980 and 1996. Beside taking part in numerous group activities, including potluck dinners, teaching sessions, and weekly meetings, we conducted forty-seven formal interviews with members, three group interviews with six ex-members, three individual interviews with high-ranking defectors who left in 1994 and 1996, and a lengthy interview with Jensen in 1980. Balch and two students also spent the night of April 29, 1980, in three BUPC fallout shelters. In addition, we have studied the group’s press releases and BUPC newsletters pertaining to the predictions.¹

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BUPC

The BUPC are a small Baha’i sect based in Missoula, Montana. Their founder, a chiropractor named Leland Jensen, was expelled from the mainstream Baha’is in 1960. During a doctrinal dispute following the death of Shoghi Effendi, the

¹ Balch observed the BUPC over an eight-month period before and after the 1980 prediction. Mahnke (1987) spent eight months with the group in 1986 when members expected Halley’s comet to collide with the earth. Domitrovich took part in BUPC activities between 1990 and 1995 when most of the failed prophecies occurred, and Morrison observed the group for almost twelve months in 1995 and 1996.

Guardian of the Baha'i faith, Jensen aligned himself with a schismatic leader named Mason Remey who claimed to be the second Guardian. However, Remey died a few years later and his followers split into rival factions, each proclaiming a different Guardian. In 1964, after becoming disillusioned with the infighting, Jensen and his wife, Opal, moved to Missoula where they opened a chiropractic clinic. Although Jensen once had been a highly acclaimed Baha'i missionary, he had stopped teaching the Faith by the time he got to Montana.

Then in 1969 Jensen was convicted of sexually molesting a fifteen-year-old patient. During the trial, several women testified against him, and he was sentenced to twenty years in the Montana State Prison. Shortly after his imprisonment, Jensen had a revelation:

I felt a presence only. I saw nobody. I saw no dove, no burning bush or anything of this nature. It talked to me – not in a physical voice but very vividly expressing to me that I was the Promised Joshua (prophesied in Zechariah 3).

After studying the Bible and Baha'i writings, Jensen understood that his mission was to establish the Baha'i Universal House of Justice after the world was cleansed of evil and apostasy by a nuclear holocaust.²

Jensen immediately began tying together diverse strands of Bible prophecy, Baha'i teachings, and pyramidology to substantiate his claims. He recruited many followers in prison, and after being paroled in 1973 he founded the BUPC in Missoula. By the end of the 1970s Jensen also had attracted followers in Wyoming, Colorado, and Arkansas.

Since 1980 membership in the BUPC has fluctuated considerably, but it probably has never exceeded 200 nationwide despite Jensen's claims of having thousands of followers around the world. In 1994, the last year for which we have a membership list, there were only sixty-six members in Montana and fewer than twenty in other states. The Wyoming and Arkansas contingents disbanded after the 1980 disconfirmation, but new groups were formed in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Over the years, about a third of the members have had college degrees, and the group has always stressed the importance of reading and research, so members tend to be exceptionally well informed about the Bible, Baha'i teachings, world religions, and international politics.

One of the most significant events in the history of the BUPC was the recruitment of Neal Chase, a spiritual seeker from Wisconsin who proved to be brilliant at synthesizing Jensen's teachings with other prophetic beliefs. Chase's most

² The development of the BUPC is a classic example of the psychopathological model of cult formation, in which religious founders assume a messianic role to compensate for a devastating collapse of their self-image and social world (Bainbridge and Stark 1979).

notable contribution was to bolster the “proofs” for Jensen’s mission by incorporating the prophecies of George Williams, leader of an obscure nineteenth-century Mormon sect known as the Morrisites (Anderson 1988; Chase 1990). According to Chase, Williams predicted that Christ would return in Montana’s Deer Lodge Valley where the Montana State Prison is located. The anticipated date of Christ’s return, August 9, 1969, happened to be the first full day that Jensen spent in the prison, which Chase claims bears a striking resemblance to Ezekiel’s temple described in the Bible.³ By 1990, Jensen, then 76, had turned much of the responsibility for interpreting the scriptures over to Chase.⁴

