

Course: Apocalypse Now  
Professor: Mikael Haxby  
Email: Mikael.haxby@rutgers.edu  
Schedule: Tuesday-Thursday 4:30-5:50  
Location: Frelinghuysen A3  
Office Hours: Tuesday 12:00-1:30  
Office: Loree 102

This class is about the end of the world. As such, it is about myth. And not merely myths as in the crazy stories of falcons with five heads and flaming talons, but myths in the sense of the narratives that humans have always used to construct a livable world.

What does it mean to imagine the end? One of the hypotheses of this class is that, as Laurence Coupe puts it, “apocalypse is always now.” To imagine the end, to seek to evoke the end and even instill in one’s audience the impression that they are living in the end, is to talk about the here and now. What of today’s world will be uprooted in cataclysm and what will remain? What actions have people been taking today which seem unimportant or even praiseworthy, but which when seen from the perspective of the end appear foolhardy or massively immoral? The myths we tell to construct our world enable us to live in this world, but they also shape how we view the world practically, personally, spiritually and politically. This course will seek to understand apocalypse in the context of the mythic present.

This course engages with apocalypse from two angles. In the first section of the class, we will read about the ancient context of apocalypse and myth, beginning with ancient creation myths. We will discuss them in the context of a variety of theories of myth, trying to puzzle out what it was that ancient people “believed” when they “believed in” these myths. We will then turn to the construction of apocalyptic mythology in the Jewish and Christian traditions—and following Elaine Pagels, we will take the book of Revelation not simply as a Christian apocalypse but also as a Jewish apocalypse.

In the second section of the course, we turn to the contemporary apocalypses. I’m interested in massively popular stories of the end, the ones that are truly part of everyday life in contemporary America. The first then will be the “Left Behind” series of books and modern Pre-Millennial, Dispensationalist Christianity. We’ll look at how this version of Christianity interprets not only the Bible but also the contemporary world, with particular focus on the relationship between contemporary Jews and Christians and the state of Israel. Then we’ll turn to two “secular” apocalypses: zombies and global warming. What story of contemporary society do zombies tell? And with global warming, what does it mean for a myth to be true? What does it mean when contemporary science tells us that the end is coming? Is this a “myth” in the sense of a story we tell about the world? How do people reconsider their practical, spiritual or ethical lives in light of anthropogenic global warming?

Course Books:

Elaine Pagels, *Revelations*  
Laurence Coupe, *Myth*

Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind*

Course Requirements:

1) Attendance and participation. We will be engaging in regular discussion in class, so coming prepared with copies of the course texts, is required. Missed classes for illness or other reasons can be excused, but you have to contact me in advance to let me know. More than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for attendance.

2) Reading Responses. There are three short response papers required over the semester. These are not due on a specific date, but one must be turned in by September 24<sup>th</sup>, another must be turned in by October 20<sup>th</sup>, and you must have all three done by November 24<sup>th</sup>. These are papers of about a page in length. You are expected to engage with course materials, but you have freedom to choose your topic. The questions for “discussion” each week can help guide your response.

3) Exams. There will be two in-class exams, both consisting of essay questions. The topics will be given to you in advance to prepare, but you will be required to write the essays in class during the exam time.

4) Paper. The final paper project is a 6-8 page paper due by December 18<sup>th</sup>. The final draft should be submitted to me by email. We will spend time in class working on these papers in rough draft form as well. Part of your paper assignment is not only to draft your own paper, but to work with your classmates to help with theirs. You will participate in reading groups of 5-6 students, and you will read each other’s first drafts and give feedback to help in the revision process. An initial proposal is due in class on November 17<sup>th</sup>. The first draft of the final paper will be due both to myself and to your reading group on December 1<sup>st</sup>.

Grading:

25% Attendance + Participation

10% Response Papers

30% Exams

35% Final Paper (5% for first draft, 5% for collaborative revisions, 25% for final)

This course will fulfill goals for the following writing intensive core requirements:

- a. Students will work at revision and peer-review of their writing in the final paper project, in which students will submit a draft to both the instructor and their revision peer group, and then will be responsible for producing written responses to each others’ work. This will teach critical reading abilities as well as the skills to produce and respond to feedback from peers and instructors.
- b. The required reading responses, as well as the paper, final and in-class discussions will teach students methods of engaging with complex and foreign texts in ways fitting to the academic study of religion and of apocalypticism in particular.
- c. The midterm, final, and writing assignments will teach students to evaluate and critically assess sources for apocalyptic movements and literature and use appropriate conventions of attribution and citation.

- d. The midterm, final, and writing assignments focus on teaching students to analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights.

