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Harold Camping and May 21, 2011: Rationalizations, Leader Responses, and Gender Differences Following a Failed Prophecy

Christin L. Moreland

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**Harold Camping and May 21, 2011: Rationalizations, Leader
Responses, and Gender Differences Following a Failed Prophecy**

by

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Harold Camping and May 21, 2011: Rationalizations, Leader Responses, and Gender Differences Following a Failed Prophecy

By

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Abstract

Previous studies regarding failed prophecies have focused on believers' responses following a failed prophecy, along with how believers rationalize and convince others of the prediction's fulfillment. The literature does not address the reaction of leaders following a failed prophecy or indicate a gendered experience within prophetic groups. This case study looks at the May 21st, 2011 rapture prediction, and subsequent failure, of Harold Camping. My research investigates new rationalizations utilized by followers and leaders of a prophetic ministry, observes the reaction of a leader towards critics, and recognizes a gendered dynamic at play within apocalyptic communities. Upon transcribing podcasts from Family Radio's "Open Forum" radio call-in program, patterns and themes important to the followers of the ministry, as well as Camping himself emerged. I find rationalizations not present in other studies, unique responses from the prophet towards critics and followers, and gender differences amongst believers and non-believers.

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**Harold Camping and May 21, 2011: Rationalizations, Leader Responses, and
Gender Differences Following a Failed Prophecy**

Religious traditions have creation stories to explain how and why humanity came about; it follows that many traditions would also give us glimpses of where we are headed (Carroll 1996, Danelek 2009, Pearson 2006, Rehill 2010). For several millennia, prophets from dissimilar cultures have declared that the world will soon end in similar cataclysmic fashions (Shermer 2000). Even today millions of people all over the world hold eschatological beliefs, showing this is not an isolated phenomenon (Danelek 2009, Newport 2006, Wojcik 1996). Stories about the end-time and worldly destruction are not unique to modern followers of Abrahamic faiths. Humanity's oldest story, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, describes worldly destruction in the form of a flood. Many cultures have myths regarding the necessity of cataclysmic disasters to cleanse the world of the corrupt and contaminated (Pearson 2006). Apocalypticism is not restricted to religious traditions, as secular society has envisioned cataclysmic ends of the world by way of environmental destruction, war, natural disasters, disease, and technological failures (Danelek 2009, Gribben 2006, Pearson 2006, Tapia 2002).

Seeing the cycles of life and death, societies rising and falling, apocalyptic stories are integral coping mechanisms providing "answers" to why these things must end. Not only do they provide explanations for material and corporeal endings, but for those who are persecuted in this world these stories provide positive otherworldly and spiritual outcomes. Eschatology answers why a civilization that was here yesterday is gone today (or will be tomorrow). Stories of end times give hope to those who are persecuted today-

eschatology most often discusses how the bad will be punished and the good redeemed, no longer to suffer.

Obviously none of these apocalyptic predictions have fully come to pass, yet groups of people are still drawn to those with a claimed power to see beyond the present. Even more bewildering are the groups of people remaining faithful to the leader and/or tradition after such a prediction fails. In this thesis, I ask why some people continue membership and belief in an eschatological tradition while others fall away after a prediction has failed to occur. More specifically, how do people account for the failed prophecy in a manner that preserves their faith? What responses do prophets give to followers and detractors? Additionally, is there a gendered dynamic involved in understanding a prediction and failure? To appreciate these groups, leaders, and members more fully, I examine the case study of Harold Camping's May 21, 2011 Rapture prediction.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

The history of the Abrahamic religious traditions shows how integral prophecy and eschatology are to those religious outlooks and societal narratives (Danelek 2009, Festinger, Riecken, Schachter 2008, Hunt 2006, Newport 2006). Additionally, apocalypticism has greatly informed and shaped the history, religion, politics, and contemporary society of the United States. First and foremost, Columbus' voyage was greatly influenced by apocalyptic views, as his mission was not only to find a trade route to India for spices, but to find gold to finance the capture of Jerusalem in the "last" crusade (Rehill 2010). Without the expectation that the world could be brought to an end, the Americas may not have been "discovered" for decades, if not centuries.

For pockets of communities throughout Europe and the American Colonies, the year 1666 was thought to be a year of apocalypse because of the relationship to the number of the antichrist (666). When 1667 arrived, colonists saw themselves as saved because they were God's "elect" commissioned to build God's kingdom on American soil. We can see evidence in this thought process in names of cities such as New Haven and New Canaan (Pearson 2006). The early eighteenth century colonists saw the new land as Biblical Israel and the mass immigration at the time was seen as "the final ingathering" (Ibid: 197). Perhaps most influential was William Miller who predicted the end of the world sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844 (Danelek 2009, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter 2008, Newport 2006, and Pearson 2006). Several religious groups today can claim lineage to the Millerites, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Danelek 2009, Newport 2006). These traditions,

along with the Latter Day Saint community, are uniquely American. The doctrines and beliefs both inform and are informed by American culture.

In the contemporary United States, talk and images of fictional apocalyptic themes are prevalent within books, cable and network television programs, films, and even music (Danelek 2009, Newport 2006, Pearson 2006, Rehill 2010). The advent of twenty-four hour news channels has brought continuous images of natural and man-made destruction reminiscent of the end of the world into our homes (Pearson 2006). There seems to be no end to predicting cataclysmic events, and no shortage of people willing to acknowledge the warnings of these prophets. But what is the experience like for believers of apocalyptic predictions?

Before the predicted date, the faithful often endure criticisms and taunts from the general public- the closer such a date gets, the more harassment a group can expect (Bader 1999). After the date/time passes without event, those taunts become even more severe, yet many people still remain faithful to the tradition and the leader. Somehow adherents find ways to rationalize the event (or lack thereof) in order to remain committed, even amidst criticism from the general public (Bader 1999, Hardyck and Braden 1962). While it may seem that such pressure from the outside world along with evidence contrary to initial beliefs, would lead to doubt and pressures to leave the group, research suggests this is not always the case. In some instances such a group will experience doubt, disband, or at least lose a majority of membership, but in others the faith of adherents' increases and membership may rise (Bader 1999, Dawson 1999, Gal and Rucker 2010).

With the above as background, my specific research question more narrowly looks at what reactions can be found in the wake of a failed prophecy regarding the leader and followers: What rationalizations are utilized prior to and following a prophecy? How do leaders and believers react after a failed prophecy? Does gender factor in to how individuals perceive a prophecy and a subsequent failure? And, if gender differences exist, how can those differences be explained?

SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF FAILED APOCALYPTIC PROPHECIES

Two main questions dominate the previous literature of failed prophecies. First, researchers strive to understand how believers respond to a failed prophecy. Believers depend on “rationalizations” to explain the failure and to keep beliefs intact. Primary rationalizations of believers include human error, divine intervention, partial physical fulfillment, and/or full spiritual fulfillment. Some of these explanations seem improbable at best, especially to outsiders, and brings researchers to a second question. How do believers convince themselves and others that these rationalizations contain merit?

Rationalizations: Explaining Failed Prophecies

The first study to explore how people respond to failed prophecies was conducted in 1956. Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter used the concept of cognitive dissonance to explain loyalty to a leader or group after a failed prophecy. Festinger and colleagues covertly infiltrated a UFO cult that claimed the world would end in a few short months. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter find holding two incompatible ideas (the UFO will arrive versus the UFO did not arrive) creates “dissonance” and those believers will attempt to reduce the discomfort of this internal contradiction.

While Festinger et al. started the conversation regarding the actions of individuals and groups following a failed prophecy, researchers have since found the theory in need of refinement while others refute the validity of cognitive dissonance as a whole. Carroll (1979) finds Cognitive Dissonance Theory (in relation to failed prophecies) problematic due to difficulties reconstructing the necessary conditions to determine whether a disconfirmation has taken place. Determining simultaneous experiences of dissonance

creates further difficulties because people are generally consciously unaware of the inconsistencies within themselves, let alone their whole group.

To understand the ideas surrounding adherents of prophetic faiths and the failure of predicted apocalyptic events more fully, later research addressed the topic without utilizing theories of cognitive dissonance. Individuals rationalize and adapt to the failure of a prophecy through blaming human error (Dawson 1999, Tumminia 1998, Zygmunt 2000a and 2000b), understanding failure as divine intervention (Zygmunt 2000a and 2000b), and/or through different methods of interpreting resulting events (Tapia 2002, Tumminia 1998, Zygmunt 2000b). Below, I explore each of these rationalizations.

