

SOCS 618 Course Syllabus

The End of the World: End Times in American Religious Thought

Professor Elizabeth McAlister
Religion Dept 104
860-685-2289
Emcalister@wesleyan.edu

Note Special Schedule: This course meets for one full week, from June 14-18, from 9:00-5:00. Also, plan to wear church-appropriate clothing on Wed or Thurs, for a field trip to an evangelical church service at 7:00 pm (about which more information will come. On that day we will break early in the afternoon to make up the time for the 7:00 pm field trip).

Albritton Center Room 004

This course examines how some religious groups in the U.S. herald the hastening of the end of time, when a messiah will appear to cleanse the earth of all unrighteousness. We will focus on selected societies in U.S. history, including Puritans, Messianic Jews, and Christian Fundamentalists, and on genres of representation including fiction, film and popular music. Among the themes we will discuss will be Americanism, or the ways groups imagine the United States to be favored by God, religious politics, and the ways that American eschatologies ("end-of-the-world" theologies) are gendered and racialized.

Students will read, hear or view the assigned texts in advance of the class sessions, so we can spend our time together in discussion. (Note that the texts consist of books, articles, radio programs, and films.) In class, we will discuss the readings in seminar format, share presentations of our assignments with one another, view film clips and web sites together, and go on at least one fieldtrip.

I believe in student-led learning, and learning through discussion, so while I will be lecturing some of the time, we will also spend a lot of time discussing various questions that we all generate.

Note on the texts: Texts are listed in order best read or viewed, and follow a generally chronological order. However you may proceed out of order if you wish. The theoretical underpinnings of the course are the articles by Peter Berger, Russell McCutcheon, so read these carefully.

Also note that you have a choice in the novel you read: pick EITHER Left Behind by Tim LaHaye, OR Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler, so you may wish to begin that right away and keep it going on your bedside table. (You'll see that we are reading Left Behind for its sociological value, not its literary merits! Also be aware that Parable of the Sower, while a far better work of art, is disturbingly violent, especially in the first third.) Obviously you can read them both but I've only required one for time's sake.

Besides the required texts (that you will want to purchase or borrow), all the other readings are downloadable through the Wesleyan website under "Course Documents". You must find the films yourself, through something like Blockbuster, Netflix or on the Internet.

Assignments are designed to help you process the information and reflect helpfully on it for yourselves, and to give me a way to evaluate your thinking and writing: You will be responsible for:

1) A 1-page response paper on 4 different readings. (That's four 1-page papers) You will respond to A) Berger and B) McCutcheon, plus 2 other texts of your choice by June 14th, to be posted on Blackboard under "Discussion Board." Instructions for writing that paper are under "Course Assignments." 3 of the 4 responses are **due by June 10th**, and the last is due by June 14th.

There are some student examples already posted there to follow as models. Please do not respond to those papers, but rather add your own "thread" so I can see your responses when I click on the author's name. I would like to have these responses spread out so that all the readings receive thought and response from one or more of you. So when you are deciding what to respond to, please choose a reading nobody else has chosen, and only double or triple up when all the readings are covered.

As for the mechanics of posting the responses, first prepare your response in a Word file, then log on to Blackboard, go to "Discussion Board" and then click "add a thread" and post your response, either by copy and paste, or as an attachment. If you have technical trouble, email Jolee West at Jwest@wesleyan.edu.

2) Two in-class 7-minute presentations, one of which is with a partner. One in-class presentation you will prepare beforehand on a text, and the second will be with a partner, on your choice of 1) a website review or 2) a popular song or work of art. I will decide which presentations will be scheduled when, so please have your presentation ready by the first class meeting.

Please sign up for a reading to present on the Blackboard under "assignments." This reading should not be one of the 4 assignments you responded to on the "discussion" board. I have listed all the materials, and you can go in on a first-come first-served basis and sign up. Please have your presentation ready by June 14th when we meet. In order to put your name into a slot, you click "edit" on the right hand side of the page. Then write your name, and then CLICK SAVE.

3) A 5-page final essay due June 30th. Essay topic is under "Course Assignments"

Required texts to buy or borrow – Note: Pick Left Behind OR Parable of the Sower

Nancy Ammerman, BIBLE BELIEVERS (Rutgers Press), Paperback

Octavia Butler, PARABLE OF THE SOWER (Grand Central Publishing), Paperback

David Chidester, SALVATION AND SUICIDE (Indiana University Press), Paperback

Tim LaHaye, LEFT BEHIND (Living Books), Paperback

Hal Lindsey, LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH (Zondervan), Paperback

Films to View before June 14th

1. "Mysteries of the Bible: The Apocalypse: The Puzzle of Revelation"
2. *On the Beach*
3. *Bladerunner*

READINGS:

A Theory of Religion:

--Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, chapters 1 and 2.

Apocalypse as Ancient Genre

Paul Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in American Culture. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard), ix-45.

The Book of Revelation (last book of The Holy Bible), any edition. Read through this dense text as best you can

Screen "*Mysteries of the Bible: The Apocalypse: The Puzzle of Revelation*" Available on Netflix

Optional: The Book of Daniel (from The Holy Bible, any edition)

The Messianic Idea in Judaism

"Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism." in Gershom Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism. New York: Schocken Books, 1971. pp. 1-36.

Contemporary Jewish Messianism

William Shaffir, "Lubavitch Millennialism" in The Jewish Journal of Sociology, Vol. 36 No. 1 (June 1993)

Lis Harris, Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family. Ch. 3

Myth, Narrative, Americanism

McCutcheon, "Myth," 190-208.

Conrad Cherry, God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny, Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice Hall, 1971. pp. 1-30

Albert J. Raboteau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel." in Hackett, Religion and American Culture.

Christianity 101

Wiles, "What Christians Believe"

Christian Fundamentalists: An Ethnography

Nancy Ammerman, Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World. New Brunswick: Rutgers U Press, 1987.

Susan Harding, "Imagining the Last Days: The Politics of Apocalyptic Language." in Marty and Appelby, eds. Accounting for Fundamentalisms.

Millennial International Politics

Listen to Christian Zionist Pastor Hagee on "Fresh Air.":

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6097362>

Listen to Gersham Gorenberg on "Fresh Air"

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6097356>

Listen to Max Blumenthal on "Fresh Air"

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6097359>

Nuclear Secular Apocalypse

Daniel Wojcik, "Secular Apocalyptic Themes in the Nuclear Era." in The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America. New York: NYU Press, 1997, pp. 97-132.

Screen film: "On the Beach"

Christian Nuclear Visions

Hofstater, "The paranoid style of mind" in David Brion Davis, ed., The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hal Lindsey, Late Great Planet Earth (Just read selectively throughout the book)

Apocalyptic Utopia

David Chidester, Salvation and Suicide, An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the People's Temple, and Jonestown

The Rapture as Best-Seller

La Haye and Jenkins, Left Behind

Futuristic Feminist Post-Apocalypse

Octavia Butler, The Parable of the Sower (novel)

Post-Apocalypse Science Fiction

Screen Bladerunner

Students are encouraged to read articles of interest in these websites:

The Revealer is a blog run by NYU's Religion program, featuring academics and others writing about religion and the media:

<http://www.therevealer.org/>

Religion and Ethics Newsweekly is a PBS TV show on Religion in the news:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/current/headlines.html>