Endings Without End: *When Prophecy Fails* and the Rise of New Age Spirituality and Cognitive Dissonance¹

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It may seem rather unconventional to begin on a note of endings, but when one’s topic is prophecies, especially failed prophecies, one finds oneself without usual recourse to beginnings. A bit of a spoiler, to be sure, to begin with the closing act. No surprise, no moment of anticipation, or is there? When I tell someone I am preparing a history of Festinger, Riecken and Schachter’s 1956 social psychology book *When Prophecy Fails*,² their replies often run counter to expectation. Recently, one went something like this: Ah, so, how *did* things pan out? I paused, wondering if they were asking me in that nod-nod, wink-wink kind of way about some failure on my part to recognize the title’s tell all: “When Prophecy Fails.” In my moment of hesitation, however, they leaned in to repeat their question, as if I had not heard them. As if I had failed to grasp what question was being asked. To my mind, there dawned, in that moment’s pause, a crucial distinction. For what, in the end, their questions directed me to has less to do with endings, or beginnings of the end, and more with what this story of failed prophecy reveals.

This distinction is pivotal for at least two reasons. For one, we live in a culture saturated by end-time discourse, perhaps even more than at the time of the study in mid-fifties America, a time culturally attuned by systems of surveillance, secrecy, and the Doomsday Clock poised for a second year at two minutes to midnight, a time when
people were said to want their religion to be a little more psychological and when the psychological was being wrought through cybernetics to be a little more cognitive. For another, many today are conversant with end-time cries, hearing in them larger notions than letter-for-letter predictions. Both of these are discernible from the study’s outset to its vast cultural absorption today.

Just days before the prophesied end investigated in Festinger et al.’s work, a Chicago Daily News headline deemed its “prophetess,” Dorothy Martin of Oak Park, Illinois, student of theosophy, “calm on cataclysm eve,” December 20, 1954. Often featured in such newspaper stories alongside Dorothy Martin, better known by the pseudonym Mrs. Marion Keech given to her by the authors of When Prophecy Fails, was her colleague Dr. Charles Laughead, called Dr. Armstrong in the book. He was also declared calm on the prophecy’s eve, despite having been fired from Michigan State College’s health staff for his “end of the world” teachings. Claiming his group was not a cult or religious sect, Laughead noted that a small group met “under the auspices of the People Church of East Lansing” and was known as the “‘quest’ group” who discussed saucers, philosophy, ancient mysticism and the “atomic war that disturbs saucer men”—the unbalancing of the universe. Just weeks before, the Chicago Sun-Times ran the story “Tidal Wave Reactions” surveying what Chicagoans would do if they believed Martin’s prediction of the city being “washed away by a tidal wave.” Most surveyed “seemed unconcerned,” unrattled: “Some of those asked indicated they would advance and enlarge their New Year’s Eve celebration in to a real fling.” Others told the Sun Times “they wouldn’t change any plans.”
Four days before the prophesied end by flood, a *Chicago Daily News* headline read: “‘End of the World is Near!’ – It’s an Old Cry in History.” It is an old cry in history but is it the same old cry? Today, one senses end-time talk has become rather banal, punctuating everyday discourse as if we are at a loss for descriptors of severe or bothersome conditions and so we add the suffix –pocalypse to all manner of things: snowpocalypse, wordpocalypse (words that need to be wiped out from everyday talk), zombie apocalypse (a little overkill, if you ask me), and we encounter endless media reports of “it’s the end of the world as we know it.” Use of the word apocalypse shows steady increase in books from the 1950s on, spiking, not unsurprisingly, perhaps, between 1990 and 2012.

All of which brings me back to the point of a cultural conversancy with end-times. On this read, my interlocutors are indicating how never-ending invocations of “apocalypse” to render social, cultural, political, economic, environmental and all assorted catastrophe cataclysmic are now not only unbelievable but also unlikely. One senses in their questions a more cosmic horizon of inquiry: Is that all there is – the end? To what larger worlds might a world’s ending point? In the end, those puzzled by the tale of *When Prophecy Fails* may be attuned to how endings extend themselves out to frontiers of subjective and objective worlds, to matters of consciousness and human existence—a hearkening to what a prophetic apocalypse reveals about worlds beyond or other than endings, invoking, in the quest, apocalypse’s etymological meaning: to uncover, to disclose, to reveal.
It may not all have been for naught, then, that Leon Festinger came to call the psychological phenomenon arising from that December night of failed prophecy cognitive *dissonance*. For dissonance, drawing on ideas from musical dissonance, as this psychological concept does, may be said to connote foreshadowing and revelation. Early twentieth century composers and artists used dissonance in new ways and to new effect, with some claiming their new age of dissonance foretold tonality or consonance’s collapse and/or opened another window to the soul. Likening dissonant compositions to streams of consciousness, expressing the inner spiritual necessity of an age, or giving voice to inner turmoil, dissonance resonated with that era’s clamor of war, fragmentation and chaos as with other moments when innovations in dissonance sounded the age’s ferment in a language of transformations at the very level of who we are.11 Of note, of course, is Olivier Messiaen’s composition, “Quartet for the End of Time,” prepared while a prisoner-of-war at Stalag VIII-A in Gorlitz. Inspired by the line in Revelation, “There shall be time no longer,” Messiaen’s piece is described as the “gentlest apocalypse imaginable.”12 Its innovative rhythms evoked a new hearing on time by dispensing with conventional notions of meter and musical time, such as regular beats, so reminiscent of marching and war, of time marching on. To Messiaen, changing compositions of rhythm corresponded to changed understanding of temporal orders, a break with metrics of the future as that through which the past becomes converted into meaning. His rhythms invoked time outside such metrics of history, time as the “starting point of all things.”13

