During my recent PDA I did extensive research for my new project, in the process somewhat refining my goal. Even in my original conception of it—a comparative examination of medieval providential theories of history in a variety of medieval apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic writings and movements—I planned to concentrate on those containing an idea of progress, and have now decided to limit myself to these. I am particularly interested in what kind of government millennialist foresaw for the Last Age, something that connects this project to my previous publications about medieval and Renaissance political thought.

In modern terminology millennialists can be divided into pre-millennialists, who expect things to get worse and worse until Jesus comes, and post-apocalypticists, who expect Jesus only after a wonderful millennial society. Today, especially in Protestant millennialism, the former dominates, but it was not always so. In the Middle Ages and early modern times, both kinds of millennialism were common. Clearly the idea of progress could only exist in the latter form, but it was not universal in it either. One very common variety had another kind of savior—often a “Last Emperor”—who would come to set the final events in motion, independent of any previous societal reforms.

Ideas involving progress often derived from the teachings of Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202), but I have been surprised to discover how influential Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was as well. Her approach, sometimes called “reformist apocalypticism,” focused on the creation of reforms in society that would result in as many as two millennial-like societies before the final one.
My work this spring focused on reading works by and about a wide variety of medieval and early modern writers and beginning to write about them. I have especially concentrated so far on Hildegard (I already have read much concerning Joachim) and on several people who tried to establish millennial-like societies in Europe, particularly Cola di Rienzo (1313–54), who on two different occasions led a popular take-over of the city of Rome, Savonarola (1452–98), a Dominican who established a participatory government of Florence, which he thought of as the New Jerusalem, and Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), who was both a utopian and an apocalyptic writer and who joined in a failed conspiracy to institute a millennial society in Southern Italy. I have also begun to look at radical movements of the Protestant Reformation, such as the Anabaptists who briefly created their own New Jerusalem in Münster in the 1530s, until they were crushed by the local prince.

Although I will be discussing many obscure millennialists that I have come across, none of the people I have mentioned have been neglected by scholars. What has not been written before is a synthetic account of this kind of millennial thought. As I mentioned in my proposal, since both secular ideas of progress and millennial scouring of current events for signs of the end-times are ever-present, I think that my book, if presented in an appropriate manner, has the potential to reach a large educated audience, not just specialists in apocalyptic movements. Although it will probably take over five years to complete this book, I expect to be able to publish scholarly articles within the next couple of years.

This PDA has been invaluable in getting my project off the ground, and I thank the college for giving it to me.