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Failed Prophecies Are Fatal

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Many scholars of new religious movements claim that religious belief and religious groups generally survive failed apocalyptic or millennial prophecies. This claim originates with the original cognitive dissonance study, When Prophecy Fails, and has been reiterated by recent surveys of the field. In this article, I argue that this is false. I argue that the litera-
ture on religious groups which experience failed prophesy suffers from survivorship bias. I then demonstrate that even setting that aside, the extant case studies of failed prophecies show that the most common outcome for a religious group following a failed prophecy is group demise. I also argue that groups that root their prophecies in a broadly accepted source of authority, such as biblical interpretation, fare better after prophetic failure than groups that base their prophecies on novel sources of authority such as personal revelation or a leader who claims divinity or psychic powers.

Introduction
Ever since scholars began studying how religious groups responded to failed prophecies, they have emphasized how religious believers ignore or rationalize the failure of their prophecies while maintaining their commitment to their religious group. This claim goes back to Festinger et al. (1956), who in their landmark book When Prophecy Fails claimed that a UFO cult predicted an apocalyptic flood and expected that members of the cult would be rescued by extraterrestrials. Festinger et al. (1956) claimed that the group responded to the failure of the deluge or the arrival of aliens by maintaining their faith and trying even harder to

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proselytize their beliefs. Festinger would go on to create the theory of cognitive dissonance (1957) and use the case of the UFO cult to substantiate his new theory.

Some of the specific claims of Festinger et al. (1956) have held up poorly. First, the authors substantially misrepresented the behavior of the UFO cult both before and after the prophecy failed (Kelly 2023), and while Festinger et al. (1956) presented the group as an example of faith that endured failed prophecy, the group itself disbanded immediately after the failed prophecy (Dawson 2011; Barkun 2015; Kelly 2023). Second, attempts to replicate similar studies failed to find examples of groups which increased efforts to proselytize after their prophecies failed (Hardyck and Braden 1962; Balch et al. 1983; Singelenberg 1989; Zygmunt 1970). Consequently, scholars have moved away from the specific claim that proselytization generally follows failed prophecy (Stone 2000) but they have continued to maintain that both religious belief and religious groups generally ignore the unequivocal failure of their prophecies and maintain their beliefs even as outside observers would argue that their religious beliefs had been falsified. Stone (2011, 44) summarized this conventional wisdom, "despite obvious and unequivocal disconfirmation, believers tend to respond to failed prophecy in ways that reaffirm their faith."

While Festinger et al. (1956) contributed a singular case study to the scholarship of new religions, they also examined various historical religious movements that they argued may have thrived despite experiencing failure of religion. Some of the religious movements they discussed in this context included the Sabbateans, the Millerites, and early Christians. Much of the scholarship that followed Festinger et al. (1956) focused on new case studies of new religious movements or evaluations of new religious movements as whole, rather than examining long-established religions such as Christianity.

Many Christians view Christianity as a case of a successful prophecy, viewing Jesus of Nazareth as fulfilling various passages from the Hebrew Bible, which they take to be predictions of his ministry, crucifixion, and redemptive sacrifice, with various other passages of the Hebrew Bible referring to his eventual future return. Some critics of Christianity and various religious scholars have viewed Jesus of Nazareth as a failed religious prophet and the world's largest religion, Christianity, as an example of a religion successfully enduring a failed prophecy. If early Christianity is understood as a movement enduring a failed prophecy,

and Festinger and others are correct about religious belief surviving failure of prophecy, then the world's largest religion is an exemplar of this tendency. And many scholars claim that the study of new religious movements shows that the failure of prophecy only reaffirms religious belief and does not undermine religious movements.

Yet, when carefully examined, the scholarship on new religious movements does not substantiate the claim that these movements tend to survive failed prophecy. Most of the religious groups that have been studied die within ten years of the failed prophecy. The main contribution of this article is to show that the conventional wisdom on the consequences of prophetic failure is wrong: when a prophecy fails, the failure of the religious movement usually follows shortly thereafter. Assessing whether this is causal is important, challenging, and outside the scope of the article. What this article establishes is that new religious belief and religious groups do not generally survive the failure of their religious prophecies, and that claims that such religious movements tend to survive failed prophecies are not true. Theories about group behavior and religious belief or about cognitive dissonance that rely on the claim that religious belief and groups survive failed prophecy should be re-evaluated in light of this evidence. If Christianity is understood as a movement that experienced a failed prophecy at its very origins, then the world's largest religion is a historic anomaly by surviving failed prophecy, rather than an exemplar.

