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 3.** Introduction to the course and assignments; overview of the history of apocalyptic thought


**Week 2. September 10. Early apocalyptic**

This week's readings explore the apocalyptic strains in Judaism that spilled over into early Christianity, taking as examples the book of Daniel and the apocryphal (that is, non-canonical) 2 Esdras (= 4 Ezra). Both are classic examples 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). These works will help demonstrate the elements of the genre, as well as the way in which such texts could speak to contemporary concerns, as both works contain thinly disguised references to events surrounding the times of their composition.

Reading: Daniel 7-12, in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*;


Research: Finding a topic; beginning research.


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 very 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), in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*;

Weber, *Apocalypses*, 40-44;

Research: Initial survey; primary sources.

You will hand in a copy of an article from a scholarly encyclopedia (or the equivalent) pertaining to your topic and will present to the group a primary source to be used for your research.

**Week 4. September 24. 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 article provides an intriguing scholarly approach to this topic. What uses does he make of the sources? What can we learn from what authors do not say?

Reading: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book V, chaps. 25-35 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);

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. Welkenhuysen, eds., *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988), 137-211 (ER);


Research: Initial survey; 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.


pseudo-Methodius, Apocalypse [also known as Revelations], in Apocalypse, Pseudo-Methodius. An Alexandrian World Chronicle, ed. and trans. Benjamin Garstad, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), vii-xviii; 75-139 (odd pages only) (ER);

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

Weber, Apocalypses, 83-98.


Research: Diagrams.

You will make a presentation in which you will diagram your research topic for the class.

**Week 6. October 8. 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. 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.


Research: Diagrams, continued. **Prospectus due.**

**Prospectus for the research paper due October 8 in class: bibliography of primary sources, major secondary sources, and a general description of the project (see instructions).**

**Week 7. October 15.** 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 recent 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);


Research: Close readings.

You 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 Wednesday at noon.

**Week 8. October 22.** 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.

Brett Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 100-24, 270-79 (ER);

Research: Close readings, continued.

**Week 9. October 29. Radical millenarians?**

One of the most influential (and controversial) interpretations of medieval apocalypticism has remained Norman Cohn's study, first published in 1957, linking apocalyptic thought with revolutionary and anarchistic movements. Many of the authors and themes Cohn discusses will be familiar to you by now. Your job this week is to use your knowledge to critique his book. What sorts of sources does he use? How does he use them? What does he ignore? Is he right?


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. (This is the "hook" that will draw readers into your paper. Look at a couple of good articles as model compositions to see how other historians have hooked their readers, and look over the handout How to Get a Handle on Historiography.)

**Week 10. November 5. 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. 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? As we peer over Columbus's shoulder at his prophetic compilation, we see the centrality of apocalyptic thought in the Spanish
conquest of the New World. How does this square with any mental picture you may already have of Columbus? Of the Renaissance? Of modernity?


Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies,'" *American Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (1985): 73-102 (ER);

Columbus, *Book of Prophecies* (ER).

Research: Historiography, continued. **Historiography paper due in class on November 5.**

**Week 11. November 12. 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);


You will make a presentation outlining the argument you will make 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. Notice that you will have to have a working outline of
the paper and a good sense of the thesis for which you wish to argue in order to make a successful presentation.

**Week 12. November 19. No class: writing time**

Drafts of complete research paper due to me and to peer reviewers by Monday, November 24, at 5 p.m.

**Week 13. November 26. No class: Thanksgiving break**


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;


Research: Workshopping drafts/peer reviews.

**Week 15. December 10. Presentations**

This week is devoted to presentations of your research projects.

**Final papers due on December 18, by 5 p.m.** in the History Department. 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 intertestamental 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:


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

Course requirements:

Reading responses----20%
Participation in discussions----10%
Research prospectus----5%
Meeting intermediate deadlines as listed on syllabus----10%
Historiography paper (3-5 pages)----15%
Final research paper----40%

Reading assignments are due on the day they appear in the lecture schedule. Reading responses are due on the day of the discussion on the pertinent materials.

Attendance at and participation in all classes is crucial. Three unexcused absences will lower your grade by 5%; 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 reading responses:** For each discussion so indicated, you must bring to class and hand in a 1-2 page (double spaced) response to the readings. You will want to 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:** 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:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100-93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>92.9-90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>89.9-87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>86.9-83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>82.9-80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>79.9-77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>76.9-73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>72.9-70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>69.9-67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>66.9-63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>62.9-60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Below 60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

**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](http://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/](http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty/).

**Copyright notice:** Copyright © by Laura Smoller as to this syllabus and all lectures. Students and auditors are prohibited from selling notes during this course to (or being paid for taking notes by) any person or commercial firm without the express written permission of the professor teaching this course. Students may tape lectures for their own study purposes, but students are prohibited from selling such tapes or making them available to other students in any manner.

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