THE PREDICTIONS

Between 1979 and 1995 Jensen and Chase made twenty specific predictions. The first time Jensen set a date for the apocalypse was in 1979, when he proclaimed that a nuclear war would begin on April 29, 1980. Jensen’s second prediction came in 1985, when he claimed that Halley’s comet would crash into the earth the following year, triggering catastrophic upheavals that would culminate in the battle of Armageddon. All eighteen predictions in the 1990s were made by Chase, although each had Jensen’s approval. Unlike Jensen’s two predictions in the 1980’s, which foretold worldwide catastrophes, Chase’s predictions pertained to small-scale disasters that he claimed would lead step-by-step toward the apocalypse. Some of his predictions focused on upheavals caused by meteors, asteroids, and comets, but most pertained to the destruction of New York City by a nuclear bomb that would be planted by Middle Eastern terrorists.

REACTIONS TO PROPHECY FAILURE IN THE BUPC

Two predominant patterns emerged in response to the BUPC’s failed prophecies. Jensen and Chase reacted in a manner that for the most part supports dissonance theory, whereas their followers generally did not. Therefore, it is important to treat these patterns separately.

The Reactions of Jensen and Chase

Before and after each prophesied date, Jensen and Chase behaved much like Marian Keech. Prior to every date they made strong public commitments by

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issuing strident press releases, and in the 1990s Chase made numerous unequivocal proclamations on the BUPC’s public-access television show, “Baha’i Phone-In Live.” Before the 1980 date, Jensen urged his followers to build fallout shelters and stock them with food, water, and survival gear, and he allowed his own shelter to be photographed for a front-page story in the local newspaper. Jensen also proclaimed in one of his

³ Leroy Anderson, the leading expert on the Morrisites (Anderson 1988), disputes Chase’s claims about William’s Deer Lodge prophecy. In a personal conversation, Anderson told Balch that Williams never specified August 6, 1969, as the date for the Second Coming of Christ. The date simply happened to be the day of the last annual Morrisite gathering.

⁴ Jensen died unexpectedly on August 6, 1996. Chase has taken the helm and members seem to be taking the transition in stride. Neither the group’s apocalyptic rhetoric nor its routine activities appear to have changed. However, Jensen’s death is likely to have serious repercussions because Chase is disliked by some influential longtime members.

books that any religion that cannot predict the exact moment of the apocalypse “lacks Divine Guidance” (1979, 61-62).

Jensen and Chase also reacted like Mrs. Keech when their predictions were disconfirmed. In light of the hypothesis that proselytizing should increase after disconfirmation, their most notable response was to heighten efforts to spread the BUPC message. After each failed prediction they quickly issued more press releases in which they insisted they had been right all along. These releases were sent as far away as the Vatican and the United Nations, and frequently they were hand delivered to politicians and media executives. Jensen and Chase eagerly granted interviews to newspapers and radio talk shows, and they urged BUPC members to take advantage of each reprieve by renewing their efforts to recruit 144,000 who would enter God’s kingdom.

Renewed proselytizing, however, required plausible explanations for each prophecy failure. Throughout the fifteen-year period, at least seven types of explanations were used: (1) the prediction was fulfilled spiritually rather than physically; (2) the prophecy was fulfilled physically, but not in the manner expected; (3) the date was off because of miscalculation; (4) the date was a prediction, not a prophecy; (5) the leaders has a moral responsibility to warn the public despite the date’s uncertainty; (6) God had given the world a reprieve; and (7) the predictions had been tests of member’s faith.

1. Jensen relied heavily on the notion of a spiritual fulfillment in 1980. He claimed that the seven-year Tribulation described in Revelation had commenced on April 29 and that the four winds of destruction (Revelation 7:1) were being held back until the 144,000 had been recruited. He offered a similar explanation in 1986 after Halley’s comet failed to crash into the earth:

The Spiritual fulfillment [of the prophecy] did take place. A spiritual stone hit the earth. This stone is the message of the messiahship that only the [true] Baha’is understand. The spiritual stone crushes and destroys what the Christians claim, and what the covenant breakers [mainstream Baha’is] claim.