I begin by explaining how the literature on failed prophecy suffers from a survivorship bias problem. I then show how some scholars have claimed to find examples of new religious movements experiencing failed prophecies—even when no failed prophecy existed. Next, I show that some scholars have exaggerated the survival rate of groups which experience failed prophecy. For instance, Melton (1985) claimed to provide five examples of groups that survived failed prophecies, but two of these groups disbanded following the failed prophecy, one lost most of its members, one group's true identity is unknown, and its survival cannot be known, and the fifth may not have experienced a failed prophecy.

I then address two potential sources of resilience for groups experiencing failed prophecy. The first is age. It seems plausible that old groups might survive failed prophecies more easily. Older religious groups have proven that they have staying power and such groups might have more members whose careers, social networks, and worldviews are heavily enmeshed in their religious group. Exit costs in older groups might be

higher, causing members to remain even after their group experiences a failed prophecy. I find no evidence that old groups fare better when facing failed prophecies due to the paucity of examples of older religious

groups predicting an imminent apocalypse.

The second protective factor considered is the source of the prophecy. Failed prophecy might be especially hard to survive when the source of the prophetic knowledge does not have default legitimacy or a history of being viewed as authentic by both the group members and by the broader society from which the group can draw new recruits. For instance, if a religious leader claims to have received a vision or novel revelation or prophecy delivered by an angel or an extraterrestrial, if that revelation or prophecy fails, that casts doubt on the abilities of the prophet (or the trustworthiness of the supernatural messenger). If the movement and its theology was based upon that prophet's personal authority, it calls the whole movement into question. In contrast, if a new sect splits from an existing religion based off a new interpretation of religious scripture or tradition, even if a prophecy based off that new interpretation fails, the sect might continue to trust in their scripture and treat the failed prophecy as a failure of interpretation rather than a failure of their scripture itself.

For instance, within Anglo-Protestant societies, biblical interpretation is not a novel source of information about the second coming of Christ but is an accepted, authoritative source. Within Anglo-Protestant societies, prophecies based on personal communication with an angel would be a novel source. A failed prophecy based on scriptural interpretation would likely pose little threat to the enduring status of the Christian Bible. Group members might be willing to continue to accept claims based upon the Bible but acknowledge that the group simply made an error in interpretation. Members still trusting the Bible might even be willing to accept new prophecies issued based on the authority of the Bible. However, a failed prophecy based on an angelic visitor might cast into doubt the ability of the prophet to communicate with angels, the existence of the alleged angel, or the trustworthiness of the angel, and members might cease to regard claims of angelic communication as a trustworthy guide to the future.

What is an accepted source versus a novel source of the prophecy is contextual. Within the early Latter-Day Saints movement, the claim to be a living prophet of Jesus Christ might be an accepted source of knowledge whereas it would not be within most Protestant circles. I review

the cases of failed prophecy in the literature and find some evidence that groups that based their prophecy on accepted sources of knowledge, especially biblical interpretation, fare better.

Survivorship bias

Many studies of failed prophecies are retrospective. Since religious groups that die after failed prophecies are less likely to make a mark on history, to produce documentation of their beliefs and behavior, or to be noticed by researchers when compared to groups that have survived

failed prophecies, retrospective studies of failed prophecy will exaggerate how many groups experience failed prophecy and survive. This means that the literature on failed prophecy has overstated how commonly religious groups survive failed prophecy. The extent of this bias is unknown; it may have caused the literature to significantly overstate the survival rates of groups experiencing failed prophecy.

Contestable claims of failed prophecy

To study failed prophecies, scholars must find examples of failed prophecies. The pool of case studies that scholars of new religious movements and prophecies often reference is small, and many of the case studies suffer from the problem that, in some of the cases, it is not clear that the studied religious groups actually experienced a failure of prophecy. I review four oft-cited case studies where the existence of a failed prophecy can be contested for a variety of reasons. In the first case, a group neither produced nor promoted a prophecy but some members came to believe a prediction they heard on a paranormal radio show. In the second case, the prophecy was carefully worded and qualified, making it hard to conclusively say it failed. In the third case, the prophecy concerning a medical miracle was partially fulfilled according to scientific experts of the time. In the fourth case, the claim that a prophecy failed depends on accepting a specific theological premise.

The UFO Center

Bader (1999) provided an account of failed prophecy entitled “When Prophecy Passes Unnoticed.” One explanation for why this prophecy was not noticed is that his account makes it clear that there was no prophecy, at least not in the sense that corresponds to any normal use of the term. Bader (1999) tells us of a monthly UFO discussion group that hosted guest speakers, talked about UFOs and other occult and

paranormal topics. After hearing of predicted alien landings in 1996 from a paranormal radio show, some members of the discussion group thought that the radio show was correct. Then aliens did not land. Bader (1999, 125), who observed this group, notes that “the failure neither disappointed members enough to prompt their desertion of the group, led to increased excitement of any form, nor required any explanation or apology from the group leader.” He then goes on to argue that members of the UFO discussion group did not react strongly to the “failed prophecy” because their level of commitment to this group was low, so failed prophecies should have little effect on morale. Bader’s proposed connection between a group’s response to failed prophecy and commitment to the group might be true. However, it is inappropriate to treat this as an example of a religious group experiencing failed prophecy.

