Assignment: Drawing upon the disciplines of History and Psychology, please explain the appeal of the millennial idea any one group or movement.

Your essay should not exceed three pages and is due by Wednesday May 4.

Background: We have now spent 14 weeks studying millennial and apocalyptic movements in Europe, the Middle East and North America. What disciplinary approaches to the subject have we employed?

Our main line of inquiry has been historical, following changes over time. Specifically, we have wondered how various movements have been similar to (or different from) those that preceded them. Two types of historical analysis have been useful to us: intellectual history and social history. Intellectual history, of course, concerns ideas—in our case, religious ideas about an “End” or a “Return” or a “Redeemer,” drawn from Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity. Also, we have considered more secular ideas coming out of the Enlightenment and French revolution, such as “progress.” Social history, meanwhile, is concerned with the make-up of various movements, focusing on such things as gender, ethnicity, class, denomination, leadership, etc. Our “texts” have been mainly literary, though we have also considered artwork.

The other important disciplinary approach that we have been introduced to is psychology, which asks such questions as: What qualities typify cults or radical groups? Why do people join? Why do people stay? In particular, we have discussed the interpersonal perspective (stressing the attractiveness of the qualities that groups possess) and the functional perspective (stressing the needs of prospective members). Further, we discussed the ideas that group joiners have “unique needs” (Individual Differences model); are affected by their times (Historical model); or are affected by their age (Developmental model).

So our question is, how can we use both of these disciplines to understand millennial or apocalyptic movements?

Readings: In addition to course readings (including guest lecture readings) and class notes, you may wish to consult portions of the PBS Apocalypse! Web site, especially Apocalypticism Explained: “The resiliency of apocalyptic belief” and “The apocalyptic world view,” plus the Roundtable Discussion, first round.