

COPING STRATEGIES FOR FAILED PROPHECIES

Dr David V Barrett

Prophecies of the end of the world – from Jesus' expected return to the coming Maitreya to flying saucers – have a track record of failure. Prophets have well-established techniques to cover their embarrassment when nothing happens... again.

On December 21 2012 the Mayans had prophesied that the End of the World would occur – at least, according to a number of New Age pundits and the authors of a surprisingly large number of books. In fact the Mayans had prophesied no such thing. In inscriptions relating to the exceedingly complex Mayan calendar there is only one reference to the date possibly equivalent to December 21, 2012, and (*contra* the apocalypticists) no clear indication of what was supposed to happen on that day. Also, there are many hundreds of Mayan inscriptions referring to other dates – and a fair number of them look forward to dates well after 2012.¹²

The media enjoyed it as an offbeat story, though few bothered to follow it up when, as always, nothing happened.

Much the same had happened (or not) the year before, with American evangelist Harold Camping's prophecy that Christ would return, first on May 21 and then when he didn't, on October 21. Few knew that Camping had previously prophesied September 6 1994, and before that May 21 1988. After October 2011 he went quiet for some time, then let it be known that he was retiring from prophesying; only God knew when Christ would return.

Every single prophet who has set a date for the end of the world or Christ's return or the arrival of Our Brothers From Space has one thing in common: he (or more rarely she) was wrong. How do they cope with the fact that Christ or the UFOs have not kept to the schedule others keep setting for them?

The classic study on this was *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* by Leon Festinger et al (1956) which examined a small group that believed a UFO was about to save them from the devastation of the world; Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, which stems from this, looks at the psychological consequences of disconfirmed expectations. Festinger's theory and his methodology have been challenged, most notably by leading American scholar of new religions J Gordon Melton, who points out flaws in his suppositions and reasoning, and his lack of understanding of millennial religions.³

We shall see how over the centuries prophets and religious groups have developed a number of coping techniques to deal with the disconfirmation of their deeply-held beliefs.

Apocalyptic beliefs in Judaeo-Christianity

Belief in Jesus' imminent return goes right back to the New Testament writers,⁴ and has been the defining feature of Christian millennialist groups in almost every century since then.⁵ The idea that this world will come to a cataclysmic or transforming end can be traced back to Zoroaster, founder of the first monotheistic religion of the Middle East. Zoroaster taught that there would be a final conflict when Ahura Mazda (God) would defeat Angra Mainyu (the Evil One), leading to the Frashgird – literally "making wonderful" – an eternity of bliss for true believers. If this sounds familiar it's because of the huge influence Zoroastrianism had on the development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; when the Israelites returned from the Babylonian Captivity around 538 BCE they brought with them a set of new beliefs and myths which were absorbed into what became Judaism and incorporated into the Old Testament. These included the Creation story, the Flood and the Zoroastrian concepts of, amongst others, one God with an evil opponent, an afterlife in Heaven or Hell and a Final Judgement – the idea of the apocalypse ("uncovering, disclosure, revelation"), in all the gloriously colourful imagery seen in the Book of Daniel.

In the couple of centuries around the time of Jesus the Jewish world was awash with

apocalyptic frenzy as they eagerly awaited the arrival of their Messiah. The Book of Revelation, which very nearly wasn't included in the New Testament, was just one of many weird and wonderful apocalyptic works of its day; prophecies of Jesus' impending return today would be a lot less colourful without it. Incidentally, the Christian concept of Christ, the universal Saviour of mankind from our sins, is a very different idea from the Jewish Messiah (anointed one), a priest-king figure who would deliver them from their enemies and occupiers – a man perhaps appointed by God, but not in any way the God-man known as Christ.⁶

The early Church Fathers – Hippolytus, Origen, Jerome, even the authoritative 4th-century Augustine of Hippo – said the Second Coming should be read allegorically, not literally – but they have been comprehensively ignored by preachers and prophets ever since, each of whom clearly knows better than Jesus, who said: “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew 24:36).

Despite this, from the earliest centuries people have prophesied the imminence of the End Times. The 2nd-century Montanus believed the New Jerusalem would descend from heaven near a town in Phrygia (now in Turkey). Bishop Hilarion wrote in 397CE that the last battle would be 101 years ahead, while the 6th-century Bishop Gregory of Tours set the date between 799 and 806 CE – both of them sensibly long after their own deaths.

Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) preached that there were three Ages, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Third Age would begin around 1260, again sensibly after his death, with a brief reign of the Antichrist followed by the coming of a new Adam or a new Christ. He was hugely influential, on Dante and Francis of Assisi amongst others.

