


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Debunking “When Prophecy Fails”

Thomas Kelly 

Independent Scholar, Washington DC

Correspondence: Thomas Kelly (tmichaelkelly@gmail.com)**Received:** 22 September 2024 | **Revised:** 3 September 2025 | **Accepted:** 13 October 2025**Funding:** The author received no specific funding for this work.**Keywords:** cognitive dissonance | cults | proselytization | Religion | UFOs

ABSTRACT

In 1954, Dorothy Martin predicted an apocalyptic flood and promised her followers rescue by flying saucers. When neither arrived, she recanted, her group dissolved, and efforts to proselytize ceased. But *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), the now-canonical account of the event, claimed the opposite: that the group doubled down on its beliefs and began recruiting—evidence, the authors argued, of a new psychological mechanism, cognitive dissonance. Drawing on newly unsealed archival material, this article demonstrates that the book's central claims are false, and that the authors knew they were false. The documents reveal that the group actively proselytized well before the prophecy failed and quickly abandoned their beliefs afterward. They also expose serious ethical violations by the researchers, including fabricated psychic messages, covert manipulation, and interference in a child welfare investigation. One coauthor, Henry Riecken, posed as a spiritual authority and later admitted he had “precipitated” the climactic events of the study.

In 1956, three psychologists, Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, published *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger et al. 1956), their book about a UFO cult that unsuccessfully predicted an apocalyptic flood and a last-minute rescue of cult members by advanced extraterrestrials. The authors predicted that when believers were deeply invested in a world view that had social support, believers would maintain their beliefs even when actual events disproved their world view. In fact, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (hereafter FRS) argued that true believers would double down on their false beliefs and try to reassure themselves of their beliefs' veracity by proselytizing their beliefs to others. FRS claimed this is exactly what the UFO cultists did— a perfect example of a new psychological theory: cognitive dissonance.

One year later, Leon Festinger published *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. The book and concept go on to be widely influential

in the study of psychology. *When Prophecy Fails* also proved influential in both scholarly and lay debates over the origins and accuracy of religious beliefs. FRS implied that the evangelistic fervor of the early Christians could be explained by the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth being falsified by his crucifixion and the resulting cognitive dissonance of his disappointed followers, driving them to attempt to spread their now falsified beliefs. FRS more directly argued that other religious movements could be explained in this way, including the Millerites and the Sabbateans.

FRS and several paid observers infiltrated the UFO cult, gathered with them as they waited for alien rescuers, and witnessed their disappointment when none arrived. Supposedly, the group rationalized the failure of prophecy and embraced evangelistic fervor where they had previously shunned new recruits. They explained the failure by claiming their group had released so

Public significance: *When Prophecy Fails* is one of the most influential case studies in 20th-century social science. It helped launch the theory of cognitive dissonance, shaped popular understandings of how belief survives disconfirmation, and became a touchstone for explaining the origins of religious movements—including Christianity. But the case was misrepresented. The cult did not persist, proselytize, or reinterpret its failure as a spiritual triumph. Its leader recanted, the group disbanded, and belief dissolved. This article shows that the authors of *When Prophecy Fails* misled their readers—and that scholars in psychology, sociology, and religious studies have been building theories atop a collapsed foundation.

much “light” that God had chosen to be merciful. This revelation became known as the “Christmas message.” The daring and bravado of the three men who infiltrated the cult made *When Prophecy Fails* not just influential but immensely readable. It inspired a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel (Lurie 1967), stage productions (Strachan 2025), and even a progressive metal album (Circle Pit 2013). Their version of events became canonical—while contradictory accounts from cult members and later researchers were largely ignored.

Inspired by FRS, several other scholars would later observe other religious groups that had predicted apocalypses. Generally, they failed to replicate the findings of FRS. Shortly after the publication of *When Prophecy Fails*, Hardyck and Braden (1962) investigated an apocalyptic group of Pentecostals to see if the failed apocalypse would result in enduring conviction and proselytization, but it did not. Balch et al. (1983) investigated a Baha’i group that inaccurately predicted an apocalypse and found that the failed prediction undermined the size, conviction, and enthusiasm of the group. Zygmunt (1970) reviewed the proselytization efforts of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a group which has predicted the apocalypse multiple times, and found that failed prediction led to reduced proselytization. Singelenberg (1989) also found that failed prophecies harmed proselytization efforts among the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

In one sense, these were failed replications of *When Prophecy Fails*. In another, they were accurate replications of what really happened in 1954. Because the truth is that the FRS account is largely false. The group actively proselytized before the prophecy failed. Afterward, the prophecy was quickly abandoned. The cult leader recanted. The group dissolved. The Christmas message vanished.

The remainder of this article proceeds in this order. First, I discuss the influence of *When Prophecy Fails* within psychology, but also in the academic study of new religious movements and the study of Early Christianity. Then, I summarize the nature of the group and its key members, according to the writings of FRS and other scholars. Then I compare what FRS claimed about the group to what is shown by other sources. Then I compare what FRS claimed about the UFO cult in *When Prophecy Fails* to what Festinger claimed a single year later in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* reveals substantial contradictions about the behavior and belief of the group members from that put forth in *When Prophecy Fails*. I also review later writings by Festinger, reminiscing on the investigation of the group, which portrays FRS in ways contradictory to how they presented themselves in *When Prophecy Fails*.

1 | The Influence and Ambition of When Prophecy Fails

In *When Prophecy Fails*, FRS set out to propose a theory not only about human psychology, but also about the origins of major religions. The book was influential on psychologists as well as scholars who studied new religious movements, early Christianity, and the New Testament.

The theory of cognitive dissonance is major and influential psychological theory (Vaidis et al. 2024). Festinger is still

recognized as the key figure in the theory, with both *When Prophecy Fails* and *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* are still recognized as paradigmatic. Cooper (2007) in his book-length history of the concept wrote that his book “pays homage to Leon Festinger, the social scientist who started the research tradition that for fifty years has been a dynamic and innovative theory.” (p. x) The influence of the theory of cognitive dissonance, and the influence of *When Prophecy Fails* on the theory itself, is even acknowledged by scholars who are somewhat critical of the work of FRS. Jenkins (2013), who argued that cult dynamics are better viewed as sociological rather than psychological, described its influence by saying that the theory of cognitive dissonance “has become a commonplace of educated thinking” (p. vii) and also acknowledged that *When Prophecy Fails* is the book that introduced the concept.

At the time of FRS’s study, the field of social psychology was in its infancy and Festinger and his collaborators helped form the field. Festinger was Schachter’s doctoral advisor before they worked together. Both Schachter and Festinger also worked with Kurt Lewin (Nisbett 2000), who is considered one of the founders of social psychology. Social psychology, according to Pettit (2024), was at the center of an earlier psychological research program, known as the “New Look.” The “New Look” positioned itself against older forms of psychology, that seemed too apolitical and asocial to meet the challenges of time. According to Pettit (2024, p. 28) the “New Look’s uneven impact on psychology was one of the most lasting legacies of “the cultural front”: the organizing of American cultural production around antifascist aesthetics between 1936 and 1948.” This approach, driven in part by the entrance of non-WASP academics and European émigrés into the field, positioned itself against fascism, racism, and authoritarianism. This approach to psychology lost favor as the Cold War began, however social psychology itself remained acceptable. Social psychology and Festinger himself received substantial institutional support, including from anticommunist funders such as the Ford Foundation and the U.S military (Pettit 2024).

Schachter likewise received institutional support to promote his own work in social psychology. He received funding from the Ford Foundation to attempt to replicate his work on group conformity and to promote American approaches to psychology to European psychologists. Pettit (2024) notes that despite the failure of Schachter’s work to replicate, he was successful in promoting applied psychology, particularly in Northern Europe. (The inability to replicate Schachter’s work was not an European anomaly- American psychologists also failed to replicate some of Schachter’s findings (Marshall and Zimbardo 1979).

Just as social psychology was influenced by the “New Look” but outlived it, Leon Festinger was deeply influenced both politically and religiously by his father. Stanley Schachter (1994), one of the other authors of *When Prophecy Fails*, began a short biography of Festinger by describing Festinger’s relationship with his father, and wrote: that Festinger’s father “left Russia a radical and an atheist and remained faithful to these views throughout his life.” (p. 99) Festinger (n.d.) himself, in a

handwritten reflection on his father that is preserved among his papers at the University of Michigan, wrote that:

As you may guess, I grew up in a thoroughly atheistic home. From early childhood my father pointed out the inconsistencies in religion, the absence of any evidence to support beliefs in a god, the irrationality and uselessness of such beliefs... His atheism was thoroughgoing and intolerant; it was intellectual but also emotional.

(p. 2)

The thesis of *When Prophecy Fails* has been taken up by some scholars of early Christianity and the New Testament, who have argued that the theory of cognitive dissonance could explain the behavior and zealous proselytization of early Christians following the execution of their leader (Aune 2007; Bermejo-Rubio 2017; Gager 1975; Fredriksen 2018; Jackson 1975; Wernik 1975).