New musical forms or techniques of creating dissonance carried implications for understandings of reason, self, consciousness, social order and the cosmos. If the modern subject could come to hear what at first seemed to be inharmonious sounds or melodies
as having a form of harmony, then, or so the thinking seemed to go, might this new dissonance also signal the end of a form of ordering the world, an end to psychological and social certainties? Whether of mythic proportion or not, one cannot escape how dissonance came to be both sign and practice of psychic and social life in western twentieth century music, social theory, literature and the arts. Few deny dissonance’s grip on imagining the modern subject, its tones of meaning beating through and through with those of spirituality, including theosophy, its contrapuntal innovations calling us to new modes of listening to culture and history, even as debate remains open as to what extent this moment’s experiments with dissonance, with sound, time and psyche, transformed or revealed anew the modern subject.

Exerting an equal hold and set of implications is the case of Festinger’s 1950s rendition of dissonance as cognitive dissonance, a theory absorbed so thoroughly by academic and popular discourse our age itself is said to peal with like signs and acoustic symptoms of cognitive dissonance.

Terms and Scales of Meaning

Prophecy, dissonance and cognition are capacious concepts, further enlarged by their own distinct histories as well as by their historical imbroglio. To embark on a project of their historical detail is a task made all the more meaningful by their many-tentacled conceptual and historical reach into music, literature, astronomy, religion, psychology and science as much as by their power to summon order in the cosmos, universe, and nature, and even to sound “first beginnings.” Conceptually, this trio reminds us of our need to know how things will go, our preference for order, predictability and for surprises and the unpredictable. These are tensions neither
resolvable into measures of time nor balanced by re-orderings of psychological or
spiritual life or sweetening of life’s routine with a surprise here and there, now and then.
Much as relations between dissonance and consonance are not reducible to part and
counterpart or dichotomies of thought,16 these relational tensions, this longing for balance
or harmony among spheres of life – inner and outer – is a dynamically orchestrated co-
performance created in the “medium of time.”17 In terms drawn from functionalist
theory, a chord’s identity as consonant or dissonant “depends on the company it keeps,”18
and, by extension, that references disciplinary boundaries and ways their interrelations
are thought resolved in ideas of interdisciplinarity. That such “category-mistakes”
trouble music theory and history is well recognized, if rarely corrected,19 these troubles
arise as well in the many and varied adoptions of the theory of cognitive dissonance. For
dissonance shifts and changes by its adoption and renditions, as does cognition. To
capture their essence is a little like trying to hold on to a fading note. A sense of its
sound lingers even as it morphs into other sonorous dimensions. Capacious and
unwieldy, deliberated upon and the source of disputation, short-lived and seemingly
eternal, and yet exercising a force to effect the very ways we come to imagine and
reinvent who we are and to puzzle out mysteries of the worlds in which we find
ourselves, prophecy, dissonance and cognition are central terms with which to contend.
To pursue their entanglement in When Prophecy Fails is as much reminder of their
formative powers as it is to underscore the need to renew engagement with them and, by
extension, necessarily, their reincarnations in psychology, science, religion and
spirituality.
Parts Played Against One Another

What sort of sounding board is dissonance for history, the psyche and notions of the self? For isn’t dissonance’s early twentieth century challenge to tonality coincident with expanding consciousness of inner worlds, to experiment with its expressive forms, to give an ear, as some put it, to the psyche’s double step of anguish and joy or, as others said, to compose a spiritual philosophy of multicultural utopia or a reconciliation of science and mysticism? And, isn’t mid-twentieth century cognitive dissonance with Festinger’s focus on persistence of beliefs in the face of evidence to the contrary, such as end-time prophecies, about making sense of how humans appear counter-intuitive to a rational calculus of the mind, a more conservative idea? True, one could imagine the earlier moment as an opening to wonder and the later “post-tonal” one, as given over to a rationalization or intellectualization of the counterintuitive, a closing of wonder. Such a narrative would make of the history of cognitive dissonance but one more element in that larger and well-rehearsed plot line of the western world’s continuing secularization. It would also leave unexamined that implicit twinned association of psychology and secularity, and of one calling out the other – that is, an implied two-way causal relation of becoming more psychological and more secular. But does the contrapuntal line not have a resonance of its own too? That is, an association of becoming more psychological and more spiritual or religious? These historical plotlines and sets of assumptions are precisely the historical and conceptual knot my research seeks to tease apart to grant a new hearing to the paradigmatic *When Prophecy Fails* and the theory of cognitive dissonance.
To listen again is to listen for this history’s discordant notes: How was it that the same century in which we purportedly became more psychological and secular was also the same century in which we ostensibly became equally more spiritual? How did the transit from religious or New Age spirituality and prophecy to cognitive dissonance become, in the end, a matter of psychological rather than spiritual or religious tension? That is, the measure of rationality cognitive dissonance was envisioned to instance relied first on Martin’s New Age prophecy, one the authors devoted considerable print space to placing in the context of other failed religious prophecies, and, as a second step, abjuring the religious or spiritual in the theory of cognitive dissonance itself. As this reflection will show, the spiritual acoustic unconscious returns, manifesting as a form of irrationality. This repudiation and recurrence is good reminder of the forgotten rudiments in the story of Narcissus, his “refusal to hear Echo’s invocations of love.”22 Here, though, the story is of a discipline replaying its history, unable to hear in its questions, concepts and theories neighboring resonances made to sound all too far afield.