When a meteor collision and massive earthquakes failed to occur as predicted in 1991, Jensen claimed the prediction had been fulfilled by a “spiritual

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earthquake” caused by the defection of one of his most important followers, “Everything,” he said, “happens on the spiritual plane before it manifests in the physical plane.”

2. More often, Jensen and Chase claimed their predictions were *physically fulfilled by other events* that happened on or around the dates or shortly thereafter. In 1980, Jensen cited numerous phone calls from reporters as far away as Australia to prove that he had fulfilled the prophecy that the Seventh Angel would pour his “bowl of wrath” into the air (Revelation 16:17-18). He claimed this referred to the worldwide media coverage his message received on April 29. When Mt. St. Helens erupted nineteen days later, Jensen proclaimed the volcanic ash that inundated Missoula was a warning of what would happen when Portland and Seattle were bombed.

A more recent instance of claiming a physical fulfillment occurred in 1994 after Chase made the following prediction about the bombing of New York City:

On March 23, 1994, the veils will be rent asunder with the fiery holocaust of New York City's millions of inhabitants! Forty days later will come the battle of Armageddon, in which one third of mankind will be killed in one hour of thermonuclear war. (Press release, November 1, 1993)

3. Jensen and Chase frequently claimed to have made a *miscalculation* when they missed the mark. After the prophecy failure in 1980, Jensen immediately set a second date and then a third. Chase used this strategy continuously in the 1990s. For example, Chase's first prediction about New York was that the city would be bombed on November 29, 1992. Nothing happened until the World Trade Center was bombed three months later, although not with a nuclear weapon. Chase subsequently cited Daniel 7:12, which says, "their lives were prolonged for a season and a time," to prove that his prediction had been correct. Claiming that "a season" is three months, he announced that the November 29 date "plus the prophesied season of three months brought us to February 26, 1993, the day, the minute, the hour, the second that the World Trade Center was bombed" (press release, August 4, 1993).

4. The admission of human error was rationalized by making sharp distinction between a *prediction* and a *prophecy*. Prophecies came directly from

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God, whereas the BUPC's predictions were based on research and logic, which are subject to human fallibility. As Chase put it: "We can't be false prophets because we don't claim to be prophets. We simply *interpret* what is already there in the Bible." Jensen had always made this distinction, but it became increasingly important in the 1990s. according to this reasoning, Jensen and Chase were only human and they could make mistakes like everyone else.

5. Despite the uncertainties caused by human failings, Jensen and Chase claimed they had a moral responsibility to warn the public because so many "signs" had suggested that catastrophes were imminent. The signs were synchronistic events that converged around a particular date. For instance, Chase claimed that numerous events had pointed to November 26, 1992, as the date for the bombing of New York:

1. Thousands of covenant-breaking Baha'is would be gathering on this date in New York, a city marked for destruction in the prophecies of Nostradamus.
2. Comet Swift-Tuttle, which supposedly heralded the founding of the Baha'i faith in 1863, would reach its closest distance to earth on December 18.
3. During a lunar eclipse on December 9, the moon would turn blood red as foretold in Revelation 6:12 and Joel 2:31.

To ignore these signs would have been morally irresponsible because the BUPC had a "mandate from God to warn the people" about the apocalypse. If New York had been destroyed while they kept silent, because they only *suspected* something might happen, then "the blood of the people" would have been on their hands.

6. With each disconfirmation, Jensen and Chase claimed that God had granted the BUPC a reprieve. After the 1980 prediction, Jensen claimed that God had given the BUPC more time to recruit the 144,000. The same explanation was offered in 1986. After both the Trade center bombing and the Edison pipeline explosion in the 1990's,

Chase claimed that God in his mercy had spare New York, but that the predictions were “wake-up” calls for the city’s residents.

