

HONORS COLLOQUIA 2012

Philip Jenkins
Baylor University

[Institute for Studies of Religion](#)
[History Department](#)

FAITH AT THE END OF THE AGE
Or, THE CHURCH AT THE END OF THE WORLD

September 17

October 15

November 12

Throughout Western history, writers have been fascinated by the end of the world, and have drawn heavily on religious and scriptural material to understand it. The word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek word for “revelation”, which is the same name as the final book of the New Testament. But religious writers themselves face special dilemmas when contemplating the end times, and especially in understanding just when that final age is really upon us. Yes, persecution and suffering might be running amok in the present world – but how do you actually know that things have become so bad the final judgment is at hand? How do believers cope in an age when would-be messiahs and cults are proclaiming the end of the world, and demanding submission to their new visions? When they are proclaiming the death of old religious establishments, and the creation of new churches for the emerging millennial age?

In these three sessions, we will be looking at novels that imagine faithful believers forced to deal with the end of their respective worlds, and how they manage (or fail to manage) to keep faith alive. Although framed as fiction, all these books raise critical questions for real present-day faiths seeking to confront surging claims of spiritual truth, or facing deadly persecution. Each in its way poses the problem of keeping to true paths in worlds gone radically astray. Among other things, we will explore such themes as the appeal of apocalyptic thinking; the rise and fall of new messianic religions; the nature of faith and doubt; and the means by which religions can actually perish.

By the way, these issues will be much in the news over the next year or so, for two quite distinct reasons. Martin Scorsese’s long awaited film of [Silence](#) will come out next year, starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Benicio del Toro. It’ll be fascinating to see how Scorsese deals with the rich spiritual themes in the book. Also in 2013, the media will be spending a lot of time commemorating the anniversary of the “apocalyptic” events at Waco in 1993, and the massacre of the messianic sect that followed David Koresh.

The three books to be discussed will be

[Walter Miller, A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ \(1960\)](#)
[Isaac Bashevis Singer, SATAN IN GORAY \(1955\)](#)

[Shusaku Endo, SILENCE \(1966\)](#)

I should add one thing up front. Although these books range widely over different cultures and places, I expect no prior knowledge of any history or background, which we will learn about together as we go!

In the first colloquium, we will be addressing such [themes](#) as:

What is apocalyptic, and why is this theme so important in understanding religious history? How have apocalyptic ideas driven churches and religious movements, and helped create new ones?

What is the appeal of apocalyptic? Why are we so fascinated by nightmares about the end of the world?

Apocalyptic is notionally about the future, but the lessons it teaches are strictly about the present-day, and the recent past. What do we learn from apocalyptic literature about the world in which it is written?

What are the implications of apocalyptic thought for understanding the secular world, and secular political power? Does it force us to distrust the world and the state?

Specifically, what does apocalyptic literature teach us about faith and organized religion? How does it help us imagine the future(s) of faith? What do these visions teach us about such fundamental concepts as martyrdom, sacrifice and suffering?

Do these books force us to imagine a world where religion in anything like the sense we know has died altogether? Put crudely, do these books force us to think that faith might have an expiration date?

Assuming you accept the dreams and nightmares that apocalyptic offers, how does this affect your attitudes and conduct in today's real world? How does it force us to imagine and confront these frightening realities here and now?

How would WE actually cope if we were forced to live through these conditions?

And perhaps here's a core issue: witnessing faith in conditions of ultimate peril and imminent destruction forces us to ask what, exactly, are the central elements of religion, the ideas and institutions that absolutely have to be preserved. What are those core themes? How do the different novels answer that question?

We will then these themes more specifically as they arise in the novel [A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ](#).