What transpires, one wonders, for the modern subject in that moment of turning the extraordinary powers of prophecy into ordinary irrationality or madness, a practice embedded in an ontology “guaranteeing that all are in principle explicable.”23 No wonder, there. We are led to ask what the nature of cognitive dissonance’s relation to religion and spirituality is, and what implications this has had in its psychological conversion to cognitive renditions of the mind, religion and spirituality. This question is one of historical mishearing: What goes missing from consciousness and affective life when a discipline such as psychology bases its study on spirituality as an already determined “other” on which to set the terms of its concept or theory and then eschews this “other”
on the grounds of its irrationality or madness? What happens to understandings of the psyche? Of religious experience? To urge the question along: What, if anything, goes missing or ends? What other worlds of meaning and ways of understanding ourselves, the mind, reason and rationality were surrendered in this twentieth century of uncertainty with its resonant strain upon strain of dissonant music, literature and theory unraveling one after another end without end, one and another formulation of the modern subject?

Changing Scales and Scales of Change

These questions inform the larger arc of my history of *When Prophecy Fails* and cognitive dissonance. It is an arc that extends to wonders at disciplinary partings of the way that nonetheless return, such as those of religion and spirituality in psychological science, burnished anew in novel psychological terms. This is not a history of the psychology of religion, or the religion of psychology, or the science of religion or of psychology. Rather it is a history of how science, religion and psychology egg one another along, the tangle of their relations. It is a history that finds itself incomplete without the arc of William James’s treatment of consciousness and varieties of religious experience through to his astute rendering of medical materialism or reductionism. A “sad discordancy,” writes James, attends medical materialism’s measure of moments of “sentimental and mystical experience,” as of genius and as signs of disease alike.24 “Medical materialism,” he continues, “finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysterical, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.”25 Philosopher Isabelle Stengers, drawing on James, also inquires into how “a
being of faith, the Blessed Virgin for example,” becomes turned into matters of what exist and what does not (categorically or symbolically) thereby failing to consider the Virgin Mary’s own particular force or effects.  Historian of religion, Leigh Eric Schmidt addresses how a “psychological shift in perspective” functioned to silence or to turn into sensory illusions “a numinous angel, the rustling leaves that became whispering voices, the statue that came to life.” Whereas Schmidt’s history attends to a disenchantment of an acoustic unconscious, a loss of acoustic consciousness in religion, Ann Harrington’s history of the science of mind-cures attends to that productive conjunction of science and knowledge at the level of embodiment. Not only does she observe how understandings of hypnosis changed over time but that the “mental and physiological experience of hypnosis -- what it is” underwent change too, and “in ways that clearly reflect changing social expectations and morés.” Further, historian Molly McGarry traces “historical crossings, marking a moment” when Spiritualist thought meets up with emerging discourses of sexual science and with science and secularism. McGarry proposes Spiritualism persists in neurological, psychological and medical discourse as a “residual discourse,” defined by Raymond Williams as an element “formed in the past but … still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.” One is struck by certain resonances across these authors, whether of spiritualism’s residual discourse in notions of fragmented and multileveled consciousness or in dynamics between spirituality, religion and secularism in notions of mind and consciousness, of how we hear who we are and imagine the world in which we live. Their works reveal an arc of “mores”, James’s mediating term for how there is “actually and literally more life in our total soul
than we are at any time aware of" and stretch out this “more” to encompass the networks operating amongst science, religion, spirituality and psychology, despite their assumed divisions. A larger dissonance is made resonant here, one extending and illuminating anew *When Prophecy Fails*.

Two moments are illustrative: the night of the failed prophecy and the emergence of psychology’s cognitive dissonance, and a recent use by Barbara Herrnstein Smith of *When Prophecy Fails* and its theory in contemporary debate on the new natural theology and cognition. But, first, an excursus.

**Dissonance and Historiographical Unrest**

In my work, dissonance operates not only as a conceptual and historical object of investigation, but also as an opening into rethinking how we carry out historical scholarship. Histories such as those examining the disenchantment of the ear, the force of apparitions or symbols to set in motion pilgrimages and piety or changes in the body at the level of embodied senses or spirituality in the making of the mind, reason and consciousness are thorny by their very nature. For attention to spirituality, especially New Age Spirituality, inevitably prompts questions about the psychological status of the prophets or the group members, including in the case of *When Prophecy Fails* whether there are signs of or information on whether Dorothy Martin, who was threatened with psychiatric treatment, had epileptic seizures or a traumatic childhood, or suffered from auditory hallucinations and/or some other medical-psychological disorder. Similar questions arise regarding Charles Laughead, who underwent a court-ordered psychiatric examination in light of charges of mental incompetency filed by his sister. In
undertaking these histories, one wrestles with the twin horns of the dilemma: either someone is mad or their beliefs are mad. Either the psyche has gone astray or the spiritual or religious beliefs have run amok.

To steer clear of such well-trodden ground means holding in tension various contrary parts to raise new questions about psychology, science, religion and spirituality and to move discussion beyond iterations of believers in or redeemers of either the small millennial group and their new religious movement or the research social psychologists. Such histories compel their own unique historiographical needs, I would argue, ones that break with limited notions of historicity, much as reinventions of dissonance of the twentieth century sought to achieve.

