History 382W/482. Apocalypse Now . . . and Then:
A History of Apocalyptic Thought

T 2:00-4:40
Rush Rhees 456
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This seminar examines the history of beliefs about the end of the world in the western Judeo-Christian tradition. We will examine such topics as the birth of apocalyptic thought, the medieval development of various aspects of traditions about the End (such as the figure of Antichrist and millenarian traditions), millennial influences on the discovery and colonization of the New World, millennial movements of the last two centuries (such as the Millerites and the Mormons), and contemporary apocalyptic scenarios. A major theme of the course will be the flexibility of apocalyptic language, its ability to interpret various historical situations, and its power to move people to acceptance or action.

Week 1. September 4. Introduction to the course and assignments; overview of the history of apocalyptic thought


Research: Finding a topic; beginning research.
Week 2. September 11. Early apocalyptic

***N.B.: This week’s class will meet in the Plutzik Room, Rare Books and Special Collections (Rush Rhees 225).

This week’s readings explore the apocalyptic strains in Judaism that would spill over into early Christianity, taking as example the book of Daniel. Daniel 7-12 is a classic example of the literary genre apocalypse, a type of writing that includes the disclosure of divine secrets in written form; the use of symbolic language, with dramatic, highly visual descriptions; a threefold pattern of crisis—judgment—salvation; pseudonymous authorship; and the incorporation of ex eventu prophecies (history disguised as prophecy). Reading Daniel will help demonstrate the elements of the genre, as well as the way in which such texts could speak to contemporary concerns, as it contains thinly disguised references to events surrounding the time of its composition.

Reading: Daniel, in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 5th ed (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), with the introduction by Amy C. Merrill Willis (at pp. 1249-50);


Research: Resources in Rare Books and Special Collections.


For all Christians, the starting point for speculations about the end of the world is found in Scripture. Amongst canonical Christian texts, the most important is the book of Revelation (Apocalypse) of John, written sometime in the late first century C.E., with not-so-veiled references to the Roman emperors. Other important information comes in the so-called “Little Apocalypse” found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These texts, along with the Book of Daniel, provide the basis around which later authors developed their own apocalyptic scenarios. As you read these texts, think about what is there and what isn’t there (from any preconceptions you may have about the Christian view of Armageddon). How might the original audience have interpreted these books to give meaning to their own times? Who or what is being critiqued here?
Reading: Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21; 2 Thessalonians 2; Revelation (complete), with introduction by Jean-Pierre Ruiz (at pp. 2203-05), in The New Oxford Annotated Bible;

Weber, Apocalypses, 40-44;

Bernard McGinn, Apocalyptic Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 1-16;


Research: Scholarly encyclopedia article; primary sources. Locate an article from a scholarly encyclopedia (or the equivalent) pertaining to your topic; each student will hand in a properly formatted bibliography entry for that article and will present to the group a primary source to be used for their research.

***Students should schedule an individual conference with the instructor this week or next.

***Write your own apocalypse, with commentary: Due by midnight on Friday, September 21. (Graduate students may substitute a book review of a monograph relating to their research interests.)

Week 4. September 25. Millenarians and anti-millenarians of the patristic period

Most early Christians assumed that they were living near the end of time, but interpreters disagreed over whether that End was imminent or centuries away. Controversy also raged over the notion that the end would be preceded by a reign of peace on earth. As you read the church fathers’ thoughts on these topics, consider how they are interpreting the scriptural tradition. What other sorts of sources are they bringing to bear upon their considerations of the end? Richard Landes’s studies of chronological systems and his concept of “owls” and “roosters” provide an intriguing scholarly approach to this topic. What use does he make of sources? What can we learn from what authors do not say?

Reading: Irenaeus, Against Heresies, book V, chaps. 25-26, 28, 30, 32-34 only (ER);

Lactantius, from Divine Institutes, in McGinn, Apocalyptic Spirituality 17-28, 55-80 (that is, skip VII.2-13, at pages 28-54);

Augustine, City of God, book XVIII, chaps. 52-54 only; book XX, chaps. 7, 8, 11-13, 19, 23, and 30 only (ER);


McGinn, Visions of the End, 14-18, 25-27;

Weber, Apocalypses, 27-40; 45-47.
Graduate students should also read:

Richard Landes, “Lest the Millennium be Fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography, 100-800 CE,” in W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst, and A. Welkenhuyzen, eds., The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988), 137-211 (ER);


Research: Scholarly encyclopedia article; primary sources, continued.