One of the central claims and counter-intuitive findings of *When Prophecy Fails* that religious movements survive even when their central prophecy fails has largely been accepted by scholars of new religious movements, even as they raise partial objections to the emphasis on increased proselytization as a coping and survival mechanism (Stone 2013). For instance, Melton (1985) in his influential review of how cults coped with failed prophecies argued that “[t]imes of testing tend to strengthen, not destroy, religious groups” and that “within religious groups, prophecy seldom fails” (page 20). Dawson (1999), in his likewise influential review of failed prophecies among religious group, cautioned against relying too much on the singular case study of the Martin group, especially given that a large share of its adherents were covert researchers and indicated that FRS overemphasized the role of proselytization, but still concluded that “on the whole the record shows that Festinger et al. were right to predict that many groups will survive the failure of prophecy.” The belief that religious movements survive failed prophecies remains influential among scholars of religions, including scholars of new religious movements, and *When Prophecy Fails* continues to be cited in support of that claim, despite reservations about its methods and emphasis on proselytization.

A new study (Kelly 2025) challenges this widely held belief. Kelly (2025) reviewed the literature on failed prophecy and argued that such failures are often fatal to religious movements—contrary to the claims of Dawson and Melton. Kelly argued that existing literature on cult survival often draws upon retrospective studies of religious groups which suffer from survivorship bias, as surviving cults are easier to observe than defunct cults. Kelly also showed serious flaws in the case studies that both Dawson and Melton cite to claim cult survival. For instance, both Dawson and Melton Martin's group as evidence that cults survive failed prophecy even though it dissolved immediately and that of the five cases invoked by Melton as examples of cult survival, two immediately disintegrated, one experienced severe attrition, and one's fate is unverifiable. Kelly (2025) showed similar problems exist in the Dawson (1999) review. For example, Dawson listed a Canadian cult (The Institute of Applied Metaphysics) as an example of cult survival even though the

source he relied upon acknowledged that it was already defunct.

When Prophecy Fails casts a long shadow over both psychology and religious studies. It has shaped a widespread—but ultimately misleading—account of how religious belief and movements respond to disconfirmation.

2 | The Nature and Beliefs of the UFO Cult

FRS used pseudonyms for all figures in *When Prophecy Fails*, except for themselves and their paid observers. This article uses the real name of the cult leader, Dorothy Martin, as well as the real names of Charles and Lillian Laughead, the married couple who played a central role in the group. Both the identities and roles of the Laugheads and Dorothy Martin were widely documented by both contemporary and latter writers. In all other cases, this article uses the pseudonyms from *When Prophecy Fails*, unless noted otherwise.

Dorothy Martin was a Chicago-area housewife who believed she received telepathic messages from extraterrestrials. She had been influenced by Theosophy and other occult teachings. Many of these messages she received through “automatic writing” which is a purported technique for receiving occult or psychic messages where spirits or other forces control a human hand to write messages. Martin met her two most important followers, married couple, Charles Laughead and Lillian Laughead, in 1954.

The Laugheads, originally Christian missionaries, had embraced occult beliefs before meeting Martin, and had even promoted these beliefs among their church. Charles Laughead was a physician and after trying to convert student patients to his belief systems was forced out of his job at the Michigan State University health center shortly before December 21, 1954, when the flood was predicted to occur (Castanier 2018). Lillian was an influential Ufologist and her allegorical interpretation of supposed alien footprints, which she said revealed truths about the lost continent of Lemuria was embraced by important figures in the UFO community and flying by saucer publications (Williamson 1953). The Laugheads became convinced of the legitimacy of Martin's ability and her prophecy. The Laugheads operated an occult and UFO discussion group and spread Martin's beliefs to this group. Martin also had followers around Chicago and throughout the country. Most of the meetings described by FRS occur at the Laugheads' home in East Lansing, Michigan, or Martin's home in Oak Park, Illinois.

The beliefs of Martin and the Laugheads were already broadly similar before they met, and none of them were especially novel within the broader UFO subculture. Eghigian (2024) describes the general embrace of esoteric New Age beliefs which included ascended masters (enlightened beings often extraterrestrial), esoteric interpretations of Christianity (often involving an extraterrestrial Christ), a belief in personal spiritual enlightenment, psychic channeling, and the imminent coming of a new age. Many of Martin's followers had already explored or embraced these teachings before joining her, and some would remain in this New Age and UFO-believing milieu after leaving her group.

Membership in groups based around flying saucers, and the groups themselves were generally ephemeral. Eghigian (2024, p. 99) noted that “local flying saucer groups and their newsletters quickly came and went, some lasting no more than a few months. This instability, in fact, would go on to characterize local UFO organizations for decades... Personality conflicts, differences of opinion about flying saucers, and resentment over the group’s pecking order only added to the challenges facing UFO circles.” Neither religious fervor nor the purported effects of cognitive dissonance would spare Martin’s group from a typically rapid dissolution.

As for Martin herself, her beliefs would gain specificity by the things aliens told her- or things she at least claimed to learn from aliens. One alien claimed to be Jesus Christ and Martin came to believe she was the reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. Martin also learned that a great flood would devastate North America on December 21, 1954. Martin’s believers and perhaps a few others would be rescued by aliens the day before the flood began. Charles Laughead released two press releases to various American publications in August and September of 1954, warning of the coming cataclysm. FRS claimed that a second press release caused a local Chicago newspaper to run a story about Dorothy Martin’s prediction, leading FRS to discover the group and later join the group, posing as true believers.

Shortly before Christmas in 1954, Charles Laughead lost his job for aggressive proselytization, which attracted letters from across the country both condemning Laughead and defending his First Amendment rights (Michigan State University 1955). Newspapers began to mock Charles’s belief and Martin’s prophecy, and many of Martin’s followers gathered at Martin’s home to await alien rescue. Martin, the Laugheads, and others refused most interview requests from the hostile press. FRS presents the media as treating the group as a figure of ridicule, but not presenting them as a threat. This editorial tone of treating cults and new religious movements as a source of colorful human-interest stories was typical of the mid 1950s (McCloud 2004).

The group waited for aliens to arrive on December 20th. On multiple occasions before the morning of the 21st, Martin told her followers to rush outside to be picked up from Martin’s backyard by flying saucers. No aliens came, no great flood occurred, and Martin and her followers remained on Earth. FRS described the growing disenchantment of some of Martin’s followers and discussed how some walked away from the gathering instead of continuing to wait for aliens. After the aliens missed several supposed deadlines for them to arrive, Martin received a new psychic message early on the morning of the 21st. This new psychic communication, the Christmas message, revealed to her that her group had spread so much light and goodness that the flood had been called off and humanity had been granted a reprieve. Martin suggested they share this message with the media, and the members enthusiastically complied and announced that on Christmas Eve, they would sing carols and hope that aliens would arrive several days late. The aliens did not arrive on Christmas Eve. Their newfound enthusiasm for the media was the main evidence for FRS’s claim that the failure of the prophecy led to increased proselytization and persistent belief.

According to FRS, the group that should have collapsed after disconfirmation instead embraced the Christmas message and became more convinced than ever that the failed prophecy had been true all along. The story told by *When Prophecy Fails* ends with Martin fleeing Chicago due to threats of being institutionalized in a mental hospital, the Laugheads fighting to keep custody of their children and their estate because of accusations of insanity, and the group members dispersing, but largely retaining belief in the failed prophecy.

FRS argued that they located a religious group that would allow them to test how religious believers would respond to disconfirmation of religious beliefs. FRS claimed they found evidence that religious believers not only retained their beliefs by doubled down and increased efforts of proselytization. While their choice of case study may have been reasonable, this article argues that their interpretation was not. This paper shows that FRS misrepresented how the group responded to disconfirmation and that the group did not maintain their beliefs after disconfirmation nor dramatically increase efforts at proselytization.

3 | Behavior Before the Prophecy Failed

In both *When Prophecy Fails* and *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, FRS insists that proselytization before the predicted cataclysm was minimal. They claim the group made only a brief effort in August–September 1954: two press releases, a few public talks, and little else. Festinger (1957) even described this as a “brief spurt of activity ... designed to attract adherents,” soon replaced by secrecy and silence (p. 253).

This lack of proselytization before the date of the failed prophecy is important for FRS to establish since their key claim is that the failure of prophecy prompts massive efforts at proselytization. FRS needed to show that there was a marked increase after the prophecy fails, if their theory of cognitive dissonance is applicable to the origins of various religions, including Christianity. But neither book’s account is complete nor accurate. Proselytization for Martin’s beliefs was more extensive than FRS claimed. Also, it did not consist of a single spurt between August and September of 1954, but was an ongoing effort.