But the idea that thousands of believers in sackcloth and ashes awaited Jesus' second coming in 1000 CE, exactly a thousand years after his first, is “a romantic invention, dating back no further than the sixteenth century”.⁷

In the 16th century there were prophecies of the Day of Judgement happening in 1524, 1525, 1528, 1533, 1534, 1535, 1544, 1555, 1556, 1588 (believed by the mathematician, cartographer and occultist John Dee and by Queen Elizabeth) and 1593.

In the 16th century Martin Luther predicted Jesus would return 300 years from his time, so around 1830-1850. In the late 1700s John Wesley predicted 1836.

It wasn't always preachers. Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) believed it would happen in 1656. John Napier (1550-1617), creator of logarithms and an early slide rule, decided the Last Judgement would be 1688 (going from Revelation) or 1700 (going by Daniel). Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) said 1948 – or possibly 2060, so he might still be right...

The 19th century was a hothouse of millennial expectation. The best known movement still around today is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have made many predictions of the End. Founder Charles Taze Russell said 1874; later JWs said 1914, then 1925, 1941 and 1975. In 1920 Russell's successor “Judge” Joseph Rutherford, who gave the movement their name, coined the brilliant slogan “Millions now living will never die!” Although some people living in 1920 are still around today, it's probably safe to say that his prophecy too has failed.

Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, said in 1832 that Jesus would return in 1890.

Dr John Thomas, founder of the Christadelphians, said in 1866, “It is pretty certain that Jesus will return within the lifetime of the present generation.”

The Catholic Apostolic Church, founded by Edward Irving in the early 1830s, believed that Christ would return between 1838 and 1855. The movement died out because it had made no provision for appointing new clergy after Christ's return – which didn't happen. I'll return to them at the end.

American preacher William Miller said that Christ would return “sometime between March 21 1843 and March 21 1844”. When he didn't, Miller was reluctant to set further dates; it was his followers who settled on October 22 1844, which became known as the Great Disappointment. But out of this the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded in 1860. Out of the same movement came the Branch Davidians, who met their own awful day of judgement in 1993, and the

Worldwide Church of God (WCG), founded by Herbert W Armstrong in 1934.

In 1958 Armstrong published a booklet, *1975 in Prophecy*, which made it quite clear that Christ would return by then; the booklet became strangely difficult to get hold of from the mid-Seventies. WCG lost quite a few members – but Armstrong’s response was simply to say that he’d been misinterpreted, and that he’d never said Christ was going to return by 1975.

Following radical changes to WCG’s beliefs after Armstrong’s death, hundreds of ministers and thousands of members left to set up new Churches, all continuing to proclaim the imminent return of Christ. I studied these offshoot Churches and the process of schism for my PhD, and have continued to maintain an interest in them.⁸

One of these many small offshoot Churches is the Church of God – Preparing for the Kingdom of God, led by Ronald Weinland, “a prophet for this end-time”.⁹ In his books *The Prophesied End-Time* (2004) and *2008: God’s Final Witness* (2006) he describes the very-soon-to-come events, and states that he is one of the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11 and Zechariah 4:14;¹⁰ he later announced that his wife is the other one.¹¹ Several other former Worldwide members claim to be one of the Two Witnesses (one minister told me he has met five of the Two Witnesses), but Weinland is by far the most prominent of them – though, as so often, his online presence is considerably larger than his actual following.

In *2008 – God’s Final Witness* Weinland wrote: “If the things written in the book do not shortly come to pass, then what is written here is false, and I am false.”¹² But the failure of any of his specific prophecies for 2008 to occur does not appear to have worried him. Instead, with attack being the best form of defence, he castigates those who criticise him: “Foolishly there are those who are quick to find fault by saying we are wrong or that I am a false prophet since physical destruction did not come at a time I had previously stated.”¹³

He explains Christ’s non-appearance with a common coping strategy: “God is being merciful by temporarily holding back the day when the Second Trumpet sounds and massive physical destruction begins... This ‘holding back’ is in large part due to the result of God answering the prayers of His people who set aside a time of fasting.”¹⁴

He then prophesied that Christ would return on May 27 2012. In his online “final sermon” for the Saturday Sabbath service on May 26, the day before the Big Day, he said: “We are hours away from Christ’s returning in the atmosphere of this earth.”¹⁵