Human error

Outsiders are likely to assign blame to the leader of the religious organization. The prediction is seen as “made up” by the leader to those outside the group; however those within the group see the leader as privy to divine communication. Human error does not necessarily lie entirely with the group’s head or members, as those from outside the organization also interpret the prediction. Some groups have verified the fulfillment of a prediction by accounting for interpretation errors from external, non-member sources. In Tumminia’s (1998) study of a “flying saucer” group, members understood media reporting as a way to prepare the people of Earth to accept the upcoming arrival of spaceships. However, the general public’s (mis)understanding of how and why the space crafts would arrive ultimately caused the failure. According to the leader, the collective frequency was lowered when the media used the term “prophecy” (members used terms such as “future viewing” and “reliving”). Followers blame this inadequate terminology

for reducing collective vibrational frequencies, and in turn repelling the spaceship pilots. Additionally, outsiders' abilities in comprehending "Unarian Science" lacked competency and resulted in interpretive errors. Thus, outsiders interpreted the absence of flying saucers as a prophetic failure, while members understood the leader's ability to see the future was interrupted by reliving events from past lives.

Divine intervention

Some apocalyptic predictions are created as a form of exhortation or consolation to a divine authority by a group experiencing crisis. The predicted apocalyptic event sends a seriously violent message to the people from the divine to "shape up," while the predicted aftermath often includes a transformation of the current world into one filled with peace and justice (Collins 2003, Landes 2006, Pearson 2006). When the predicted event does not happen as expected, the group may understand failure as a successful campaign on their part. God has seen the accomplishments of believers, and has decided against destruction of the physical earthly realm (Shermer 2000). Alternatively, the prophecy was nothing more than a test of the faithful; the divine has merely sought to determine who is paying attention and following instructions (Zygmunt 2000a and 2000b).

Both of these examples are clearly seen in Bradley Whitsel's 2003 account of the Church Universal and Triumphant. Along with followers, Elizabeth Clare Prophet acquired a large amount of land near Yellowstone National Park in Southwestern Montana totaling over 24,000 acres. With a rise in catastrophic events such as war, disease, and natural disasters on the rise, six hundred members moved to the property and

built an underground town in preparation for a nuclear strike (Danelek 2009, Whitsel 2003). When an attack failed to materialize after March 15, 1990, Ms. Prophet declared it a “surprise practice run” (Whitsel 2003:114) indicating a mere test of preparedness for adherents. Following a subsequent nonevent, Elizabeth Prophet stated the reason behind the lack of disaster was due to diligent prayer and preparation of the faithful. While approximately one third of the membership defected following this explanation, a majority of members did find the justification believable, thus showing the effectiveness of divine intervention reasoning (Whitsel 2003).

Complete symbolic/spiritual fulfillment

Often a group will simply refuse to recognize or even consider the possibility that a failure has occurred. The language of apocalypticism can be molded in various ways as the rhetoric ebbs and flows between the literal and the metaphorical. Because of this vagueness, prophecies can be “proven” true after what looks like blatant disconfirmation to outsiders (Tumminia 1998, Zygmunt 2000a). Thus, groups can “reinvent” or “reinterpret” the original prophecy and collective ideologies by citing the vagueness of the original prediction, creating new rituals, and reorganizing (Dawson 1999, Tumminia 1998).

A leader and/or group will take a retroactive look at the prediction in an attempt to match expected with actual results. Collectively, the group often comes to see the prophecy as having been partially, if not perfectly, fulfilled in a more spiritual, symbolic, and metaphorical way than anticipated (Festinger et al. 1956, Tapia 2002, Zygmunt 2000a and 2000b). The Millerite Community following the final nonevent of 1844 clearly

exemplifies this. Members stated they believed the Second Coming truly did occur, however Jesus' arrival was spiritual, not a physical manifestation on earth as originally anticipated. In this way members refuted disconfirmation, resolved cognitive dissonance, and perpetuated belief (Festinger et al. 1956).

Other researchers find prophecies become self-fulfilling for groups through processes best understood under the lens of symbolic interactionism. Predictions are stated and interpreted in vague ways so as to be only partially disproven, while proof of fulfillment is found through intense meaning placed upon seemingly small signs and symbols. When the group already holds a pessimistic worldview, even minor social disruptions (e.g., dips in the stock market) and natural disasters (e.g., powerful isolated storms) confirm the looming destruction of the physical world. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the supernatural is assigned higher status than the physical world. Thus, an isolated group will find significant meaning in small signs, in which the outside world would not see any obvious meaning. Ultimately, experiences within the group serve to validate (and thus perpetuate) the group's legitimacy as a prophetic movement (Zygmunt 2000a).

Partial literal fulfillment

Those groups not engaging in symbolic and metaphorical interpretations will find physical manifestations of the prediction; however they look at these physical signs in different ways than outsiders might. Tapia's Year 2000 (Y2K) subjects still thought that some areas were affected by computer glitches on January 1, 2000, but expressed relief that it was not nearly as disruptive and catastrophic as expected (Tapia 2002). Thus, the

prophecy was fulfilled as predicted in a completely physical manner, but due to diligent warning and preparation by believers, the outcome was not nearly as severe as anticipated.

After a prophecy fails to arrive as expected, members must take the evidence which is contrary to their beliefs and make sense of it. Typically this occurs through a process of socially constructed logic. In this view, one's assumptions of reality are actually the result of social, cultural, and historical processes. Referred to as "mundane reason" (Pollner 1987), this process allows for explanation of events by collaboratively reinventing the prophecy, the failure, or both. Group members react to the leader and the prophecy in ways they see as logical and rational while the outside world observes irrational behavior. Both of the reactions of group members and outsiders are dependent upon socially constructed logic and not individual realities. In other words, an individual does not determine the authenticity of a prophecy; rather, legitimacy is determined by the group as a whole by interpreting the world around them (Tumminia 1998). By working together, a group can come to see the prophecy as having been at least partially fulfilled (Zygmunt 2000b), thus individual dissonance is alleviated by way of group rationalization.

Regardless of the interpretations utilized by groups dealing with the aftermath, the believers' world is irreparably changed. The prediction itself is a significant social event that cannot be ignored as preparations (securing shelter/protection, storing food/supplies, selling of property, and finding more time for proselytizing and spending time with family) for the end create long term effects on individuals, thus affecting the group. Members expectantly look, with as much hope as fear, for some grandiose transformation

of the world in which they currently live (Tapia 2002). After the uneventful passing of the predicted date, some believers may resolve dissonance through relief, but still have anxiety regarding what to expect next.

It is important to recognize how interrelatedness of these adaptational strategies ensures continued membership after a non-event. Those that rationalize the failed prophecy with reasons of human error, blaming others, seeing the prophecy and failure as a test of faith are those groups with strong, decisive leaders, while those groups reaffirming the prophecy are further influenced by prophetic vagueness, ideological scope, rituals, and group organization (Dawson 1999).

Making Rationalizations Believable

Rationalizations do not come easily to individuals; convincing one's self that these explanations have merit requires much thought and collaboration. Just as explanations are not easily accepted by outsiders, believers of the prophecy must find ways of making these rationalizations plausible and believable. Proselytizing, defending the group and its leader from mockery, and maintaining exclusivity are some of the ways in which believers go about convincing themselves and others of the prophecy's fulfillment. Significantly, researchers recognize that seeking to understand and adjust to the nonevent is a collective, not merely an individual, endeavor (Zymlunt 2000a and 2000b).

Collective interpretation

Wright and Greil's 2011 study on the Chen Tao concludes by emphasizing that responses to failed prophecies are most productively studied within the context of social structures and surrounding cultures rather than through individuals. The Chen Tao continuously relied upon close-knit connections and an extensive kinship network to repeatedly face failed prophecies. The solidarity among members reduced dissonance and upheld the group through several nonevents. After the final failure, this same sense of community helped members reintegrate into wider society. Thus, it is not simply the leader or the individual, but the group as a whole utilizing experiences to interpret predictions both before and after a failure (Weiser 2000). Even Festinger and colleagues, primarily psychologists, found that individuals must have social support in order to maintain belief (Dein and Dawson 2008, Festinger et al. 1956). Understanding this need to look at how groups come to share interpretations, Shepherd and Shepherd (2006) study *The Family International*, a prophetic religious organization where prophecy and scriptural interpretation is socially constructed through the membership's collective responses. This input is then processed and discerned by community elders to reveal the Word of God. The results may be unpredictable and somewhat radical, which is why the institutional leadership ultimately regulates what will be published. The processes of "The Family International" show how individuals work together to provide and circulate information.

