

University of Toronto
Department for the Study of Religion
RLG107H1
"It's the End of the World as We Know It"
Winter 2023, Online-Synchronous
Lectures 1:00-3:00 PM EST on Wednesdays

Instructor Information

Instructor: Dr. Maxwell Kennel (SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto). Email: maxwell.kennel@utoronto.ca

Course Description

Throughout the course of human history, many social and religious movements have envisioned the end of the world as we know it. This course explores how apocalyptic images are used in religious and secular ways to prepare for and expect an end time, while covering topics ranging from ecology to conspiracy theories. By examining the influence that apocalyptic ideas can have in various utopian and dystopian forms, this course gives resources for understanding how claims of “the end” reflect the aspirations, anxieties, and concerns of religious and secular communities.

All readings will be available on Quercus as PDF files.

Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

- Understanding how secular and religious ideas combine in historical and contemporary images of the end of the world.
- Examining apocalyptic ideas and categories are used as tools of persuasion.
- Looking critically at the histories of apocalyptic, millenarian, and utopian thought.
- Using scholarly prose to distinguish between your own ideas and the ideas of others.

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- A. Identify religious themes in modern cultures of “the end of the world.”
- B. Analyze the religious histories and characteristics of terms like “crisis” and “apocalypse.”
- C. Examine persuasive uses of apocalyptic thinking in careful, critical, and contextual ways.

Course Requirements and Assessment

<u>Assessment</u>	<u>Due Date (Midnight EST)</u>	<u>Weighting</u>
Introductions Assignment	January 18	5%
Assignment 1: Apocalypse Analysis	January 31	20%
Assignment 2: Utopia Analysis	February 15	20%
Assignment 3: Reading Response or Film Analysis	March 1	20%
Tutorial Attendance and Participation	April 6	10%
Assignment 5: Final Research Essay	April 12	25%

Teaching Assistants

- Christina Pasqua: christina.pasqua@mail.utoronto.ca
 - Danielle Baillargeon: danielle.baillargeon@mail.utoronto.ca
 - Heer Kahlon: heer.kahlon@mail.utoronto.ca
 - Barbara Hazelton: barbara.hazelton@mail.utoronto.ca
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Introductions Assignment (5%). DUE: January 15 at midnight EST.

TASK: Please post on discussion board.

• Introduce yourself to your classmates and instructor by posting your name, one interesting fact about yourself a 4-sentence description of why you chose this course. and a short description of one apocalyptic image you find interesting!

Tutorial Attendance and Participation (10%).

TASK: Please attend each tutorial for your scheduled section.

• Tutorial attendance and participation are fairly simple. In order to achieve the full 10% you must attend and make at least one substantial contribution to 10 tutorials out of the 11 that are scheduled. A substantial contribution means asking one detailed question or providing one detailed answer to another question, or providing a meaningful comment on the course topic and/or reading.

Assignment 1: Apocalypse Analysis (20%). DUE: January 31 at midnight EST.

TASK: Write and submit 500 words, single-spaced, in .doc format.

• Choose an *apocalyptic* story or set of images from literature, popular culture, film, television, or another medium (graphic novel, video game, etc.), and provide a two-part

analysis. First, describe its narrative structure by carefully showing how it presents the end of the world as an apocalypse. Pay particular attention to the implicit values and revelations that your chosen story or image relies upon. Second, please highlight any and all religious imagery and themes you observe, and make clear connections with the course themes as they have been presented in the lectures and readings.

Assignment 2: Utopia Analysis (20%). DUE: February 15 at midnight EST.

TASK: Write and submit 500 words, single-spaced, in .doc format.

· Choose a *utopian* story or set of images from literature, popular culture, film, television, or another medium, and provide a two-part analysis similar to Assignment 1. First, describe its narrative structure by carefully showing how it conceptualizes the end of the world as a positive utopia where human beings flourish. Then make explicit the values that underpin this utopian vision by answering two questions: What defines the good life in this utopia? Is anyone left out of this utopia? Lastly, show how religious ideas are present or absent in your chosen story or images, and make substantial connections to the lectures and readings.