September 1: First Day of Class, Discussion of The End of the World

September 3: Genesis 1-6.9, Daniel 7, 1 Thess 4.13-5.11

**Discussion:** What are the stories of the beginning and the end in the Jewish and Christian traditions? What are the key narratives of birth and death, life and resurrection? How are these stories told? Is there one creation and one apocalypse, or many? What stories do creation and apocalypse tell about the contemporary world?

September 10: Revelation, Pagels, *Revelation* 1-35

**Discussion:** What do you notice the first time you read the book of Revelation? What do you think this book is about? What aspects of the stories of creation and apocalypse from Genesis, Daniel or Thessalonians do you see reflected here? What is not reflected?

Pagels makes the case for reading Revelation in light of the Roman Empire. Do you buy her reading? What about her interpretation of Daniel 7?

September 15: [Enuma Elish](#)

**Discussion:** We return to the world of creation with our first non-Biblical myth, the Babylonian Enuma Elish. Compare this story to Genesis 1-9 in particular. What are the roles of the highest god and other gods? What are the roles of women and female deities? What does the Enuma Elish have to say about how our world should be structured?

September 17: Coupe, *Myth* 1-12, 37-58

**Discussion:** Laurence Coupe introduces us to his concept of “myth”, and uses these readings to address a variety of ancient and modern texts.

What is “myth” to Coupe? Is “myth” a part of our lives today, or just a part of the old world? What is the “myth of mythlessness”?

He discusses in the “Chaos” chapter the Enuma Elish in light of the theories of the scholar Mircea Eliade. What is Eliade’s understanding of religion and myth? Do the categories of sacred and profane, order and chaos help us to understand the Enuma Elish, Genesis, or Revelation?

September 22: [Hesiod’s Theogony](#)

**Discussion:** Our second non-biblical creation myth, Hesiod’s *Theogony* lays out the proper and perfect order of the cosmos through the stories of the Gods. Or does it? Hesiod is often seen as the great typologizer of Greek antiquity, the creator of just-so stories and a well-ordered universe. But to what degree does Hesiod’s order of creation hold up, and to what degree does it succumb to the “chaos” of Coupe’s story?

September 24: [Genesis 1-12](#), Coupe 16-29

**Discussion:** We return to Genesis in light of Coupe, looking at the “Order” of myth in the theories of James Frazer. What methods of reading myth help us understand the constant play of

creation and destruction that is laid out in the first chapters of Genesis? If Genesis 1-3 seems to lay out the proper order of the world, why is that divinely-ordained order not maintained in the following chapters? What play of creation and destruction, order and chaos is being made known?

September 29: [1 Enoch 1-36](#)

**Discussion:** Enoch is a non-Biblical Jewish myth that interprets Genesis in light of a story of fallen “Watchers.” It can be difficult to follow at times, as it seems to reflect two different traditions about the Watchers. What is Enoch saying about Genesis? What is Enoch saying about the myths of creation and destruction in Genesis, and what sort of myth for its world is it seeking to lay out?

October 1: [Daniel 7-12](#), Collins, *Commentary on Daniel*

**Discussion:** Understanding the early apocalypse of Daniel requires understanding the political history of the ancient Jews. We have seen some of this from the Pagels reading, but Collins gives us a full overview. How does Daniel use visionary rhetoric to tell a contemporary and political story? What is Daniel’s purpose in putting this story in the mythical and visionary future?

October 6: Qumran Community Rule

**Discussion:** The Qumran community was a Jewish sect organized by resistance to the priesthood of Jerusalem and an apocalyptic outlook. The Community Rule seeks to tell people how to live, day-by-day, in light of the apocalypse. What sort of life does it articulate? How does the apocalypse become now for the people of Qumran?

October 8: 4 Ezra, Pagels 73-84

**Discussion:** This is a Jewish apocalypse contemporaneous to Daniel. How does Ezra interpret the destruction that surrounded him, in ancient post-war Judea? How does he read together the past, the present and the future into mythical time?

October 13: Gospel of Mark (esp. Mark 7 and 13), Coupe, 59-74

**Discussion:** The first Christian gospel is also the most clearly apocalyptic. How does Jesus’ apocalyptic expectation influence his ministry in this Gospel? What does Jesus mean when he preaches “the Kingdom of God”? Is this Kingdom here in the present or set off in the future? If we understand Apocalypse as Now, how should we understand the confusing nature of the “Basileia tou Theou” (Kingdom of God)?

Coupe offers us some strategies for reading about “endings”—focusing particularly on how telling a myth of the end is a way of ordering a new world, laying out an order that is different from the one we know. How is Mark’s apocalyptic orientation focused on this sort of new order?

October 15: 1 Thessalonians, Stendahl, “Call not Conversion”

**Discussion:** The earliest document of the Christian New Testament is not a gospel, but the letter from the apostle Paul to the church in Thessaloniki. In it, he lays out his teaching to a group of Gentile believers. How do we know that Paul writes to Gentiles? Given that our stories of apocalypse have thusfar mostly been found within the Jewish tradition, what does it mean for a Jewish prophet to be teaching Gentiles?