In May of 1954, Charles Laughead wrote in *Roundhouse* magazine (1954c) of a psychic message from an alien known as “Elder Brother” received by a friend of his (almost certainly Dorothy Martin). This message promised that a mass landing of aliens would occur that summer and told the psychic that they were to “congregate people as often as possible and tell them of the truth of the present coming of the Saucer People.” (p. 7)

Gray Barker, editor of the influential *Saucerian* magazine, wrote that Dorothy Martin sent “out a series of messages from the space people to anyone who seemed interested.” (1955/2020, p. 6) Lillian Laughead would later support this effort, sending out copies of Martin’s writing even as they had “begun to take on a more religious tone, and began to contain dire predictions for Planet Earth.” (Barker 2020).

Martin did not just write about the psychic messages she received from outer space; she also sought out media coverage

for her past encounters. In 1954, she contributed a short piece to *Mystic Magazine* describing a UFO sighting she claimed occurred in 1918 (Martin 1954M Mystic). This article suggests that Martin was eager to share her experiences with the broader public, contradicting FRS's characterization of minimal early proselytization. A clipping of the article appears in Leon Festinger's personal papers, suggesting that at least one author of *When Prophecy Fails* had access to this information, though it goes unmentioned in the published book.

The Laugheads were prolific proselytizers even as their beliefs changed. Before their interest in the occult and UFOs, the couple had worked as medical missionaries in Egypt and Lillian had even tried to invent a new type of diapers that used snaps instead of pins to fund their missionary efforts (Barker 2020). After becoming interested in UFOs, they tried to recruit Christian students to a UFO study group (Barker 2020). Their efforts to promote their beliefs including to MSU students, eventually led Laughead to lose his job before he ever encountered Martin—however, he was eventually rehired by the student health at MSU. (Schachter 1954). He would later be fired again for promoting Martin's teachings too aggressively in December of 1954.

FRS noted that Charles Laughead sent two letters to editors and publishers promoting Martin's prophecy. They describe the first letter, sent in August 1954, as “an important move for the believers personally, since it represented their first attempt to ‘tell the world’; but its practical, social effect was disappointing. Apparently not even one of the more than fifty recipients published the announcement or requested further information” (p. 58).

This is incorrect. The letter was published in the September 1954 issue of *Roundhouse* magazine (Laughead 1954), and it closed with a promise that more messages would follow. A second letter from Laughead appeared in the October issue (Laughead 1954). The first letter also announced plans for a forthcoming book of Martin's teachings—clear evidence of intent to proselytize.

FRS minimize or ignore these efforts. They frame the book as a passing idea, not a published plan. But internal notes show that FRS knew the proselytization was extensive before the failure of prophecy. For example, the researchers acknowledged that Laughead actively tried to recruit a potential book publisher who had become a regular visitor to the group (Bosted et al. 1954).

Martin herself was outspoken about spreading the message. She reportedly clashed with local law enforcement over her efforts to evangelize high school students. According to Bosted et al. (1954), she disliked “the local cops, who she felt had been persecuting her and watching and following her, apparently, largely because of her work with the high school students.” The same set of notes records that Martin, immediately after complaining about law enforcement, declared: “from now on until the cataclysm, her job was to gather in the recruits.” She didn't use the word *recruits*—“initiates” was closer—but the intent was the same. She reportedly believed new followers would “flock to her door,” and she appeared increasingly willing to “spread the word.”

Riecken agreed that the group was enthusiastic about recruitment. On December 18, 1954, he wrote: “It is quite obvious that the newspaper publicity has led to a great deal of proselytizing. Laughead remarked at one point in the day, ‘Just imagine if a guy had a million dollars, he couldn't buy this kind of publicity.’ And he seemed to be quite cheered by this.” Riecken added that although no one had gone “out on the highways and byways” to recruit, they were “extremely accepting of the people who have come to the house” (Riecken 1954).

Martin, in particular, seemed to thrive on public attention. Her husband told observer Don Salzman that “Dorothy lives by publicity, by being in the limelight as much as she can” (Salzman 1954).

Festinger and Schachter relate one particularly incident where Laughead and Bertha eagerly proselytized some visiting teenage boys:

“The session with these five kids lasted quite a long time and it is worth trying to describe the general aura and atmosphere around the place. Chuck Laughead, particularly, but also [Bertha] and also [Member] and [Member] who injected things at various occasions and were really working on these five kids. The creator [the personality Bertha channeled] had told them they were to be saved and there was real proselytizing, working, pounding, and forcing to get these kids to accept the fact and delight in the fact they were to be saved, that they were among the elect. For example, when Laughead told them only 144,000 were being saved he looked them right in the eye, everyone of them simultaneously, and said “You see, that's pretty select, isn't it?” It was a vigorous attempt to sell those kids.”

(Festinger and Schachter 1954)

Not only police, but parents in Martin's neighborhood had long complained about Martin's promotion of her beliefs to neighborhood children—Martin told observer Marsh Ray that the local P.T.A. groups opposed her interaction with children for this reason (Ray 1954).

Notes of FRS also describe another attempt to streamline proselytization efforts on December 19th (Festinger et al. 1954). They noted that when callers visited Martin she would “turn over assignments to lieutenants because there is too much for her to do. It almost seems as though the proselyting is being organized and clearly there are few lieutenants who can do the proselyting.”

Taken together, these examples undermine FRS's central claim that Martin and her followers engaged in only minimal proselytization before the failed prophecy. They planned a book, published articles in multiple magazines, sent letters to editors and spiritual seekers, and welcomed curious visitors with open arms. Whatever else *When Prophecy Fails* may have captured about the psychology of belief, it mischaracterizes the group's efforts to spread its message before the prophecy failed.

3.1 | FRS's Selective Interpretation of Evidence

FRS also interpret identical situations differently depending on whether they occurred before the supposed apocalypse (when proselytization is supposed to be minimal) or afterwards (when proselytization is supposed to be extensive). One of the most glaring examples of this double standard, involves how FRS treated men who arrived at Martin's house and engaged in extensive conversation with her. The first man arrived at Martin's house in early December to try to sell her cemetery lots. The second man arrives on December 18th, after the aliens missed their first promised evacuation time, but before it became clear that the flood would not happen.

Again, in April 1954; Martin (1954, p. 5) claimed that another alien, Sara without an h, told her that she had been chosen by the aliens and that the aliens needed her because the aliens "need you, for we are going to try to reach your planet soon, by levitation, which is literally thought world (sic) made dense. We will come to let you of Earth know that you do not need to war over a planet." Then Martin claimed to receive yet another message from Sara, grandly titled "The Wisdom I Give Is From the Light of the World- Share All- and be Enlightened to Those who are Ready." In this message, Martin claimed that she was told to gather friends and share her teachings (1954d). In May 1954, another message reiterated that Martin was to spread what she was learning. Martin (1954) claimed that Sara told her

A visitor in early December

Another caller was a complete stranger, a salesman of cemetery lots who probably received the most unusual reception of his career when he announced his trade. "That," retorted [Martin], "is the least of my worries." But she invited him into the house and she and Edna Post spent over an hour explaining the ideology and the prediction to him. He promised to return for further instruction, and they expected him, but, as far as we know, he never showed up again.
(p. 108)

A visitor on December 18

Their technique of proselyting is well illustrated by one of these, a thirty-5-year-old technical sergeant in the United States Air Force, who arrived at the house about 4:30 in the afternoon after having telephoned for an appointment. [Martin] took him and one of the authors up to the attic with her, where she proceeded to describe the history of her messages, the prediction of the cataclysm, and the reasons it was being visited on the world. For more than an hour and a half she lectured to the sergeant, then told him to go home and meditate, pray, and wait... but the incident illustrates the time and energy being devoted to such activity at this time.
(p. 149)

These two incidents are strikingly similar. Yet in *When Prophecy Fails*, the first is categorized as part of a pattern of minimal proselytization, while the second is held up as evidence of aggressive outreach. The inconsistency reflects a deeper ambiguity in FRS's theory: they generally stress a sharp increase in proselytization following the failed prophecy and the absence of the Christmas flood, but they also treat earlier episodes as supporting evidence—so long as those episodes came after some kind of disappointment or alien no-show. The theoretical timeline shifts to accommodate the data, rather than the other way around.

that Martin was to "spread the news, tell the story, and be fearless in the doing."

Charles Laughead told Don Salzman that aliens told Martin what role he and his wife were to play in spreading the movement (16). Martin received messages that told her that Lilian was to be the secretary and send copies of her messages to "every flying saucer club in the United States they were able to contact" and "Dr. Laughead was to be the one who was to organize the publicity." (Salzman 1954).

3.2 | Aliens Told Dorothy Martin to Proselytize

Not only did Martin and her followers try to spread her teachings before the prophecy failed, but she also had a theological mandate to do so. In April of 1954; Martin (1954) claimed to receive a message from an alien known as "Elder Brother" instructing her to tell others of her contact with him and to search for followers, or "little fishes", an apparent reference to the Christian practice of describing evangelists as being "fishers of men."