Three days later he wrote: “May 27th has come and gone, so how can I say this is still the day of Christ’s return?” The answer was that “I viewed it in a physical manner until God revealed that it was spiritual.”¹⁶ A few weeks later he was able to be more explicit, using two further common coping strategies: redefining terms (moving the goalposts) and shifting the date. “Yes, the ‘Day of the Lord’ is a year in actual length. May 27 2012 was the beginning of the ‘Day of the Lord’ when Jesus Christ will return on the final day of Pentecost 2013” – May 19 2013.¹⁷

His latest explanation of why he was not wrong despite Christ’s non-appearance is even more ingenious. God had now revealed to him that “there were two separate days of the prophetic Day of the Lord”, one for the Church and one for the world. On May 19 2013 “God revealed that this particular Day of the Lord was about His Church and that the one about the world was yet to follow. It is at the end of the prophetic day concerning this world that Christ will return.”¹⁸

Whenever it occurs it should be a welcome release for Weinland, who is currently serving a 3½ year prison sentence for tax evasion. The judge had clearly done his homework into Weinland’s beliefs; apocalypse-watchers will immediately recognise 3½ years as the first half of the Tribulation.¹⁹

Other religions

It’s not just Christians who have a destructive view of the End of the World – but other prophets of doom are just as bad at it.

1999 was a favourite year. Shoko Asahara, leader of Aum Shinrikyo, which launched a Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, said Armageddon would happen on 2nd or 3rd September 1999. Philip Berg, head of the Kabbalah Centre, said a great ball of fire would hit Earth on the 11th

September 1999 – unless they raised enough money to open a number of new Kabbalah Centres...

Let’s politely draw a veil over the many very convoluted interpretations of Nostradamus, including a 1991 book by VJ Hewitt & Peter Lorie which said (amongst much, much else) that May 2 1992 would see the coronation of King Charles III with his wife, Queen Diana, that there would be a great earthquake in California on May 8 1993, that Margaret Thatcher would become the British Conservative leader again in 1996, and that there would be a manned space flight to Mars in 2000.²⁰

In 1982 Scottish-born artist Benjamin Creme (b. 1922) announced that Maitreya, the long-prophesied fifth Buddha, the living incarnation of a Master, and the new World Teacher. was living anonymously in the Asian community in East London, and would reveal himself to the world shortly; the media must be ready. In 1985 22 journalists met in an Indian restaurant in the East End, hoping that Maitreya would turn up; they were disappointed. Creme’s explanation for the Maitreya not turning up when he said he would was the insincerity and lack of belief of the journalists assembled to greet him (or not).²¹

Finally, let’s look briefly at two UFO religions. Ruth Norman, or Uriel (1900-93), one of the founders of the San Diego-based movement Unarius, told her followers that aliens would come openly to Earth in 1974, then 1975, then 1976, and then 2001 – by which time she could no longer be embarrassed by her failed prophecy. Unarius’s justification of the alien non-arrival is that our Space Brothers have now decided not to appear visibly “until people stop their warlike attitudes and practices”.²² They may be waiting some time.

In 1973 a young French sports journalist, Claude Vorilhon (now known as Raël), was contacted by a being from another planet and given a message for mankind: that we were created by DNA manipulation by an extra-terrestrial race, referred to as the Elohim in the Book of Genesis. They are not God or gods, but humans much like us. Two years later he visited their planet. Raël, it turns out, is Jesus’ half-brother; they shared the same biological father.

Having appeared to Raël as the prophet for our age, and explained themselves in scientific terminology we can understand, the Elohim will shortly be returning physically to Earth to greet all of us, and instructed Raël to build an embassy where they can meet world leaders. The Raelians expect the Elohim to visit the Earth before 2030 – but they have already said that the space visitors will not come if they feel they are not welcome by the majority of mankind, which seems a safe advance get-out clause.²³

Conclusion

The sensible thing is to prophesy Christ’s return or the arrival of the spaceships for at least a few years after you expect to have departed this Earth yourself – it avoids embarrassment. But if you do insist on setting dates you need some sort of rationalisation when movements, to quote a late-Victorian writer on the Catholic Apostolic Church, “are forced by the stern logic of life to turn their backs upon their past history, and to make their doctrines square with facts when facts absolutely refuse to square with doctrines”²⁴ – a brilliant 19th-century rendering of cognitive dissonance. I have designed a typology, a model of ideal types, to categorise the coping strategies of failed prophets.