October 20: Romans

**Discussion:** Know that Paul is, let's say, not a systematic writer. There have been ranging debate now for two millennia as to what this letter means, and do not be too troubled if you find yourself confused. Indeed, when you are confused, that is often a good time to stand back and lay out what has confused you, what issues are being discussed that do not seem to get resolved. You may just have identified a place where Paul's own thought is confused, and that is an excellent place to begin analysis.

In Romans we learn Paul's opinions on creation and apocalypse, on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in salvation. What sort of reader of Genesis is Paul? Does he see the story of Adam (and Eve) as one of historical or symbolic truth? What sort of myth of creation does Paul propound?

Read this complex text in light of Stendahl's strong argument that Paul has not left Judaism as a "convert" to Christianity. What is the relationship between Jews and Gentiles or Jews and Christians in this text?

October 22: Gospel of John

**Discussion:** The Gospel of John provides for us what appears to be a non-apocalyptic version of early Christianity not oriented around a mythic future vision. Is it right to say that John is non-apocalyptic? If so, what does that mean about the mythic nature of John? What sort of mythic story is being told in John, and how does it differ from the peculiarly apocalyptic texts of Paul and Mark.

This is also yet another text about the relationship between Jesus and Jews or Judaism. Is the portrayal of the Jews in this text in line with that of Paul or Mark, or does it differ?

October 27: Revelation, Pagels 37-72

**Discussion:** Elaine Pagels places Revelation now square in the middle of this discussion of Christianity and Judaism, of Jews and Gentiles in relation to Christ, which has been the topic of many of our discussions of Paul and Gospels. Is Revelation a book about Judaism, written from a distinctly Jewish perspective? If that is right, what does it mean for our understanding of apocalypticism? What sort of mythic story is Revelation telling, in Pagels' reading?

October 29: First Exam

November 3: Library Orientation Day

November 5: Karen Armstrong, *The Battle For God* (selections on Sakai), begin Left Behind

**Discussion:** We turn now to the modern history of Revelation and its implication in Protestant Pre-Millennial theology. What is "dispensationalism"? What sort of method of reading the Bible is implied by this new approach to Revelation and to the Bible?

Note how the Bible and faith function in the early chapters of *Left Behind*. How are you supposed to read the Bible, according to *Left Behind*? This is something sort of new to us, a textual mythology. How does the text of Revelation function within this mythological space?

November 10: Finish *Left Behind*

**Discussion:** What is the reading of Revelation that you have just finished? As you go through the text, have Revelation with you. (It's what Jerry and Tim would want, anyway.) What of the text is being emphasized? What is being downplayed? What is the relationship between the apocalyptic mythology of Revelation and the apocalyptic mythology of these Pre-Millennialist readers of Revelation?

November 12: Victoria Clark, "Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism"

**Discussion:** Israel, the state, plays an utterly central role in *Left Behind*. This reflects the growth of the "Christian Zionist" movement, Christians who support the state of Israel in great part because of its implication in this myth of the end times.

We have placed Revelation in the context of ancient Jewish and Christian relations, now we see the same text in the context of contemporary Jewish and Christian relations. What has changed and what differs? How do apocalyptic myths create either bonds or tensions between religious groups?

November 17: Zombie film to be announced

November 19: Drezner, "Politics and Zombies," Coupe, 118-146

**Discussion:** Ok, what are zombie films about? I bring in Coupe's discussion of the psyche and the family because one of the key issues that recur in zombie films are familiar relationships. What do zombies tell us about the contemporary world? Why are we as a culture so up to here with zombies? What sort of secular mythology have these films played into?

November 24: Screening: *An Inconvenient Truth*

December 1: Laura Johnson, "Environmental Rhetorics of Tempered Apocalypticism in *An Inconvenient Truth*"

**Discussion:** This is our *Inconvenient Truth* discussion class. How does Gore make use of apocalyptic rhetoric in laying out the science of global warming? Is this "myth"? Think about it this way: if Gore had simply written out all of the mathematics that go into climate modeling, would anyone have appreciated the film? What happens when math and models are translated into rhetoric? Indeed, were the models ever not narrative? And how does the construction of narratives influence how we as modern people imagine our world as a world in danger? What ethical and political outlook is advanced by this myth?

December 3: Coupe, 181-214

**Discussion:** Global warming organizes one of the most important modern myths of apocalypse, that of eco-apocalypse. Coupe traces the roots of this tradition through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then engages with a variety of contemporary eco-theorists. This will be our final course

discussion, and we will look back over the course and try to figure out what apocalypses and myths really are, anyhow.

December 8: **Second Exam**

December 10: Meeting of revision groups in class