



## **American Apocalypse**

REL 482

Spring 2011

M/W 2:45 – 4:35pm, Humanities 112

Professor: Dr. Sam Thomas

Office: Humanities 236

Phone: x3693

Email: [sthomas@callutheran.edu](mailto:sthomas@callutheran.edu)

Office Hours: M/W 11am-12:30pm; T/Th 10-11am; by appt.

“Doom! Doom! Doom! Something seems to whisper it in the very  
dark trees of America. Doom!”

-D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*

\*Image from <http://americanapocalypse.net/>

### Course Description

This course will explore American history and culture through the lens of 'apocalypse' (broadly defined), with the aim of highlighting aspects of American history and society that draw from and express apocalyptic visions. 'Apocalypse' is here understood to function in different ways but to reflect a core conception of history-as-teleology as well as the claim that certain people catch glimpses into the true nature of reality (whether heavenly or earthly). In some versions this means that society and nature move toward the goal of perfection, harmony, etc., whether by human progress or by decisive action on the part of God. Because the apocalyptic vision is totalizing, such a conception of history and culture often provides the *prima facie* justification for agonistic social, military, political, and economic processes. Perhaps for this reason, in other apocalyptic visions the motifs of American goodness and innocence are in fact their own opposites—they mask a twisted and perverse underbelly of a culture whose ultimate destiny is not perfection but annihilation. Nowhere have these 'apocalyptic' themes been played out more clearly and deeply than in the theater of the 'American project,' from its inception to the present day.

### Course Requirements

This course will be reading- and writing-intensive (not, however, according to the Registrar), and will require regular and active participation in the form of discussion, presentation, and research.

#### *Participation*

Classroom discussion will be a central activity of this course. Students must come prepared to each session, having read all assigned readings and reflected on their significance for the topic. To facilitate preparation and discussion, there will be a short writing assignment for each week (see Weekly Paragraphs below). In addition to classroom participation, students will be required to participate in several small-group presentations.

Given the subject matter for this course, it is imperative that students engage in discussion in a civil, respectful, and dignified manner. The topic will inevitably generate political (and perhaps religious) disagreement, and all efforts must be made to navigate these moments with a spirit of intellectual generosity.

**The primary requirement for this course is that you take it with an open mind. If you agree or disagree with a given text or interpretation, that is your prerogative—as long as you can discuss it with enough critical distance to maintain a genuine conversation.**

#### *Research Project / Paper*

Students will take up a research project for the course, and the results of this project can be expressed in the form of a research paper, a formal presentation, or other appropriate form of analysis. Suggested topics for research projects will be provided. Research projects must be original and will be presented to the class.

### *Weekly Paragraphs*

At the end of each Monday class session the professor will announce a question to guide student preparation of the next reading assignment. Students will write one paragraph in direct response to the question of around ten lines and no more than one page. The opening sentence should introduce the answer; the remaining sentences should articulate the answer via an interpretation of the assigned text(s). Also, students will compose one pertinent question in response to the reading. As an incentive for excellent writing, one percentage point of extra credit (to be added to the final grade) will be awarded to five students who write the best paragraphs on three randomly selected occasions (15 total). Often a copy of an excellent paragraph will be given to everyone at the next class, especially early in the semester, both as an exemplar and as a study aid.

**Paragraphs must be posted to Blackboard before each Wednesday class and will not be accepted late.**

### *Exams and Quizzes*

There will be two short exams, and a few short quizzes, that will cover the assigned reading material. The exams will consist of objective, short-answer, and essay questions. **Quizzes may not be made up unless prior permission has been given by the professor.**

### Grading

Participation	20% (participation includes attendance!)
Weekly Paragraphs	20%
Final Project	25%
Exams	30% (15% each)
Quizzes	5%

Classroom participation will be graded according to the following criteria:

<u>Engages in discussions?</u>	never	infrequently	frequently	consistently
<u>Asks questions in class?</u>	never	infrequently	frequently	consistently
<u>Respectful of others? (Does NOT dominate discussions)</u>	never	infrequently	frequently	consistently
<u>Demonstrates serious academic pursuit</u>	never	infrequently	frequently	consistently

### Policy of Academic Honesty

All students are expected to know and to conform to the Policy on Academic Honesty found in the *Student Handbook* and to sign the statement specific to this course if requested.

### Students with Disabilities

CLU is committed to providing reasonable accommodations to **students with various documented disabilities** (physical, learning or psychological). If you are

a student requesting accommodations for this course, please contact me at the beginning of the semester and register with the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities (Pearson Library, Center for Academic and Accessibility Resources, x3260) for the facilitation and verification of need. I will work closely together with you and your coordinator to provide necessary accommodations.

**Readings** (required for purchase)

Kirsch, Jonathan. *A History of the End of the World* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

Marcus, Greil. *The Shape of Things to Come* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *America, Amerikkka: Elect Nation and Imperial Violence* (Equinox, 2007).

Shaban, Fuad. *For Zion's Sake* (Pluto Press, 2005)

Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. (any edition)

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. (any edition)

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. (any edition)

**Additional readings will regularly be placed on Blackboard (BB)**

**Course Schedule**

The course will be composed of 5 'units' in which related themes will be addressed. *Assigned readings are listed below each day and are to be read/prepared for that day!*

**Unit 1**

*Ancient Apocalypses and the Apocalyptic Worldview*

W Jan 19—Course Introduction: What is America? What is Apocalypse?

