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MILLENNIUM CLASS ENABLES UD STUDENTS TO EXPLORE PROPHECIES IN LITERATURE, FILM

DAYTON, Ohio — Rare is the professor who consciously designs a course with a shelf life of one or two semesters. Too much work, too little reward.

Unless it explores an event that comes once every thousand years.

For the first time, Jim Farrelly, a University of Dayton English professor, is teaching a film and literature class using the nearing millennium as its theme. Students are studying the historic event from philosophical, religious and science-fiction perspectives.

As part of the course, they examine texts and their film treatments on the anti-Christ, Armageddon, the Second Coming, the prophecies of 16th-century astrologer Nostradamus and the New Testament’s “Book of Revelation.” Students also explore such sci-fi/fantasy books and films as Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, Arthur C. Clarke’s 2001: A Space Odyssey and Ira Levin’s Rosemary’s Baby and their relevance to the millennium.

“The goal is to let students see what we can model as possible futures,” Farrelly explains. “In this context, they can explore the ‘end of the world’ in a way they would not normally get to explore in their other classes.”

The arrival of the new millennium has been associated with myriad prophecies, from the biblical — the Second Coming, Judgment Day, the appearance of the anti-Christ — to the natural and fantastic — life-eradicating natural disasters, alien invasions and the evolution of humankind.

The 300-level course grew out of Farrelly’s passion for reading and teaching classes on the occult and science fiction and an opportunity to “recycle resources and material” from those classes. Its existence also stems from the public’s “millennium fever” with the approaching date.

As an extra-credit project, Farrelly’s students surveyed 338 fellow UD students on their views of the millennium using the prophecies as a frame of reference. Of the students interviewed, 180 were male and 158 female, and most were either juniors or seniors.

When asked to name a sign they’ve seen that the world is coming to an end, most
respondents offered rather sobering “omens”: war, pollution, decline in morality, global warming and AIDS. When asked how they would react if they knew the world was going to end in 2000, most said they would either party, “live life to its fullest,” travel or “have fun with family and friends.”

Farrelly says he was surprised by the disbelief expressed by many respondents in accepting the end-of-the-world premise. “I suspect because of their own sense of immortality, they don’t consider it part of their own reality. They were actually more concerned about the (YK2) computer problem than a day of wrath, so to speak. “

Farrelly’s millennium course isn’t the first he’s created with the understanding that it would be shortlived. In 1974, he designed a class on the occult based on the then just-released movie The Exorcist. Much to Farrelly’s surprise, he still teaches it today.

“I thought the occult class had a life of one or two years,” Farrelly says. “I never thought my investment in it would lead to a course that will soon celebrate its 25th anniversary.”

But the millennium class is, alas, destined for termination — officially at 12:01 a.m. Jan. 1, 2000. A fact that fails to elude his sense of humor.

“Either the prophecies of the doomsayers will be debunked (when the new millennium arrives) or no one will be around to take the course,” Farrelly jokes.

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