7. Finally and most consistently, Jensen and Chase repeatedly claimed that the predictions were tests. After the 1980 prediction, Jensen pointed out that Matthew 24:37 says that the “coming of the Son of Man [Jensen] will repeat what happened in Noah’s time,” which according to Baha’i teachings is that

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Noah predicted the flood several times (Baha’u’llah 1931). Noah’s first predictions separated the “sheep from the goats” so that when the flood finally happened only the pure-of-heart remained. By the 1990s, Jensen was referring to the 1980 prediction of “God’s fire drill” and a “practice run.”

The explanations offered by Jensen and Chase are examples of what Lyman and Scott (1968) call *accounts*. These are face-saving strategies intended to reduce embarrassment after a discrediting situation has occurred. In the BUPC these accounts enabled Jensen and Chase to claim they had been right all along: “We didn’t make a mistake,” Chase proclaimed after two failed attempts to predict the nuclear destruction of New York, “not even a teeny eeny one!” (press release, November 1, 1993). Almost a year later, after five more failed prophecies, Chase claimed that the BUPC had “a 100 percent track record!” (press release, October 9, 1994).

At first glance, the way Jensen and Chase reacted to the failure of their predictions seems to be entirely consistent with cognitive dissonance theory. However, the theory does not consider the effects of *repeated* prophecy failures.

Before the 1980 date, Jensen encouraged his followers to build fallout shelters and store food to prepare for the holocaust. Yet by the time of the second prediction in 1986, Jensen no longer emphasized physical preparedness and the group’s fallout shelters, including his own, had been dismantled. Instead he claimed that Missoula would be safe because of its remote mountainous location, as well as the fact that the “Promised One” lived there. In the event that shelters might be needed, Jensen said that the BUPC would be able to occupy an extensive network of tunnels under the university and city center, and he claimed his followers could stockpile all the provisions they would need in just three days.

By downplaying the need for building, stocking, and maintaining shelters, Jensen eliminated one of the most important commitments members had made in 1980. This is significant because, following the reasoning of Festinger et al., the fewer commitments members make before a prediction, the less the dissonance should be when a prophecy fails.

Perhaps more important are two changes that occurred in the 1990s. First, the nature of the predictions changed from apocalyptic global catastrophes to small-scale disasters heralding the nuclear conflagration. Chase explained that prophecy fulfillment is not a discrete event but a continuous, unfolding process. This had the effect of diffusing the impact of any particular prophecy failure.

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Second, beginning in 1993, Jensen and Chase began making *disclaimers* before their predictions. Disclaimers are face-saving strategies that are used to head off *anticipated* embarrassment (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). For example, one of the dates for

the bombing of New York was September 4, 1993, the third anniversary of Opal Jensen's death. Even before the day was over, Jensen was speculating that the real date might be September 8, the anniversary of his wife's burial. Before the next date Chase clearly hedged his bets by saying:

I don't really care if the bombing is today, tomorrow, or next year, I only know it is part of God's plan, and it *will* happen as prophesied. Nothing can alter the plan of God.

Because severe dissonance is likely to occur only when a prediction is believed with deep conviction, the use of disclaimers should reduce the dissonance caused by prophecy failure. What is most interesting about these disclaimers however, is that ordinary members had been using them for years before Jensen and Chase.

The Reactions of Ordinary Members

The responses of ordinary BUPC members to the failed predictions were considerably more complicated than those of Jensen and Chase. Not only were their reactions consistent with the hypotheses proposed by Festinger et al., but their reactions changed considerably over time. By "ordinary members" we refer to everyone in the BUPC except Jensen and Chase. It will help to divide the fifteen-year period into three phases: 1980-1981, before and after the original prediction; 1986-1987, before and after the second; and 1990-1995, when Chase made a flurry of predictions about lesser events that would culminate in Armageddon.

1980-1981. The first prediction provided the clearest test of dissonance theory because the BUPC met all the conditions specified by Festinger et al. (Balch, Farnsworth, and Wilkens 1983)

The prediction was specific down to the minute, and members made substantial commitments based on their belief that it would come true. The most important commitment was the construction of fallout shelters, but members also wrote numerous pamphlets and books using Bible prophecies and pyramidology to prove the prediction was correct. Several members sent letters to the local paper warning people to prepare for the holocaust, and the BUPC organized a nuclear-preparedness group called SAFE (Safety and Fall-Out

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Education), which distributed thousands of leaflets urging Missoulians to prepare for nuclear war. The disconfirmation was painfully obvious to everyone, but, consistent with Festinger et al.'s fifth condition, members had the support of a close-knit community of fellow believers.