Leader response

The collective may be important in coming to terms with a failed prophecy, but leadership response is also integral to the adaptation of the followers. Throughout the prophetic process, leaders rely upon broad ideological and theological systems which frame the worldview, mission, and identity of followers. After the absence of predicted events, leaders need to react quickly, confidently, and resourcefully to coordinate adherents. A leader admitting a mistake regarding the date, time, interpretation, or exact sequence of events can actually promote group cohesion, as well as further support of the leader and the belief system so long as it is accomplished in a swift and assertive manner (Dawson 1999). This is evidenced in groups such as the Church of the True Word and Lubavitch Hasidic Judaism, where the prompt, coordinated, and repeated efforts of leadership to communicate with followers helped the organizations to survive and thrive. Alternatively, delayed communications or an unwillingness to publicly and transparently admit misinterpretation of the prophecy will find followers and outsiders reinterpreting the prediction on their own. It is in these ways groups such as the *Mission de l'Esprit Saint* and *Ichigen no Miya* were unable to survive (Dawson 1999, Tumminia 1998).

Proselytizing

Festinger et al. (1956) found that in order to minimize cognitive dissonance, groups need to legitimize their beliefs following a nonevent. Often, this is accomplished through proselytizing in order to increase the membership base and support system. In determining what might mitigate effects of dissonance, Carroll (1979) recognizes avoiding detractors as an obvious choice. However, avoidance may not be the most

practical option when living in the world and associating with others. On the other hand, social support alleviates dissonance, making the search for others with the same beliefs (proselytizing) imperative. Dawson (1999) notices that proselytizing members tend to have lower levels of in-group support, primarily due to geographically scattered members or other forms of disorganization. In other words, the more people included in the group, the easier it becomes to ignore those with opposing ideas. By introducing those outside the community to the beliefs of the group, a larger number of believers is created, thereby reducing uncertainty (Carroll 1979).

Proselytization has also been shown to restore shaken confidence. This leads researchers to conclude that following a failed prophecy, group members will proselytize as a way to resolve doubt (Gal and Rucker 2010). Higher levels of social support from within and/or minimal derision from outside lowers the need for proselytization following a nonevent. Alternatively, more ridicule from the outside world will usher in a need to convince the “unbelievers” that the group is right (Hardyck and Braden 1962). These findings have also been shown through a study of the Church Universal and Triumphant. Following the failure of an expected nuclear holocaust in 1990, members did not find a need for proselytization due to high levels of conviction towards the theology, doctrine, and lifestyle of the group as a whole. While there was some loss of membership after the non-event, most of those were newer members who joined three to six months before the predicted event (Whitsel 2003) and thus had less attachment to the group.

Defending mockery and maintaining exclusivity

When a prophecy fails and the outside world mocks or chastises believing members, the latter renew their determination to salvage the belief system in question (Stein 2003). In a study of a flying saucer group, ridicule of the leader resulted in members questioning media motivation. Believers held that reporters were purposely leading the public off track in order to deceive (Tumminia 1998). Research finds tensions from the outside community results in higher group commitment among members within the group (Bader 1999, Stein 2003). Bader (1999) researched three prophetic groups using theories of rational choice as well as tension versus commitment inside and out of the group to determine whether individuals will remain after a failed prophecy. Those groups expecting complete breaks from the outside society or requiring deviant dress or behaviors will find themselves in high tension with the larger cultural group. Higher levels of tension create further commitment to a group while lower levels of tension tend to reduce member commitment. Thus, apocalyptic groups that already experience high tension with society will band together more strongly when experiencing continued hardship and persecution following a nonevent (Bader 1999, Stein 2003).

Remaining Questions

While the literature has explored many outcomes of failed prophecies, this thesis examines three questions: Are there additional rationalizations that can be found following a failed prophecy? Furthermore, a majority of research looks at the reactions of followers while minimizing the response of the leader. This leads me to my second question: how do the prophets themselves respond? Finally, none of the literature

addresses gendered differences in prophetic religious groups. The third question I ask is: are there gender differences? Specifically, are men or women more likely to be followers of a prophetic group? Is one kind of rationalization more attractive to one gender over another? To explore these questions, I analyze the case of Harold Camping's May 21, 2011 failed prophecy.

HAROLD CAMPING AND FAMILY RADIO

In order to understand the dynamics involved more clearly, this case study places focus on Harold Camping's Family Radio and the call-in radio program "Open Forum." Integral to the point is determining just who Harold Camping is and what dynamics of the radio station/program contribute to the culture of listeners. Much of Harold Camping's life is presented in fairly vague terms on the Family Radio website. Other sources do give some additional background information on Mr. Camping, but it is difficult to determine the reliability of those sources. Reliable sources tell us Harold Camping received a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the University of California at Berkeley in 1942 and started a construction company shortly after. A faithful Christian all his life, Camping has always studied the Bible independently, and served as an Elder and Bible teacher in the Christian Reform Church (www.familyradio.com¹). Although never formally trained in theology or Biblical literature, Camping has written over thirty books and pamphlets. Most of this literature can be obtained for free from the Family Radio website (www.familyradio.com).

In 1958, Camping sold his construction business and formed Family Stations, Inc. with a few friends. Commonly referred to as Family Radio, this non-profit ministry was created to spread the Christian gospel to the world. Family Radio programming can be found on more than 140 different AM and FM radio stations, the internet, satellite broadcasting, television, and printed materials. Harold Camping is the president and general manager of the corporation (www.familyradio.com), but insists that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Family Radio is Jesus Christ himself ("Open Forum" May 2011). Additionally, Mr. Camping is a volunteer for the station, providing his time and

¹ Interesting to note here is the ".com" suffix instead of the non-profit designated ".org" suffix

expertise completely free of charge (“Open Forum” May 2011, www.familyradio.com). Additionally, each weeknight from mid-1961 to June 9th, 2011, Mr. Camping hosted a live program (“Open Forum”) where listeners were encouraged to call in to discuss Bible passages and their meanings.

The Family Radio theology is based on their assumption regarding the inerrant nature of the Bible and the belief that the Bible was dictated by God and written by man. Thus, the Bible should never be altered or added to. Additionally, concepts of Predestination are common throughout the programs on the Family Radio broadcasts and unequivocally taught on Camping’s Open Forum program (Open Forum May 2011).

Interestingly, May 21, 2011 is not Harold Camping’s first End of the World prediction. After reading the book *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could be in 1988* by Edgar Whisenant, Harold Camping declared that the end was imminent, although he did not present a specific date (Abanes 1998, Rey 2011). In 1992 he published his book *1994?* which stated that the rapture would happen on September 6th of 1994, after which no one could be saved by God (Abanes 1998, Camping 1992). When September 7th, 1994 arrived with no apparent rapture, Camping admitted he may have made a miscalculation and determined the rapture would occur in the middle of September, and then October 2nd. Following the final date of March 31, 1995, technically still 1994 in the Jewish calendar according to Camping (Abanes 1998), he reminded believers that the book was merely an introductory study. After all, he did include a question mark at the end of the title (Rey 2011).

The complete May 21, 2011 rapture prediction was fully developed by Mr. Camping in the 2005 publication of *Time Has an End: A Biblical History of the World*

11,013 B.C. – 2011 A.D. In this book, Camping determines the date of Creation to be 11,013 BCE and utilizes hidden meanings and forms of numerology to then interpret cycles of time throughout the Bible. Ultimately, his extensive timeline of history and genealogies within the Bible lead to Camping's assertion that the Christian Rapture would occur on May 21, 2011. Following the rapture, five months of terror and judgment would reign over those left behind until the final destruction of the world on October 21, 2011 (Camping 2005).

