CHAPTER EIGHT

A SQUARE THEORY IN A ROUND REALITY:
THOUGHTS ON THE STUDY OF
THE UNARIUS PROPHECY

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I cut my social-psychological teeth on *When Prophecy Fails* long before I became an undergraduate. It has been part of my personal library since 1962 because I treasured its scientific audacity for having gone where no one had gone before. What depth of curiosity it took to plunge into a nonsensical situation only to make perfect theoretical sense out of chaos! Therefore, when I encountered another group in 1986 led by a female psychic who touted the landing of flying saucers, I could not resist taking on a comparable intellectual adventure. This chapter revisits my ethnographic study of Unarius and its failed prophecy of the coming of spaceships that were to start a new millennium, a golden age of peace and interplanetary technology. In 2005, I published *When Prophecy Never Fails* based on almost two decades of research on Unarius. In that book and in previous articles (1998, 2002), I have argued my own necessity of shifting from Festinger et al.’s theory as delineated in *When Prophecy Fails* (1956; cf. Festinger 1957) to a more multi-dimensional analysis of prophecy as a functional reality within a spiritual group. My experiences explain why I shifted from Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory to focus more upon phenomenological approaches to studying prophecy. Herein I retrace the difficulty I had in applying Festinger et al.’s theory to my research on the Unarius Academy of Science.

Beginning Research

We found Unarius while attending a peace festival in the park. Their choir sang original hymns to the Space Brothers as Archangel Uriel (aka Ruth Norman) in all her finery waved to the crowds. Initially, my co-researcher, sociologist R. George Kirkpatrick (1943–2005), and I immediately thought of Festinger et al.’s *When Prophecy Fails* (1956). Uriel predicted a space fleet landing in 2001 on Unarius’s property in
Jamul, which was in the foothills of San Diego near the university. We thought we could more or less replicate the classic study because Unarius was only fifteen minutes away by car. What luck! Eureka! At first, many sociologists dismissed our work, and they prejudged our subjects as weirdoes (a non-sociological word for deviants, who are not deviant enough to be significant). Yet when we name-dropped Festinger, others took the research more seriously. In 1986, the prophecy’s date of fulfillment was a long time coming, meaning the year 2001. Festinger’s cognitive dissonance did not seem like an outdated theory at the time, nor does it now. However, the more time I spent doing fieldwork with Unarius, the less I thought cognitive dissonance adequately described what I observed. At the time, a few studies had already refuted *When Prophecy Fails*, but many more were to come (Stone 2000).

**Charismatic Leaders: Ruth Norman and Dorothy Martin**

In a short informational digression, we can explore the differences and similarities between the visionary I observed and studied from 1986–1993, Ruth Norman, and the 1950s leader, Dorothy Martin of Festinger’s fame. The charismatic leader of Unarius, Ruth E. Norman (1900–1993) evolved into her role as a celestial prophet as she acquired devoted helpmates and followers who assisted her in presenting herself as a twentieth-century space goddess from California. Ruth’s life bore some resemblance to Festinger’s Mrs. Marian Keech (real name, Dorothy Martin 1900–1992), inasmuch as it had earlier adult exposures to the cultic milieu. In Dorothy Martin’s case, she had studied Theosophy and Dianetics—the latter now known as Scientology (Festinger *et al.* 1956, Clark 2007), as well as the flying saucer sightings of A-list contactees from whom she acquired name of the planet Clarion. A student of psychic phenomena, she became a channeler of cosmic messages by accepting the role of being chosen by mysterious higher powers. Her husband cared little about her atypical activities.

Just about the time Festinger *et al.* published *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), Ruth married Ernest Norman after meeting him on February 14, 1954 at a convention where he performed a psychic reading of her past lives. The first meeting marked the official beginning of the Unarius Science of Life. Ruth became the helpmate of Ernest who channeled scientific lessons from Infinite Intelligence as he continued doing psychic readings in person or through the mail. Ernest Norman’s teachings built