College of Charleston  
Department of Religious Studies  
Fall 2011

RELS 315: NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS  
MW 2-3:15 in Ed Center 219

Instructor: Dr. Elijah Siegler  
Email: sieglere@cofc.edu  Office phone: 953-3910  
Office: 4 Glebe St. Entryway C  
Office Hours: Tues 1-3 and Fri 11-1 or by appointment

This class takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of new religious movements (NRMs), looking at them through the lenses of sociology, history, and cultural studies. We look at NRMs in the West and around the world, as historical phenomena and as agents of political and social change.

A typical class on new religions (or “cults”) assumes that NRMs are a sociological problem to be solved by asking and answering a series of questions—who would join a NRM? Do NRMs really engage in brainwashing? Why do some NRMs become violent? While these questions are not ignored here, this class takes as its premise that NRMs are a normal aspect of religious development and are not an aberration that has happened to the Western world since the 1960s. We will examine NRMs as transnational phenomena, acting as both cause and a symptom of globalization.

On the other hand, this class also assumes that NRMs (like other religious phenomena) can and should be productively studied as local occurrences. Thus, the major assignment for this class will be an oral and written presentation on NRMs in the Carolinas and Georgia. These presentations will require resourceful investigation and original research. In other words, students will make the leap from consumers to producers of knowledge.

There are three required texts, available at the campus bookstore:  

One book may be able to be bought used: New Religions by Elijah Siegler, ISBN-13: 978-0131834781. It will also be available via e-mail. This book is recommended as class lecture notes.

There are also required short E-Readings, numbered ER # 1-8 in the schedule of classes, online at OAKS. Please print these out at the library.

Please bring the relevant book or printout to class.
Grading Scale: A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82; C+: 77-79; C: 73-76; C-: 70-72; D+: 67-69; D: 63-66; D-: 61-62 F: 60 or below.

Requirements:
Midterm exam on Wednesday October 5 = 15%
Final exam on Wednesday December 14 = 20%
1 12-15 pp. research essay, due Wednesday Nov. 30 = 25%
1 12-minute oral presentation on the subject of the research essay = 5%
6 out of 11 memos @5%/each = 30% (see last page)
Attendance and participation = 5%

All work must be original and all sources correctly cited. The university’s honor code will be strictly enforced. Students can find a complete version of the Honor Code and all related processes in the Student Handbook, available online.

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Wed 8/24: What is expected in this course? How do we define NRM s?
Read: Siegler Ch. One

Mon 8/29: How do we study NRM s? Memo #1 Due
Read: Partridge 6-24; Dawson 5-24
Recommended: Dawson 26-34

Wed 8/31: Explaining NRM s Using Sociological Models
Read: Dawson 59-69, 89-108; Partridge 358-360

Mon 9/5: NRMs as Modern Heresy
Read: Dawson 73-85; Partridge 75-76, 32-35 (Latter Day Saints), 314-317
Recommended: Partridge 26-31 (Christianity); Siegler Ch. Two

Wed 9/7: NRMs in the Media Memo #2 Due
Read: ER #1 (McCloud): you may skim (not skip) the first 7 ½ pages; ER #2 (Neal): you may skim it

Mon 9/12: The Apocalypse at Jonestown; Movie
Read: Partridge 77-78; Dawson 186-202

Wed 9/14: Explaining Jonestown: Movie (cont.) Memo #3 Due
Read: ER #3 (J.Z. Smith)

Mon 9/19: The Brainwashing Controversy Memo #4 Due
Read: Dawson 143-177
Wed 9/21: Applying What We’ve Learned to Scientology Memo #5 Due
Read: Partridge 385-387; Reitman ix-88
Getting Started on the Research Papers (bring your laptops!)

Mon 9/26: What is Esotericism?
Read: ER #4 (Gnostic); Partridge 305-308 (Western Esotericism), 312-313, 317-319, 322-325 (Golden Dawn and OTO), 331 (Tarot), 337-339 (Astrology), 39-40, 42-43 (Unity School), 319-320 (Spiritualism), 320-322 (Theosophy), 329 (Arcane School)
Recommended: Siegler Ch. Two

Wed 9/28: Roots of the New Age Memo #6 Due
Read: Partridge 308-312 (New Age), 335-336 (Findhorn), 348-349 (Miracles), 355 (Celestine), ER # 5 (Lazaris)

Mon 10/3: Pagans, Neo-Templars and UFO Contactees
Recommended: Partridge 297-299 (CAW and Covenant of Goddess)
Midterm Review

Wed 10/5: Midterm Exam

Mon 10/10: NRM as Asian Missions to the West
Read: Partridge 173-174, 182-184+187 (TM), 238+245 (SGI)
Recommended: Siegler Ch. Four; Partridge 158-168

Wed 10/12: Is American Daoism a New Religious Movement? Memo #7 Due
Read: ER #6 (American Daoism)

Mon 10/17: FALL BREAK

Wed 10/19: What is Charisma? Memo #8 Due
Read: ER #7 (Psychopathologies); Reitman 111-171 (you may skim 111-124)

Monday 10/24: NRM in East Asia
Recommended: Siegler Ch. Five; Partridge 212-219

Wed 10/26: Qigong Fever and the Falun Gong crackdown Memo #9 Due
Read: ER# 8 (Palmer); Partridge 265-266

Mon 10/31: NRM of Africa and the African Diaspora (Guest: Dr. Katie Hladkey)
Read: Partridge 281-286,44-51, 52-53, 57-64, 280+287-288 (Santeria, Candomble), 139-140, 142-144
Recommended: Siegler Ch. Six
Wed 11/2: Race, Gender, Age, Class: NRMs Demographics Memo #10 Due
   Read: Dawson 113-126, 227-229, 245-254; Reitman 295-315
   Recommended: Dawson 131-142, 230-242

Mon 11/7: Student Presentations

Wed 11/9: Student Presentations

Mon 11/14: Student Presentations

Wed 11/16: Student Presentations

Mon 11/21: Student Presentations (if necessary)

Wed 11/23: THANKSGIVING BREAK

Mon 11/28: Violence and Suicide Memo #11 Due
   Read: Dawson 181-184, 202-206; Partridge 388-391; Reitman 175-249

Wed 11/30: NRMs in a Virtual World TERM PAPER DUE
   Read: Dawson 271-291; Partridge 360+365-366, 406, 407-408; Reitman 253-294

Mon 12/5: What is the Future of NRMs?
   Read: Dawson 259-269; Reitman 316-369 (you may skim 315-336)
   Recommended: Siegler Ch. Eight

Final Exam Review

Wed 12/14: Final Exam 12-3 PM

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Note: Students with documented disabilities who have been approved to receive accommodation through SNAP should feel free to discuss this during office hours. For more information, contact Disability Services at 953-1431.

The Center for Student Learning has writing labs and can arrange individual tutoring for these particular assignments at http://www.cofc.edu/~csl/ or 953-5635.