Because of the dire consequences of the upcoming apocalypse and the number of people calling in to seek advice on the Open Forum program, Harold Camping hosted the show seven days a week (instead of the regular five days a week) from May 1, 2011 through May 19, 2011. This enabled more listeners to discuss Biblical references and the upcoming rapture with him on air. This prediction, and the people involved, was the focus of many news stories, television programs, and interviews. Additionally, some individual Christian congregations began their own campaigns refuting the prediction on Christian television networks, websites, and blogs. When May 21st passed without event, Harold Camping and his followers were shocked and befuddled. However, many listeners still believed in the approximate date and time of the end of the world.

After several days of contemplation in solitude, Mr. Camping gave a press conference attempting to convince his listeners and the general populace that his prediction had been fulfilled, but not in the way that he or anyone else had expected. He and his followers expected something physically destructive; however the judgment arrived in a spiritual way in order for God to show his mercy to the unsaved without making the entire earth suffer until the final day. It was at this time that Camping

reiterated his original prediction that the physical end of the world would commence on October 21st, 2011 (Harold Camping Address, May 23, 2011). The rationalization of this failed prediction – not his first failed eschatological prophecy – fell short of convincing skeptics and even some believers. Still, some accepted the engineer-turned-biblical-interpretor's explanations regardless of mockery and accusations of heresy.

On June 9, 2011, Harold Camping suffered a mild stroke affecting his mobility and speech. After rehabilitation, Camping and other board members felt that at the age of 89 it was time to retire, thereby ending the Open Forum Program. Harold continues on as president of Family Radio and is still heavily involved in the decisions and direction of the radio franchise at the time of this writing (www.familyradio.com, July 1, 2013).

DATA AND METHODS

In order to understand this unique case of failed prophecy, I collected podcasts of Harold Camping's Open Forum broadcasts from May 1, 2011 through June 9, 2011 from the Family Radio website. My initial research plan indicated collecting two weeks of programming before and after both the May 21 and October 21 predictions in order to compare the two predictions and subsequent failures. Unfortunately, Camping suffered a stroke affecting his speech the evening of June 10th, 2011 rendering him unable to host the radio call-in show any longer, thus eliminating the possibility to explore the October prophecy. Thus I focus my research only on the analysis of the first prediction and failure.

These podcasts, lasting approximately ninety minutes each, consist of callers throughout the world, but mostly the United States, initiating conversations with Harold Camping regarding specific Bible verses or questions concerning the upcoming prophecy and following failure. These broadcasts include not only Harold Camping's predictions, explanations, and Biblical interpretations, but comments and questions from believers and the general public at large. Callers are asked to base their questions and comments firmly in the Bible, and specifically to compare scripture with scripture in order to come up with a faithful interpretation. Spreading one's own theology or specific religious doctrine is not acknowledged during these phone calls, as the only accepted information is to come directly from the Bible. Any interpretations outside the realm of Camping's belief system are quickly refuted and ignored. Reliability is maintained as Camping himself controls for the theology and the ideology of The Open Forum and Family Radio.

Analysis of broadcasts before the May 21st prediction enable deciphering of different strategies used by Camping to explain and convince others of his position, as well as reactions to the prediction. Additionally, these recordings give a sense of the audience Camping is attracting as well as a baseline to compare callers following the failure. Content available after the failed prophecy allows recognition of Harold Camping's explanations and legitimations for the failure, as well as facilitates understanding of listeners' reactions. These broadcasts assist exploration of responses from those who still believe the teachings of Camping, alongside those who have lost their faith. This data provides a unique opportunity to see the social construction of rationalizations as it is occurring.

For this project I use an inductive analytic strategy, which seeks to generate theory by examining data. As a grounded theorist, I choose to maintain close contact with the data while constantly testing ideas throughout the collection process. This resulted in the use of empirical data to form the larger social life patterns that emerge directly from the people experiencing a failed prophecy (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). Additionally, grounded theory minimizes the risk of self-fulfilling prophecy which seeks and acknowledges only those instances fitting pre-existing theories. In a process known to qualitative researchers as a "spiral design," I examined the question of what reactions occur following a failed prophecy with no preconceived codes. Through memo writing, I was able to keep track of codes created from the beginning of data collection. As the codes emerged from the data, I moved back and forth throughout the data to reexamine and reapply codes (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006).

Upon downloading the podcasts, I personally transcribed each of the thirty-two programs. Nineteen programs are dated before the May 21 prediction, and thirteen programs follow the failed prediction. Utilizing the method of content analysis for this study has two primary benefits: the data exists independent of the researcher making the research unobtrusive and non-interactive, and it contains the possibility for both qualitative and quantitative applications (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). During and after the transcription I was able to explore and contemplate the data through memos and coding. Because the callers already had specific ideas they wished to talk about, “chunk coding” made more sense for this project, as “line-by-line coding” presented too many thoughts with little explanatory value (Saldana 2009). I employed the computer assisted software program ATLAS.ti (version 7) to perform interpretations of the resulting codes and memos.

The coding process began with writing down questions and intriguing aspects of conversations while listening to and transcribing the podcasts. Upon reading the transcripts, items of interest were noted and given individual codes. Variables such as male or female and believer or nonbeliever were obvious codes, while other codes included items I thought might be important in explaining what happens following a failed prophecy, such as themes of power dynamics, social reactions, Biblical interpretations, interpretations of the prophecy, and explanations of the nonevent. Following the initial coding, my notes were analyzed to determine significance. Codes which only occurred once or twice were rejected while those occurring more frequently were determined true patterns and examined more closely. The most prominent codes included male/female, pre and post believers, pre and post nonbelievers, literal and

spiritual Biblical interpretations, mocking and support of Camping, as well affirmation and avoidance from Camping. For a full list of all codes used, please see the appendix.

While exploring these themes and codes, a noticeable pattern among males and females emerged. To explore this pattern more closely I used Chi-Square, a statistical test to determine independence by summarizing how close the expected frequencies fall to the observed frequencies (Agresti and Finlay 1997). More will be discussed about this statistical method and the results in the Findings section.

Limitations

Due to my sample selection, several difficulties need to be addressed. This sample does not allow me to look at those members who simply “exit” without confrontation, or otherwise do not feel it necessary to call in (Hirschman 1970). Additionally, the sample does not allow for assessment of the level of investment, commitment, or ties to Family Radio, Harold Camping, or the ideology as a whole. Furthermore, most talk radio programs employ staff (“screeners”) who, through previously specified guidelines, determine which callers will and will not talk on air. Not knowing the screener guidelines for the Open Forum provides difficulties in obtaining an unbiased sample, or even the ability to acknowledge what ways the sample might be biased. However, having listened to all broadcasts, I feel confident that the screener (if indeed there was one) did not automatically reject any caller expressing disappointment or anger at the failed Second Coming.

The nature of the call-in radio broadcast does not allow for social profile analyses such as socio-economic status, race, education, network relationships, age, or geographic

location. Unless the caller specifically gave this information, demographics were undeterminable. This lack of information is challenging because previous research within the Sociology of Religion recognizes differences in these characteristics. Additionally, these variables might be important for determining more social patterns amongst believers and non-believers of prophecy failure. While these characteristics were unavailable, I was able to discern gender through context and tone. Additionally, the differences between believers and non-believers were fairly obvious.

While the noted sampling issues may be problematic in some cases, this sample does allow for the exploration of reactions to a prophecy in the public space through the unique observation of the social constructions of prophecy and failure explanations. The limitations noted are primarily significant for private constructions of meaning. While private constructions are important, this is where the lens of most research places its focus. My research, through this exceptional data, looks at the public constructions which are informed by (and inform) private constructions of meaning.

FINDINGS

While much of the data corroborate the previous literature, some intriguing findings stood out. In Camping's failed prophecy, many of the same rationalizations were utilized to better understand the failure, but additional justifications for the results can be found. Furthermore, earlier research does not get into the specifics of a prophet's reaction to the hostility of outsiders, but my data offer interesting insight showing the reactions of Camping. Finally, sociologists understand religion as a gendered experience, but the literature on prophetic movements does not include this information; this case study addresses the omission of gender.

Rationalizations

Previous research suggests three forms of rationalization following a failed prophecy: incorrect methods of interpretation (such as literal versus metaphorical), human error (humans incorrectly conveying the prophecy), and divine intervention. A plethora of examples illustrating these exact rationalizations are observed alongside additional, more intriguing rationalizations within this case study.

