

## Prophecies are Dangerous Things: Mental Health Implications of Prophetic Disconfirmation

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### ABSTRACT

*There has been little work conducted by mental health professionals pertaining to the mental health implications of prophetic disconfirmation. A number of case studies are presented of individuals who become distressed in the context of millennial/apocalyptic prophecies, in some instances resulting in suicide. Triggers may include disillusionment at the failure of the millennium to arrive or to the fear that the individual is not one of the elect who will survive the apocalypse. The implications for mental health professionals are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Prophecy, disconfirmation, mental, health, dangerous*

### INTRODUCTION

There is by now a large literature examining relationships between various aspects of being religious and mental health. On balance being religious promotes better mental health. This is borne out not just in terms of well-being, hope and optimism but also in terms of major psychiatric diagnoses such as anxiety and depressive disorders (Koenig 2009). However being religious/spiritual may at times impact negatively upon mental health. The focus of this paper is the mental health implications of one particular belief system- apocalyptic and millennial prophecy. While there has been some debate in the literature concerning the mental health status of prophets (see for example Cook 2013), there is little to suggest that prophets suffer from frank mental illness. The focus here is rather on the mental health implications of disconfirmed millennial and apocalyptic prophecy.

Much of the empirical work in the social sciences of religion examining failed prophecy has concentrated on cognitive dissonance and its resolution (Festinger 1956, Dein 2010, Stone 2013). The mental health implications of prophetic disconfirmation have been little researched beyond statements that those experiencing prophetic failure feel distressed. Furthermore little is said concerning the mental states of those experiencing disconfirmation of

prophecy. While the literature on failed prophecy indicates that prophetic failure is often associated with profound distress and disillusionment, suicide in its wake is a rare phenomenon.

Koenig, George, Meador et al (1994) examined religion and general anxiety as well as depression in groups of mainline and conservative Protestants as well as Pentecostals. The Pentecostals had significantly higher six month to life time rates of depression, anxiety and any mental disorder. The authors propose that the fatalism in modern Pentecostalism produces anxiety on account of their dispensationalist theology which argues humanity as approaching an inevitable cataclysm which cannot be avoided.

In some cases prophetic disconfirmation, although profoundly stressful, may result in little psychiatric disorder. Dein (2002, 2010, 11) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the UK Lubavitcher community for over ten years and has longitudinally examined their responses to prophetic disconfirmation. Members of this group maintained that their spiritual leader, the Rebbe, was *Moshiach*, the Jewish Messiah. Following his 'unexpected death in 1994 from a stroke, his followers underwent a profound grief reaction but found little evidence of overt mental illness precipitated by this event. While outsiders predicted that there would be mass

suicides, this did not occur. As the JTA tabloid (June 15, 1994) reports: 'For all the criticism Lubavitch attracted from other Jewish movements for its messianism, when the unimaginable day came, it went with no mass suicides, conversions or violence'. It appeared that high levels of social support and the rapid provision of rationalisations after the Rebbe's death (such as his immediate resurrection or the illusory nature of his death) provided sufficient coping strategies.

In this paper I present a number of case studies of individuals who suffer from significant mental health problems following prophetic failure, in some instances leading to suicide. The author is a practising mental health professional who has worked with a large number of patients in his 30 year career who have been involved in new religious movements as well as mainstream religions (Dein 2013).

Much of the literature on cultic suicide has focused upon group suicide. The term doomsday cult is used to describe groups who believe in [Apocalypticism](#) and [Millenarianism](#), and can refer both to groups that prophesy [catastrophe](#) and destruction, and to those that attempt to bring it about. Dein and Littlewood (2005) have discussed a number of new religious movements where, rather than face the possibility of the world not ending, adherents kill themselves en masse. I include here groups such as The People's Temple, Heavens Gate, the Order of the Solar Temple, the Branch Davidians which have attracted much media attention and scholarly interest (see eg .Chrissides and Zeller 2014). While the circumstances leading to group suicide differed in each group, all had beliefs pertaining to the imminent apocalypse. Of course we cannot rule out the possibility that some of these individuals were murdered by other group members.

Another lesser known 'doomsday' movement was The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda was an apocalyptic catalytic offshoot established in the 1980s after an alleged vision of the Virgin Mary ordering strict obedience to Ten Commandments. Characteristically members spoke very little and some had adopted sign language to avoid bearing false witness to their neighbour. As the year of the apocalypse drew nearer daily confession was encouraged and adherents sold off their possessions and work in the fields ceased. However, when the day of judgement failed to arrive, followers began to question

their leaders so a second doomsday was announced for March 17<sup>th</sup> whereby all the thousands of followers, adults and children, were invited to celebrate their imminent salvation. This resulted in self immolation and poison.

