

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
RELIGIOUS STUDIES/ HONORS 381-05
CULTS AND CONVERSION IN MODERN AMERICA
SPRING SEMESTER, 2018
TR 3:05-4:20; MAYBANK 320

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Description

This course will investigate new religious groups outside of the mainline denominations in contemporary America and the controversies about them. Our goal is to improve our understanding of certain aspects of contemporary religious activity and the general social response to them, and, hence, of the general phenomenon of "religion." Our task is not to commend or to condemn particular religious groups, but rather to attempt to reach some understanding of them, first on their terms and then on ours, and in the appropriate historical, social, and religious contexts.

This course aims to prepare students to make informed judgments about new religious groups or movements when they encounter them either indirectly (e. g. in the news or entertainment media) or directly (e. g. through their members, ex-members, or cultural opponents). Being able to make such analytical and interpretive judgments about new religions should also equip students to make more general judgments about any form of religion, an ability that is crucial to citizenship in the twenty-first century.

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

The Purpose of Class Sessions

I view the classroom as a site for the provisional making and testing of knowledge. The readings provide us with the raw material for our attempts to make and test knowledge through asking questions, entertaining hypotheses, venturing comparisons, and trying out interpretations. Accordingly, class sessions will not be devoted to a simple review of the reading. Beyond making sense *of* what we read together, we will strive to make sense *with* it. The central question will always be: what can we make, together, with the material provided by this reading. *Consequently, your unfailing attendance, active participation, careful listening, and considered verbal contributions to class sessions are all essential elements of the course. Each of us is as essential to the success to the course as the other.*

Goals for the Course

Students who complete this course will have demonstrated some degree of mastery over several essential topics. It may help to conceive of our general task as involving three interrelated operations: *description* ("what is it"), *analysis* ("how does it work") and *interpretation* ("what does it mean" or "why does it matter"). Effective description involves the marshaling of appropriate evidence and the preliminary sifting, sorting, and organization of it. Effective

analysis involves the identification in the evidence of salient relationships, generative principles, and crucial problems; it seeks to identify the dynamics of a religious movement, an individual life, or a particular incident. Effective interpretation involves making the material interesting, important, and significant by relating it to broad questions in human life and substantial issues in the study of religion. It also involves discerning and evaluating the specific interpretive points of view embedded in all of the material you have considered. All of those processes involve *making an argument*, rather than simply rehearsing facts. See the handout on the course website entitled “Generating an Argument through Description, Analysis, and Interpretation.”

Listed below are the primary learning objectives of the course, brief descriptions of them, and indications of how they are linked to specific assignments.

1. *Develop an understanding of the multiple contexts in which new or alternative religious movements exist in the contemporary U. S.* Both the terms “new” and “alternative” indicate that the groups that we will be studying are ordinarily understood *in contrast to* other religious groups. The same certainly goes for the frequently pejorative term “cult,” which has as its implicit opposite “legitimate religion.” Common terminology thus suggests some of the contexts in which our subject matter is placed. Groups themselves will also signal contexts in which they intend to be understood; consider, for example, the uses of the Bible by the Branch Davidians and the Peoples Temple, or the appeal to the wisdom of the East in Theosophy indicate important interpretive contexts for those groups. In addition, scholarly approaches from the sociology of religion, history of religions, history and other fields will also help students develop contextual understandings of our topic.

2. *Develop an ability to apply theoretical concepts to the interpretation of new and alternative religions.* All interpretations, from the seemingly casual observation that “he’s nuts” or “that’s really spiritual” to the multi-volume treatment of a particular group, depend upon certain theoretical assumptions. Often, especially towards the more casual/popular end of that spectrum, the theoretical presuppositions are largely implicit and unspoken. In order to develop your own interpretation of the material at hand, you first need to be able to identify and evaluate others’ interpretations, including those embedded in the material. Originality in interpretation does not mean ignoring everything else in order to make up something by yourself. It involves making a thorough inventory of what has already been said about the material, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each position, and then positing your own interpretation as a superior and more persuasive account of the evidence. For some discussion of what makes an argument persuasive, see the section, “Values that Guide the Evaluation of Your Paper,” in “A Guide to Writing Papers” on the course website.

3. *Develop a familiarity with at least some of the groups that are frequently mentioned as alternative or new religions or “cults.”* A surprising amount of the public discourse about “cults” is based upon very little evidence about a restricted number of groups. Not many people who offer their opinions, including those in the media, government, or law enforcement, have had prolonged exposure to members of those groups either directly or through the study of the products of their religious lives (texts, rituals, etc.). Informed participation in the contemporary controversies about “cults,” including the brainwashing/deprogramming argument, statements about the connections of cults to violence, and other volatile topics, demands a deep familiarity with the evidence. Public attention to “cults” waxes and wanes, but it is hard to predict when a

certain religious group will become “newsworthy.” Also, the lines between “cults” and legitimate religions are often highly arbitrary. This course will prepare you to participate in a wide range of public discussions about religion.