Explanations for failure of prophecy

	Positive/Forthright	Negative/Evasive
Human failure	We were wrong	We never said that
Spiritual explanation	God in his mercy stayed his hand	People’s faith was not strong enough
Redefine the situation	Our calculations were incorrect; he’s actually coming next year	EG He did return, but invisibly or on a spiritual plane

Examples of the two aspects of human failure are the Jehovah’s Witnesses and (eventually) Harold

Camping on the one hand, and Herbert W Armstrong of the Worldwide Church of God on the other.

The two spiritual explanations are useful for any prophet. Saying “I asked God to be merciful and he listened to me” makes the prophet look good; saying that people’s faith wasn’t strong enough shifts the blame away from the prophet. Ronald Weinland is one example of the first, and Benjamin Creme and the Raelians of the second.

As for redefining the situation, it’s very common for prophets to keep changing the date: William Miller, Harold Camping, Ronald Weinland, Unarius and many others have done this. A more subtle, evasive redefining is to change the meanings of words, as Weinland did with “Day of the Lord”, or to say, as the Seventh-day Adventist Church do, that Christ actually did return when they said – but he did it invisibly, on a spiritual plane. This has two great advantages: they can still claim they’re right, and no one can prove them wrong.

I urge all prospective End Time prophets to study this typology so that they will be fully prepared for when the time comes... for them to explain away their failure.

Dr David V Barrett was awarded his PhD in Sociology of Religion by the London School of Economics in 2009. A version of his thesis was published as The Fragmentation of a Sect (Oxford University Press 2013). He has written numerous other books on minority religions and esoteric movements.

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- 1 Five excellent articles by Ted Harrison, Joseph Gelfer, John Hoopes, Kevin Whitesides and Richard Stanley in *Fortean Times* 285, March 2012: 33-47 and 72-5, provide a balanced, sensible and informative overview of the “Mayan prophecy” phenomenon, including an understandable explanation of the Mayan dating system.
 - 2 Greer, John Michael, *Apocalypse: A History of the End of Time*. London: Quercus 2012: 6, 184.
 - 3 Melton, J. Gordon, “Spiritualisation and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails”, *American Studies*, no 26, 1985: 17-29.
 - 4 I Peter 4:7, I John 2:18, etc.
 - 5 See Chapter 7, “It’s the End of the World as We Know It”, in Barrett, David V, *The New Believers: A Survey of Sects, Cults and Alternative Religions*. London: Cassell 2001: 70-81; also Weber, Eugen, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, cults and millennial beliefs throughout the ages*. London: Hutchinson 1999; Thompson, Damian, *The End of Time: Faith and fear in the shadow of the millennium*. London: Random House/Minerva 1996 etc.
 - 6 Barrett 2001: 72-4; Aslan, Reza. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. London: Westbourne Press, 2013: 27-8, 131-6, 165-8; etc.
 - 7 Thompson 1996: 37.
 - 8 See Barrett, David V, *The Fragmentation of a Sect*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013 for more information on the Worldwide Church of God and its roughly 400 offshoots.
 - 9 Weinland, Ronald, *The Prophesied End-Time*. Dallas, TX: The-end.com. 2004 (end flap).
 - 10 Weinland, Ronald, *2008: God’s Final Witness*. Dallas, TX: The-end.com 2006: 16.
 - 11 <http://ronaldweinland.com/?p=75>, April 18, 2008.
 - 12 Weinland 2004: 145.
 - 13 <http://ronaldweinland.com/?p=80>, March 6, 2009.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 http://www.cog-pkg.org/audio/docs/2012-05-26_A_New_World.pdf. Sermon: “A New World”, May 26, 2012.
 - 16 <http://ronaldweinland.com/?p=115>, May 30, 2012.
 - 17 <http://ronaldweinland.com/?p=117>, June 15, 2012.
 - 18 <http://www.ronaldweinland.com/2013/05/19/still-pentecost-to-pentecost-2/>
 - 19 Daniel 9: 27, Daniel 12: 11, Revelation 11: 3.
 - 20 Hewitt, VJ & Lorie, Peter, *Nostradamus: The End of the Millennium – Prophecies 1992-2001*. London: Bloomsbury 1991: 25, 72-97, 110, 130.
 - 21 Barrett, David V, *A Brief Guide to Secret Religions*. London: Constable & Robinson 2011: 41-3.
 - 22 Diana Tumminia, “When the Archangel Died” in Partridge, Christopher (ed), *UFO Religions*. London: Routledge 2003: 78; Barrett 2011: 116-7.
 - 23 Barrett 2011: 131.
 - 24 Edward Miller, “Irvingism: or the Catholic Apostolic Church” in *Religious Systems of the World*, 9th edn 1908: 598.