In a recent incident in Brazil in 2012 police narrowly avoided mass suicide by a Brazilian doomsday cult where more than a hundred followers were about to commit mass suicide by drinking poisoned soup. Proclaimed prophet, Lewis Perera dos Santos, barricaded himself after predicting the world would end at 8 o'clock. He was known to his followers as Daddy Lewis. He claimed an angel visited four years before telling him the exact time the world was going to end. The 43 year old spiritual leader had instructed his 113 followers to leave their jobs, give the world their possessions and take their children out of school.

Dein and Littlewood (2000, 2005) postulate that several factors may be responsible for the suicides: a strong dualistic philosophy, a leader with total control over the movement, and relative isolation in the presence of apocalyptic teachings. Mass suicides are often undertaken by those who feel trapped within circumstances they cannot control or escape other than through death. They often have strongly apocalyptic theology with a charismatic leader whose doctrine is accepted as scripture. Although the apocalypse may be a good thing it will mean the destruction of the community at the hand of its enemies which might include death, imprisonment or spiritual slavery or being forced to accept ideas counter to those of the religious community.

Below I report on a number of individual suicides resulting from prophetic predictions. In the first instance Martin became depressed because of the failure of prediction to manifest (biographical details of case changed). In the second instance the suicide was precipitated by the fact that individual did not feel she was one of the chosen. The third instance pertains to a suicide following a secular prediction. It may be that isolated individuals who encounter doomsday predictions on the internet may be more at risk of suicide than adherents of new religious movements which offer substantial social support.

### A DEPRESSED JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

Since 1975 when the Witnesses predicted the arrival of God's kingdom on earth there have been numerous problems in the Watchtower

congregation. These problems have included dis-fellowshipping, doctrinal disputes, and the aftermath of recurring prophetic speculation failures (Hickman1992). In 1966 the Watchtower society issued a number of statements predicting the significance of the new date 1975 for the heralding of Christ Millennial Reign and the catastrophic implications for non-believers. The prediction was based upon biblical chronology which predicted that 6,000 years from man's creation will end in 1975 and the seventh period of a thousand years of human history will begin in the fall of 1975. This prophecy had a significant effect on the movement which was galvanised and proselytisation increased substantially. However, 1975 passed without incident leaving the Watchtower vulnerable and open to claims of prophetic disconfirmation. The leaders responded through invoking a number of rationalisations, denial and purges and blamed the rank and file membership for misreading the organisation's interpretation. The initial rationalisation of the failure of Armageddon to arrive emphasised the time lapses within the creation of Adam and Eve. This had been miscalculated.

In his ethnographic study of Witnesses Sociologist Andrew Holden (1992) presents a number of testimonies of ex Witnesses who believed the world would end in 1975.

"I said it from the platform. We told everyone the end was near. When I became a Witness I gave up my insurance policies, I cancelled my insurance endowments, I never bought a house because I knew I wouldn't need one. We didn't even want to put the kids' names down for school".

Holden notes that the governing body of Watchtower regarded the failures as a test of faith. In agreement with Brian Wilson's judgement many did not abandon faith because of disappointment about a date as this would be too traumatic an experience to contemplate. Like many other prophetic groups disconfirmed prophecy does not necessarily lead to the dissolution of the group (Stone 2013).

In my own work I have treated one man who lived through the anticipated apocalypse in 1975. Martin is a 70 year old man. Martin was born in the north of England. He first encounters Jehovah Witnesses while he was growing up as an adolescent in his home town. He started to attend Kingdom Hall and to read Watchtower. Very quickly he became hooked

and begun to believe their prophecies about Armageddon. In 1974 the year before the expected arrival of Armageddon he was very excited. Much of his time was spent in Kingdom Hall and the discussions there centred round the arrival of Jesus' reign. He had no doubt in his mind that this would occur. He left his employment as a chef in anticipation of this prospect. He remembers for several days before the expected arrival he could not sleep. Every morning he awoke in eager anticipation of the end.

But the expected date arrived and nothing happened. How did he respond? Like many other Witnesses he knew at the time, he developed a depressive disorder. For several months he was low in mood. He was bewildered and could not understand why things had happened as such. His sleep was poor as was his appetite. He lost a considerable amount of weight. He begun to doubt the views of the Witnesses and debated with them as to why their prediction had failed. He became angry when one Witness explained to him that it was the fault of the believers who had miscalculated the date. He began to feel that life was hopeless and even seriously contemplated suicide. He ended up in psychiatric treatment where he was prescribed antidepressants. Over several months he improved and shortly afterwards left the Jehovah Witnesses movement. Much of the psychotherapeutic work with him focused upon his anger pertaining to this disconfirmed prophecy. In retrospect he felt he was 'naive' to be taken in by this prophecy and cautioned me never to get involved with them. He is no longer religious although he considers that God may exist but for him no one can know when the world will end.