Week 5. October 1. The Last World Emperor and the Muslim enemy

Part of the power of apocalyptic language is the way in which it can be adapted to symbolic reinterpretation. This week’s readings show us how late antique and medieval authors adapted the End time cast of characters in terms of their own times. As the Roman Empire became Christianized, new apocalyptic roles were envisioned for Augustus’s (and Nero’s) successors. And, with the rise of Islam and major conquests by Arab forces in lands of the old Roman empire, the eschatological scenario had to be adjusted to incorporate a major new adversary. The texts attributed to the Tiburtine Sibyl and to the third-century martyr Methodius (hence the appellation pseudo-Methodius) were among the most widely read eschatological works throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. This fact should remind us that texts have a history apart from the milieux in which they were composed.

Reading: “The Tiburtine Sibyl,” in McGinn, Visions of the End, 43-50;

d’Ailly, from On the Persecutions of the Church, trans. Laura Smoller (ER);

Weber, Apocalypses, 83-98.

Graduate students should also read:


Research: Diagrams. You will make a presentation in which you will diagram your research topic for the class.
Week 6. October 9. Antichrist, apocalypse, and the pope-emperor struggles of the high Middle Ages

An evolving Antichristology (to match theologians’ Christology) saw medieval authors elaborating on a handful of scriptural passages to flesh out the career of an Antichrist, a powerful adversary with whom Jesus Christ would have to battle in the Last Days. (The term “Antichrist” appears only four times in scripture: 1 John 2:18, 1 John 2:22, 1 John 4:3, and 2 John 1:7; Daniel, Revelation, and 2 Thessalonians represent other important sources.) This process resulted in the first full-blown biography of Antichrist, by the tenth-century Cluniac monk Adso of Montier-en-Der, a work drawn upon by numerous later authors. The language and imagery of Antichrist (and Last World Emperor), as we will see in this week and next week's readings, could also be harnessed for political ends, most notably in the pope-emperor struggles unleashed by the Investiture Controversy.

Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, Eleventh Vision of the Third Part, in Hildegard of Bingen, Scivias, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop; introduction by Barbara J. Newman; preface by Caroline Walker Bynum, 491-513 (ER);

Graduate students should also read:
Michael A. Ryan, “Antichrist in the Middle Ages: Plus ça change . . . ,” History Compass 7/6 (2009): 1581-92 (ER);

Research: Diagrams, continued.

Week 7. October 16. Fall Break

Week 8. October 23. Apocalyptic rhetoric in service of empire and Crusade

The figures of the Last World Emperor and Antichrist proved to be irresistible for their propaganda value. The twelfth-century Play of Antichrist offers a fine example of the political use of eschatology to exalt the emperor Frederick Barbarossa and to minimize the role of the papacy in End times (and, by implication, the present?). Jay Rubenstein’s article, taking up themes from his book Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse (New York: Basic Books, 2011), argues that the Crusades were understood by participants (and observers) as inherently apocalyptic. To what extent did eschatology propel current events (in addition to serving to sharpen political rhetoric)?
Reading: *The Play of Antichrist*, transl. John Wright (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), Introduction (at least pages 24-40) and text (pages 67-99);


***Prospectus for the research paper prospectus must be submitted to Blackboard by midnight on October 23. (See instructions).***

Research: Close readings. Each student will make a presentation offering a close reading of a key passage or passages from a primary source. Make copies of the passage for the class, or get an original to me by Monday at noon.

Week 9. October 30. Joachim of Fiore: Prophecy as history; history as prophecy

Beginning in the twelfth century, a number of scholars have argued, a major shift in apocalyptic thinking occurred, as commentators applied a historical approach to the interpretation of Revelation. The central figure in this new interpretation of the apocalypse was the Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore. For Joachim prophecy (especially the Book of Revelation) became a means of ordering the past, and history a way of thinking about the future. His powerful prediction of the appearance of new spiritual men was quickly seized upon by the beleaguered Spiritual wing of the new Franciscan order, while his promise of “one pastor, one flock” in the upcoming Third Age fueled dreams of a united Christian empire.


