

This is the Way the World Ends: Apocalyptic Visions and Nationhood

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Since the beginning of time, humans have been fascinated with our own demise. Prophets and scientists have foreseen the end of the human race more times than we can count, though luckily, none of their predictions have come to pass. Apocalyptic visions are inextricably bound to the myths we rely on to create our societies and more broadly our nations. They bring panic and discord, but often also serve to bring people together around a common cause or to spark massive political change. Different visions of the apocalypse grip us at different times and relate to the to specific social and political circumstances. The way we see the apocalypse and react to it can show us much about who we are, how we live, and who we hope to be.

This seminar explores the connections between apocalyptic visions and nationhood. As citizens, it is important for each of us to understand how we create our visions of our nation and to critically analyze our own views and biases. There are several key questions that help to illuminate this analysis and guide the course. Why are humans so fascinated with the end of the world? What specific circumstances cause apocalyptic visions to take hold? How do we respond to them? How have groups used the threat or promise of apocalypse to further political goals? And what can these things tell us about how we create our societies and ourselves?

The seminar will begin with two units setting up theoretical views on apocalyptic visions and societal formation. These theories will then be used to explore three case studies, each of which draw on different disciplines, methods of analysis, and relate to different questions. The first is the Fifth Monarchists, a political movement in 17th century England that believed the apocalypse would take place in 1666. This section takes a historical approach and can reveal much about the circumstances in which apocalyptic visions take hold and political reactions. The second, on ISIS, looks at a group that is actively attempting to bring about the apocalypse and how they have deliberately used it to form a new nation out of nothing. The third, apocalyptic visions in pop culture in the United States, seeks to understand how these fears manifest in the non-political sphere and what pop culture can tell us about our views of our societies. This section also incorporates scientific theories on the apocalypse, such as global warming and pandemics, rather than the religious foundation taken by the other two case studies. In taking a comparative approach, I hope the seminar will be able to reveal common threads, but also how specific circumstances shape which visions of the apocalypse take hold and what that means for our conceptions of society.

Though the theoretical sources in the first two sessions come primarily from religion, sociology, philosophy, and political science, the materials also draw from psychology, environmental science, biology, literature, history, and visual media, particularly in the case studies. Although on the surface the course may appeal more to students from sociology, philosophy, political science, and religion, the texts were deliberately chosen to include access points for people from a much wider variety of disciplines.

Tentative Course Materials

Note: selections will be 1-3 chapters, most between 10-50 pages total. These course materials are preliminary, and I am still working on cutting things.

Theories of Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Prediction

- *Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber (selections).
- *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (selections).
- *Vision and Violence*, Arthur P. Mendel (selections).
- Selections from the ArtStor collection of apocalyptic imagery curated by Jamal Velji
- “The End of the World as We Know It? Apocalypticism, Interdisciplinarity, and the Study of Religion”, Sarah King. Journal article.

Myth Building and Nationhood

- *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*, John Hall (selections)
- *Political Myth*, Christopher Flood (selections)
- “The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought”, B.S. Capp. Article.
- “Terror Management Theory,” Jeff Greenberg and Jamie Arndt. In *Handbook of theories of social psychology*.

The Fifth Monarchists and Revolutionary Apocalypse

- *The Fifth Monarchy Men*, B.S. Capp (selections).
- *Antichrist in the 17th Century*, Christopher Hill (selections).
- *Revelation Restored*, W. Johnson (chapter two).
- “A Door of Hope,” pamphlet. Primary source.
- Book of Daniel, relevant section.
- “A Treatise of the Fifth Monarchy, or, Christ's Personalm Reigne on Earth One Thousand Years with his Saints,” Robert Maton. Primary source.

ISIS and the Deliberate Apocalypse

- *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, Will McCants (selections).
- *Dabiq*, ISIS's English language magazine (selections).
- “Apocalyptic Religion and Violence,” Jamel Velji. In *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*.
- Quran (selections).

Pop Culture and the Scientific Apocalypse

- *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood. Novel. Centers around a dystopian future caused by environmental catastrophies.
- *Y: The Last Man*, Brian K. Vaughn. Comic book series (selected issues). All men on earth but one are killed by a mysterious pandemic.
- “Mad Max: Fury Road”. Film.

- “Doomsday America: The Pessimistic Turn of Post-9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema,” John Walliss and James Aston. Journal article.
- “Narrating the Environmental Apocalypse: How Imagining the End Facilitates Moral Reasoning Among Environmental Activists,” Robin Globus Veldman. Journal article.
- “An Apocalypse Think Tank”, interview with Lord Martin Rees, co-founder of the Center for the Study of Existential Risk. Magazine article.

Speakers

- Jamal Velji, professor of religion at Claremont McKenna (formerly at Haverford). Religious visions of the apocalypse.
- Richard K. Emmerson, visiting professor of Art History, Florida State University. Apocalyptic visions in art.
- John R. Hall, professor of sociology at UC Berkeley. Author of *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*.