So, here I borrow from twentieth century versions of dissonance in music and the arts as an experimental tool in conceiving of and investigating human nature (and the cosmos). If dissonance instructs historiography, which I think it does, it may be to reformulate it, as well as its kin relations, history of science and science studies, along lines proposed by Wai Chee Dimock in her literary theory of resonance to give a new “profile to the concepts of historicity and context.” She sounded a challenge to time- and place-bound notions of historicity whose context-delimiting frameworks may oblige words and texts to stay within and be contained by particular times and places. Looking at resonances outside time-and-place specific contexts, however, may reveal significant meaning. This type of resonant history not only considers residual discourses (or what lingers and endures) but what tensions resonate in new ways, what lives on to propagate afresh and to disturb domesticated orders of knowledge, and what seemingly inessential or incidental tones become, through certain resonances, newly heard as significant.
One is put in mind here of Kathryn Lofton’s contrapuntal moves in historical scholarship of religion, where, by inquiring into history as religious studies object, counter tenors of religious studies’ microtones and macrotones become audible, something akin to pianist Glenn Gould’s radio experiment in the early 1960s to recreate by means of simultaneously recorded contrapuntal voices and music *The Idea of North* (in Canada). Each reads the signs of their respective lands, to paraphrase from Gould’s program, to find in the most minute, the infinite, the dissonance not resolved. Two additional theorists amplify. Arnold Schoenberg, composer, painter, theorist and key figure of the new “emancipation of dissonance,” as he phrased it, writes of dissonance as stirring unrest: “a state of rest is placed in question through a contrast. From this unrest a motion proceeds.” He elaborates:

The primitive ear hears the tone as irreducible, but physics recognizes it to be complex. In the meantime, however, musicians discovered that it is capable of continuation, i.e., that movement is latent in it. That problems are concealed in it, problems that clash with one another, that the tone lives and seeks to propagate itself.

Schoenberg’s theory of dissonance resonates with certain features of William James’s multiverse, described as the “strung-along type, the type of continuity, contiguity, or concatenation.” Here too discord is operative in one phenomenon’s contrary relation with another that “conceals all its religious effect upon the mind. Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership.”

James’ multiverse collects within its analytic frame extensions in time, proximity as a principle of association, and relation through chains they create; Schoenberg directs one to movement that lies latent in resonance, movement from which emerges something
unheard or the creation of a new sense of harmony. Things travel through time; things affect one another in their transit; sometimes their resonances sound a new depth of meaning, sometimes heard out of time and sometimes heard as a clash of symbols, concepts and texts, what Dimock calls a “timely unwieldiness.” This unwieldiness pays homage to “time both as a medium of unrecoverable meaning and as a medium of newly possible meanings.”

Dissonances, as, perhaps, hearing or hearing of prophecies, have a momentum of their own. Their resonant tensions worry the terrain of change, of metamorphoses, of ontological meaning, of wonder, of a search for ratio, which “always lurk[s] just a little bit beyond the ordinary, the obvious explanation.” They are endings without end, echoing longingly across the ages humanity’s refrain of how to begin (again), to hear anew: Who are we? How are we to dwell here together? What bodes for humanity’s future – harmony? disharmony?

Cognitive Dissonance’s Resonant Chamber

What kicked off Festinger’s mid-twentieth century dissonance research was a growing interest in how communications travelled and how they gathered within them significant resound. This is the vexing problem of felt resonances in communication, the more often than not inaudible strains of acoustic conscious and unconscious worlds. One might hear something – a message, news, prophecy, or communication of some sort – but that tells one little about how it will be received or shared with or orient one to others. To begin to map communication flow, one had to trace out less visible and audible networks of social relations and influence operating in what Festinger called the psychological environment. Communications resonated; they had a momentum of their own, could
set other things in motion, were unpredictable in their effects, and often had manifest or latent within them emotions, motives, desires and longing.

What intrigued Festinger were not those consonances where information, behavior and the psychological environment fell into more comforting constellated harmonies. His questions were more in tune with the dissonant times of mid-twentieth century America’s tensions and turmoil around rumors, secrets, and political transgressions. Rumors, such as those associated with communist propaganda, for example, took on a life of their own, creating or sustaining psychological environments, with little grounding in fact, or what could be taken for fact. The number of contingencies in any effort to chart such psychological environments seemed astronomical.

However daunting the task, four institutions, the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, Harvard University (sociology), Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research and University of Minnesota’s Laboratory for Research in Social Relations, were brought together by the Ford Foundation to inventory the status of knowledge within the fields of social stratification, child development (socialization), political behavior and social communication and social influence. The aim of these inventories was to determine the status of knowledge on what influences human conduct. Festinger’s field of expertise was social communication and social influence, and he formed, as did each expert at the other three institutions, a team of researchers to work together over several years to complete the inventory. Planning proposals detailed a vast and wide swath of literature to be reviewed in the humanities and social sciences, from Aristotle to Marx, from Simmel, Weber and Durkheim to Park,
Parsons, Homans and from Freud to Allport, Sherif, and Asch, to name a few.\textsuperscript{49} Works under study in Festinger’s group, composed of a philosopher, sociologists and later social psychologists, covered a vast range of disciplines, from American Studies to history and literature, and from political science to public opinion psychology, including John Hershey’s \textit{Hiroshima}, Bruno Bettelheim’s \textit{Rumors and Communications in Concentration Camps}, Mike Jay’s \textit{The Unfortunate Colonel Despard}, volumes of the \textit{Irish Rebellion Rumors}, Henry Smith’s \textit{The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth}, Hadley Cantril’s \textit{Invasion from Mars, A Study in the Psychology of Panic}\textsuperscript{50} and Clara Endicott Sears’ \textit{Days of Delusion}\textsuperscript{51} (a study of the Millerites). Events of interest ranged from disaster, disease, catastrophe, and prisoner-of-war camps (in Germany, Canada and the U.S.), through to military and navy troops, lynching, mass poisoning, interracial tensions, race riots in Chicago, and so on.