First, Bader’s own description of the UFO Center makes it sound like it is not a religious group at all. Second, the failed prophecy or prediction of UFO landings originated outside the group and was not core to the

group's collective beliefs or purposes. Unlike other groups whose leaders issued predictions and whose members prepared for the fulfillment of prophecy only to see the prophecy fail, members of this group only learned that some radio guests that they had found convincing were wrong. The fate of the UFO discussion group does not provide relevant data about actual religious groups' responses to failed prophecies.

The Morrisites

Another problem with case studies on failed prophecies is that some scholars will read a conditional, equivocal prophecy and claim that it is a highly specific prophecy that can easily be labeled as failed once its predictions fail to come true. Halford et al. (1981) provide a history of a splinter sect of the Latter-Day Saints or "Mormon" movement known as the Morrisites after their founder, Joseph Morris, who proclaimed himself a living prophet. His followers formed their own community, before a violent conflict with outsiders, "the Morrisite War," resulted in the death of their prophet and several others. Halford et al. (1981) treat this group as providing a straightforward example of a group persisting despite failed prophecy. While this overall interpretation is correct, the authors demonstrate how easy it is for scholars to think that they have discovered an example of a clearly failed prophecy when they did no such thing. Compare the description of an 1861 prophecy given by

Table 1: Comparison of prophecy interpretation and original prophecy.

Halford, Anderson, and Clark's account	Actual prophecy
On December 31, the prophecy was specific and unqualified: "Let my people settle up their accounts today and prepare themselves for a visit from me tomorrow." (p. 6)	BEHOLD, I say unto you, my son, I see the position in which you are placed with my people. They cannot get ready to meet me this day by the time that I wanted to come. I felt satisfied last evening that my people could not get everything ready to meet me this morning, and I shall not come to-day. Let all my people settle up their accounts to-day, and prepare themselves for a visit from me to-morrow morning; and if they will do this, I will surely come to-morrow morning. I am satisfied that my people have done all that they possibly could to prepare themselves to meet me to-day ; but

they have not been able to make all things ready, and, on that account, I cannot come this day. I want to come as soon as my people will prepare themselves to meet me. They may do this to-morrow, morning without hurrying themselves. My servants must show unto my people the necessity of fully preparing themselves to-day to meet me to-morrow ; for, as I live, I shall come to-morrow if my people are prepared to meet me. Therefore, if my people wish to see me on that day, they can, if they will prepare themselves to do so. If they do not see me on that day, it will be entirely their own fault. If they do not prepare themselves, they will have to see me whether they are ready or not. I shall not wait for them more than another day or two. My people now know my mind ; therefore, if they wish to see me, let them prepare themselves by to-morrow. I am the Lord of Hosts. Even so. Amen and Amen. (Morris 1886, 341–342)

Halford et al. (1981) in their article to the full context of the Morrisite prophecy in Table 1.

While the prophecy of 31 December 1861 definitely urged the Morrisites to view the Second Coming as imminent, its immediate fulfillment of the return of Jesus hinged on the preparations of the Morrisites. This was not the first time their prophet had taught them that prophecies were hard to understand and rarely unequivocal. In February of that year, their prophet had delivered a message, which he said came from Jesus Christ. In this message, whose ominous title begins with “THE INABILITY OF MAN TO UNDERSTAND THE WAYS OF THE LORD,” Morris, speaking as Jesus warned his followers that “I am not trifling either with them or with this people. I am placed in a position where I have to work in a

manner that all do not understand; and, not understanding, they have thought that I have not fulfilled my promises; but I have. When I speak I do it in mine own way, and all cannot understand me; but to you it is given to understand my ways, to others it is not” (Morris 1886, 60–61). Morris, speaking as Jesus, would reiterate this message just months later in August, that his followers “should know that I speak in half sentences. I speak plain enough for those to understand who are enlightened by my spirit. I can make all those understand me whom I wish to. I do not want all people to understand” (Morris 1886, 125). Morris also reprimanded his followers for misinterpreting other prophecies, such as a directive to not plant crops, which he said they took too far. The general framing that Morris provided of his own prophecies makes it hard to say that any given prophecy is clearly falsified. The example provided by Halford et al. (1981) for 31 December was clearly not an unqualified prediction—yet they claimed it was. Some scholars in this area find clear examples of failed prophecies even when their selected examples are far

from clear.