Martin had a theological mandate to proselytize and the Laugheads had been assigned specific tasks from above. The researcher's notes show they knew but they omitted this from their account.

Later in April 1954, Martin claimed to receive a message from a different alien, called Jain Sai (who according to the message was the assistant to yet another alien, Sara). In addition to telling Martin that it was Sara without an "h" but pronounced the same way, Jain Sai told Martin that she could "go tell the world that we have at last contacted the Earth planet with waves of ether." (Martin 1954, p. 7)

4 | The Exalted Brother Henry

In *When Prophecy Fails*, FRS present themselves as sober-minded, professional observers who aimed to influence the group as little as possible. They acknowledge that their presence—and that of their paid observers—likely affected the small group's behavior to some degree, but they insist they remained as passive and objective as circumstances allowed.

However, a later essay by Leon Festinger, written in memory of Stanley Schachter (Festinger n.d.), casts doubt on that account. In it, Festinger recounts how he and Schachter jokingly swapped names when introducing themselves to Martin's followers—a

ruse they maintained throughout the study. He also mentions that the researchers were on “some prescription” drugs to stay alert during the study and Henry Riecken “started to be seen almost as a minor leader” within the group—a statement that can be shown to be a radical understatement.

The newly unsealed Box 4 of Festinger’s papers held at Bentley Historical Library contains transcripts, telephone logs, research notes, channeled messages, and internal communications among the researchers. Collectively, they reveal serious ethical breaches: fabrications, covert manipulation, and at least one instance of interference with a child welfare investigation. They also confirm that Riecken held an exalted status within the group—one he cultivated through deception. According to the archival material, Riecken fabricated psychic messages from extraterrestrials to shape group behavior including the pivotal events that unfolded on the night of the failed prophecy.

4.1 | Riecken’s Role in the Group

Riecken was well-received by the group and for whatever reason, he was immediately believed to be spiritually significant to the group, a status that would be constantly affirmed. Shortly before the flood was to occur, Dorothy Martin informed him that he was “the favorite son of the Most God.” (Martin 1954).¹

Doris Bosted (1954) related how Riecken already held a central role in the group in November. At her second meeting at Martin’s house, the entire group waited for Brother Henry.

“Mrs. Martin put some music on the tape recorder and we sat around meditating waiting for the man from Minneapolis. By the time the man from Minneapolis arrived, the tension level was quite high... She introduced him to the rest of us as Brother Henry. She had not used this term brother with anyone else. When he sat down she then said, Brother Henry do you have a message for us?”

‘Later that evening, Bertha entered a psychic fit, apparently overwhelmed by her own power, and urgently called for Brother Henry’s intercession. She “implored him to take her hand in prayer... a real scream for help. She was clearly panic-stricken and didn’t know what to do. She kept reiterating that Brother Henry should pray for her.”

Riecken was well aware of his status. On December 3rd, Dorothy Martin told him he was a close friend of Sananda or Sara, and no one was to gainsay him. Bertha and the others eagerly awaited a revelation. Riecken later wrote: “I think [I] could have taken over the movement if I had had any kind of message at all to bring to this group.”

Bertha told him, “you will have a very important role, you will be a guide to many people.” (Riecken 1954). In response, Riecken claimed to belong to both the Brotherhood of Sara and the Brotherhood of the Light—an admission that deeply impressed her.

4.2 | Rationalizing for Brother Riecken

After the aliens failed to arrive, the group was stunned. Riecken began pressing members to admit the prophecy had failed and mocked Martin’s attempts to salvage it with a new psychic message—“pretty dense all right,” he said. Then he left the house, followed by Charles Laughead. Riecken claims he had “precipitated what seems to have been quite a scene inside of the house” (Riecken 1954).

Martin fell into despair, begs the group to hold together and warns of dark forces attacking them.

“Mrs. Martin cried... there are black horses all over, black horses... these black beasts that breath germs into you, and they are all over; they have breathed germs into Don and made him sick, and they have breathed germs into you...they will go to any length to break up meetings like this, to break up groups like this.”

(Festinger 1954)

Outside, Riecken told Laughead that he was struggling with lack of faith and invited Charles Laughead to share his feelings. Riecken said to Laughead “It’s not that I want to appear to be of little faith, but Chuck, tell me, what do you think?” (Riecken 1954). At this point, Laughead said he had struggled with faith in past months and Riecken urged Laughead to help him, saying “Will you help me Chuck? Will you walk a way with me?”

At this point, in response to Riecken’s pleas, Laughead delivered a dramatic speech about the importance of keeping faith, which Riecken interpreted as confirmation of Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance. Laughead said:

“I’ve had to go a long way. I’ve strung along with this and I may be strung up. I’ve given up just about everything. I’ve cut every bridge. I’ve turned my back on the world. I can’t afford to doubt. I have to believe, and there isn’t any other truth. The preachers don’t have it, the priests don’t have it, and you have to look closely to find it even in the Bible. You know there was a time with the apostles when everybody began to drift away and some of them came to Jesus and said, Where shall we go, what shall we do, there are none left? And there wasn’t any other place to go. You know they crucified him and they are crucifying me. I’ve taken an awful beating in the last few months, just an awful beating. Of course it’s in a different way then he did. And they’re crucifying me in a different way in the press this time, but it’s part of the pattern, it’s the same pattern. But I know who I am and I know what I’ve got to do. I know I’ve got to teach just as Jesus knew, and I don’t care what happens tonight. I can’t afford to doubt. I don’t doubt even if we have to make an announcement to the press tomorrow and admit we were wrong. I still don’t doubt it. You’re having your period of doubt now, my boy, but hang on, boy, hang on. This is a tough time and we know that the boys upstairs are taking care of us. And

they've promised us that we won't be strung up. They've given us their promise. And I understand your doubt, but hang on boy. These are tough times and the way is not easy. We all have to take a beating and I've taken a terrific one, but I have no doubt."

Riecken thanked Charles and said "'Thank you, Chuck, you've given me just what I was looking for.'" Riecken revived Martin's spirits by returning to the house and affirming he no longer had any doubts. Festinger described this incident:

Henry came back in with a perfectly, wonderful ecstatic -- tremblingly ecstatic expression on his face, went over and grabbed both of Laughead's hands and said, thank you, then went over to Mrs. Martin and said, I just got the most wonderful help from Brother Laughead, it was a wonderful revelation to me, all my doubts are dispelled, I must confer with my brothers, Stanley and Leon.

(Festinger 1954)

Once the exalted Brother Henry had reassured Martin there was no room for doubt and given her hope that the group might persevere, she replaced the previous unsatisfactory message with the Christmas message. Festinger noted that "'At Henry's reappearance, Dorothy Martin brightened up fantastically and her eyes were shining and she started writing.'" (Festinger 1954) Then she revealed the Christmas message.

Martin's despair, Laughead's defiant affirmation of belief, and the Christmas message were all driven by Riecken. Laughead gave his speech in direct response to Riecken's plea for reassurance, and Martin only wrote the Christmas message after Riecken returned to the house, declared his doubts gone, and rejected the earlier psychic message as inadequate.

4.3 | The Earthly Verifier and the Keeper of the Magic Box

As the study wound to an end, the researchers wanted to gather additional information, so they invoked Brother Henry's spiritual status. Riecken "revealed" that his role was as the "earthly verifier" who had been tasked with comparing the accounts of the members to what was already known to the Space Brothers. He had everyone sit with him for an interview (Riecken and Schachter 1955). He obtained access to private documents and "sealed prophecies" of Martin's by invoking his access to extraterrestrial wisdom and naming Don Salzman as the "guardian." After examining the box, Riecken bound the box with a magical "Seal of Protection" and gave them to Don.

This contradicts the account in *When Prophecy Fails*, where FRS claims that the box was in the possession of a true believing cult member, "Mark", and that Mark wanted to open the box to retrieve some of his own documents that had been sealed in there, but was unwilling to do so since it would risk breaching the seal. FRS use this apparently fabricated incident as an example of belief surviving disconfirmation.

4.4 | Fake Automatic Writing

Another observer, Elizabeth "Liz" Williams would invent supernatural abilities and experiences of her own. Williams like fellow observer Frank Nall, primarily observed the Laugheads and other members based in East Lansing or affiliated with Michigan State University.

Liz had quickly ingratiated herself with the Laugheads and had become a constant presence in their household by mid-December despite only having met them on November 19th (Williams 1954). When approaching the Laughead household, she claimed to have previously met Charles Laughead and to recently have experienced a mystical dream in which a mysterious, luminous man rescued her from a flood (Williams 1954). Liz would repeat this story to other members of the cult, and increasingly played up the references to the flood after witnessing how impressed they were by her apparent premonitions (Williams 1954).

Martin was quite moved by the sudden, apparently supernatural entry of Liz and Frank into the movement, as reported by Bosted et al. (1954).