Their inventory took shape around anxiety-provoking versus anxiety-reducing rumors and fears, how beliefs were justified, and any disjuncture between the “reality of a situation” and your “picture of the environment.”\textsuperscript{52} As early as 1952, Festinger specified, “[d]issonance or consonance is not between the behavior and psychological environment but between or among parts of the psychological environment. Communication serves to change the psychological environment.” Of most interest then were the resonances of social communication, how the over- and undertones reverberating amongst persons – joy, sorrow, feelings of loss, anger, fear, anxiety – had a sort of agency in cognition’s psychological environment.\textsuperscript{53} Just as dissonant tones altered the sound of music following them, or, some have argued, modern interiority, so the reverberation of social
communication, its feeling structure, was vital to what and how people made sense of things and responded.

Of the innumerable works they inventoried, three held Festinger’s and his research team’s interest from the early phase on. One was an anthropology dissertation on rumors in Japanese relocation centers;\(^54\) a second was a study following rumors after the great 1934 earthquake in Bihar, India.\(^55\) Between the two a pattern emerged of rumors and their tendency to multiply unrestrainedly “strange, baseless, and even absurd” reports and of being stoked by wonder and fear.

Arguably, though, it was lay historian Clara Endicott Sears’ aforementioned work *Days of Delusion: A Strange Bit of History*, that would become if not foundational a touchstone for dissonance theory. Sears placed a notice in many leading newspapers around 1920, calling for recollections of the “great religious excitement in 1843, the year that William Miller predicted the end of the world.”\(^56\) She drew on others describing the broader psychology of this historical moment as a “remarkable agitation of the mind.”\(^57\) The year 1843, she writes, “was also a year of great revival among the Shakers….all discovering mediumistic powers within themselves, and … continually conversing with those long dead, and with prophets, martyrs and scriptural characters.”\(^58\) Emerson, she writes, captured the feel of things in his description of a “Convention of Friends of Universal Reform”: “If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, Madwomen, Men with beards, Dunnkers, Muggletonians, Come-Outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers – all came successively to the top.”\(^59\) Described in different ways, this old New Age, as Leigh Eric Schmidt refers to it, may be understood as central to the story of
modern interiority, a history that, for some, meant moving away from “‘religions of authority’ into the new ‘religion of the spirit’.”

There is a felt resonance between this earlier moment described by Sears and the 1950s, during which time the dilemmas of the day were said to be written “soul sized.” Insofar as social psychology pursued the mind’s rational calculus, a corresponding religio-spiritual inward quest sought to find reason in “the universal primordial wisdom of humankind, now secreted only in the arcane language of myth and symbol.” Both pursuits, however, arose during Cold War America and both seemed acclimated, as much of psychology itself was, to notions of balance, consistency, and contiguity. Just as David Riesman was lamenting Americans’ lack of inward direction, Norman Vincent Peale was expounding a psychospiritual power from within. Each view was featured in 1954 issues of *Time Magazine* within a month of one another, though Riesman did grab the front cover. There was a transverse plane of the American psyche taking shape from America’s overarching narrative of its age as the “end of innocence.” Ideologies could capitalize on weak minds, reason alone offered questionable assurance as an “ethic of power,” deceptive illusions could exert a formidable hold, and groups, collectives, could be a force of their own. Relations amongst theology, religion, spirituality, psychoanalysis and the budding field of cognitive psychology were tossed up in this age’s effort to shore up the American psyche, or at least harness the individual’s if not the nation’s ego to reason and rationality. Matters of surveillance and worries over conformity were parlayed into psychological, religious and spiritual renditions of the inner-outer problem: Was the populace simply driven by outer forces or was there an equally strong inner-directed “gyroscope,” as Riesman referred to it?
Theorists differed, to be sure, but what Festinger sought to chart was the field of information as a circulating medium of tensions amongst cognitions, propelling people to resolve dissonance. By late summer of 1954, Festinger, having been joined by Stanley Schachter and Henry Riecken, had a good handle on what he saw as the contingencies and conditions of dissonance and consonance. What he was missing was a psychological environment in which to test them. How he longed, recalled Riecken, for some historical event, something comparable to the Millerites, to give dissonance theory its test. Then, as luck would have it, on a routine morning checking the stock market pages in the newspaper, Schachter came across the story of Dorothy Martin’s prophecy in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* on September 24, 1954. The headline read: “Head for the Ark, folks! ‘Word from Space’ Says Flood’s Due.”

**A Mid-1950s Suburban Prophecy**

The story had been picked up from the *Chicago Daily News* on September 23, 1954, and it remains a mystery as to how or why the *Chicago Daily News* reported the story or the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* picked it up. But they did, and Dorothy Martin, born in West Virginia in 1900, moving from there to Oak Park, Illinois by way of New York, became headline and sometimes front-page news in local and national newspapers over the next five months.