That said, Halford et al. (1981) still provide a useful history and interpretation of the Morrisite movement. Even if some of their prophetic interpretations were overstated, it is fair to treat the Morrisites as a sect that experienced failed prophecy and survived. Morris (1886) makes it clear that they should have prepared for the second coming of Christ to arrive in 1861. Morris also prophesied that he would not be killed by his enemies (Morris 1886). He would later be killed by his enemies. Despite the non-arrival of the Second Coming and the unforeseen killing of their leader, the Morrisites would persist for decades afterwards. While there was substantial attrition among the group, those who held to their faith claimed that Joseph Morris had fulfilled his role by putting on an elaborate pageant that symbolically foreshadowed the Second Coming (Anderson 1981).

Halford et al. (1981) point to some features of the Morrisites that might account for their survival as a group. Group members surrendered their individual property, making it hard to leave the group. Apostates were threatened with death. Many Morrisites were recent European immigrants with no social ties outside the group. Finally, almost all other people living in the region were mainstream Mormons who the Morrisites believed would shun them even if they left the Morrisites, making apostasy economically challenging and physically perilous.

Joanna Southcott

Joanna Southcott, a British woman who claimed to be a prophet of God and the bride of Christ, started gathering what would eventually become thousands of followers in 1801 (Balleine 1956). She and her followers are used as an example of a group surviving and maintaining belief in a failed prophecy by Melton (1985) in his influential article that argued that religious groups easily survived failed prophecies.

The prophecy in Southcott's case was that when she was 64 years old, she would become pregnant with a boy named Shiloh, who when born would prepare the world for the second coming of Christ. Southcott's case is interesting because the first part of the prophecy did come true—at least according to the medical establishment of the time. At the age of 64, Southcott appeared to become pregnant and her apparent pregnancy was confirmed by physicians, including some of the country's most prominent doctors (Balleine 1956). The pregnancy then ended with no child appearing. This is generally interpreted by latter observers as evidence that Southcott was experiencing a false or hysterical pregnancy, but some of her followers became convinced that not only had Southcott been pregnant but her child had been taken away by God till the time was right to reveal him to the world.

Is it fair to treat Southcott's followers as ignoring a clearly failed prophecy? While no miraculous child has yet returned, it is true that

had Southcott's followers observed her apparent pregnancy or trusted the dozens of physicians that examined her, they could reasonably conclude that Southcott was pregnant, in accordance with her prophecy, and given her age, it could be seen as miraculous. Another reason why we might not think that Southcott's followers simply ignored a failed prophecy is an event that happened following her death. After Southcott died, several competing leaders with their own factions claimed to be her legitimate successor. As Melton (1985) admits, one of the leaders vying for influence, John Wroe, claimed that Shiloh would return six years after his "birth," but when Shiloh did not return and the prophecy clearly failed, Wroe lost influence over the movement. The movement may not have rejected Southcott's partially fulfilled prophecy, but when Wroe's simply failed, he lost influence (Melton 1985).

Lubavitch Hasidim

Another proposed case of belief persisting after a prophecy has failed is the continued belief among some members of the Lubavitch movement

that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson is the Jewish messiah even after his death in 1994 (Dein 1997, 2011; Shaffir 2000).

Dein (2011, ix) writes that the "belief in the final resurrection of the dead is normative in Judaism and is set down as Maimonides's thirteenth principle of faith, but there is little precedent for the view that Moshiach could come from the dead." In other words, the claim that Schneerson was or would become the messiah must be false because the religious doctrine that the messiah must not die is true. To treat the death of Schneerson as a failed prophecy, we must affirm a contested religious doctrine. This makes using the case of Schneerson's death troublesome. In contrast to the prophesied flood in When Prophecy Fails or claims of the second coming of Christ or of mass landings by alien spacecraft, which observers can agree did not happen in a physical sense, it is unclear how social scientists could determine whether or not the Jewish messiah can die or appear to die.

Even if most or all contemporary Jewish religious authorities agreed that Schneerson's death meant he could not be the messiah, it would not follow that Schneerson's followers who viewed him as a messiah were suffering from cognitive dissonance following his death. It is quite common for practitioners of any religion not to hold or acknowledge the religious or moral doctrines formally taught by religious authorities. No matter how incongruous the claim that a dead man could be the messiah might be according to contemporary Judaism, to convincingly count Schneerson's death as a failed prophecy among his followers, it would first be necessary to show that at least some subset of his followers thought that Schneerson was the messiah and therefore could not die. Then it would be possible to treat Schneerson's death as a case of failed prophecy for at least that subset of his believers. Assertions that correct

religious doctrine shows Schneerson is not the messiah do not prove that his followers or others assent or assented to that teaching in practice. Not only do members of the Lubavitch movement who consider Schneerson the messiah disagree that death preclude a messianic claim, but literally billions of other humans also agree. Both Muslims and Christians consider Jesus of Nazareth to be the Jewish messiah (Alma'itah and Ul Haq 2022), which means most of humanity belongs to religions that assert that death (or the appearance of death in the case of Islam) is consistent with an individual being the Jewish messiah.