Assignment 3. Two Options:

Reading Response (20%). DUE March 1 at midnight EST.

TASK: Write and submit 300 words, single-spaced, in .doc format.

· Choose one reading from the course so far, and provide a detailed 300 word summary and analysis of it, while addressing how it defines and challenges our ideas about the end of the world. To help give substance to your response, think ahead to a possible final essay topic and make suggestions about how the reading you have chosen might help you analyze religious themes in a utopian or dystopian story from pop culture, news media, or literature, broadly construed.

OR

Assignment 4. Film Analysis (20%). DUE March 1 at midnight EST.

TASK: Write and submit 300 words, single-spaced, in .doc format.

· Choose one readily available film or TV-series episode with apocalyptic themes, and provide a detailed 300 word summary and analysis of it, describing how it represents the end of the world and then analyzing that representation in a critical way. Make specific use of at least two course readings in your analysis, and be sure to choose a source that your TA can readily find information about online.

Assignment 5. Final Research Essay (25%). DUE April 5 at midnight EST.

TASK: Write and submit a 2000 word research essay, double-spaced, in .doc format.

• Using the basic materials of your first four assignments, choose two course readings and one story about the end of the world to analyze in-depth for your final research essay. Be sure to use the readings and lectures from this course to carefully and critically analyze the story you have chosen. The apocalyptic, utopian, or dystopian story you choose can be from a work of literature, a real-life event with significant media coverage, or an artifact from popular culture (film, television, etc.).

Please reach out to your TA with a brief summary of your idea by **March 31st**.

This is a recommendation and not a requirement.

Essay Requirements

Final essays require a clear use of sources and a detailed narrative summary and analysis of the story you have chosen, along with a bibliography and proper citations in Chicago or MLA format. Please pay special attention to the course content from Week 11 where we will talk about how to structure and write a high-quality research essay.

Each item on the following checklist of questions should be included in your essay:

- Is your essay 2000 words, including the bibliography?
- Does your essay contain a bibliography?
- Does your essay use proper Chicago or MLA citations?
 - Chicago:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html
 - MLA:
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_general_format.html
- Is your essay double-spaced in 12 point Times New Roman or Calibri font with normal margins?
- Was your essay submitted in .doc format? (PDF and .docx are also acceptable!)
- Does your essay clearly draw on what you learned in the lectures, readings, and your other assignments?
- Is your essay focused on a narrative or story with a beginning, middle, and end?
- Does your essay use at least two of the course readings to analyze the story?

- Does your essay accurately summarize, quote, and cite from at least two of the course readings?
- Is the story you have chosen apocalyptic, dystopian, or utopian?

A good practice is to keep this list open while you write your essay and check each point after you have finished your first draft. If you answer 'no' to any of the questions above, please revise your essay accordingly.

Course Outline

Week 1. Introduction

Lecture: Wednesday January 11, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Including: Introduction to the Instructor and Teaching Assistants. Syllabus Review. Brief Lecture. Close reading of the assigned text.

Key Questions: Do we live in a time of crisis? What does it mean to think about the end of the world as we know it? How do religious ideas influence how we think about the end of time and the ends toward which humans strive?

Introductory Reading: Elisabeth Dias, "The Apocalypse as an 'Unveiling': What Religion Teaches Us About the End Times" *New York Times*. April 2 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-apocalypse-religion.html>

Week 2. What is an Apocalypse?

Lecture: Wednesday January 18, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Key Questions: What is an apocalypse? What are scholarly and popular definitions of the term? How is the term used for persuasive purposes? What is periodization, and how does apocalyptic thinking divide and value periods of time and history? What is time? What is history? How do our ideas about time and history receive both secular and religious ideas about progress and the end of time?

Reading: Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 1-20. PDF.

