

Rutgers expert says Mayans never forecast Dec 21st apocalypse

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Twelve percent of Americans believe the world will end on December 21.

December 21st may not be the end of the world as we know it, but if next week's predicted apocalypse falls through, America's many doomsday prophets will invariably choose a new date, says Stuart Charme, a Rutgers-Camden professor of religion. The basis for the latest End Times date is the Mayan calendar, which stops on 12/21/2012. Although the Mayans themselves didn't really forecast an apocalypse, explains Charme, some have interpreted the date to be a sign that life on Earth will be snuffed out next Friday.

Scenarios of the world's end have a strong tradition in United States. From the Book of Revelation to the present day explosion of zombie

films and TV shows, apocalyptic thinking has always been with us. According to polls, at least 40 percent of Americans believe Jesus will return to Earth by 2050. Twelve percent believe the [Mayan calendar](#) is correct and the world will end on December 21, says Charme, who teaches a class called "End of the World."

Although it's easy for skeptics to dismiss the predictions as crackpot theories, Charme says they're not all that outrageous. "Just because some people have some unrealistic ideas shouldn't distract us from the fact that there are challenges that humanity is going to have to confront. Whether it's [climate change](#) or fossil fuel running out or the world's population straining resources, humans are going to have to change their attitudes and behavior."

Rutgers Today: Why is there such a focus on the Mayan calendar as signifying the end of the world?

Charme: The Mayan theory has been percolating in New Age spiritual circles for at least five years, combining ideas about the world's end with the expectation of some huge transformation of human consciousness. There's a feeling that ancient cultures had insights and wisdom that we don't have. People who believe this think there's a possibility that a sudden reversal of the [magnetic poles](#) of the world or the alignment of the earth, the sun and the center of the galaxy on the winter solstice will have catastrophic consequences. This isn't really something the [Mayans](#) would have expected. I think they had a sense that the earth goes through different cycles and where the calendar ends is just the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. There wasn't this notion of cataclysmic destruction. They had every expectation that history was going to continue.

Rutgers Today: How does the Biblical account of the End Times differ from the December 21 model?

Charme: The Book of Revelation predicts there will be a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. Some believe that before this happens true believers will be lifted up from Earth into some kind of heaven. This is known as "the Rapture." Then there will be great tribulation – storms, floods, earthquakes, disease. Everything will culminate in a final battle between the forces of the anti-Christ, often symbolized as a beast and the forces of God led by Jesus.

Rutgers Today: How is the idea of the apocalypse manifested in pop culture?

Charme: Zombies have really taken the place of the kind of mutant monsters, like Godzilla and giant ants, which first showed up in the '50s and '60s in apocalyptic movies. It's not very hard to determine that they were symbolic of a whole variety of threats, from radiation to nuclear annihilation and societal collapse. Today, zombies appear in a post-apocalyptic world where the institutions of society have collapsed and we are all reduced to a base level of survival. The causes of zombies are often envisioned as a virus produced by corporate, scientific or government projects gone wrong. We see that the major pillars of society can't be trusted. It's very conspiratorial. But on a simpler level, zombies are also images of mutilated, dying bodies that may reflect fears of terrorism and other threats.

Rutgers Today: When the world doesn't end on the designated day, what's the response of people who believed those predictions?

Charme: There are usually a couple of strategies: One is to recalculate the date or reframe what the end of the world really means—that the date was really the beginning of a new transformation and not literally the end of the world or that the earth was spared because of the prayers of devout people. Very low on the list is to decide that focusing on the end of the world is foolish and you shouldn't put any more energy into it.

Rutgers Today: What are your plans on December 21?

Charme: I'm having some students who were in the graduate version of my class come over to my house for an end of the world party. I don't know exactly what we'll do. I'm not sure what end of the world activities would really look like. One of my students recommended that we play Twister. Maybe . . .

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