Schneerson was an incredibly influential religious figure, and no doubt it is worthwhile for scholars across the world to examine the

consequences of his death and legacy. But to treat his death as invalidating his potential messianic status requires affirming a specific theological premise.

Contestable and false claims of group survival

Beyond survivorship bias and the reliance of case studies on groups that, at least arguably, did not experience failed prophecies, the literature on failed prophecy (both case studies and surveys of the field) has overstated how well groups do following a failed prophecy. Some scholars have claimed that groups survived that actually died shortly after the failed prophecy.

What would it mean for a religious group to survive? Since many religious groups claim to possess unique, urgent, and divinely ordained missions and knowledge, we might think a religious group must endure forever to succeed according to its own merits. But that metric is impractical since we would not be able to label religions that are thousands of years old or possess billions of followers as successes. For this article, a group that experiences failed prophecy will count as having survived failed prophecy if the group, or a direct successor of the group, clearly continues to exist for ten years after the failed prophecy, without having recanted their original beliefs, the original prophecy, or the prophet. Demanding that a group continue to exist for decades after a failed prophecy sets the standard too high. First, it would force us to ignore more recent groups that may have appeared to thrive after experiencing failed prophecy. Second, if a group lasts 40 years after a failed prophecy and then collapses, the cause of the collapse is likely something other than the failed prophecy. Of the groups discussed so far in this article, the Morrisites survived their failed prophecies.

Evaluating the cases of Melton (1985)

Melton (1985, 19–21) argued that "[t]imes of testing tend to strengthen, not destroy, religious groups" and that "within religious groups, prophecy seldom fails" (p. 20). Melton further argued that religious groups were able to move on from failed prophecies by successfully spiritualizing the prophecy in a process where the "prophesied event is rein-

terpreted in such a way that what was supposed to have been a visible, verifiable occurrence is seen to have been in reality an invisible, spiritual occurrence." Melton reviewed five cases to support this claim of groups that supposedly experienced failed prophecies and survived. However, I

find that of the five cases, two groups died, one group (Joanna's Southcott's followers) arguably did not experience a failed prophecy, one group immediately lost the majority of its followers, and the fifth group cannot be identified, and its fate cannot be known.

Melton discussed the group led by Dorothy Martin, made famous by When Prophecy Fails as an example of a group surviving failed prophecy. This is inaccurate: the group dissolved within weeks and never reunified (Dawson 2011; Barkun 2015; Kelly 2023). Melton also claimed the Universal Link group survived a failed 1967 prophecy of a universal revelation. The movement died within five years (Living Record 2023a, 2023b).

Melton also cites the Millerites as surviving a famous failed prophecy of the second coming of Christ. He is correct. Seventh Day Adventists are descended from this movement; however, the movement experienced extreme attrition after the failed prophecy. Adventist historian Knight estimates that the majority of followers abandoned the movement following the failed prophecy (Knight 1999).

The final group cited by Melton is a pseudonymous Pentecostal group studied by Hardyck and Braden (1962). It is impossible to know the long-term fate of this group—the only account of the group was published two years after the failed prophecy, and since the authors, for reasons of privacy, used pseudonyms for the group and its location, it is impossible to follow up on this group and ascertain whether it survived beyond the initial follow-up conducted by Hardyck and Braden.

Melton tried to provide evidence that religious groups easily weather failed prophecies. Discarding the example whose existence or long-term fate cannot be known, he provided two examples of movements that died entirely, one movement that lost most of its members, and one movement that may not have experienced a failed prophecy at all. Of the three groups that clearly experienced failed prophecy, two of them died. A better interpretation of Melton's cases might be that within religious groups clear failures of prophecy are generally not weathered and that most groups that experience failed prophecies die. Based on Melton's examples, failed prophecies appear fatal.

Evaluating the cases of Dawson (1999)

Dawson (1999) provided a table of thirteen different religious groups that he claimed experienced false prophecy and listed whether the group survived the failed prophecy. He claimed twelve of the groups survived and labeled surviving groups as surviving "for a time" or "quite well"