However, there was no increase in proselytizing after the date. In fact, proselytizing stopped altogether, which is significant because the BUPC had been heavily committed to teaching the Faith before April 29. During the first BUPC meeting after the prophecy failure, Jensen gave an emotional speech in which he exhorted his followers to capitalize on the reprieve: "Rise and Shine!" he shouted. "Establish the kingdom! Teach as you never have before!" Although he had brought a large box of books for members to distribute, not one was taken. The BUPC were extremely confused and demoralized, and attendance at meetings dropped precipitously. These reactions clearly contradict dissonance theory.

On the other hand, it took six months before anyone defected, and when members left, their stated reasons usually had no direct connection to the failed prophecy. Instead their leaving usually was prompted by doctrinal disputes or interpersonal conflicts within the group. The prophecy failure may have contributed to their disillusionment but it was not emphasized by any of our informants. The members who stayed were able to sustain their faith by claiming that the prophecy was only a test, which had given them more time to prepare. The Noah analogy was quickly adopted throughout the group. However, rather than redoubling their efforts to prepare for the holocaust, most members seemed burned out by the group's apocalyptic fervor. They claimed they had become so wrapped up in the prophecy that they had ;lost sight of the basic Baha'I teachings. As a member 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."

1986-1987. Since Jensen claimed the seven-year Tribulation began on April 29, 1980, he had committed himself to a second prediction for 1987. Halley's comet, which was due to arrive in 1986, provided the rationale. Jensen predicted that on April 29, 1986, the comet would get pulled into an orbit around the earth and begin to break up, pelting the planet with debris that would strike with the force of nuclear warheads. The gravitational pull of the comet would produce massive earthquakes and a convulsive shifting of the earth's crust. This would continue for one year until April 29, 1987, when the remainder of the comet would plummet to earth, producing tidal waves thousands of feet high and earthquakes more devastating than any before.

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The predictions rekindled the group's millennial enthusiasm. The comet dominated practically every meeting as members eagerly discussed books, articles, TV documentaries, and biblical prophecies about comets. On March 22, 1986, the group finally went public with the prediction by issuing a press release proclaiming Halley's comet as the herald of the new kingdom.

However, the activities of the BUPC prior to the 1986 prediction differed from those in 1980 in two important ways. First, this time members made hardly any personal preparations to survive the coming destruction. Missoula presumably would be safe from the tidal waves and earthquakes that would devastate coastal cities.

The second difference was that members began hedging their bets with disclaimers before the 1986 date. The group's self-taught comet expert suggested that God might be using the comet to distract mankind from the real threat, which he speculated might be asteroids. Others speculated that God might be using the comet to test their faith, much as they had been tested in 1980. Still others claimed Jensen could be mistaken because, despite his identity as the "Promised One", he was "only a man" with failings like everyone else.

On the evening of April 28, 1986, the BUPC had a potluck dinner. Unlike a similar meeting the night before the 1980 date when Jensen delivered a fiery speech and members had talked excitedly about the impending holocaust, Jensen did not address the group and nobody even mentioned the comet.

The morning after the disconfirmation members quietly resumed their lives by going to work, attending school, or taking care of their children, as if it were just another day. As in 1980 there was no increase in proselytizing and members offered accounts to explain the failed prophecy, the most common being parallel with Noah's predictions. But unlike 1980 there was no apparent confusion or

disillusionment, perhaps because members had not committed themselves to the same extent and because they already had prepared themselves for the prophecy failure. The expression “business as usual” is a good description of the aftermath of the disconfirmation. Although some members continued to profess belief that Armageddon would happen by April 29, 1987, others appeared to have lost interest in Jensen’s date setting.