McGinn, *Visions of the End*, sections 17, 19, 24;


Research: Close readings, continued.

Week 10. November 6. Political apocalyptic in the later Middle Ages

With the turmoils of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we frequently see apocalyptic language put to political use, as the excerpts in McGinn’s *Visions of the End* will show. With Savonarola, the figure of the New Jerusalem becomes a goal to be realized in a reformed Florence. Is it “mere rhetoric” or a means of making sense of one’s own world? We also will see the centrality of apocalyptic thought in the Spanish conquest of the New World. How does this insight square with any mental picture you may already have of Columbus? Of the Renaissance? Of modernity?

McGinn, *Visions of the End*, sections 30, 33;

Delno C. West, “Medieval Ideas of Apocalyptic Mission and the Early Franciscans in Mexico,” *The Americas* 45, no. 3 (1989): 293-313 (ER);

Columbus, *Book of Prophecies*, especially his letter to Ferdinand and Isabella (at pp. 105-11, odd numbers), although leafing through the compilation in its entirety is instructive (ER).

 Graduate students should also read:


Research: Historiography. Make a presentation in which you outline the historiography on your topic and demonstrate the ways in which your research makes a contribution to or overturns some existing interpretation.

***Historiography paper must be submitted to Blackboard by midnight on Friday, November 9.***

**Week 11. November 13. Apocalypticism and modern nations: the special place of America**

The settlers who came to the British colonies in North America brought with them an apocalyptic sense (not unlike Savonarola’s conception for Florence) that they were creating the New Jerusalem in New England. Apocalypticism remained a potent force in the consciousness of the new nation. We sample two American apocalyptic movements this week: the Millerites and the Mormons (both of which have their origins not far from Rochester!). As you read, ask yourself what is distinctly American here, what distinctly modern, and what is familiar from medieval and early modern traditions.

Reading: Ronald Numbers and Jonathan Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), selections (ER);


*The Pearl of Great Price*, excerpts from the section entitled *Joseph Smith—History* ([http://www.sacred-texts.com/mor/pgp/](http://www.sacred-texts.com/mor/pgp/)) (ER);


Optional: Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), online at [http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015004283084;view=1up;seq=11](http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015004283084;view=1up;seq=11);

and, for an example from nineteenth-century France, R. Hermon-Belot, “God’s Will in History: The Abbé Grégoire, the Revolution and the Jews,” in *Catholic Millenarianism: From*

Research: Historiography, continued.

Week 12. November 20. No class: writing time


We sample a fundamental text in the strain of eschatological interpretation known as dispensational premillennialism this week in Hal Lindsey’s classic The Late, Great Planet Earth, a book that has informed political interpretations of contemporary events since its first publication in 1970. And we are reminded of the potential dangers of the ignorance of apocalyptic language by revisiting the tragedy of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, in 1994.

Reading: Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth (New York: Zondervan, 1970) at least chapters 1, 4-8, 11-13;


“Evangelical Apocalypse Preacher Harold Camping Admits Failed Judgement Day Prediction for May 21 [2011],” YouTube, https://youtu.be/KBevUZf0TNw (link on Blackboard also);


Research: Thesis and evidence, lightning round. You will make a very brief, five-minute presentation outlining the argument you will pose in your paper and showing some of the ways in which you will prove your thesis. This is a trial run for the paper draft, so don’t make a presentation “in search of a thesis,” i.e., laying out all the neat things you found without making a clear argument. Think about logical structures and ways of presenting evidence.

***Complete draft of your paper must be submitted to the instructor on Blackboard and shared with your peer readers by November 30 at midnight.

Week 14. December 4. Workshop on drafts

Research: Workshopping drafts/peer reviews.

***Students should schedule an individual conference with the instructor to discuss the paper draft this week or next.

Week 15. December 11. Presentations

This week is devoted to presentations of your research projects.
**Final papers due on December 19, by 5 p.m., via Blackboard.**

Undergraduate papers should be at least 20 pages in length; graduate student papers should be of publishable length (25-40 pages) and quality. Papers should be submitted in Times or Times New Roman font, 12 point, double-spaced, with standard margins. You may use footnotes or endnotes, but whichever you choose you MUST follow University of Chicago style (Turabian/humanities style) for text and references. Emailed papers will not be accepted without prior permission.