Week 3. Dystopias and Utopias, Religious and Secular

Lecture: Wednesday January 25, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Questions: What is the key difference between utopian and dystopian narratives? How do utopian and dystopian themes animate our vision of the end of the world? How do secular utopias/dystopias and religious utopias/dystopias differ? How are they similar?

Reading: Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Blackwell, 1986), 3-18. PDF.

Week 4. Apocalypticism and Millenarianism

Lecture: Wednesday February 1, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Questions: What do apocalypses reveal and conceal? How do historical and contemporary groups – both religious and secular – use the concept of the ‘millennium’ to make meaning in the world and conceive of its end? How does apocalyptic thinking create tension in time and urgencies in action?

Reading: Frank Kermode, “Millennium and Apocalypse” in *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (University of Toronto Press, 1999), 11-27. PDF.

Week 5. Messianic Time and the Ideas of Progress and Decline

Lecture: Wednesday February 8, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Question: How is the idea that time is coming to an end used for persuasive purposes? How are Jewish and Christian ideas about a coming messiah taken up and used for persuasive purposes (for example, in the manipulation of tensions between origins and ends, or in populist proclamations of salvation)? How is the idea of decline used to persuade and legitimize knowledge?

Reading: Andrew Potter, *On Decline* (Biblioasis, 2021), 9-23. PDF.

Week 6. Religion and Fanaticism

Lecture: Wednesday February 15, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Question: What does the history of fanaticism and extremism tell us about apocalypse and religion? How does the term ‘fanatic’ and its uses help us to see how religion is both relegated to the past and reborn in the present through images of the end? What is the ‘myth of religious violence’ and what does it tell us about the category of religion itself?

Reading: Alberto Toscano, Preface to the Korean edition of *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (Verso, 2013). <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1286-fanaticism-to-write-a-history-of-a-thing-without-history> and Karen Armstrong, “The Myth of Religious Violence” *The Guardian*. September 24, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/25/-sp-karen-armstrong-religious-violence-myth-secular>

Week 7. Conspiracy Theories and Apocalyptic Thinking, Part 1.

Lecture: Wednesday March 1, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Question: How are apocalyptic conspiracy theories connected to the history of religion? How do conspiracy theories use and abuse the past?

Reading: Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013), 1-14. PDF.

Week 8. Conspiracy Theories and Apocalyptic Thinking, Part 2.

Lecture: Wednesday March 8, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Questions: How are conspiracy theories and spiritualities combined in ‘conspirituality’? What apocalyptic, messianic, dystopian, and utopian images are used as persuasive tactics by conspiracy theorists?

Reading: Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26.1 (2011): 103-121. PDF.

Week 9. Environmental Apocalypse, Part 1

Lecture: Wednesday March 15, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Questions: How do environmental movements feature apocalyptic images? What role do apocalyptic images play in environmental movements and how do they motivate and paralyze meaningful political action?

Readings: Foreword and Afterword to *This Is Not A Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook* (Penguin, 2019). Preview for *If a Tree Falls*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAGxy85R38o>

Week 10. Environmental Apocalypse, Part 2

Lecture: Wednesday March 22, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Questions: How do environmental movements entangle with the history of religious ideas about apocalypse and salvation? How do decolonial approaches and ecological approaches entangle?

Reading: Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology* (Polity, 2022), 1-22.

Week 11. Essay Writing Workshop: How to write an apocalyptic research essay

Lecture: Wednesday March 29, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Readings: How do essay writing and apocalyptic images of revelation use similar persuasive techniques of hiding and revealing? How can we responsibly narrate scholarly and popular narratives given the connection between persuasion and apocalypse?

Readings: Highlights from Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2021). PDF

Week 12. Conclusion: The 'end' of the course...

Lecture: Wednesday April 5, 1:00-3:00 PM EST

Questions: What does it mean to divide time and history into periods using the terms past/present/future or categories of ancient/medieval/modern? How do the complex lives and afterlives of religious and secular apocalypse appear in public and academic debates about the periodization of time and history?