Methods of interpretation

As seen in research by Dawson (1999), Tumminia (1998), and Zygmunt (2000a), the vagueness and interpretations of a prophecy, both before and after the nonevent, is integral to the acceptance of a leader and his or her ideologies. In the case of Harold Camping, the prediction was fully literal, while the interpretation following the nonevent was metaphorical or spiritual. While Camping and believers understood that the events of

May 21, 2011 would be purely physical, callers (and later Camping himself) find the perceived nervousness of nonbelievers perfectly fulfilling the prophecy in a more metaphorical fashion.

Caller 2: “Well, I believe he did come because it shook a lot of people [chuckle]. It was like an earthquake to them because they were all feared and scared.”

Harold Camping: “...To me it’s unbelievable how many- how big of an impact this was on the world. It was a terrific impact and why are people still continuing to talk about it and trying to stumble or scoff at the whole idea. It’s because it made an enormous impact upon people. But God got that activity done in his own way.”

Program 27, Caller 2

A large part of the prediction included the fact that an earthquake would affect every time zone in the world. This was considered to be a purely physical earthquake that would start at the International Date Line on May 21, 2011, and continuously roll across the entire earth reaching each time zone at approximately 6:00 pm. When no obvious signs of even a single minor earthquake presented itself, Camping and his followers sought to understand why. Through this confusion several callers (and ultimately Camping himself) sought more metaphorical or spiritual interpretations of the nonevent. Ultimately, because Camping’s message was broadcast all over the world, people (man) all over earth were shaking in fear due to the violence predicted. Additionally, according to the Book of Genesis, God created man out of earth. Thus, according to Camping and his followers, the entire planet was filled with “earthquakes” on May 21, 2011.

Camping and his followers refuse to consider that Judgment Day did not occur, preferring to believe that it definitely did take place, albeit in a manner different than expected. Thus, different types of interpretation are integral to understanding how

followers continue to believe following the nonevent. While this method of spiritual interpretation can be found in other studies of failed prophecies, one of the more innovative methods of interpretation found in this study is the term “spiritual eyes” used by Camping.

Spiritual eyes

The term “spiritual eyes” was repeatedly found throughout the programs, both before and after the nonevent (114 instances). This code is similar to, but different from, the label “symbolic interpretation” (106 instances). The term symbolic interpretation is used as a contrast from literal interpretations, while Camping suggests one’s “spiritual eyes” must be opened by God in order to understand how to interpret the words of the Bible. Camping consistently reminds callers that the Bible needs to be carefully studied and interpreted, as what the reader understands is not always God’s ultimate implication. The Bible is written in such a way that only those with their “spiritual eyes” opened by God will be able to determine the meaning(s) within.

“But in order for us to understand God has to open our spiritual eyes. And it’s only until the time of the end that God is opening our spiritual eyes. That’s why when we teach... the churches think we’re berserk... they aren’t reading the Bible together. They don’t understand that God had a lot more information that would only be revealed in this day.”
-Harold Camping (Program 2, Response to Caller 16)

In determining when to interpret the Bible literally and when to understand the words more metaphorically, it is important to have God open one’s spiritual eyes. While there are several clues given throughout the Bible, God will only allow humans to interpret the Word correctly in his own time. Camping admits that some of the Bible is

literal, while other areas have definite spiritual, or metaphorical, meanings. One caller accuses Camping of inconsistently interpreting the Bible, and he replies:

“That’s a very fair, fair question. When do we understand something literally and when do we think to understand that it is to be parabolic or metaphorical understanding? In many cases when God is giving historical events, they are very literally true, but they do have a spiritual or metaphorical meaning to them. On the other hand, when He’s talking about these things, about an earthquake for example, are we to understand that literally but it has some kind of spiritual meaning? Well, the big question is can we understand it literally? Only because we have a lot of other information in the Bible can we know that we can understand it literally.”

-Harold Camping (Program 7, Response to Caller 8)

Here, Camping understands the earthquakes of the upcoming Rapture literally, and only because his spiritual eyes have been opened by God can he be considered an authority on the issue. Additionally, he is not the sole authority on the matter, as others have also have had their spiritual eyes opened by God and have come to the same conclusion. Interestingly, following the nonevent Camping admits that it is possible that his spiritual eyes had not been fully opened by God.

Human Error

Because of the need for “spiritual eyes” to be opened by God, interpretations of the Bible can be misunderstood and easily understood as human error. Harold Camping repeatedly tells callers that he was mistaken while at the same time defending his credibility by stating God had not finished opening his spiritual eyes. Camping shows no difficulty in admitting he was mistaken, but refuses to accept accusations of heresy or being a false prophet.

“Now, we were incorrect. We were mistaken in looking at it in a physical way, when actually it should have been looked at in a spiritual way. There are people that say, well, that makes you a false prophet. No. that’s not what a false prophet is. According to biblical definition, a false prophet is someone who is getting his information from someplace other than the Bible. But God has written the Bible so that he can decide to open our eyes this far, or not this far. So, to that degree, we can be mistaken. That has happened all through the history of the world. Every pastor that has ever pastored any church throughout the church age has been mistaken about many things that now we understand. But that did not make them false prophets. That made them mistaken. God uses that in order to get his work done. So that is exactly what happened.”

-Harold Camping (Program 24, Response to Caller 5)

While Camping does admit to misinterpreting parts of the prophecy, he contends the error is not entirely his own. Because this admission of error and rationalization happens in a relatively short time following the nonevent, some callers still find him credible. Due to his admission of imperfection and the fact that his “spiritual eyes” have now been opened, Camping asserts that he is not a false prophet and can still be trusted.

“I myself have had to repeat again and again, I was mistaken. I taught the wrong thing. And I don’t hesitate to do that because as God has opened my spiritual eyes as well as the eyes of many of our listeners, we have recognized more and more truth.”

-Harold Camping (Program 11, Response to Caller 15)

“It doesn’t mean that we can’t make a mistake at a point. But do we admit then that we did make a mistake or that God had not finished opening our eyes to that?”

-Harold Camping (Program 22, Response to Caller 10)

This rationalization seems to place all of the responsibility upon the shoulders of the divine, but Camping and his followers assert that the divine has purposely hidden his true intent from those studying the Bible by not opening their “spiritual eyes.” In this way, God was able to fulfill his own purposes.

Divine Intervention and Divine Purpose

The previous literature suggests the failure of an event is understood by the community to be brought about by way of divine intervention because of the diligence of the faithful (Shermer 2000, Whitsel 2003, Zygmunt 2000a and 2000b), and this study is no exception. Callers to the Open Forum program suggest God rewarded their evangelism efforts by delaying the physical earthquakes and other frightening events.

“I’m calling from Paseak, and I just want to say that I believe that God was in everything concerning the 21st because people now know about the October 21. The world now, it’s like, some people only heard about it a day or two before the 21st and now they have 5 months, it’s like a grace period.”

-Program 25, Caller 16

Responses like this convey a clear understanding of divine intervention. The caller reasons that because God is benevolent and loving, and followers were faithful in getting the word out to everyone possible, the divine refrained from violent destruction of the world at this time.

Camping, while recognizing the compassion God has for humanity, does not see this as intervention by God, but as all part of God’s initial plan. According to Camping, God never actually intended to physically destroy the earth at this time, but merely wanted people to think he was planning on annihilation. God’s presentation of a specific (and quickly approaching) date in front of the faithful created urgency among followers to spread God’s plan for humanity. Thus, God’s purpose was fulfilled. Here, Camping explains:

“...God has designed it all this way so the very thing happened that DID happen. That by not giving us all the information so that some of the end

information remained a mystery, we managed to get the eye on the year of the whole human race. It's been utterly astounding! ...from a Biblical vantage point, the other dates like May 21 in 1988 and September 7th in 1994 and May 21 in 2011 all tie in perfectly with what God has planned for the end of the world..."

-Harold Camping (Program 25, Response to Caller 16)

Some callers recognize God's purpose for the prediction was to have the faithful spread the word of God throughout the world. In this way, the prophecy was perfectly fulfilled; the message had been given to the entire world through radio, television, internet, billboards, pamphlets, and word of mouth. Through this message, according to Camping and followers, people who had never heard the words and promises of God before were able to enter into relationships with the divine. This indicates that the prediction and subsequent failure was part of God's plan and not divine intervention as a form of reward.