**Learning objectives:**

At the end of this course, students will be able to

- Read and understand primary sources as products of a specific historical context
- Identify the elements of the literary genre apocalypse
- Outline major developments in the history of apocalyptic thought from the inter-testamental period through the twentieth century
- Provide examples of the way in which apocalyptic thinking responds to current events and can be used either to propel action or to support the status quo
- Identify the thesis and analyze the argument of secondary sources relating to apocalyptic thinking
- Present historical analysis and arguments in a clear written form, including the ability to construct an argument by marshaling evidence in an appropriate and logical fashion.
- Write a research paper that asks a significant historical question, situates it within a body of scholarship, answers it with a clear thesis and a logical argument, supports it with both primary and secondary sources documented according to the standards of the Chicago Manual of Style, and articulates its points in clear and artful prose with the grammar and spelling associated with formal composition.

**Books to purchase:**

**Recommended:**

**Required:**

**Electronic Reserves (ER).** Readings designated (ER) in the syllabus are linked through Blackboard.

**Course requirements:**

- Quotations from the readings/reading responses----5%
- Participation in discussions----10%
- Write your own apocalypse, with commentary—10%
- Research prospectus----10%
- Meeting intermediate research deadlines as listed on syllabus----10%
- Historiography paper----15%
- Final research paper----40%

Reading assignments are due on the day they appear in the lecture schedule (with the obvious exception of the first day of class).

Attendance at and participation in all classes is crucial. Three unexcused absences will lower your grade by one letter grade; after five unexcused absences, I reserve the right to withdraw you from the course. For the sake of accounting, three tardies will constitute one absence.

**About the quotations from the readings:** For each assigned reading, undergraduates will be required to hand in one quotation you would like to discuss (please indicate page number), as well as a one to two sentence explanation of why you have chosen that quotation.

**About the reading responses:** Graduate students will write a 300-600 word synthetic response to the week’s readings. The response should demonstrate that you have done all the reading (so if there are multiple texts to be discussed, be sure to mention all of them), that you have thought about the reading (so you will want to raise some questions or ideas for discussion), and that you can use evidence from the readings to back up a point (so you will want to offer brief quotations in support of arguments that you advance).

Late work will be penalized 10% for each calendar day late. I do not accept emailed assignments without prior arrangement and only under the most exigent of circumstances.

**Grading scale:**

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In case of some mix-up, it is a good idea to save all returned work until you receive your grade at the end of the semester.

**A note regarding the use of computers in the classroom:** While I do not (yet) ban laptops from the classroom, there is a significant body of research that shows that people retain material more effectively when they take notes by hand rather than on a computer. (See, e.g., https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop.) Needless to say, the opportunities for distraction are much greater if the Internet and the world of social media beckon. Similarly, while there are numerous readings posted on Blackboard for the class, researchers have demonstrated that reading a physical, hard copy of a text results in more focused and critical reading. (E.g., https://newrepublic.com/article/135326/digital-reading-no-substitute-print.) Ideally, you will print out readings that have been posted on Blackboard to read them. At the very least, you should plan to bring some version of the text to class (hard copy of digital).

**Students with disabilities:** The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL, 1-154 Dewey Hall, 585-275-9049) offers a variety of disability services for undergraduates and graduate students in Arts, Sciences & Engineering. These services aim to provide an inclusive experience and equal access to academic content and program requirements. They can help you to request accommodations for your success in this class. You can learn more at: www.rochester.edu/college/cetl/undergraduate/disability. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me as well.

**Classroom etiquette:** Please turn off cell phones or set them to a silent alert. In the rare event you must enter late or leave class early, please let me know in advance.

**Academic honesty:** All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy. Cheating and plagiarism are serious offenses and will be treated as such. Anyone who engages in such activities will be turned over to the College Board on Academic Honesty for disciplinary action, as outlined at http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/. For a helpful discussion of plagiarism (including subtle instances), see the American Historical Association’s “Defining Plagiarism,” https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/plagiarism-curricular-materials-for-history-instructors/defining-plagiarism

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**Disclaimer:** The instructor reserves the right to change topics and assignments on the syllabus at any point in the semester.