CHAPTER TWO
WHERE PROPHECY LIVES:
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES
OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE
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The Annual Review of Psychology has published only two reviews of the psychology of religion, one by Richard L. Gorsuch (1988) and the other by Robert A. Emmons and Raymond F. Paloutzian (2003). Neither review dealt with the theory of cognitive dissonance in general or with studies of failed prophecy in particular. Yet given the prevalence of the discussion of cognitive dissonance and failed prophecy in textbooks on the social psychology of religion (Batson et al. 1993, Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997, Spilka et al. 2003), one might reasonably ask, “Where is prophecy in the reviews of contemporary psychology of religion?”

As is traditional, both of these Annual Reviews focused upon empirical research, yet the nature of each review, separated by 15 years, is strikingly different. Each proposed a paradigm for the psychology of religion. The first review emphasized measurement and correlational studies, while the second stressed the importance of experimental research. This shift marks the psychology of religion courting mainstream privileged methodologies of American social psychology on areas and topics funded by foundations, most of which can be traced back to Templeton money. Undisputedly, it is largely the influence of the Templeton Foundation that is driving the choice of topics and experimental emphasis in contemporary psychology of religion (Wulff 2003).

In the decade prior to Gorsuch’s identification of a measurement paradigm (1984, 1988), Donald Capps et al. (1976), noted that out of a total of almost 2,800 articles to that date in the psychology of religion only 150 were empirical studies. Of these, 90% were correlational. Dittes (1985) noted the same dominance of correlational studies in the only review chapter on the psychology of religion to appear in the Handbook of Social Psychology, which has gone through four editions with only the second carrying a chapter on religion. The Emmons and Paloutzian review does not abandon the measurement/correlational
paradigm noted earlier by Dittes and Capps et al., but simply embeds these correlational and measurement studies in research methods exhibiting the characteristic of mainstream psychology. The new trend in psychology of religion is decidedly experimental, following the same trend that cognitive dissonance theory has taken (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999, Jones 1998). This shift best identifies the gold standard according to which it has long been argued empirical psychology of religion ought to aspire (Batson 1977, 1979). Persons trained in experimental research (typically social or personality psychologists) do much of the current empirical research in American psychology of religion. Not surprisingly, then, the theme that dominates is research modeled after what is acceptable to the flagship journal in American social psychology, The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP).

This chapter considers the idealized experimental paradigm in order to contrast empirical findings concerning Festinger’s theory that has been so successful in laboratory studies with field studies in which its success has not been matched. Not surprisingly, these differences make for rather extreme evaluations of cognitive dissonance theory. For instance, Edward E. Jones (1998: x) acknowledges cognitive dissonance as “the most important development in social psychology to date.” However, the social psychology to which Jones refers is psychological social psychology located in the laboratories of American universities. Conclusions differ if we step outside the laboratory. Here, cognitive dissonance and Festinger’s now classic study of the prophetic flying-saucer group depicted in When Prophecy Fails has been judged “a radically deficient guide” for research in failed prophecy (Van Fossen 1988: 194). Different conclusions regarding the theory of cognitive dissonance and its value for understanding failed prophecy stem from different methods employed by two radically different versions of social psychology located in two very different places (Hood and Belzen 2005, Spilka et al. 2003). As with the value of real estate, what most often matters are three things: location, location, and location.

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Emmons and Paloutzian call for a new multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm (2003: 395 [emphasis in the original]) accompanied by the assertion of the value of using data at multiple levels of analysis, as well as the