"[Martin] went on in detail about the fact that in recent weeks more and more people were strangely coming into the movement. She mentioned two specific cases, describing in specific and unerring details the stories of Liz and Frank, our two East Lansing observers. She seemed really impressed by these and dwelled on them in detail, and clearly accepts them as independent confirmation of the whole business."

The entry of the researchers in Chicago had also reinforced the beliefs of Chicago area followers. At the same time as Martin was marveling at the appearance of Frank and Liz, a follower described the mysterious entrance of Doris and Don into the group, likewise impressed by their inexplicable attraction to the movement.

Liz admits to thinking another cult member, a woman in the East Lansing group, was also quite stupid and admits to hating her. The East Lansing woman was generally unpopular and believed to of a "lower vibration" than other members (Nall and Williams 1954). She manipulated this woman by performing automatic writing sessions for her, in which Liz claimed to channel extraterrestrial messages. This woman expressed doubt about Liz's psychic abilities given she could produce specific information, which caused Liz to regret that she had not obtained more insider information from the Chicago members to make her psychic act more convincing.

4.5 | A Child Welfare Investigation Before the Apocalypse

According to Nall and Williams (1954), Charles Laughead's sister contacted personnel at her brother's employer, Michigan State University, expressing worry about the Laughead children, fearing that they would be neglected due to their parents UFO

obsession. The sister asked that a social worker be sent to check on the children. The local family service agency contacted a MSU clinical psychologist, “Miss Baldwin.” Baldwin visited the Laughead home. Liz intercepted her and told her that she was not a cultist but a covert researcher, observing the family and providing childcare. Liz told Baldwin that various higher-ups at MSU were aware of and supported the study including Baldwin’s boss, “Dr. Boss” and a student affairs administrator, “Dr. Counselor.” Liz told Baldwin that she should stop her investigation and verify her story with Dr. Boss which offended Baldwin. Liz, in turn, was offended to be accused of spying on a family.

After Liz, informed Frank of the investigation, Frank contacted Baldwin and was frustrated that she was not enthusiastic about their study and believed that Baldwin was a status-conscious woman who was offended because she had been unaware of the study, not because of any concern for child welfare. Frank told Liz that he had informed Baldwin that:

“I more or less set forth the objectives of the study, presuming all along, of course, that I was speaking to a reasonable professional social scientist... I told her among many things that we- that the study was being conducted by a group of psychologists or social psychologists at the University of Minnesota... After my conversation with her was over she said that she was not going to go into the case any further, that she was keeping her hands off it, and of course afterwards we realized that she was doing this because her boss had told her to do that already.”

Dr. Counselor told Baldwin to drop the investigation and implied that revealing Liz’s role as a spy in the home might be dangerous. Liz wrote “Counselor said that Laughead was a sick man and in no conditions to be told about a spy in his home,” which caused Frank to muse about best research practices, writing “Perhaps ideally in a study which is being conducted by the method of participant observation, it would be best to have really no involvement on the part of the participant observer.”

Liz wrote that she had intentionally cultivated the affections of the youngest Laughead child and felt maternal affection towards her in return. Liz and Frank believed this proved useful when Dr. Counselor paid his own visit to the Laughead home and observed affectionate behavior between Liz and the child, and reassured him that he was correct to conceal the nature of Liz’s presence.

After the flood did not emerge, the Laughead’s eldest daughter wanted to go to Chicago to fetch her parents. Liz and Frank, concerned about legal jeopardy, invoked Sananda to keep her in Michigan, and then consulted with Dr. Counselor (Nall and Williams 1954). They learned that custody of the youngest daughter had been awarded to the probate court as Charles Laughead was accused of insanity. The Laughead son blamed the aunt’s intervention and planned to take his younger sister to Chicago anyways, but a court probate officer arrived before they could depart. Frank had taken the son for a car ride to speak with him and to give the officer more time to arrive, in hopes of avoiding legal complications.

Liz’s role in the home went far beyond observation. She acted as a surrogate parent, influenced the children’s movements, and

helped redirect official scrutiny—actions that may have endangered the family if her deception had been uncovered.

4.6 | Brother Marsh

Yet another paid observer played a role in reinforcing the cultists’ belief in alien presence and in sheltering the group from the child welfare investigation in Michigan and police suspicion in Illinois. Marsh Ray first contacted the group on Christmas Day. They immediately welcomed him and scrutinized his statement for indications that he was an extraterrestrial emissary. Almost as soon as he arrived, he was begged for guidance by a member, but Marsh resisted and said he no advice to give. He also reported his impression that “there was no leadership in the group... no one wanted to take the responsibility for this.” (Ray 1954)

Martin insisted he bless their Christmas meal and told him “This is the happiest Christmas we’ve had because YOU have come.” She would later ask him if she should address his as “Brother Marsh” in a reference to his believed extraterrestrial origin. Ray indicated they attempted to keep up each other spirits even as local youth mocked them. Kids gathered to mock the cult and shouted “Blast off... Mrs. Martin and the group seemed to think a pretty humorous sort of thing... they tried to convey the impression that they were not at all upset by this.”

Ray also played a role in helping the group evade police investigation. On December 27th, “[Mr. Martin] stated that everybody... had to be out of the house immediately because the police were going to arrive to check the place and if they weren’t out that the police had... a subpoena- for them to appear.”

Ray was initially tasked with escorting the eldest Laughead daughter to a house in Winnetka, IL, as her parents did not want her to return to Michigan, where the investigation into Charles Laughead’s sanity was ongoing. The plan changed and he escorted her and another member to a separate vehicle which they would use to flee Oak Park. Ray would later visit the group in their Winnetka hideout where Martin would demand he give her his extraterrestrial message (Ray 1955). (He declined to provide one).

At the hideout, Martin continued to insist that aliens had hidden themselves among the other onlookers at Christmas Eve, but one young follower expressed doubts and said: “I think for the younger people we felt let down because the sources didn’t land because we’ve built up for this terrific thing and we wanted action and nothing happened.”

5 | Behavior After the Prophecy

FRS’s central claim is that following the failure of the prophecy, those committed followers who had social support from other believers maintained their beliefs in the now failed prophecy and tried harder to spread their beliefs than they did before the prophecy failed.

To persuade their readers, FRS rely on a few lines of evidence. Mainly, they assert, Martin’s group went from shunning media

attention while waiting to be picked up by flying saucers to seeking it out after the saucers failed to arrive at the predicted time. As media outlets learned of Charles Laughead due to his proselytization, newspapers and other outlets began running stories, mocking Laughead and Martin.

FRS described how the group turned away most requests for interviews before the aliens were supposed to come. After the aliens did not come and Martin received the Christmas message the group contacted the press themselves and shared their new teaching. FRS treat this as conclusive evidence of the change in proselytization efforts. If the group had engaged in zero or little proselytization before the prophecy failed, this could be viewed as an increase in proselytization. Since the group had actively proselytized before the failed prophecy, the group's behavior fails to demonstrate any real increase in proselytization.

An alternative interpretation of the groups' behavior regarding the media before the supposed apocalypse and alien rescue would be that the group was too preoccupied with getting ready for their extraplanetary trip to take calls from hostile media outlets that ran mocking articles about them. *When Prophecy Fails* discusses some of the steps the group members were regularly practicing to get ready for the aliens. These included practicing a password ("I left my hat at home"), preparing a passport (a stamped envelope), and removing all metal from their persons and clothes. Likewise, once the group realized they were not going into outer space, it is not surprising the group wanted to offer their version of events to the media, rather than endure the mocking with no response.

Ray Marsh reported that the group, while welcoming, was not engaging in proselytization or recruitment by Christmas Day. He wrote of his visit to the Martin's house on Christmas Day

"there was no leadership... they there waiting and looking for a sign, that they took my visit to be of some significance... There would seem to be no recruitment process as such in evidence t the moment." (Ray 1954).

The creation of the Christmas message and the temporary belief in it as recounted by FRS, does show the members maintained their beliefs even after their prophecy failed for a few days. Rather than immediately admit to a hostile press that their beliefs were false they instead acted as if their beliefs were true for up to several days after the prophecy failed. FRS claimed that their case study provided insight on the origins of the Christians, and the Millerites, and the Sabbateans who maintained their beliefs for years (or millennia) after outside events proved those religions wrong. But FRS failed to show any evidence of long-term persistence of belief.

FRS presented some evidence that members maintained their falsified beliefs at least into January of 1955. FRS claimed to present summaries of interactions between FRS and cult members in December of 1954 and January of 1955. As proof of "Edna's" continuing belief, FRS wrote that Edna claimed in January she said that she continued to write letters to Dorothy Martin, asking for further messages. This would demonstrate that Edna remained interested in Martin's teaching, but it does not prove enduring, sincere belief.