By August of 1986 the emphasis had shifted away from the new date to being spiritually prepared for the end, whenever it might occur. Reports by ex-members indicated that the 1987 date was ignored by virtually everyone. Jensen began ridiculing the Tribulation as a misguided concept promoted by “the Christian sects.” And his followers quickly followed suit.

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1990-1995. Prior to the 1980 and 1986 predictions, members had sought confirming evidence to prove the accuracy of the prophecies, and that pattern continued in the 1990s. The evidence marshaled to support the predictions included Hopi prophecies, planetary conjunctions, dreams, numerological coincidences, the prophecies of Nostradamus, and predictions made by psychics and other religious leaders, such as Jeane Dixon and Elizabeth Clare Prophet.

However, as in 1986, the BUPC made a few public commitments to the dates. The members who had weathered the disconfirmations of the 1980s were the least likely to take the predictions seriously. They made virtually no preparations. Some of the newer members attended civil defense workshops and stored survival gear, but these were isolated individual efforts. No maps of the city’s civil defense tunnels were distributed to the BUPC and members did not make an effort to warn the public as they had with SAFE in 1980. On two occasions members boxed up their possessions and camped in parks or their back yards when earthquakes were expected, but these commitments were minimal compared to those in the shelter-building days of 1979 and 1980.

Members also used disclaimers more often than ever before. Significantly, these face-saving strategies were extensions of the accounts that had been offered to explain past prophecy failures. Even members of Jensen’s inner circle used these disclaimers. For example, one of Jensen’s staunchest supporters started telling prospective members “not to lay any stock in the predictions Neal made [because] the real sign would be the entrance of the 144,000.” She added that “the truth is that people would have really preferred for Neal to knock off his prophesying.”

After each failed prediction, life for the BUPC continued on course. There were few traces of disillusionment among either new or old members. The BUPC provided the usual accounts in an offhanded matter: Jensen and Chase had to warn the public whether they were sure or not; God gave the BUPC more time because they were not ready yet; the prediction had been just another test. Some members did not even bother to offer accounts for the failed predictions. “I didn’t get too concerned about these predictions,” one said, “because a number of them had not been materialized in the past.” 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 on Revelation ultimately would be fulfilled. Even the World Trade Center bombing and Edison gas explosion failed to rekindle the group’s apocalyptic enthusiasm.

Instead of focusing on Armageddon, members became increasingly absorbed by everyday life in the BUPC. In addition to the traditional round of weekly and monthly events, new group activities developed. These included a public-access television show, information tables at the university. Sunday church services, song writing and a choir, and demonstrations against the U.S. government's treatment of Iraq. The demonstrations are significant because prior to the 1990s the BUPC had never shown an interest in changing political events, only monitoring them for warning signs.

In 1991, Jensen established a twelve-person governing body called the Second International Baha'i Council (IBC) whose stated purpose was to lay the foundation for the Universal House of Justice, which Jensen expected to govern the world after the apocalypse.⁵ The IBC quickly came to dominate the lives of its members as its meetings steadily became longer and more frequent. IBC members engaged in endless wrangling over administrative details, writing projects, plans for establishing the world government, and discussions of other members' personal affairs, including marital problems, homosexuality, and gambling.

In contrast to the informality of previous years, the BUPC took on increasingly bureaucratic character despite the fact that by 1990 the group probably had fewer than one hundred members nationwide. The IBC elected officers passed numerous "laws" governing the conduct of BUPC members, and conducted its meetings according to Robert's Rules of Order. To deal with more mundane matters, local BUPC "councils" were formed in Montana, Colorado, and Wisconsin. City and county councils were established in Missoula, each with its own officers and formal responsibilities.

We found no evidence that these changes were prompted by the spate of failed prophecies in the 1990s. Instead, former IBC members attributed them to the death of Jensen's wife in 1990 and the growing irrelevance of the predictions. According to their first hypothesis, Opal Jensen's death compelled Jensen to consider his own morality and the need for an administrative structure to carry on his mission after he died. The second hypothesis was that the new councils, offices, and activities were created to keep members motivated as the predictions lost their grip on the BUPC.