or “barely” or “with difficulties” or “but weakened” but unfortunately
gives no guidance as to what these terms mean. For instance, Dawson cites Palmer and Finn (1992) to justify labeling the Institute of Applied Metaphysics as surviving “quite well” even though Palmer and Finn stated that it had ceased to exist by the time they wrote their article.
In Table 2, I return to Dawson’s cases and record how long the groups existed before and after the failed prophecy, what we know of changes to group membership after the failed prophecy, and whether the prophecy drew upon a novel or accepted source of knowledge.
Dawson claimed twelve of these groups present evidence of survival. Having set the standard for survival at ten years, I find that three of the twelve groups clearly survived: The Baha’is under the Provision of the Covenant, the Millerites, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Unarians. A fifth, the Rouxists, may also have survived. Six groups perished after the failure of prophecy. One group cannot be studied due to their identity having been hidden. One group, the Lubavitch Hasidim, cannot be labeled as having experienced a failed prophecy without accepting a specific theological stance. The death of groups is more common than survival. The Unarians survived disappointment, but whether they survived failed prophecy is an open question, due to the conditionality of language and because the prophet disavowed its fulfillment before the date it was supposed to be fulfilled.
Of the three groups covered by Dawson that clearly survived failed prophecy, two of the groups were studied retrospectively, therefore suffering from survivorship bias. The study of Baha’is under the Provision of the Covenant provides an example of a prospective study of prophecy that shows a group surviving failed prophecy. But even here the group recognized that the prophecy failed. While the leaders would make more and more predictions of future disasters (Balch et al. 2000), the members of the group responded by discontinuing efforts to convert others to their sect, in some cases leaving the group, and the remaining members ceased preparing for future disasters predicted by the leadership. The remaining members’ religious beliefs also shifted away from apocalyptic prophecies as a central focus and shifted towards a greater emphasis on the general pre-existing teaching of the Baha’i faith rather than the unique teachings of their particular sect (Balch et al. 1983).
It is plausible, but not obvious, that the Unarians should be counted as a group that experienced failed prophecy. Tumminia (2005) describes Ruth Norman, the group’s leader, as predicting a UFO landing in both

Table 2: Cases from Dawson (1999).

Name of	Dawson	Length of pre-	Length of post-	Accepted or

prophet or (1999) failed prophecy failed prophecy
Post-failure decline novel source of
Group alleged messiah sources existence existence
or growth knowledge
Dorothy Dorothy Martin Festinger et al. Less than a year Weeks (Dawson
Ceased to exist Novel (psychic
Martin's (1956) (Festinger et al. 2011)
within weeks extraterrestrials)
group, 1956)
(Dawson 2011; Barkun
"Seekers"
2015; Kelly 2023)
Church of the Pseudonymous Hardyck and Five years Unknown
Unknown Accepted
True Word Braden (1962) (Hardyck and
(Pentecostal gift of
Braden 1962) prophecy)
Ichigen no Motoki Isamu Sanada (1979) 24 years At least one
year Dramatic decline in Novel (personal

Miya (Sanada 1979) (Sanada 1979)
but first year (Sanada revelation)
probably fewer than 1979)
ten* (Earhart 1983)
Baha'is under Chase and Balch et al. 11 years (Balch 43 years
and still Moderate decline of Novel/Accepted
the Provision Jensen (1983) and et al. 1983) exists (BUPC)
believers based in (angelic visitation
of the Balch et al.
Montana, dramatic and biblical
Covenant (2000)
decline elsewhere interpretation)
(Balch et al. 1983)

(Continued.)
Table 2 (Continued.)

Name of Dawson Length of pre- Length of post-
Accepted or
prophet or (1999) failed prophecy failed prophecy
Post-failure decline novel source of
Group alleged messiah sources existence existence
or growth knowledge
Millerites William Miller Melton (1985) 13 years (Knight 179 years
and still Most Millerites Accepted (biblical
1993) exists as Adventists abandoned Millerism interpretation)
(Knight 1999)

Universal Link Liebie Pugh Melton (1985) Six years The two
groups No institutional Novel (supernatural
(Melton, 1985) promoting the existence after five visitor and
prophecy folded years miraculous angel
within five painting)
years although
publications
promoting the
prophecy were
released up to nine
years afterwards
(Living Record

2023a, 2023b)
Jehovah's Charles Taze Zygmunt Eight years 145 years
and still Departure of key Accepted (biblical
Witnesses Russell (1970), (Rogerson 1969) exists
theologian, Nelson interpretation)
Wilson (1978), Barbour and some
Singelenberg demoralization
(1989) but no great effect
(Rogerson 1969;
Macmillan 1957;
Zygmunt 1970)
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Name of Dawson Length of pre- Length of post-
Accepted or
prophet or (1999) failed prophecy failed prophecy
Post-failure decline novel source of
Group alleged messiah sources existence existence
or growth knowledge
Rouxists Georges Ernest Van Fossen Seven years 76 years and
still Unclear Novel (founder
Thomas Kelly

Roux (2000) (Van Fossen exists
claimed to be God)
(republished) 1982)
Mission de Emmanuel Palmer and 62 years One year
(Palmer Group ceased to exist Novel (founder
l'Esprit Saint Robitaille Finn (1992) and Finn,
1992) claimed to be
incarnation of the
Holy Spirit)
Institute Winifred (Win) Palmer and 13 years Leader
expelled Group ceased to exist Novel
of Applied Barton Finn (1992) after eight

years, (extraterrestrial
Metaphysics movement
defunct insect spirit guide
within nine years from Atlantis)
(Palmer and Finn
1992)
Lubavitch Rabbi Shaffir (1993, Hundreds of 19 years and
still Unharmed Accepted
Hasidim Menachem 1994) years (Dein, exists
(Rabbinical

Mendel Dein (1997) 1997)
teaching)
Schneerson
(Continued.)
Table 2 (Continued.)