FRS insisted that Martin and the Laugheads "passed through this period of disconfirmation and its aftermath with their faith firm, unshaken and lasting." (p. 208). *When Prophecy Fails* suggests that outside events, the legal troubles of Martin and the Laugheads, killed the movement. They speculate that had this not occurred, belief in this failed prophecy may have continued to spread, writing had "they been more effective, disconfirmation might have portended the beginning not the end" (p. 233).

Members of the group remained sympathetic to Martin and her legal troubles. Ray (1955) noted that some group members contributed money to Martin for her flight from the Midwest and living expenses, but "not a contribution to the cause of the sect."

However, there is good evidence that Martin and the Laugheads abandoned their faith in the failed prophecy and the Christmas message. The rest of the group is less prominent and most of their real identities unknown; however, there are good indications that none had lasting belief.

5.1 | Dorothy Martin Recanted Her Belief in Her Prophecy

When Prophecy Fails claims the committed members of the cult maintained their beliefs even after experiencing failed prophecy. But the group dissolved and even Martin immediately disavowed belief in being rescued by aliens.

A feature story in the UFO magazine, the *Saucerian* demonstrates this. She told Gray Barker, editor of the *Saucerian* that "she really didn't expect to be picked up physically by the saucerman" (Barker 2020). Charles Laughead also backtracked, suggesting that "I think maybe it was our spirits that were lifted" (Barker 2020, p.55). If the cultists and cult leader were so committed to their beliefs and post-failure proselytization, Charles Laughead, who was interviewed for the piece, could have attempted to evangelize, or defend the Christmas message but they did not.

Even though Martin publicly walked back her belief in the prophecy in a magazine article in 1955, *When Prophecy Fails* which was published in 1956 portrays Martin as remaining completely committed.

Within 2 years, Martin was publicly denying any ability to predict the timing of cataclysms, telling a local Arizona newspaper that even if she received messages from extraterrestrials, no one could know the hour—citing the New Testament to support her view (Automatic Writing Brings Messages to Dorothy Martin, n.d). It is true that the Laugheads and Dorothy Martin continued to believe in aliens and extraterrestrial contact. All three would continue to study alien psychic messages in Latin America with the psychic and occult writer, George Hunt Williamson, even as the rest of the Martin group completely dissolved (Barkun 2015; Moseley 1957).

We know that Martin did not attempt to proselytize on behalf of the failed apocalyptic prediction or the Christmas message because of her extensive writings and teachings later in life. Renaming herself Sister Thedra, Martin would continue to channel psychic messages and teach others in Mount Shasta, CA and

the American Southwest. After her death, her followers compiled some of her teachings in the sixteen volume *Great Awakening* series and the eight volume *Transfiguration* series. None of these twenty-four books defend or describe the prediction that is the center of *When Prophecy Fails* nor do they defend or promote the “Christmas message.” Even though Martin would gain new followers who believed in her psychic powers and alien contact, and who probably would have accepted her teachings on the failed prediction and Christmas message, she did nothing to spread these teachings or reassemble the followers who had experienced its failure.

This absence is further confirmed by Nina Lee Wilkins, a New Age practitioner and blogger who learned to channel Sananda after attending a 1986 ASSK gathering organized by Sister Thedra. Wilkins has continued to channel Sananda for more than forty years (Wilkins 2020). I corresponded with Wilkins to learn what later students of Thedra knew about her early teachings in Illinois and her association with the Laugheads. Wilkins expressed no familiarity with these figures or with the failed prophecy (Wilkins 2025), and referred me to *Celestial Raise* (ASSK 1987), a collection of teachings of Thedra and other channelers, compiled by her followers. That volume likewise contains no mention of the failed prediction or the “Christmas message.”

Dorothy Martin distanced herself completely from these events, even rewriting the story of how she developed her psychic powers. In an undated interview with *UFO Review*, she claimed she had been in a car accident, developed cancer, and was miraculously healed by an appearance of Jesus Christ (UFO Review n.d.). Afterward, she moved to the Andes and began channeling messages from Jesus and extraterrestrials. The failed prophecy and Christmas message were omitted entirely.

In the first volume of *The Great Awakening* (Thedra 2020), her followers offer only a vague allusion to the prophecy episode:

Those years, 1950 to 1955, were the years in which many things happened...They were also years in which she learned to deal with the pressure and the publicity which at times threatened to swallow her up.... Since most of us were either too young to remember or were not even born when most of this all took place, we have very little understanding of what transpired at that time.

(p. 252)

Even though Martin had new students who would likely have accepted her earlier teachings, she never shared the failed prophecy with them. Her and her followers' later accounts of her life are inconsistent—in *The Great Awakening* Vol. 4, for instance, they claim she had psychic powers from a young age (Thedra 2020). But across all these writings, none promote the failed prophecy or the “Christmas message.”

That her followers explicitly disclaim knowledge of 1954–55 also suggests that none of her earlier believers remained with her. The prophecy's failure seems to have ended belief among her 1954 circle entirely.

FRS claimed that true believers would rationalize away disconfirmation. Martin was their signature example. But she abandoned her falsified teachings. Even before the dust had settled, Martin seemed to fear that others might not hold the line. In Winnetka, after hearing that the Laugheads had sold their Michigan home, Ray (1955) reported that: “Mrs. Martin asked “What else did Doc say, he didn't seem as if he was selling out, did he?” The implication being he didn't seem as if he was lacking faith and falling by the wayside and recanting.”

5.2 | The Laugheads Declined to Proselytize

I found no record that either of the Laugheads formally recanted but we can also be confident that Martin's most important followers, Charles and Lillian Laughead did not attempt to spread Martin's teachings on the apocalypse or humanity's miraculous reprieve from such apocalypse because both Charles and Lillian continued to write and publicly discuss their beliefs, and because their activities were regularly covered by magazines that focused on UFOs and the occult. While they continued to associate with Martin, promote beliefs in aliens, and endorse the validity of psychic messages from outer space, there is no record of them trying to spread belief in the failed prophecy despite ample opportunity to spread such a message to receptive audiences.

In February of 1955, Lillian Laughead published an article in *Mystic Magazine*, a publication that covered UFOs and the occult. She wrote about aliens, but she did not mention Martin, did not defend the supposed apocalypse, nor did she spread the “Christmas message.” Instead, she focused on decoding strange symbols found within alleged alien footprints, claiming they contained references to the mythical lost continent of Lemuria (Laughead 1955). Her connection to Martin was still newsworthy as before the start of her article, the magazine's editor posted a note summarizing Lillian's connection to Martin. The magazine readers may have been a good target for proselytization, but Lillian makes no effort to spread Martin's teachings. Instead, she returns to her interest in alien footprints. She had published an article on the same topic in *Roundhouse* magazine the previous year (Laughead 1954). Later reports of Laughead's UFO-related activities made no mention of the failed prophecy or the Christmas message (Bishop and Thomas 1999).

When Prophecy Fails tries to persuade the readers that the Laugheads and their eldest daughter remained convinced of Martin's failed prophecy, by writing that the three of them waited to be picked by another UFO in May of 1955 and that Charles continued to teach about aliens and other occult beliefs. But as Eghigian (2024) and the earlier engagement of the Laugheads and other Martin followers with UFO and New Age beliefs both show, these general beliefs were endemic in those circles and did not depend upon Martin herself. In fact, the failure of Martin's prophecy made even associations with the Laugheads socially costly among the Detroit occultist set when a popular psychic Neva Dell Hunter (who had warned against attaching weight to any specific date for a flood) held an important séance in early 1955, Liz was purposely excluded due to her close ties to the Laugheads (Nall 1954).

In fact, as FRS admits, the May 1955 prediction of a UFO arrival came not from Martin but from a rival psychic they called “Ella Lowell” (identified by Clark 2000] as Rose Phillips, though archival records confirm she was Detroit-area medium Neva Dell Hunter). “Ella” was not a disciple of Martin’s but rather a friendly rival, who at times spread doubts about the predicted 1954. Even if the Laugheads were convinced of the abilities of Hunter that would do nothing to demonstrate that they maintained their faith in Martin’s prophecy.

FRS provided several examples of historical religious sects that they believed experienced disconfirmation of their religious beliefs such as the Christian Millerite movement and the Jewish Sabbateans. FRS argue that the beliefs of the Millerites were disconfirmed when Jesus Christ did not return in 1844 and the beliefs of the Sabbateans were disconfirmed when the rabbi whom they believed was the Messiah converted to Islam. FRS do not argue that the Millerites should have concluded that Christianity in general was false, only their sect, nor do they argue that the Sabbateans should have concluded that Judaism was false, only their sect. By the standards of FRS, mere belief in UFOs or psychics or occultism is not an example of belief persisting past disconfirmation, only belief in Martin’s specific prophecy and reinterpretation would qualify.

6 | Contradictions Between *When Prophecy Fails* and Later Writings

When Prophecy Fails provides (or claims to provide) detailed information about Martin’s followers. FRS reports that of the 33 people attending meetings in East Lansing, only eight were heavily committed, seven were somewhat doubtful, and eighteen “can hardly be called members” with beliefs ranging from partial acceptance to “almost complete skepticism” (1956, p. 76).

