

Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman began his December 23, 2012 op-ed column in the New York Times with a shout-out to a study conducted over sixty years earlier. “Back in the 1950s three social psychologists joined a cult that was predicting the imminent end of the world,” Krugman wrote, referring to the work conducted by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, published as *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956). Krugman continued: “Their purpose was to observe the cultists’ response when the world did not, in fact, end on schedule. What they discovered...is that the irrefutable failure of a prophecy does not cause true believers—people who have committed themselves to a belief both emotionally and by their life choices—to reconsider. On the contrary, they become even more fervent, and proselytize even harder.” Krugman, who has himself emerged in the twenty-first century as the liberal Jeremiah of the financial crisis, adores this insight about the seemingly contradictory nature of belief. Disconfirmation of prophecy doesn’t seem to diminish devotion; indeed, the opposite seems to occur. Krugman continues, “This insight seems highly relevant as 2012 draws to a close. After all, a lot of people came to believe that we were on the brink of catastrophe...As it turned out, of course, the predicted catastrophe failed to materialize. But we can be sure that the cultists won’t admit to having been wrong. No, the people who told us that a fiscal crisis was imminent will just keep at it, more convinced than ever.” To be clear, despite his own occasionally prophetic intonations, Krugman finds these kinds of economic hand-wringers to be absolutely ludicrous. His tone is cheerfully condescending. “The key thing we need to understand, however, is that the prophets of fiscal disaster, no matter how respectable they may seem, are at this point effectively members of a doomsday cult...[W]e cannot and will not persuade these people to reconsider their views in the light of the evidence. All we can do is stop paying attention. It’s going to be difficult, because many members of the deficit cult seem highly respectable. But they’ve been hugely, absurdly wrong for years on end, and it’s time to stop taking them seriously.”

For Krugman, the takeaway from *When Prophecy Fails* is the absurdity of cognitive dissonance, namely the way that people keep believing things even when ‘the evidence’ counters their belief. Unsurprisingly to any scholar who has read *When Prophecy Fails*, or any scholar trained in the contemporary study of religion, Krugman leans on the altogether wrong emphasis, widening the crevasse between him and those whom he has designated as cultists. For Festinger et al, the story of *When Prophecy Fails* isn’t one of ignorant obduracy before facts. Rather, it is the story of the intense effort human beings make to maintain cognitive consistency given their ever-shifting psychological landscape. Whereas the economist Krugman clucks his tongue at perceived human irrationality in the hope to argue for a more rational world, the scholar of religion considers the intimate universality of what might be understood as irrationality. The religionist doesn’t necessary care whether or not it is rational to believe a UFO will rescue you from a flash flood; what the religionist cares about is the cultural reasonableness of human decisions within their specific frames of social culture. Here I do liken what Festinger did and what so many religionists do, now. To be sure, many religionists would squirm at the comparison, since Festinger’s brand of psychological interpolation makes us pretty queasy. But, to be clear, Festinger’s perspective was relatively simple. He said that we should understand that human beings hold many cognitions about ourselves and the world we occupy. When those perceptions clash, a discrepancy occurs, resulting in a state of tension described by Festinger as *cognitive dissonance*. Because dissonance is something people don’t like to experience, they are motivated

to either reduce it or eliminate it altogether, achieving some kind internal cognitive consonance through a reiteration of their perspective, their reasons, and their sense of the world.

Immediately you may read the above description and have your own set of replies. You may not believe that clashing perceptions create dissonance. You may not believe perceptions can be articulated through belief. You may not think that scholars can ever responsibly know anything about perceptions, belief, or cognition. You may dislike altogether *psychological* perceptions, beliefs, or cognitions. You may agree with Paul Krugman about everything.

It would be wonderful if your own internal frustration with psychological analysis and cognitive conclusion were so aroused. After all, we need more work today in the study of religion that (a) actually inspires serious debate, and (b) considers the problem of cognitive perception as an organizing subject for religious studies. No matter where you stand on the arguments Festinger made, or the method of data collection he and his colleagues used to achieve them, it is impossible to avoid the pervasive argumentative power of psychological diagnoses in public discussions of religion, human decision-making, and the social scientific effort to understand the madness of crowds. Even more specifically, as Betty Bayer writes, “One cannot escape how dissonance came to be both a sign and practice of psychic and social life in western twentieth century music, social theory, literature and the arts.” Bayer concludes: “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.”

Bayer is writing the book that offers such another hearing. Her main subject is *When Prophecy Fails*, for which she hopes to offer a history. Such a history of a single work is also the history of a concept: the history of dissonance. “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.” Bayer has high hopes for this historical labor, writing that “dissonance operates not only as a conceptual and historical concept of investigation, but also an opening into rethinking how we carry out historical scholarship.” For Bayer, historical scholarship is a telling of not only things that occurred, but also the way that things which occur are never neatly existent as objects or documents. They are also things that didn’t happen (like failed prophecies) but in that not-happening propound enormous energy, experience, and action. As she writes, “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.”

There are several intriguing lines of thought raised in this suggestive essay, each of which consider the capacities of historical scholarship to effect, and change shape within, a world in which cognitive dissonance is a presumptive terming of human experience. First, Bayer mentions that she may explore the uniquely “traverse plane of the American psyche taking shape” in the 1950s. Second, she intimates this emergent psyche effected the definition of cognition, and the subsequent cognitive science for which she names Festinger a determining intellectual forbear. Finally, she infers that the tactical mistakes of Festinger and his colleagues as scholars have not in any way undermined the persuasive power of cognitive science as a decoder for our interpretive present. Bayer’s connection of these three elements begins to wend an account of *When Prophecy Fails* that situates it in both the literal (and institutional and intellectual) context of its production as well as the ideas about that context. In other words, she infers that studying the origins of *When Prophecy Fails* may tell us a great deal about where the diagnosis of religion stands in present (that is, twenty-first century) scholarship, since within those 1950s origins one

finds the postwar expansion of higher education, the popularization of psychology, and the democratization of the workplace at the same time that the threat of communism, of ideologies more generally, pressed a steroidal prescription of normal psychology, normal families, and normal identities (religious, gendered, and otherwise) into the fabric of that expansion, popularization, and democratization. Here *When Prophecy Fails* has a prophetic relationship to this present, a present in which the expansion of higher education is matched by the invasive threats to its labor force; when our fear of theological and socialistic ideologies is equaled by our faith in psychological explanation and individual expression; and when our ability to continue to believe in human freedom, technological innovation, and economic justice—despite all evidence to the contrary—make us as much subjects for Festinger and his inheritors as critical students of them. This is all a way to say that the question of who is in which cult, and how we differentiate among them, is a more lively topic than we might imagine so many decades after planet Clarion failed to rescue us.

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