"Mr. Camping, my question is, do you think that Christ is simply telling us that he DOES plan for us to be here until the very end of the world? That it was his plan to have us here and I was connecting that with thinking about the fact that so many wonderful seeds of faith were planted over the course of the last few months, especially the last couple of weeks. That those seeds that we all were sown by the word of God, that perhaps that has sprouted a number of new plants, and-"

Caller 12, Program 25

"...What has happened is now, in these last weeks, in these last days, has done one thing that we know was one of God's intentions. That is that the whole world... might know the word of God before the end, because that is God's plan. If it had not gone the way it had, we would never, never, never have gotten the attention of the whole world. This isn't because we are so smart, not a bit. Not a bit. It is simply that God had not opened our spiritual eyes that far... That's up to God..."

Harold Camping (Program 20, Response to Caller 1)

In the preceding examples, Camping and his followers proclaim that God never actually intended to physically destroy the world at this time; he simply wanted the world to know about him. While still understanding that Judgment had occurred, Camping and followers find the prediction and failure exemplifying the integrity and beneficent nature of God. By presenting images of annihilation to followers, the word of God was being spread, and more people were saved from Judgment due to fear of a physical devastation.

Prophet Reactions

Instances of hostility interspersed throughout the programs present opportunities to understand Camping's reaction to the opposition. Before the failure, Camping's strategy consists mainly of avoiding the question or disqualifying the respondent. In some instances successful evasion is produced through caveats such as, "I'm not qualified." Following the event, reactions to antagonism range from blaming others for trusting Camping (instead of the Bible or God) to understanding persecution as a sign of faithfulness.

Avoidance

Much as might be expected, not every caller sought to express their appreciation for Camping or agreed with his prediction. Even without staff to screen incoming calls, Harold Camping effectively avoids those questions he is not comfortable answering. In some cases Camping reiterates the point of the program- to study the Bible on its own- in

order to dismiss a caller. Caller 13 asks to look at 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3² and has a problem with the Hebrew translation into English. Subsequently, he asks to look at another verse that references the Book of Enoch, in order to support his argument. The caller is cut off mid-sentence by Camping:

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m going to go to our next caller. You’re speaking about things that have nothing to do with the Bible. And on this program we are interested in what the BIBLE is saying, not what theologians or people who are reading, or who are trying to introduce something into the Bible. We can’t make any progress with that. So I’m going to have to say we have to go to our next caller.”

-Harold Camping (Program 5, Response to Caller 13)

While Camping suggests the question does not adhere to the Bible, many Biblical scholars, theologians, and lay people would find the question directly related, as meaning can vary greatly depending upon the differences in the original language and translation.

Other callers also recognize how Camping avoids those questions he does not want to answer. After a lengthy monologue having nothing to do with the question asked (regarding baptism), the caller pointedly asks:

Caller 11: “Do you cut the callers off while you’re speaking? Is that what you do? Do you- so they’re not able to say anything-”

Harold Camping: “Well, you have to remember that we can’t have a dialogue if everyone is trying to talk over the other-”

Caller 11: [unintelligible]

Harold Camping: “Excuse me, excuse me. Now you ask a question and I have to have time to answer it. And lot of times I start answering and the caller wants to interject something. But we can’t have a rational conversation that way. So we do tone down the caller until an answer can be given.”

² That ye be no soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means, for that day shall not come, except for falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition. (KJV)

Caller 11: “Well, you didn’t answer my question though, sir.”
Program 8, Dialogue with Caller 11

One of Camping’s avoidance tactics entails blaming the callers for their personal lack of faith in God and the scriptures. Callers proposing hypotheticals regarding what will be once May 21st passes without event are met with Camping’s unwillingness to acknowledge such a possibility. He refuses to broach the possibility and explicitly tells several callers that even pondering such questions is unacceptable as it borders on blasphemy.

Caller 19: “Can I ask just this last question? It’s a yes or no question. May 21st, when it comes and goes, if the rapture as you say does not take place on May the 22nd, will you resign from ministry?”

Harold Camping: “Excuse me, you are CHALLENGING GOD, you are challenging the Bible. The Bible has given us so much information, it’s incredible. There is no other prophecy God has ever made- and he’s made a lot of prophecies and they’ve all come true... And here God has given us a, of course a fantastically great prophecy, because it has to do with the end of the world, but he’s given proof after proof and sign after sign and if we are going to doubt that, well we’re challenging God...I would never DARE to think along that line because, I’m just amazed, utterly amazed at how many signs god has given us...And now to come along and say weeeellllll, there might still be a possibility- that is challenging God... and I would never, never dare to do that. It is going to happen. And so I’m sorry, I cannot entertain your question at all.”
-Harold Camping (Program 1, Caller 19)

After a caller suggests, or even hints, at the possibility of error in calculating the date, Camping does not let the caller speak again. Callers are not given an opportunity to respond to Camping’s statement, nor are they able to ask additional questions in order to understand how the date was calculated. Once a caller has indicated disagreement with Camping, the caller is rejected, and no longer allowed to present further questions.

Limitations to Camping's knowledge

Often callers provide some information and interpretation that Camping has not quite taken into account. At times it seems to make sense to Camping on a superficial level, but he refuses to directly acknowledge that the caller is correct or incorrect in his or her interpretation. When he does not have a ready answer, he often says he is “not qualified” due to his lack of focus on that particular scripture or a long hiatus from studying that scripture.

The following excerpt is a response from Camping after a caller asked if and how Ezekiel 19 was related to three tribulation periods referenced in some of Camping's publications.

Caller 10: “This short chapter appears to be addressing those three tribulation periods...It appeared to me to be describing the birth, the flourishing of the church, and the destruction of the church.”

Harold Camping: “Yeah. Well, I think you're on the right track, but I'm not qualified right now to speak more in a more detailed fashion about that. But thank you for calling and sharing.”
Program 10, Caller 10

Even though this caller seems to be presenting evidence in support of Camping's position, he is still unwilling to affirm the caller's observations. By not simply accepting every explanation that seems to support his theology Camping reinforces his credibility.

Even following the nonevent Camping fielded sincere questions by acknowledging his inability to fully answer the exact question. However, he does go on to explain as much as he does understand. Again, by admitting his insecurity and lack of expertise in a specific verse, Camping reinforces his credibility in those areas where he is knowledgeable.

Caller 4: “Okay, so can I ask you a question? What is the- like, why would the wise virgins tell the foolish virgins to go buy and sell when the master’s already- he’s already come, the bridegroom’s already come. In the 2 Kings account, why would he go tell them to go sell the oil that’s left-”

Harold Camping: “Yes, there probably is a relationship which I’m not qualified right now to develop. But the oil ordinarily represents the Holy Spirit as he brings forth the gospel. To buy and sell has to do with the proclamation of the gospel. Now, here, first God is PRODUCING all of this oil for this woman, he is the one that comes in the fullness of all his majesty as the Holy Spirit. But, really, I haven’t looked at this parable. This is really a historical parable. I have not looked at it carefully for some time. I’m going to be guessing and I don’t want to do that. So I’m sorry, I really can’t help you.”

Program 25, Caller 4

Following the nonevent Camping reminds listeners that he is not the one to blame, as God is the predictor. Camping is merely an imperfect interpreter of the Bible. While he strives to understand the Bible as accurately as possible, the capability of making mistakes still exists. Thus, the interpreter should not be confused with the ultimate authority, God.

Caller 24: “Combined with the fact that you were indeed incorrect with the events that you claimed were going to happen on May 21st- and that you can still get on the radio and claim that you are 100% certain about what will happen on September 21st, I think should prove to all of us that you are indeed doing this for the incorrect reasons. Which I believe would be for, possibly your ego. And I’d like-”

Harold Camping: “Excuse me! Excuse me! Excuse me. It has nothing to do with ego. It has to do with faithfully declaring the word of God. I never make any claims I am an authority. I know, I know. I try very honestly and very carefully to emphasize the authority is the Bible. I emphasize that again and again because I mean it with all of my heart. I am not the authority.”

Program 21, Caller 24

As shown earlier, Camping does use avoidance tactics when dealing with detractors. However, this excerpt shows that Camping will not tolerate people making claims regarding his sincerity in following God. He explains his lack of authority, and places emphasis on the Bible. While he is a self-proclaimed expert on the Bible, he admits that he does not know everything all the time.