They also describe how the group gradually dissolved. One new follower, “Manya,” left for a drink with her boyfriend and never returned—“shaken loose by the first disconfirmation” (pp. 143–144). Others, like “May and Frank,” “Clyde,” and “Arthur,” similarly left or broke curfew before the prophecy’s final deadline passed. These details directly undermine the central claim that religious believers persist in their convictions even after dramatic disconfirmation.

Yet only a year later, in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger 1957), Festinger offered a strikingly different version of events. Gone were the doubts and desertions. Now Martin’s group “numbering twenty-five to thirty persons, believed completely in the validity of these messages” (p. 252).

Festinger claimed skepticism was “quite rare,” present only in members who had joined involuntarily — like a leader’s 17-year-old daughter. “By and large,” he wrote, “if one were to characterize the degree of conviction in the group as a whole, it was complete faith in the belief and in the validity of the messages from the Guardians” (p. 255). He also claimed that after the prophecy failed, the group’s “conviction... did not seem to waver at all, at least on the surface” (p. 259).

Which was it? Did many members leave, as WPF describes? Or did they all persist in belief, as claimed in TCD? Was there a broad range of conviction, or nearly unanimous devotion?

7 | Conclusion

The authors of *When Prophecy Fails* had a theory that when faced with the utter disconfirmation of their religious beliefs, believers would soldier on, double down, and ramp up the proselytization. And the authors had ample resources to shape the cult’s behavior and beliefs. Brother Henry steered Martin and the others at pivotal meetings. The serendipitous, almost supernatural arrival of Liz, Frank, and other paid observers buttressed the faith of the cultists. The sheer quantity of research observers in the small group gave them substantial influence. Even after the prophecy failed, Henry was able to prod Martin into writing the Christmas message and inspire belief in the supernatural by posing as the “earthly verifier,” an emissary of the Space Brothers.

But even with all this influence, the study didn’t go as planned. The group collapsed; belief died. It did not persevere. What did persevere was FRS’s determination to publish their work and Festinger’s determination to use it to launch the theory of cognitive dissonance. Did any of Festinger, Riecken, or Schachter still believe at that point? History is silent.

The full scope and variety of the misrepresentations and misconduct of the researchers needed the unsealed archives of Festinger to emerge; the full story could not be written until now. But the reputation of *When Prophecy Fails* should not even have survived its first decade. The text of *When Prophecy Fails* is filled with strained interpretations of events to make their theory of low to high proselytization work. The contradictions between *When Prophecy Fails* and a *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* show Festinger, at least, was guilty of misrepresentation in one of the two books. And contemporaneous interviews with or news articles about Dorothy Martin and the Laugheads showed that Martin recanted her beliefs and they all abandoned any efforts at proselytization. Just as Martin, Bertha, and the others were eager to accept ‘Brother Henry’ as an authentic messenger of the space brothers, many academics were eager to accept FRS as authentic chroniclers of a strange, laughable sect and its silly prophesies.

Despite this, *When Prophecy Fails* spread its influence across psychology, sociology, New Testament studies, and religious studies. Ironically, some New Testament scholars whose *raison d’être* and specialization is piecing together events from thousands of years ago, eagerly embraced a false narrative that was trivial to fact check. Across disciplines, many would cite FRS even though public accounts debunked the persistence of belief and even though the Laugheads, Martin, and others could be identified and could have been interviewed by scholars if journalistic sources or articles in occult periodicals were considered insufficient. Suspicion did linger in some places. Though scholars of new religious movements were wrong to accept the account of FRS as evidence for cult survival, they did realize that proselytization after prophetic failure is not routine. In some academic circles, suspicion of the role that Riecken played in *When*

Prophecy Fails appeared to have circulated- according to a comment by an anonymous reviewer of this piece.

When *Prophecy Fails* is not the first famous psychological study or account of the mid-20th century to fall to archival research. The popular understanding of the Kitty Genovese murder (Manning et al. 2007), the Milgram obedience experiment (Perry et al. 2020), the Rosenhan experiment (Cahalan 2019), the Little Albert experiment (Harris 1979), and the Stanford Prison Experiment (Le Texier 2019) have all been challenged. The problem is not with qualitative research; we rely on historians and journalists to understand the world, and the replication crisis within psychology shows that quantitative research is not immune to error, bias or manipulation. We would likely understand more about the world if more scholars, psychologists, and journalists were embedded in niche communities like cults. The real failure lies in mistaking vivid narratives for accuracy, and confident, theatrical performances for reliable observation. The braggadocio that FRS or Zimbardo or Milgram, that they could reshape our psychological understanding with a singular, dramatic experiment should never have been accepted. Had anyone sent a postcard to Dorothy Martin, Charles or Lilian Laughead, or their daughter, the FRS account could have collapsed decades ago.

But everyone, even scholars, appears vulnerable to falling for a dramatic and vivid story about human psychology. If Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is right, reappraisal of the value of *When Prophecy Fails* may be slow. If he is wrong, perhaps reappraisal will be swift.

Reappraisal should be swift. Every major claim of the book is false, and the researchers' notes leave no option but to conclude the misrepresentations were intentional.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in the Open Science Framework repository at <https://osf.io/4jevfm/>. These materials include redacted digital versions of archival sources from the Michigan State University Archives, the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, and the Gray Barker UFO Collection at the Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library.

Endnotes

¹The channeled message that reveals this was written in faded ink in an old-fashioned style of hand-writing (cursive) on thin paper which I found difficult to read. I used a LLM ("ChatGPT") to convert these channeled cursive messages into text.

References

ASSK. 1987. *Celestial Raise: Tiers of Light Pouring Forth From the Son*. A.S.S.K.

Aune, D. E. 2007. "Christian Beginnings and Cognitive Dissonance Theory." In *Other Words: Essays on Social-Science Methods and the New Testament in Honour of Jerome H. Neyrey*, edited by D. E. Aune, 149–181. Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Balch, R. W., G. Farnsworth, and S. Wilkins. 1983. "When the Bombs Drop." *Sociological Perspectives* 26, no. 2: 137–158. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1389088>.

Barker, G. 2020. *The Collected Issues of the Saucerian*. Saucerian Publisher (Original work published in 1955 as *The Saucerian*, No. 6).

Barkun, M. 2015. "The Occultists and the Spaceman: The Metamorphosis of Dorothy Martin." In *Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling*, edited by C. Gutierrez, 464–479. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004264083_022.

Bermejo-Rubio, F. 2017. "The Process of Jesus' Deification and Cognitive Dissonance Theory." *Numen* 64, no. 2–3: 119–152.

Bishop, G., and K. Thomas. 1999. *Calling Occupants (The Giant Rock Conventions)*. Fortean Times. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from <http://www.ufoevidence.org/documents/doc1904.htm>.

Bosted, D. 1954. *Notes by Doris Bosted on Second Meeting With Dorothy Martin. [Doris Bosted November notes] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.

Bosted, D., L. Festinger, and S. Schachter. 1954. *Notes by Bosted, Festinger, and Schachter. [Notes by Bosted, Festinger, and Schachter] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.

Cahalan, S. 2019. *The Great Pretender*. Thorndike Press.

Castanier, B. 2018. *Martians: East Lansing's Other Green Men*. City Pulse. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from <https://www.lansingcitypulse.com/stories/martians-east-lansingsquos-other-green-men,1354>.

Circle Pit. 2013. *Free Music Monday—When Prophecy Fails*. <https://thecirclepit.com/2013/05/free-music-monday-when-prophecy-fails/>.

Clark, J. 2000. *Extraordinary Encounters*. ABC-CLIO, Inc.

Cooper, J. 2007. *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Dawson, L. L. 1999. "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical Overview." *Nova Religio* 3, no. 1: 60–82.

Eghigian, G. 2024. *After the Flying Saucers Came*. Oxford University Press.

Festinger, L. 1954, December 20–21. *Notes on the Christmas Message. [Notes by Festinger] (Leon Festinger Papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.

Festinger, L. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press.

Festinger, L. (n.d.) *A Personal Memory of Stanley Schachter*. [An Essay About Festinger's Memories of Schachter]. (Leon Festinger papers).

Festinger, L. (n.d.) *Untitled*. [An Essay About Festinger's Memories of His Father]. (Leon Festinger papers). Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Festinger, L., H. Riecken, and S. Schachter. 1956. *When Prophecy Fails*. Harper Torch-Books.

Festinger, L., H. Riecken, and S. Schachter. 1954, December 21. *Notes Including Pre-Flood proselytization. [Notes by Festinger, Riecken and Schachter and Schachter] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.

Festinger, L., and S. Schachter. 1954. *Pre-Flood Notes on proselytization to Teenage Boys. [Undated sheaf of Pages Pre-Flood Describing Interaction With Local Boys With Missing First Page] (Leon Festinger's Papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.