Martin had been a registered member of the Theosophy Society for at least one year, was most interested in theosophist Alice Bailey’s writings, and had a longstanding interest in outer and inner space herself, including channeled communications. By one account, her first religious vision came following her prayers for pain relief during
treatment in Waterloo, Canada for lymphatic cancer. Prior to this she had had a vision on the night her father died while she was hospitalized from serious injuries incurred in a car accident. Subsequently she began to receive messages from her father. Elsewhere Dorothy Martin recalls having had “extra sensory perception” from a young age, seeking out, around 1940, the spiritual teacher Paramhansa Yogananda, founder of “Self-Realization Fellowship.” In the first story publicly announcing her prophecy, Dorothy Martin recounts her “prophecy from planet” as one of six months of communiqués channeled to her from beings from afar. Furnished with a photograph of her, pen poised, the story “Clarion Call to City: Flee That Flood” relayed how it all began one Easter Sunday morning, when, while “lying in bed on the sun-porch of her home,” Dorothy Martin’s arm began to feel warm and she felt an urge to write. She then just “put a pencil to paper and wrote,” filling her notebook with channeled messages, what she called “lessons from her teachers,” including the prophecy of the flood to arrive on winter solstice, 1954. With this prophecy’s disconfirmation, Dorothy Martin received a message deferring the end’s arrival to Christmas Eve. “Sing your songs of the season,” instructed the message channeled to Dorothy Martin from outer space, “And faithful may join us.”

So directed, Dorothy Martin, her main associates, the Laughead family (parents Dr. Charles S and Lillian Louise and three children, Charlyn, Charles Jr., and Marilyn), and a number of other “unidentified” group members gathered together in front of Dorothy’s home. The group broke into song at 5:55 p.m. Six o’clock came and went without a sign of the anticipated Mars space ship rapture. They continued to sing. Still, no sign. At 6:35 p.m., Dorothy Martin and her followers stopped singing. Where her group had filled this winter’s evening’s air with voices of anticipation, a kind of hush fell
over them, the kind of quiet wonder incredulity summons. Who could believe the space ship would not show? Who could believe it would?

From September 1954 into the new year, and unbeknownst to Dorothy Martin and Charles Laughead, they were the subjects of social psychological study. Festinger, Schachter, and Riecken had joined the group as undercover participant observers, and they had hired and orchestrated a number of graduate students from Michigan and Chicago to also don disguise and join the group. Two undercover sociology graduate student researchers were in East Lansing, Michigan, one serving as a babysitter for the Laugheads when they visited Oak Park. At least two undercover graduate students were from the University of Chicago (sociology), and, based on my archival and interview research, at least two other undercover graduate students were involved. Nor were these subjects aware of the book about to be published on their lives during this time. And they could not have had inkling of how the book, the theory, and their lives would come to be defined by and to define a moment both within social psychology and what came to be called the cognitive turn, and within New Age spiritual and religious movements.
Endings without End

Figure 1. Night of failed prophecy. (AP archives)

This photograph of the night of failed prophecy summons us to revisit the beginnings and endings of a study carried out under secrecy and the lives whose stories under fictive names it narrates. For surely this night as the book, the theory, and the New Age moment came to have a new hold on the American psyche, its popular discourse, and ensuing debates on religious experience, psychology and science. Magnifying this prophetic drama as one of unknown worlds is the well-known photographer Charles E. Knoblock’s use of light and shadow, creating a cosmic umbra, an eclipse of one world by another. Onlookers try to hear the story of one world, Dorothy Martin’s, only to seek resonances in others.
No one could have predicted the endless ribbon that would unwind from this study. Virtually every academic discipline has drawn on it, the book was fictionalized in 1967 by Alison Lurie in the novel *Imaginary Friends* to elucidate the tangle of objective observers and subjects in participant observer studies, and then her novel was adapted for a BBC television drama.\(^{67}\) A proposal was made to turn *When Prophecy Fails* into a musical in the early 1960s,\(^{68}\) and, in the year 2000, Darcey Steinke, a descendent of William Miller’s family, published a short story drawing directly on the book. Other readers use the book as a field guide to their own personal experiences of religion.\(^{69}\) The resonances become more far-flung over the decades. Today, metal bands take their names from the title of the book or the theory, Adbusters claims cognitive dissonance as its activist tool to disrupt ordinary consumer consciousness, a recent podcast claims this term to flag its mission of religious de-conversion stories,\(^{70}\) and psychology offers a test of cognitive dissonance as if it is a state of being. Even more curious is how cognitive dissonance is invoked in historical and theoretical study of dissonance, as if a stand-alone phrase. The term is also virtually inescapable in day-to-day talk. My personal favorite was when someone, who does not know my research area, told me her daughter was experiencing a double cognitive dissonance, as if the term was self-explanatory.

If indeed we may claim cognitive dissonance as a commonplace of discourse today, and if it is not a conceit to say it signifies predicaments in contemporary life, then surely its resonance across academic and popular fields invites another hearing. Considered one of the most well-established, enduring and generative theories in social psychology, cognitive dissonance has enjoyed a parallel longevity in religious,
millennialism, and cognitive religion studies. These fields’ respective patterns of citation reveal an age-old discord. Psychological research most often cites Festinger’s subsequent 1957 book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, while religion, theology and religious studies citations as new age spirituality more often expressly cite, discuss and retest the book *When Prophecy Fails*. The most recent Oxford handbook of millennialism, for example, opens with Festinger’s study and theory as framing the field paradigmatically. These two paths of citation use indicate a division between the fields in historical emphases on epistemology over ontology, a partition resounded as well in discussion of relations amongst science, psychology and religion. To catch the resonance across these deployments is to detect at one and the same time Festinger’s interest in the persistence of belief as a question about the persistence of religious belief, an undertone made palpable by his lengthy preface of religious traditions and their failed prophecies.