Name of prophet or Group	Dawson (1999) alleged messiah	Length of pre-failure sources	Length of post-failure existence or growth	Accepted or Post-failure decline novel source of knowledge
Unarians	Ruth and Ernest Norman	20–21 years	47–48 years and still	Prophecy failure Novel/Accepted
	(1998)	before first	exists.	in
		1975 led to no	(Psychic	
		failed prophecy	significant decline	
		(Tumminia	(Tumminia 2005)	are a novel
		2005)		source
				for U.S. society
				as a whole but
				they promote
				their beliefs to
				a sympathetic
				New Age and UFO
				subculture)
Chen Tao	Hon-Ming Chen	Wright (1998)	Five years	Four years
			Leader lost all	Novel (mysterious
		(Wright and	(Wright and Greil	followers. teacher with
		Greil 2011)	2011)	divine
				(Wright and Greil wisdom and
				direct

2011) revelation)

*Earhart's (1983) comprehensive bibliography on English-language sources on Japanese new religious movements shows no publications by or on the group following Sanada (1979), consistent with the group becoming defunct, but not conclusively showing that the group went defunct.

1974 and 1975—neither of which occurred. For the 1974 prediction, Tumminia cites the cult publication Tesla Speaks: Countdown!!! to Space Fleet Landing, and notes that the copy she obtained had a paper slip pasted over a failed prediction. I obtained a copy of the same volume, which had been altered in the same manner. However, the language surrounding this 1974 prophecy is highly conditional; Norman wrote that the fleet would land only when humanity had overcome its fear of extraterrestrials (Norman 1974). As Tumminia notes—but does not emphasize—the 1975 landing prophecy was rescinded days before the anticipated arrival, when a Unarian psychic revealed that the vision of the UFO fleet was not a glimpse of the future, but of ancient Egypt (Norman 1975). By the time 27 September 1975 arrived, the Unarians no longer expected a landing. While they expressed shock and disappointment at having mistaken an ancient vision for a modern one, their belief system was not directly falsified by external events. Even the later prediction of a 2001 UFO landing, as Tumminia notes, was viewed by some Unarians as symbolic or conditional before the date arrived.

The case of the Rouxist movement provides an ambiguous example of a group surviving a failed apocalyptic prophecy. Van Fossen (1982) writes that the Rouxists of France, whose founder first claimed to have supernatural healing abilities in 1947, originally predicted the arrival of the millennium in 1954, and that despite its non-arrival, the movement continued to grow and still survives.

The movement's founder claimed to be various figures, eventually landing on a claim to be God. If the group survived a failed prophecy in 1954, this would be an example of a group with a novel source of knowledge that survived a failed prophecy when relatively young. This may be the correct interpretation. The challenge is that the claimed 1954 prophecy is quite obscure. Van Fossen (1982) appears to be the only English-language source for any 1954 prophecy and he never provides a translation or the original text of any prophecy referring to 1954.

Another source of ambiguity about the 1954 prophecy comes from Van Fossen's interviews of the group members. He writes that when he interviewed members of the group in 1974 about the failed 1954 prophecies, they "adamantly denied that they indicated any failures, contradictions, or inconsistencies" (1982, 124). Are the members rationalizing a past failed prophecy or are they correct that there was not a failed 1954 prophecy?

The group does have a history of conditional prophecies. When one follower of the group claimed that the Virgin Mary told her that they would convert the Pope to their movement, the leader claimed that her prophecy had failed because the group had not worked hard enough to win new disciples. In later decades, 1980 would be set as the deadline for the arrival of the new age, but the prophecy would be rescinded by the group's leaders in 1979, claiming that the followers were not sufficiently worthy. Other accounts of the history of the Rouxists contain no reference to a failed millennial prophecy in 1954 (Dericquebourg 2008).

Pro-survival factors?

I suggested that either the age of a group or its reliance on an accepted source of prophetic knowledge such as holy scripture might protect groups from the negative effects of failed prophecies. The case studies on failed prophecies cited above provide no evidence of old groups surviving failed prophecies, as most of the groups that issued these prophecies were quite young and set dates of fulfillment for the imminent future. New groups often die after a failed prophecy, yet even decades-old groups such as Mission de l'Esprit Saint can collapse immediately after prophetic failure.