Fredriksen, P. 2018. *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*. Yale University Press.

Gager, J. 1975. *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*. Pearson College.

Hardyck, J. A., and M. Braden. 1962. "Prophecy Fails Again: A Report of a Failure to Replicate." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 65, no. 2: 136–141. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0048636>.

- Harris, B. 1979. "Whatever Happened to Little Albert?" *American Psychologist* 34, no. 2: 151–160.
- Jackson, H. 1975. "The Resurrection Belief of the Earliest Church: A Response to the Failure of Prophecy?" *The Journal of Religion* 55, no. 4: 415–425.
- Jenkins, T. 2013. *Of Flying Saucers and Social Scientists*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kelly, T. 2025. "Failed Prophecies Are Fatal." *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 14, no. 1: 48–71. <https://doi.org/10.1558/ijnsr.33085>.
- Laughead, C. 1954, September. "An Amazing Prophecy." *Roundhouse Magazine* 3, no. 11: 8–14. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from <https://files.afu.se/Downloads/Magazines/United%20States/Roundhouse/Roundhouse%20-%20vol%2003%20No%2011.pdf>.
- Laughead, C. 1954, October. "An Amazing Prophecy (Sequel)." *Roundhouse Magazine* 3, no. 12: 6–7. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from <https://files.afu.se/Downloads/Magazines/United%20States/Roundhouse/Roundhouse%20-%20vol%2003%20No%2012.pdf>.
- Laughead, C. 1954, May. "E.S.P. Messages." *Roundhouse Magazine* 2, no. 8: 3–7. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from http://www.cufos.org/Roundhouse/Roundhouse_Vol%20%20238.pdf.
- Laughead, L. 1954, May 22. "Interpretation of Venusian Footprints." *Roundhouse Magazine*: 1–4. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from <https://files.afu.se/Downloads/Magazines/United%20States/Roundhouse/Roundhouse%20-%20unknown%20issue.pdf>.
- Laughead, L. 1955, February. "A Message From the Flying Saucers?" *Mystic Magazine* no. 8: 63–69.
- Lurie, A. 1967. *Imaginary Friends*. Heinemann.
- Manning, R., M. Levine, and A. Collins. 2007. "The Kitty Genovese Murder and the Social Psychology of Helping: The Parable of the 38 Witnesses." *American Psychologist* 62, no. 6: 555–562.
- Marshall, G. D., and P. G. Zimbardo. 1979. "Affective Consequences of Inadequately Explained Physiological Arousal." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 6: 970–988. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.6.970>.
- Martin, D. 1954, April 24. *The Constellations Do Change- The Bombs Have Broken the Sonic Barrier. [Purported channeled message from extraterrestrial]*. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Gray Barker UFO Collection.
- Martin, D. 1954, April 18. *The Elder Brother- I Will Come Again to Teach Each of You. [Purported channeled message from extraterrestrial]*. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Gray Barker UFO Collection.
- Martin, D. 1954, April 24. *The Thermin- Times Vibratory Impulses That Come From Earth- We Are All Brothers. [Purported channeled message from extraterrestrial]*. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Gray Barker UFO Collection.
- Martin, D. 1954, April 24. *The Wisdom I Give Is From the Light of the World- Share All- and be Enlightened to Those Who Are Ready. [Purported channeled Message From Extraterrestrial]*. Clarksburg, West Virginia: Gray Barker UFO Collection.
- Martin, D. 1954. *We Hear Your Prayers- the World Mind Still In Lethargy. [Purported channeled message from extraterrestrial]* Gray Barker UFO Collection. Clarksburg, West Virginia.
- Martin, D. 1954, October. "The Star That Moved." *Mystic Magazine* 6: 32. Retrieved August 20, 2023 from <https://archive.org/details/mysticmagazine06195410palmerpythagorasfsa/page/n31/mode/2up>.
- Martin, D. 1954, December 19. *At the Beginning. [Purported Channeled Message to Henry Riecken revealing He Is the Favorite Son of God]. (Leon Festinger's Papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- McCloud, S. 2004. *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Melton, J. G. 1985. "Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails." *American Studies* 26, no. 2: 17–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40641958>.
- Michigan State University. 1954–1955. "Correspondence Regarding Charles Laughead's Dismissal." In *James Denison Papers*. Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections.
- Moseley, J. 1957, March 1. *Saucer News* 4: 1–2.
- Nall, F. 1954, December 23. *Notes by Frank Nall From After the Flood to January. [Frank Nall notes] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Nall, F., and E. Williams. 1954, December 19–20. *Notes Including Discussion of Child Welfare Investigation [Nall and Williams Notes Beginning December 19] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Nall, F., and E. Williams. 1954, December 22. *Notes After the Flood. [Nall and Williams Notes Beginning December 20] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Nisbett, R. 2000. "Stanley Schacter." In *Biographical Memoirs* V.78, 223–235. The National Academies Press.
- Perry, G., A. Brannigan, R. A. Wanner, and H. Stam. 2020. "Credibility and Incredulity in Milgram's Obedience Experiments: A Reanalysis of An Unpublished Test." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 83, no. 1: 88–106.
- Pettit, M. 2024. *Governed by Affect: Hot Cognition and the End of Cold War Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Ray, M. 1954, December 27. *Report From the Winnetka Hideout. [Fourth and Fifth Reports by Ray Marsh] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Ray, M. 1955, January 6. *Second Report From the Winnetka Hideout. [Final Reports by Ray Marsh] (Leon Festinger Papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Riecken, H. 1954, December 18. *Notes Including Description of Proselytization. [Notes by Riecken] (Leon Festinger Papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Riecken, H. 1954, December 3–4. *Notes Including How He Could Take Over the Movement. [Notes by Riecken] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Riecken, H. 1954, December 20–21. *Notes including Riecken's criticism of Martin After no aliens arrived. [Notes by Riecken] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Riecken, H. 1954, December 20–21. *Notes on the Pivotal Events After the Failure of Prophecy. [Notes by Riecken] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Riecken, H., and S. Schachter. 1955, January 7. *Notes including Magic Box, the Earthly Verifier, and Warning About Satan. [Notes by Riecken and Schachter] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Salzman, D. 1954, December 16–27. *Notes including conversations With Martin's husband. [Notes by Salzman] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Schachter, S. 1954, December 7. *Substance of conversation With MSU personnel. [Memo to Riecken and Festinger.] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Schachter, S. 1994. "Leon Festinger." In *Biographical Memoirs* V.64, 97–110. The National Academies Press.
- Singelenberg, R. 1989. "'It Separated the Wheat From the Chaff': The '1975' Prophecy and Its Impact Among Dutch Jehovah's Witnesses." *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 1: 23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710916>.
- Stone, J. R., ed. 2013. *Expecting Armageddon: Essential Readings in Failed Prophecy*. Routledge.

- Strachan, G. 2025. Theatre Review: When prophecy Fails From Group-work in Association With Platform at the Studio at Festival Theatre, Edinburgh. British Theatre Guide. <https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/when-prophecy-f-the-studio-at-f-24173>.
- Le Texier, T. 2019. "Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment." *American Psychologist* 74, no. 7: 823–839. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000401>.
- Thedra, S. 2020. *The Great Awakening: Volume I*. Halls of Light, LLC.
- Thedra, S. 2020. *The Great Awakening: Volume IV*. Halls of Light, LLC.
- UFO Review. (n.d). Mt. Shasta- Headquarters of the Space Guardians. UFO Review, 15, 3-8. Retrieved from August 20, 2023 from https://archive.org/details/UFO_Review_No_15/page/n7/mode/2up.
- Vaidis, D. C., W. W. A. Slegers, F. Van Leeuwen, et al. 2024. "A Multitab Replication of the Induced-Compliance Paradigm of Cognitive Dissonance." *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science* 7, no. 1: 25152459231213375.
- Wernik, U. 1975. "Frustrated Beliefs and Early Christianity: A Psychological Enquiry Into the Gospels of the New Testament." *Numen* 22, no. Fasc. 2: 96–130.
- Wilkins, N. 2020, April 14. A Higher Perspective: You and I Are Bridges of Love-Light With Mother Nature. <https://bridgesoflovelight.com/2020/04/14/a-higher-perspective-you-and-i-are-bridges-of-love-light-with-mother-nature/>.
- Wilkins, N. 2025, July 6. Personal Correspondence.
- Williams, E. 1954, November 19. *Notes From Tape on First Contact. [Elizabeth Martin Describes Meeting the Laugheads] (Leon Festinger papers)*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Bentley Historical Library.
- Williamson, G. H. 1953. *Other Tongues- Other Flesh*, Vol. 1. Library of Alexandria.
- Zygmunt, J. F. 1970. "Prophetic Failure and Chiliastic Identity: The Case of Jehovah's Witnesses." *American Journal of Sociology* 75, no. 6: 926–948. <https://doi.org/10.1086/224846>.