Historians of scientific psychology did not miss a certain irony to cognitive dissonance’s first associations with persistence in religious beliefs while eclipsing the case of science, suggesting religion’s pursuit as something other than science’s of knowledge. Edwin Boring, historian of psychology, for example, put on record “seven instances of occasions on which the scientist proceeds in the face of cognitive dissonance.” But he directs this record to how cognitive dissonance may make the investigator “more effective” by “pushing the contradiction aside and his going on with whatever business he has in hand.” This, he argues, follows from choosing a “prescribed universe” within which to work. Others, such as Solomon Asch, in his 1957 review of the theory of cognitive dissonance, direct attention to the book’s and the theory’s reductive treatment of discord; Asch titled his review “Cacophonophobia,” a fear of
jarring sounds signaling a larger missed dissonance in this moment of heightened surveillance and conformity.

Most recently, use of *When Prophecy Fails* and the theory of cognitive dissonance to examine the science and religion debate can be found in Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s book *Natural Reflections*. She brings both the study and its theory to bear on some cognitive science and evolutionary theorists whose works naturalize notions of the mind in religion and religious experience, what she terms the New Naturalist view of cognition in the study of religion. On the one hand, she argues, are science’s efforts, largely those of anthropologists and psychologists, to debunk religious experience as a cognitive illusion or persistence of belief, echoing Festinger’s own emphasis on persistence of belief. On the other hand, Herrnstein Smith finds a strand of work seeking to square scientific accounts and religious beliefs of the natural world with arguments of their overlap, what she deems the New Natural Theology.

These two intellectual projects, she argues, mirror one another in any number of ways, including their persistence of belief and their lexical-conceptual knot of the natural versus supernatural. One senses Herrnstein Smith’s interest lies mostly with particular forms of science-religion debate where either side surrenders to what she calls “cognitive conservatism,” a persistence of belief that closes off ways to understand and pursue science and/or religion. Her interest circles back primarily to matters of epistemology. She therefore leaves unaddressed how science, religion and psychology have more broadly worked hand-in-hand to naturalize certain understandings of cognition as of the rational and as of the religious and spiritual. Their entanglements may also foreshorten perspectives on cognitive forms by looking more and more to interior worlds, creating a
form of cognitive reductionism akin to the troublesome medical materialism identified by William James.

One can hear this quest into deeper regions of inner space as well in recent invocations of cognitive dissonance in the new neurotheology, claims of a frontal cortex becoming rather lit up in atheists when asked to meditate on God: “It was almost like you were seeing cognitive dissonance;” that is, “the brain being asked to focus on something one has trouble with and it sets off all kinds of emotional alarms.”

Whether cognitive dissonance is invoked as a phenomenon to evidence beliefs or struggles with them, whether of religion or of science, and whether it is moved into new domains of cognitive mapping, such as those performed by neuroscience and neurotheology, what is overlooked, first, is how these fields’ interrelations continue to define and delimit notions of cognition, science, psychology, religion and spirituality and second, how these limited notions come to have a force of their own.

Jerome Bruner offered some insight into this current dilemma at the symposium inaugurating psychology’s mid-twentieth century turn to cognition. He offered:

Festinger’s “conception of consonance and dissonance is in a fine and ancient tradition. It is the psychology of Aesop.” He continues, “I respect the concepts of consonance and dissonance the more for their ancient origin.” But, he reflects, if “one dips further into folklore and literature, one soon finds … cases to the contrary, violations of consonance-dissonance theory like ‘We look before and after/And long [pine] for what is not.’”

His concern with scales of time here is about rhythmic patterns, history, and cosmic
recurrence, of how the smaller story of cognitive dissonance evokes larger and longstanding ones.

Bruner gestures then toward a reductionism in Festinger’s theory and the larger discipline’s formulation of cognition as one of foreshortening time and of contracting meaning to algorithmic input-output renditions instead of humanity’s search for meaning, a longing understood in that Jamesian multiverse sense of strung along types, or endings without ends. In this, Bruner points to another 1950s debate concerning psychology at the nexus of science and the humanities, a concern heightened by C. P. Snow’s article on the more general relation of science and the humanities in the mid-1950s, known now by its shorthand two cultures. Snow was concerned too with possible closure of worlds, those lifelines running between the humanities and sciences.79

So the recurrence toward which Bruner invites a rehearing, at least as I read him, is twofold. There is the cosmic recurrence. Dissonance and consonance echo across the ages, reminding us of an intimate history between making new music and new knowledge; of the technologies of the one lending themselves to new openings of understanding the structure of the universe and of the “hidden and mysterious” universe within us.80 The question of cognitive dissonance as of cognition is thus larger than supposed by its initial formulation and current metamorphoses of it as an inner state or particular spot in the brain. And there is the recurrence of relations amongst science, psychology, religion and spirituality, one surfacing most recently with repeated reference to the same text toward which Bruner gestures, C. P. Snow’s two cultures. Herrnstein Smith directs her book toward this very debate, and, others, such as Roger Luckhurst,81 include this debate’s earlier nineteenth century iteration. Qualifying the two cultures
with the phrase “or the end of the world as we know it” Luckhurst signals his focus on science and culture wars. Still, each attends to the importance of revisiting interchange amongst science and religion. Here we must add psychology, too, for as this history of *When Prophecy Fails* and cognitive dissonance argues, its interrelation with science and religion is a constitutive one, generating all kinds of worlds, from those of inner tensions to brain activity, and from activist tools to measures of psychological balance, order and certainty.

One reviewer of Alison Lurie’s fictionalization of *When Prophecy Fails* depicted her story as a tragic-comedy of the modern intellect. To pursue this history into the modern subject is indeed, then, to sound a dissonant tone, the kind intended to stir up new hearings of old compositions, to hear anew the constituent relation amongst science, psychology, religion and spirituality in that larger pursuit of asking what does it mean to be human, what’s it all about.