Blaming others for their trust in Camping

While there are instances after May 21, 2011 where Camping recognizes his ignorance, there are just as many instances where he does not admit that he has made an error. In these cases he places the blame back on the listeners for trusting in him instead of God and the Bible. In this way he is no longer culpable for misinterpretations.

C12: "I guess my question really is- first you said it was May 21st, now it's October 21st, so how can somebody like myself who believes in the Word of God, trust what you're saying is true after so many other failed-"

HC: "I don't want anybody to trust me. I am not the authority. I have said this for years. I am not the authority. The Bible has to be trusted. Therefore, when we talk on this program, we talk about verses from the Bible, not what I have written. We want to know what God has written. That's where we have to turn. My! If anybody trusts me, sure, you're gonna get in trouble because I'm just a human being. I have no authority."
Program 23, Caller 12

Here we see a caller presenting disbelief in the "new" Rapture date of October 21, 2011. After the failure of the May 21 prediction, he wonders how anyone can possibly believe Camping's predictions. Camping retorts that individuals need to seek God through the Bible as he has in order to arrive at the same conclusions. Other callers chime

in to support Camping and remind listeners that expectation and disbelief are their own fault:

“People are forgetting, they’re trying to put the blame on you. If there’s something wrong, they should have been calling and pointing it out to you a long time ago... The Bible has clear rules to what it says to do to understand the bible. As far as I can tell you’re the only person who follows those rules out there in the world that’s in the public eye. So, I just wanted to call and exhort all of Family Radio and tell you guys to keep up the good work.”

Program 20, Caller 9

Camping addresses those that think they can rationalize the nonevent by his or her self. It simply is not possible to understand God or His intentions simply by using your own mind and studying. Everything we know must come directly from God, and He will only let followers know what He needs them to know, when they need to know it. God will only open one’s “spiritual eyes” and allow them to understand when he feels it is necessary.

“Because I know that anything we are- any truth we are going to come to is not because of our smarts or because we’re so intellectual. It has to come from God. Only from God. He only gives it to us as he so desires to do it.”

-Harold Camping (Program 21, Response to Caller 6)

According to Camping, we are intelligent and knowledgeable because God has presented us with these gifts. Only after our eyes have been opened by God are we able to understand and implement these talents. Those who only trust what Camping is saying trust the wrong entity. True followers believe that God presented the Bible to humankind in order for them to obtain all the knowledge needed. Therefore, individuals need to trust that God will help them to interpret the Bible correctly.

Mockery as a sign of faithfulness

According to Camping, those who trust the Lord and whose eyes have been opened and are able to correctly interpret the Bible are often mocked, and he is no different. Several instances can be found of callers intentionally and obviously mocking Camping and his followers both before and after the nonevent. It is often difficult to tell whether Camping understands the blatant disrespect coming from the callers, or if his responses are simply his way of dealing with the criticism in a peaceful and nonthreatening way. One caller pointedly asks if Mr. Camping is on crack cocaine (Program 15, Caller 11). Another caller openly compares Harold Camping to Jim Jones and references the tragedy at Jonestown, while Camping acts as though he has not understood the allusion (Program 20, Caller 19). On more than one occasion callers request Camping and/or his followers to prove their faith in the date and time of the rapture by bestowing their money (in the form of post-dated checks) and possessions (such as vehicles, property, and other material belongings) to the unbelievers.

Camping's response to the ridicule usually includes something to the effect that he is used to name calling and derision, but he cannot back down because he is doing God's work.

“...now you're making charges. That's fine. I've been called names and slandered and everything else, that doesn't bother me. But remember you're making charges and you've, you sit down and you work out and show by careful working through the whole timeline and show where there are errors. Because you can't break into it and just say you're wrong here and you're wrong there...”

-Harold Camping (Program 4, Response to Caller 3)

Additionally, instead of getting angry and shunning his detractors, Camping makes a concerted effort to include in his prayers those wishing him ill.

“...But that’s just a convenient insult, just like we’re insulted in a lot of different ways. We’re slandered when we’re following Christ. That’s par for the course...I’ve been called every name in the book by very serious people...I understand what their problem is, so I can only feel sorry for them and pray for them.”

-Harold Camping (Program 12, Response to Caller 11)

“...you know, you don’t have to wait until then to call me a false prophet, you- I’m called as a false prophet by all kinds of people already. I’ve been told that I was Satan, that I’ve been the antichrist. I’m very accustomed to those statements. Because, those dear people, I feel so sorry for them, they just don’t understand the truth. I don’t feel slandered or reviled, although it is slandering or reviling- but I don’t sense that at all because all I do is feel sorry. I pray for them that oh, could it be that God might open their eyes before it’s too late.”

-Harold Camping (Program 17, Response to Caller 15)

Supporters call in to give accounts of being scorned as well as to back Camping and refute the mockery he is experiencing:

Caller 2: “I don’t mind, and I’m sure you don’t mind and most true believers don’t mind being ridiculed about this, but the fact is we are being ridiculed. The churches certainly are ridiculing us and having a field day with this whole thing. But, you know the idea that Christians will fill up the sufferings of Christ?”

Harold Camping: “...the Bible does indicate that we are to fill up the sufferings of Christ as he was ridiculed and mocked and so on when he came to demonstrate how he made payment for our sins. Now, we who are true believers, who are the elect of god, now we can have a little period here of being mocked and ridiculed. But that is par for the course. In other words, all through the history of the church, the true believers who have been ridiculed- those who have really tried to do it God’s way. It’s simply going right up to the very end...”

-Harold Camping (Program 25, Response to Caller 2)

Through these excerpts we see Camping and his followers using mockery to their advantage. Those who openly follow Christ and the Word of God are often ridiculed, and the faithful have come to expect this. Camping suggests that if he was not being faithful, if he were telling untruths, he would not encounter the harassment he has been experiencing. Thus, any kind of mockery he encounters acts to legitimate his position.

Gendered Dynamics

Analysis of the experience of gender in failed prophecies is seriously lacking despite the plethora of research the field of sociology of religion has published regarding gender and religious experiences (Gallagher 2004, Kanis 2002, Sleep 2000). While reading and coding the data, I was intrigued to find a skewed difference in the total number of male (258) and female (107) callers during the sample period. In order to look further into the larger number of male respondents, I utilized chi-square. Through this simple statistical analysis, the importance gender holds begins to emerge.

The chi-square test for independence can be used to determine whether the occurrence of one variable (gender) affects the probability of the occurrence another variable (belief) by summarizing how closely the expected frequencies relate to the observed frequencies (Larson and Farber 2012). In other words, if no association exists between gender and belief in the overall population, what is the chance that a random sampling would result in an association as observed in this case study?

Table 1 contains responses for 229 callers before May 21, 2011, cross-classified by gender and belief status. The percentages presented are conditional distributions referring to the sample distribution of belief conditional on the level for gender. Two

Table 1: Believers and Non-Believers by Gender Before May 21, 2011 (Conditional Distributions in Parentheses)

	Believer	Non-Believer	Total
Male	89 (54.3%)	75 (45.7%)	164
Female	53 (81.5%)	12 (18.5%)	65
Total	142 (62.0%)	87 (37.9%)	229

categorical variables (in this case belief and gender) can be considered statistically independent if the conditional distributions as shown by percentages are identical at each category (Agresti and Finlay 1997: 252). This is not the case in Table 1, as percentages in the gender and belief categories are not similar. Thus, a need for further analysis to determine if sampling variation may be responsible for the initial results is required.

In order to determine independence, a comparison between the observed and expected frequencies must be conducted. Observed frequencies are represented by the number of callers in each cell and simple calculation produces the expected frequency.³ With this information, the chi-square (χ^2) test statistic can be obtained by squaring the difference between observed and expected frequencies, dividing the result by the expected frequency, and then summing the results over all cells. In symbolic terms, the equation looks like this: $\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$. The greater the resulting number, the less likely independence between the two variables exists.

For Table 2, the resulting chi-square is 14.71. Upon looking at the chi-square distribution table for one degree of freedom, I find a P-value of less than 0.001, indicating extreme statistical significance for the dependence of belief upon gender. The conclusion, therefore, is that belief is dependent upon gender before the predicted date. To further

³ Expected Frequency equals the product of the row and column totals for that cell, divided by the total sample size (Agresti and Finlay 1997:254).