M Jan 24—Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the "Apocalyptic Worldview"

-1 Enoch (Book of the Watchers 1-16); Book of Daniel 7-12 (BB)

-Carey, *Ultimate Things* 1-18 (BB)

W Jan 26—Ancient (Jewish-)Christian Apocalypses and the End of the World?

-Revelation 1-7, 18-22 (BB)

-Kirsch, *History of the End of the World*, 19-51

M Jan 31— The Apocalyptic Tradition Unfolds  
-Montanus, Hermas, and Augustine (BB)  
-Kirsch, *History of the End of the World*, 101-135  
-**Quiz**

W Feb 2— Apocalypse in the Middle Ages  
-McGinn, *Visions of the End*—Joachim of Fiore (BB)  
-Kirsch, *History of the End of the World*, 137-171

## Unit 2

*Apocalypse and American 'Foundational Narratives'*

M Feb 7— Christopher Columbus and the New World  
-Selections from the “Libro de las Profecias” of Christopher Columbus (BB)  
-Shaban, *For Zion’s Sake*, 21-60

W Feb 9— Revelation and City Planning in the New World  
-Lara, *City, Temple, Stage* (BB)  
-Ruether, *America, Amerikkka*, 7-32  
-**Quiz**

M Feb 14—“A Modell of Christian Charity”  
-Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (BB)  
-Edwards, “The Latter Day Glory” (BB)  
-Declaration of Independence (BB)  
-Shaban, *For Zion’s Sake*, 61-100

W Feb 16—The Myth of Chosenness and American Exceptionalism  
-Ruether, *America, Amerikkka*, 7-32  
-Film: TBA

**M Feb 21—NO CLASS (Presidents Day)**

W Feb 23—“Manifest Destiny,” the “Gettysburg Address,” and Racism  
-Gettysburg Address  
-Ruether, *America, Amerikkka*, 33-69  
-Begin reading Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

M Feb 28— “Manifest Destiny” and American Imperialism  
-Ruether, *America, Amerikkka*, 100-135  
-Keep reading Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

W Mar 2—EXAM 1

### Unit 3

#### *Apocalypse at the Margins: Social Critique and Cosmic Vision*

W Mar 9— Black Theology and Black Visions of Power

-Shaban, *For Zion's Sake*, 101-116

-Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

### **SPRING BREAK**

M Mar 21— William Miller and Millerite (not Miller Lite) Theology

-O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 111-133 (BB)

-Shaban, *For Zion's Sake*, 192-211

-Film: TBA

W Mar 23—Hal Lindsey: The Apocalyptic Fringe Goes Mainstream

-Lindsey, excerpts from *The Late Great Planet Earth*

-Jewett, *Captain America*, 131-148

M Mar 28— Jim Jones and the People's Temple

-Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide* (BB)

-Film: "Jonestown: The Life and Death of People's Temple"

W Mar 30— David Koresh and the Branch Davidians

-Tabor, "Waco" (BB)

-Keep, "An Absolute Acceleration" (BB)

-**Quiz**

### Unit 4

#### *Apocalypse at the Center—Power, Empire, and New World Order*

M Apr 4— Mythic Politics and Redemptive Violence

-Jewett, *Captain America*, 107-123, 245-272

-Excerpts from the USA National Security Strategy (BB)

W Apr 6— Apocalyptic Politics and the New American Right

- O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 172-193 (BB)

-Begin reading Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

-Film: The Jesus Factor

-Film: TBA

M Apr 11—Apocalypse at the Gates

-Zizek, *Living in the End Times* (BB)

-Roth, *American Pastoral*—**keep reading!**

### Unit 5

*Apocalypse in American Film and Literature*

W Apr 13—American Pastoral  
-Roth, *American Pastoral*—Discussion

M Apr 18—Postmodern (Gnostic) Apocalypse: *The Matrix*  
-Rosen, “Apocalypse, Reloaded” (97)  
-Film: *The Matrix*  
-Begin reading McCarthy, *The Road*

W Apr 20—Nathaniel West and *The Day of the Locust*  
-Lewis, “Nathaniel West and American Apocalyptic” (BB)

**M Apr 25—NO CLASS (Easter Break)**

W Apr 27—Bleak Vision: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*  
-McCarthy, *The Road*—**Discussion**  
-Film: Select scenes from *The Road*

M May 2—The Shape of Things to Come: American Berserk  
-Marcus, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 101-145  
-Presentations

W May 4—The Time of the End  
-Presentations  
-Final Discussion

**FINAL PROJECTS DUE MAY 4<sup>TH</sup> AT 5PM.**

**FINAL EXAM: WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 1:30-3:30PM**

Suggestions for Final Project Topics:

- The Novels of Philip K. Dick
- Apocalypticism and Environmentalism
- D. H. Lawrence’s *Apocalypse*
- The Tradition of the “Rapture”
- Millerite movements / Seventh-Day Adventist Church
- Gnostic apocalypse in “The Matrix”
- Millennialism / Pre- / Post-Millennialism
- Apocalypse during the Cold War / nuclear age
- References to Revelation in early American sermons
- Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America”
- If you have other ideas let’s discuss them!**