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1 This paper is based on my public lecture of May 16th, 2014, presented while a senior fellow of the Martin Marty Center, University of Chicago. The paper has been revised for this web forum, and it represents parts of the book *Revelation or Revolution*, in preparation. Many thanks to Bill Schweiker, director, fellows of the Martin Marty Center, and Kelsey Crick of Shimer College for her research assistance.


3 On religion becoming a little more psychological, see Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997). For a related but reverse case of the mid-twentieth century as a time when once more “Americans expected their psychologization to be complemented by a religious framework” (p. 71), see Peter Homans’ (1987) article, “Psychology and religion movement.” *Encyclopedia of Religion, 12*, 66-75. On cognitive psychology’s emerging status in the mid-1950s and this subject’s concern for the “subject of the identifiability of the referent in psychology”, see, for example, the book resulting from the 1955 Cognition Symposium held in Colorado, *Contemporary Approaches to Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957). See Egon Brunswik in this same volume for his
definition of the problem of cognition as the "problem of the acquisition of knowledge" (p. 6). His concern is with psychology failing to attend to the environment or ecology of an individual or species, an erasure Brunswik finds reminiscent of medieval theologians “who granted a soul to men but denied it to women” – the problem, as he deems it, is one of equality of subject and situation.

Also see in this volume Jerome Bruner, one of the founders of the Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies.

5 December 10, 1954, p. 3
6 ibid., p. 3
7 ibid., p. 3
8 See Google’s n-gram for relevant data; also Corpus of Contemporary American English of Brigham Young University data on frequency of use as tied more to print culture – magazines, fiction, newspapers, and academia – than to media talk (http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/).
16 Problems in terminology are often highlighted by music theorists and historians, as is the matter of pairings of consonance with pleasantness and dissonance with unpleasantness and use of simple dichotomies. A good overview of these along with consonance and dissonance research in psychology from the 19th century onward is provided by Richard Parnicut and Graham Hair, “Consonance and Dissonance in Music Theory and Psychology: Disentangling Dissonant Dichotomies,” Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies 5, no. 2 (2011): 119–66. Curiously the authors mention the cognitive dissonance at work in these category mistakes, without mention of how the term, and the theory it indicates, were themselves influenced by these struggles in meaning.

18 Thomson, “Emergent Dissonance and the Resolution of a Paradox.”
19 Thomson, “Emergent Dissonance and the Resolution of a Paradox.”
20 See discussion of Rudhyar and Seeger in Oja, “Dane Rudhyar’s Vision of American Dissonance.”
22 For discussion of dissonance, sound and psyche, see, for example, Dariusz Gafijczuk, Identity, Aesthetics, and Sound in the Fin de Siècle: Redesigning Perception, Routledge Studies in Cultural History 22 (New York: Routledge, 2014).
30 Ibid., 167.
34 In this study, ethics questions arise from the research social psychologists donning disguise to study and publish their findings without the consent of the participants. To some social scientists the ends may justify the means, but, to others, this is not a means to redeem the ends. On another level, social psychology and other fields within psychology often invoke science to redeem their epistemological status.
42 To define his multiverse, James, drawing on Alfred North Whitehead, writes “If you prefer Greek words you may call it the synchrestic type.” William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011).
43 Ibid., 91.
45 Wai Chee Dimock, “Resonance.”
46 Ibid., pp. 1062, 1067
47 I am borrowing and modifying here Bynum's idea of mutation or metamorphosis, and of how change inspired wonder, to ask how or if one thing can become another, or “where something goes when it becomes something else.” By analogy, one may wonder how prophecies and failed prophecies become ways to understand ourselves, signs of madness, felt disappointments, or measures of the history of conscious and unconscious life. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York; Cambridge, Mass: Zone Books; Distributed by MIT Press, 2001), pp. 192-3.
48 Festinger's notion of a psychological environment was shaped by his close working relation with Kurt Lewin, and Lewin's topographical approach to psychology. The notion is thus expansive, covering place, time, people, feelings, thoughts, interactions, social influence and so on.
50 Memorandum, Notes from Staff meeting, November 20 & 21, 1952, Ibid.
Memorandum, from May Brodbeck, January 22, 1953, Ibid.

Memorandum, Notes from Staff Meeting, November 28, 1952, Ibid.

Memorandum, Notes from Staff Meeting, February 9, 1953, Ibid.


Ibid., p. xxii.

Ibid., p. xxi.

Emerson quoted in Sears, Ibid., p. xxi.


Ibid., 216.

Riesman was featured on the cover of Time Magazine, September 27, 1954, in the article pp. 22-25. The article on Peale appeared on November 1, 1954, describing his message on religion redemption as less about “redemption by suffering” and more about a way to “rise above sorrow,” 68.


Chicago Tribune, 1954, a7.

This photograph, despite being taken by the highly recognized photographer Charles E. Knoblock, was never published in any newspaper.


Festinger papers.

http://www.isitso.org/guide/fails.html


Data gathered thus far from 1956 to 1979 indicate religion and theology's near parallel use of When Prophecy Fails and A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance in journal articles and reviews, using ATLA, Humanities International and a broader search in JSTOR (for religious studies citations).

Catherine Wessinger, The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism (Oxford University Press, 2011). Also instructive are the many variations on Festinger et al.’s title When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament (NY:


76 Most recently, a version of this approach appeared in the April 4, 2014 Sunday *NY Times* article “Is that Jesus in Your Toast?” explaining the psychological phenomena of seeing something significant in ambiguous stimuli through the theory of cognitive priming, a readiness to see such images thought to be set off by wishes for a moral or just order during times of conflict.