The source of prophetic knowledge may play a role in shaping how well a religious group survives failed prophecy. All the groups from Dawson (1999) that are known to have failed relied on novel sources of knowledge. Of the groups that are known to survive, the two that experienced substantial growth following failed prophecy (the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Millerites) both based their prediction on interpretations of the Christian Bible, which was accepted as a holy and authoritative scripture in the societies where the movements began.

If the Unarians are viewed as having experienced failed prophecy, they survived it, while relying on psychic contact with extraterrestrials as the source for their prophecies. While this is a novel source of knowledge within the United States as a whole, Tumminia (2005) shows us that the Unarians recruit from New Age and UFO believers, who are probably more likely to view psychic contact with extraterrestrials as a more accepted source of knowledge than the general public does.

The case of the Bahai's under the Provision of the Covenant warrants particular discussion, as following the failure of their prophecy, the leaders explicitly argued that the failure should not cast doubt upon their movement, as their prophecy was only a failure of scriptural

interpretation, not of religious authority. As reported by Balch et al. (2000), the Bahai's under the Provision of the Covenant are a small schismatic sect of the mainstream Baha'i religion founded by a chiropractor Leland Jensen, who left the mainstream Baha'i religion in the 1960s after

a succession dispute about the rightful leadership of the faith. Jensen would move to Montana and be sentenced to prison for sexual offenses. While in prison, Jensen claimed he received a spiritual revelation naming him a prophet who was to teach the true Bahai's faith. Jensen would later gain a key follower, Neil Chase, who would claim that Jensen's claims to be a prophet were vindicated by earlier prophecies from George Williams, a follower of Joseph Morris, whose prophecies are discussed elsewhere in this article. Together, Jensen and Chase would issue various predictions of nuclear war, comet strikes upon the earth, and various other catastrophes which did not occur.

Although Jensen taught that he had received his mission through supernatural revelation, following several failed prophecies, Chase and Jensen insisted that their prophecies were based upon biblical interpretation, not supernatural revelation.

The admission of human error was rationalized by making a sharp distinction between a prediction and prophecy. Prophecies came directly from 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. (Balch et al. 2000, 274)

The leaders of the group seemed to recognize that inaccurate interpretations of the Bible do not cast into doubt the reliability of the Bible, but inaccurate claims delivered from God or angels might cast into doubt the spiritual authority of those who talk to supernatural beings.

Spiritualization but not survival

Melton's (1985) claim that groups respond to failed prophecy by reinterpreting their prophecy to entail a spiritual and invisible fulfillment rather than a concrete and visible fulfillment is supported by the behavior of many of the groups in the literature. Individual believers often did claim to receive visions that provided guidance for movements after prophecy failed. These visions could allow for the spiritualization and

reinterpretation of failed prophecies, to reveal that that the prophesied event has been postponed or provide support for succession of leadership in succession disputes. Most groups discussed in this article would go on to claim further revelation after their prophecies failed. Many of these groups still died.

Groups where some individuals claimed visions or other forms of revelation and prophecies following failed prophecy include Dorothy Martin's group (Festinger et al. 1956), the Morrisites (Anderson 1981), the Rouxists (Van Fossen 1982), Chen Tao (Wright and Greil 2011), the Unar-

ians (Tumminia 1998), Universal Link (Melton 1985), Southcott's followers (Melton 1985), the Millerites (Strayer 2022), Ichigen no Miya (Sanada 1979), and Baha'is under the Provision of the Covenant (Balch et al. 2000). The Jehovah's Witnesses would also go on to make many more apocalyptic prophecies, but these were based on scriptural interpretation rather than supernatural revelation. The groups in the literature did not claim to experience shared group visions or to be witnesses of physical, observable miracles. If cognitive dissonance explains the existence of some of these visions, it shows limits to what kinds of spiritual experiences disappointed believers have. Even a group that could have believed that they witnessed a physical miracle, the followers of Joanna Southcott, did not claim to experience an observable physical miracle after Shiloh was not born. The absence of miracle claims, other than visions following failed prophecies, also suggests that disappointed believers do not generally turn to pious fraud to fabricate miracles.

Conclusion

Past scholars have claimed that religious believers ignored, rationalized, or spiritualized past failed prophecies, allowing the groups that created those prophecies to survive. But the case studies carefully assembled by a variety of scholars since the publication of When Prophecy Fails do not support that conclusion. In general, failed prophecies look fatal, and groups that experience them usually fail. In some of the cases, this looks causal. For instance, the group in When Prophecy Fails disbanded almost immediately after the failure of prophecy. However, as we lack data on all new religious movements, it cannot be conclusively shown that failed prophecies consistently drive group demise or that groups that experience failed prophecies dissolve sooner than groups that do not. There is suggestive evidence from existing case studies that offering

"predictions" based upon scriptural interpretation appears less harmful than offering prophecies made through direct supernatural revelation.

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