In addition to the structural changes that occurred in the BUPC, the defection rate accelerated in the 1990s. However, this seems unrelated to the failed prophecies. Instead members were leaving because of doctrinal disputes⁶ and resentment over the intrusion of the IBC in their private lives.

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By 1996 we found only one member who still placed much emphasis on the predictions. He admitted to "feeling stupid" when they failed and he claimed he would leave if the nuclear war did not happen by 2000. For the others, the date setting had become irrelevant even though they continued to believe in Jensen's mission. The IBC's former vice president explained the general attitude this way:

I think we're immune to it now. We've been desensitized. [The dates] come and they go and they come and they go and they come and they

⁵ The first IBC was established by Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith. The BUPC's IBC was an exact replica of the first.

⁶ These disputes usually revolved around the Guardianship. Ever since the 1970s, Jensen had claimed that Mason Remey's son, Pepe, was the Guardian, but Pepe steadfastly refused the title. After Pepe died in 1994, Jensen began hinting that Chase might be the next Guardian, but many members disagreed.

go. I think that's.... why there isn't much preparedness. I think people mostly really don't believe them. I think mostly people would be really shocked [if a prediction came true].

CONCLUSION

When reviewing the reactions of the BUPC to repeated prophecy failures, two major patterns emerge: the behavior of the BUPC leaders generally supports the theory proposed by Festinger et al., but the responses of ordinary members do not. Jensen and Chase maintained their enthusiasm for the predictions and never seemed disheartened when their prophecies failed. This is not true for their followers. After the 1980 debacle, Jensen's followers became disillusioned and for a while they stopped proselytizing altogether. Over the next fifteen years Jensen's predictions became less and less important for the average member. The BUPC made fewer preparations and they showed little disappointment when the prophecies failed. By the mid-1990s the predictions had become largely irrelevant.

The long-term responses of the ordinary members reflect the emergence of a *culture of dissonance-reduction* within the BUPC. The key ingredients of this culture are accounts and disclaimers that were disseminated in BUPC meetings, press releases, newsletters, and conversations among members. The origins of this culture can be traced to the accounts Jensen used to explain the 1980 failure. Following subsequent predictions, the ordinary members began turning these accounts into disclaimers to reduce the possibility of dissonance even before it could occur.

Eventually even Jensen and Chase began to conform to the culture of dissonance-reduction. Not only did they start using disclaimers themselves, but they reduced the magnitude of the dissonance caused by their failed prophecies by

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making predictions about relatively minor events instead of a global catastrophe. They also demanded fewer commitments to their predictions.

The trends between 1980 and 1995 illustrate the process of *goal displacement*. Goal displacement occurs when an organization's original goals are supplanted by more achievable ends. Group members "retreat from the initial program to a more moderate and conservative program in the interest of maintaining the strength of the organization" (Blau and Scott 1962, 229). In goal displacement the means of achieving organizational goals become ends in themselves as members focus their attention on mundane administrative jobs, and the group's original ideals become increasingly irrelevant to members' everyday lives.

The concept of group displacement describes what happened in the BUPC. In 1980 the group's primary goal was preparing for the holocaust, but by the 1990's this objective had been supplanted by the more immediate goal of creating an administrative structure for ushering in God's kingdom. The first hints of goal displacement occurred after the failed prophecy in 1980 when members began downplaying the importance of physical preparedness in favor of getting back to the basics of the Baha'i faith. The back-to-the-basics movement reemerged after the second disconfirmation in 1986. By 1995 the culture of dissonance reduction had become so entrenched in the BUPC that hardly anyone was concerned about the imminence of the Apocalypse.

Our study of the BUPC, like all case studies, is more suggestive than conclusive. However, the data reveal two important weaknesses in Festinger et al.'s dissonance theory of prophecy failure. First, the theory ignores a fundamental structural distinction between leaders and followers: the leaders who make prophecies may respond to their failure quite differently than their followers. Second, the theory fails to address the long-range effects of prophecy failure. Our findings suggest that repeated failures cause a decline in both the fervor before the predictions and the disappointment afterward, until the goal of preparing for the apocalypse is finally displaced by more ordinary and achievable objectives.

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