ABSTRACT | The analytical category of “apocalyptic violence” has been frequently applied in recent studies of terrorism, sectarian violence, and revolutionary action. The category seems to account for the fact the certain forms of violence are carried out with a global vision in mind. As the psychologist Robert J. Lifton put it: “Apocalyptic violence denotes the readiness to cause enormous destruction in the service of spiritual purification. A world must cease to exist in order to make space for a better one.” However, as the lecture will show, the category is by no means self-explanatory, since apocalyptic literature is traditionally deterministic and rather dissuades the readers from taking action. A historical overview will demonstrate that revolutionary and violent forms of apocalypticism emerge only in early modernity, when mystical and humanist influences undermine the determinist creed. The lecture therefore argues that apocalyptic violence, despite its references to an ancient symbolic tradition, is a decidedly modern phenomenon.

BIO | Matthias Riedl is an associate professor and the head of the history department at Central European University. Before coming to CEU, he taught at Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg/Germany, where he also received his PhD, and at Duke University/USA. His research interests include the history of apocalypticism and the relation between religion and politics in Western Christianity, from late antiquity to the early modern period. He is the author of a monograph on the 12th century apocalyptic seer Joachim von Fiore (2004), numerous articles on the history of religious and political thought, as well as co-editor of volumes on Prophets and Prophecies (2005), Humans at War, at Peace with Nature (2006), Religions - The Religious Experience (2008), God or Gods? (2009), The City-Axis and Centre of the World (2011), The Apocalyptic Complex (forthcoming), and Brill's Companion to Joachim of Fiore (forthcoming). His current research is on the emergence of revolutionary apocalypticism in the Later Middle Ages and Early Modernity.

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