Table 2: Believers and Non-Believers by Gender Before May 21, 2011 (Expected Frequencies in Parentheses)

	Believer	Non-Believer	Total
Male	89 (101.7)	75 (62.3)	164
Female	53 (40.3)	12 (24.7)	65
Total	142 (88.1)	87 (53.9)	229

$x^2 = 14.71$ $df = 1$ **P = <0.001** **Extremely Statistically Significant**

analyze this data, we must look at the ratios of female/male believers and the total number of callers in each gender. A simple ratio of female believers to the total number of female callers (53:65) shows 81% of female callers are believers, compared to 54% of male callers who believe. Thus, females are more likely to believe than males.

Table 3 contains responses and percentages for 136 callers following the failed prophecy, also cross-classified by gender and belief status. Once again, the percentages presented are conditional based on gender. In Table 2, much like in Table 1, conditional distributions are not identical within the gender and belief categories, requiring additional analysis.

Table 3: Believers and Non-Believers by Gender After May 21, 2011 (Conditional Distributions in Parentheses)

	Believer	Non-Believer	Total
Male	33 (35.1%)	61 (64.9%)	94
Female	26 (61.9%)	16 (38.1%)	42
Total	59 (43.4%)	77 (56.6%)	136

The same mathematical processes and formulae used in Table 2 were utilized to determine the likelihood of dependence between gender and belief following the failure. A chi-square result of 8.53 leads to a P-value between 0.005 and 0.001. This indicates a very strong statistical significance, albeit slightly lower than that found in the callers before the nonevent. Because of this statistical significance level, we conclude that belief is affected by gender. Looking at the ratios between male/female believers and total male/female callers provide intriguing results. Females in this study believe at a rate of 62%, while males only believe at a rate of 35%. Again, this shows that females are more likely to believe than males, even following the nonevent.

Ultimately, the results show statistical significance for the dependence of gender upon belief both before and after the prediction. It is difficult to determine how transferable these results are to prophetic movements or failed prophecies in general, but it is a finding that requires further investigation in future research.

Table 4: Believers and Non-Believers by Gender After May 21, 2011 with Expected Frequencies in Parentheses

	Believer	Non-Believer	Total
Male	33 (40.8)	61 (53.2)	94
Female	26 (18.2)	16 (23.8)	42
Total	59 (25.6)	77 (25.89)	136

$x^2 = 8.53$ $df = 1$ **P = 0.005 > 0.001** **Large Statistical Significance**

Gender differences in relation to family

In an attempt to understand how males and females respond to rationalizations presented by Camping and other followers, an interesting theme of family arose from the data. Previous research on gender in religion finds women tend to hold more religiosity characteristics due to connections to family and roles as faith educators and caretakers (Gallagher and Smith 1999). Interestingly, both male and female believers reached out to Camping regarding family members both before and after the nonevent at approximately the same rates. However, the ways in which they spoke about their concern for family was noticeably different.

Women were mainly concerned with making sure that family members would be included in the Rapture and “saved” by God.

“But I feel so sad now for my loved ones... I just don’t know what to do with them, I feel so helpless for them. I pray and I pray and I keep on praying and I just realized now because the time is here and I just don’t know what to do.”

Program 8, Caller 6

“Yes, Brother Camping. Just for a little clarification, an earlier caller had asked about the time of the rapture. And if we are to occupy until he comes, should we be pleading for his mercy for our family and our loved ones right up until that earthquake hits our particular time zone?”

Program 8, Caller 19

“Uhm, I’m a grandmother, I have 2 beautiful grandchildren and I have one on the way that I’m not going to get to meet. [crying] It’s really a shame. But I know I’m not alone.”

Program 11, Caller 23

Within these excerpts we see concern for the salvation and afterlife of family members, as well as sadness of the possibility of not being with family members throughout eternity. Women are seeking ways to guarantee that family members will be safe in the hereafter.

Men, however, were less troubled about eternal salvation and expressed more anxiety regarding their ability to keep family members safe from physical harm on May 21, 2011.

“On judgment day, on May 21st, I was wondering, how’s everything going to be? Like...I know there’s gonna be a lot of killing. Just a lot of sin- a lot more sin than we can ever imagine. But I was just wondering, I was wondering like will there be like demon possessed people and just like goin’ crazy killin’ each other?”

Program 10, Caller 20

“On May 21st 2011, while we are waiting for the rapture on that day, is there any verses in the bible in which god will protect us from Satan, the devils, and evil men that want to kill us. Should we take some food and water with us and hide until the lord-”

Program 8, Caller 8

These callers are focused on what will be happening on Earth when the Judgment Day arrives. Instead of asking questions about the afterlife and how to provide salvation to family members, they are more interested in how to provide for and protect those who will not be Raptured and seem to be thinking of the event as a natural disaster rather than a divinely ordained destruction of the world.

While these comparisons are interesting, it certainly does not include all experiences and differences between male and female reactions to a prophecy and subsequent failure. Future research needs to place a focus on which gender is more likely to embrace certain rationalizations, and why.

DISCUSSION

While some of the rationalizations and reactions to Harold Camping's May 21, 2011 rapture prediction can be accounted for in other studies, there is much to consider in this case study. This study takes into account diverse rationalizations following the failed prophecy such as having God open one's "spiritual eyes." Additionally, the entire prophecy including fulfillment (or lack thereof) is considered part of God's purpose. The failure was not simply divine intervention or a reward for adherents following God's command to evangelize. This study also allows for a closer look at the responses a prophet makes to believers and unbelievers, both before and after a nonevent. Reactions to skeptics range from avoidance, to blaming the doubter for lack of faith, to understanding mockery as a sign of the prophet's adherence to God's word.

However, the most interesting result of this study is the difference in belief based on gender. The field of sociology of religion has recognized the gendered dynamics involved in religious experiences since its inception, yet none of those studying prophetic religions has sought to integrate gender in their research. The research on Harold Camping has shown that there is a definite difference in belief, both before and after a failed prediction, based on gender. One possible explanation for gender's relationship to belief may lie in the realm of the understanding of family and the contexts of nurturing versus providing protection.

Nevertheless, this research is not able to make definitive conclusions regarding why females believe at higher rates than males, nor is it able to make broad generalizations that this is always so in prophetic religious groups. Additional research should be performed to understand the true dynamics and generalizability of this data to other

religious groups. Further research should explore different reactions of males and females to prophetic movements, place an emphasis on the types of rationalizations most likely to be accepted by each gender, and how families may fit into how males and females may differently perceive the prophecy.

Appendix A

CODE	INSTANCES FOUND
"Don't trust me"	38
"I'm not qualified"	59
"Spiritual Earthquake"	20
"Spiritual Eyes"	114
Admitted Mistake	11
Affirm Caller	38
Apology	2
Avoidance	52
Bible Study Advice	39
Biblical Interpretation	46
Biblical Misinterpretation	4
Biblical Study Expert	54
Biblical Timeline	77
Biblical Translation	27
Caller Interpretation	7
Camping as Celebrity	31
Camping Knows Best	6
Condemning Camping	21
Confusion	2
Current Events	33
Defense	11
Disappointment	5
Don't Question God	29
Encouraging Camping	5
End of Salvation	14
Evangelism Advice	12
False Prophet	16
Fear	14
Female	186
Finances	21
God's Plan	46
God is in Charge	48
God/Human Difference	6
Importance of Defining Date	11
Inerrant	38
Judgment Day Description	65
Judgment DID Happen	47
Literal Interpretation	51
Male	511
Mocking	15
No Change in Prediction	28
Not As Expected	41

CODE	INSTANCES FOUND
Numerology	45
Persecuted for Beliefs	10
Personal Explanation	10
Post- Believer	60
Post-Nonbeliever	77
Prayer Advice	79
Pre- Believer	146
Pre-Nonbeliever	87
Pre-Skeptic	33
Predestination	68
Publications	13
Publicity	8
Questioning Interpretation	17
Questioning Timeline	22
Reassurance	6
Reject Caller	123
Seeking Advice	10
Seeking Explanation	9
Social Divisions	6
Soliciting Donations	8
Symbolic Interpretation	106
This WILL Happen	41

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