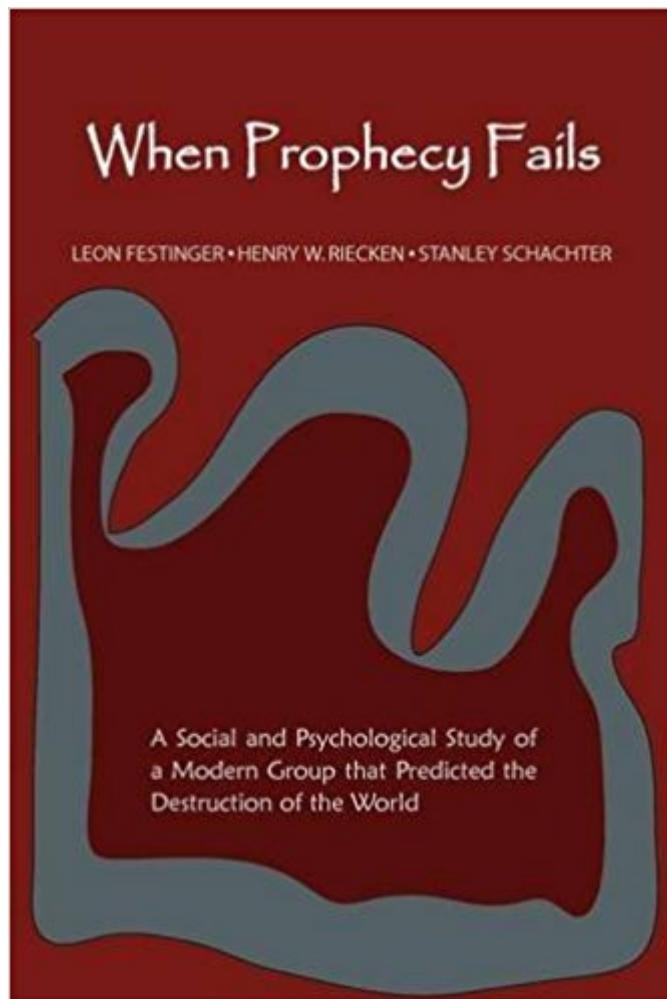


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# When Prophecy Fails



## Synopsis

2009 reprint of 1956 First edition. When Prophecy Fails [1956] is a classic text in social psychology authored by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter. It chronicles the experience of a UFO cult that believed the end of the world was at hand. In effect, it is a social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world, and the adjustments made when the prediction failed to materialize. "The authors have done something as laudable as it is unusual for social psychologists. They espied a fleeting social movement important to a line of research they were interested in and took after it. They recruited a team of observers, joined the movement, and watched it from within under great difficulties until its crisis came and went. Their report is of interest as much for the method as for the substance."-Everett C. Hughes, The American Journal of Sociology.

## Book Information

Paperback: 260 pages

Publisher: Martino Fine Books (November 12, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1578988527

ISBN-13: 978-1578988525

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 47 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #251,818 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #83 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > New Age & Spirituality > Divination > Prophecy #291 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Occult & Paranormal > UFOs #396 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Occult & Paranormal > Occultism

## Customer Reviews

When Prophecy Fails is as relevant today as it was decades ago when a little doomsday cult predicted a flood that never came. I'm a professor in a social scientific-minded communication department. It seems that no matter what class I teach, I'm always using this book as an example. From a theoretical and research perspective, it's a great field study designed to test Festinger's ideas about cognitive dissonance. It also stands as a rigorous and meticulous example of the method of data collection via participant-observation. Readers will also appreciate the beginning material chronicling known failed predictions throughout history. And the writing style is lucidly

accessible and the detailed characterizations of the people involved and action unfolding are compelling enough for even the casual reader. I've always been a fan of Leon Festinger's work, but no matter one's personal givings about dissonance theory, it is tough not to appreciate the laborious efforts of this tireless and dedicated research team in producing this study. I admire those who are able to foresee real-world applications of their ideas in advance so as to be able to properly test them as the real-world events unfold. Festinger et al. were brilliant in this regard. A must-read for anyone interested in solid research methodologies and applied learning.

A fascinating inside look at a 1950s flying saucer cult in Chicago. The world faced cataclysm, but the faithful would be taken to safety aboard a flying saucer at midnight. What happens after the prophecy fails is explained by Leon Festinger's theory of "cognitive dissonance." Other doomsday cults, such as the 1840s Millerites, have faced the same disappointment. Festinger says the "cognitive dissonance" caused by the "disconfirming event" may be resolved by one of a handful of means, but usually there is a burst of proselytization. In other words, the cult bounces back stronger than ever until subsequent disconfirming events (failed prophecies) force people to face reality. "Cognitive dissonance" is a useful lens to view movements and even examine the stresses in one's own life when one finds oneself holding two contradictory "cognitions." It is hard to understand how intelligent people could act like the subjects in *When Prophecy Fails*. Ultimately, the book is a tragedy about people's need to believe.

A bit long in the telling and more analysis might have been helpful. I learned some important things about how people hold unreasonable beliefs and why they become hard to back away from. The role of group support. Those who were alone when disconfirming events happened doubted but those in company accepted the group rationalization. Interesting stuff!!

Social psychology book about the in depth examination of a religious doomsday cult who's end of the world prediction fails. Has some other examples of failed prophecies from history and how people will affirm or justify their beliefs even in the face of fact. This book is as relevant today as ever in our religious world, and I would consider it a must read if your interested in phsyiology. Also read the book "Mistakes were made", by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, it gives many more detailed instances of people and there biases.

Interesting, easy reading. Not about religion per se, but lends insight into religion and the evolution

of belief systems and the continuing support and bolstering of belief even after significant elements of the belief are proven wrong. A brief history of *ÄfÄçÄ à ¬Ã Å“cognitive dissonanceÄfÄçÄ à ¬Ã Å•* (a term coined by Festinger in this book) is included as well as the specific case study, and the authors' methodology is described. The group in this study predicted the destruction of the world on December 21, 1954. More recently the end of the world was predicted to coincide with the *ÄfÄçÄ à ¬Ã Å“endÄfÄçÄ à ¬Ã Å•* of the Mayan calendar on December 21, 2012. This classic study is as relevant today as when written.

A must read for those interested in the way cognitive dissonance is handled by those involved and why so many hold to even ridiculous beliefs in spite of evidence refuting those beliefs. Should be required reading in all high schools as well as all psychology and sociology courses.

For a research-based book, this was surprisingly entertaining. Although the research was 50 years old, it did not detract from the relevance or readability. There are definitely parallels to more modern cults and movements.

This is the most entertaining academic book I have ever read. That and it helps change your perspective. People lie to themselves on a very regular basis rather than admit that they are wrong. Understanding how and why people do this will help change how you view yourself and what you believe. The way the group of observers is able to infiltrate the cult and present a relatively unbiased view of how they begin to rationalize what is occurring will help you gain perspective on the rationalizations of the people around you.

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