### THE AFTERMATH OF HAROLD CAMPING

The next study relates to a recent prophecy by Harold Camping which 'failed'. He first predicted 'Judgment Day' in 1994. When that date didn't occur, Camping invoked a common claim among doomsday prophets — his calculations had been erroneous, but the ultimate prophecy would still come to fruition. He then predicted a widely publicized Judgment Day in May 2011, which also failed to occur. After that failure, Camping claimed the Judgment Day had been "spiritual" in nature, not visible to the human eye, and that the world would still end several months later. The prediction had a significant impact on believers' lives. Despite three failed predictions by

Camping he still maintained that the rapture would come imminently even though the prediction on the 21<sup>st</sup> May had not been fulfilled. Prior to this many believers had sold their homes and possessions and given their belongings to the poor. One man Robert Fitzpatrick of Staten Island spent over \$40,000 on bus and subway ads warning about the end of the world. On June 9<sup>th</sup> 2011 Camping suffered a stroke and was hospitalised. He died on December 15<sup>th</sup> 2013 as a result of a complication of a fall. In March 2012 he admitted his predictions were an error. It is reported that the family stations spent more than \$5 million on billboard advertising.

A newspaper report (Christian Post <http://www.christianpost.com/news/fearful-teen-commits-suicide-on-eve-of-harold-campings-rapture-50542/>) described a 14 year old girl from Russia, Nastya Zachinova, who became agitated on account of the May 21<sup>st</sup> doomsday and rapture prediction made by Harold Camping. She committed suicide through hanging on the same day choosing death rather than being among the ones suffering on the earth after the rapture. Camping maintained that believers would rapture to heaven before the apocalypse and those living on earth would suffer disasters until the world would finally end on October 21<sup>st</sup>. Evidence was provided through reading her personal diaries that she was terrified of the expected suffering. She believed she was not one of the righteous who go up to heaven. "Whales are trying to beach themselves and birds are dying – it is just the beginning of the end,"

"We are not righteous people, only they will go to heaven, the others will stay here on Earth to go through terrible sufferings," she wrote.

"I don't want to die like the others. That's why I'll die now."

When the prediction end of the world did not arrive as expected Camping himself mentioned that the world would change spiritually and argued that God was a loving God who would not allow people to suffer on earth. Subsequently in another alleged incident a mother attempted to kill herself and her two children because she believed in the teaching of May 21<sup>st</sup> doomsday.

### SUICIDE AFTER A SECULAR PREDICTION

While there were many newspaper reports of anxiety generated by the Mayan predictions of the world ending at the end of 2012, and a few

cases of teenagers who became suicidal, there were no actual suicides caused by this specific prediction. Fears of mass suicides, power cuts, a magnetic shift in the poles, and a collision with a previously unsighted planet rushing toward Earth appeared on the Internet as the day approached

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/mexico/9757830/Mayan-Apocalypse-world-survives-predicted-doomsday.html>). However scholars dismissed these end of the world speculations, arguing instead that the 13th *bak'tun* in the civilisation's calendar was simply the beginning of a new cycle. Speculation persisted however, and authorities around the world took action to prevent suicides over rumours and planned gatherings. In China, nearly 100 people were arrested for spreading rumours about December 21st while authorities in Argentina restricted access to a mountain popular with UFO-spotters after rumours occurred that a mass suicide was planned. The mayor of Bugarach pleaded with fanatics to keep away from the small French village and police in the village banned two rave parties in the surroundings and blocked several people attempting to reach the peak of its 1,230m mountain.

Another tragic case relates to a British schoolgirl, Isabel Taylor, who pre-empted the destruction of humanity due to nuclear meltdown in 2012 by hanging herself having been convinced the world would end after researching doomsday scenarios on the internet (Mirror News <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/teenager-kills-herself-because-she-feared-838155>). The 16 year old had previously turned to Buddhism after becoming disillusioned with the complications and injustices of the modern world. However, while researching she found evidence that a nuclear reactor meltdown would end civilisation in the next few months. In a similar way the Daily Telegraph reported that in India a teenage girl killed herself after being traumatised by media reports activation of the large Hadron Collider in Switzerland could spark a big bang destroying the world. This girl drank pesticide.

## CONCLUSION

### Implications for Mental Health Professionals

I have presented a number of cases of significant mental distress/ disorder subsequent upon failed prophecy. The triggers are either anxiety that the individual will not be one of the 'chosen', a wish to avoid the end times or

extreme disillusionment following prophetic failure. There are details about these individuals which we may be unaware of relating to previous psychological health and other life stressors. Mental health professionals need to be aware of the belief systems of cultic groups and their patterns of leadership. A history of belonging to a new religious movement should alert professionals to enquire more deeply about the specific beliefs of that group. More specifically they should acknowledge that prophetic beliefs may have a significant impact upon patients' lives and that disconfirmation of prophetic expectations may result in significant distress. Useful information about these groups can be obtained from INFORM which collects, analyses and publishes data on new religious movements and provides this information to the general public. While INFORM itself does not provide counselling, they are in contact with a number of individuals who can help; some of these are ex-members or relatives of members.

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