4. *Develop an understanding that all new religions are controversial, and that the current controversies about “cults” fit into an historical pattern.* Many people, particularly anti-cult and counter-cult activists, argue that the appearance of “cults” during the past several decades is an unprecedented event in American history. In doing so, they betray their historical ignorance. New religions have been present on the North American continent at least since the first explorers and settlers. Many scholars would also claim that “new” or “alternative” religious movements can also be observed in other historical periods and in other cultures.

5. *Develop the ability to make persuasive comparisons, generalizations, and arguments.* Accurate description is essential to both effective analysis and persuasive interpretation; thorough analysis is essential to convincing interpretation. Description, analysis, and interpretation are fundamental to the processes of making comparisons, generalizations, and judgments. Comparison, which depends on the recognition of both similarities and differences and leads to a thorough accounting for their specific patterns in given instances, can be a key element of interpretation. Generalizations, which depend for their power on the consideration of a large number of cases, can also help to generate interpretations. Also, although our academic task is not to commend or to condemn particular religious groups, there will likely be contexts (e.g. law enforcement, work with members of groups or their families) in which interpretive judgments will be necessary. In popular discourse interpretive judgments abound, but they are rarely anchored in thorough description, analysis, and interpretation.

6. *Refine your general skills of information retrieval and evaluation, critical reading, argumentative writing, and oral presentation.* Refining those skills is a life-long project, and they may well be the most valuable, and transferable, skills that you can develop.

Information retrieval and evaluation is a fundamental component of any research. You need to be able to identify what you need to know, where to find it, how to evaluate what you do find, and what to do with it once you have found it. The cluster of skills that you need to master is crucial when dealing with library resources, popular media, and, particularly, information found on the web. *Retrieval and evaluation of information must always be accompanied by full and accurate citations of the material that you have used.* I don’t care which form of citation you use (e. g. Chicago Manual of Style, MLA, APA) as long as it provides the necessary information.

Close critical reading will be a necessary prerequisite for each class session. You will demonstrate your mastery of that skill in your discussion starters and any voluntary contributions to our ongoing discussion. The assignments that require you to define crucial passages from the reading or important questions about it are designed to enable you to improve your critical reading skills, as well as your argumentative writing and oral presentation.

Argumentative writing involves making a point; in other words, having a thesis. Fundamentally, a thesis is a general statement that someone can disagree with. It is not a description of your topic, not a statement of your intentions, not a question, and not simply a record of what you have learned. *Your thesis is the answer to a question,* the specific point that you are trying to persuade your audience is true; it is your whole argument in a nutshell. *In addition to being*

pointed and argumentative, a good thesis has to be important, interesting, and significant. Its importance is often determined by relating it to fundamental human and theoretical issues, topics, or questions. Without a thesis you have no reason to write a paper, and, importantly, your audience has no reason to read it. *You should write your papers in order to teach your readers something, not simply to display what you have learned.* So, if your paper simply replicates the discovery process you followed, with all its wrong turns and blind alleys, it is not the most efficient and effective mode of teaching the primary points you want to get across. For more comments on writing, see the “Guide to Writing Papers” on the course website.

Oral presentation is a skill that is often ignored. Although effective oral presentations share some things in common with effective written ones, they also require some distinctive capabilities, such as the ability to speak conversationally with a minimum of notes, the ability to modulate one’s voice in order to maintain interest, the ability to combine words with gestures and other visual aids, among other things. You will be able to practice this skill in assigned classroom presentations but you should think of refining it every time you speak in class.

Readings:

The books below will be available for purchase in the bookstore. Readings available on the course website under “reserve” are marked ®.

- D. Chidester, SALVATION AND SUICIDE
- A. LaVey, THE SATANIC BIBLE
- J. Tabor & E. Gallagher, WHY WACO?
- H. Urban, THE CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY: A HISTORY OF A NEW RELIGION
- B. Zeller, HEAVEN’S GATE: AMERICA’S UFO RELIGION

Among the items on electronic reserve on the course website is a complete electronic version of

- E. Gallagher & W. M. Ashcraft, eds., INTRODUCTION TO NEW AND ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, 5 vols.

Requirements:

1. Read the goals for the course carefully. Consult the “Guide to Writing Papers” before you hand in any written material. Tour the course website as soon as you can in order to familiarize yourself with its contents. **Download any materials that you need for class well in advance in order to avoid last minute problems. Always bring the assigned readings to class.**
2. Informed participation in class is essential. All readings listed for a specific class session should be completed **in advance** of the class session in which they will be discussed. Both excellent participation and poor performance in class will have an impact on your final grade. **I reserve the right to assign a grade of "F" to anyone who misses more than three class sessions.** Late papers will not receive comments and may be returned only at the end of the semester. **All assigned work must be completed in order to receive a passing grade.** For grading values see “A Guide to Writing Papers” on the course website.

Graded Writing Assignments:

The writing that you do for these assignments is “high stakes” in the sense that you will receive a grade on your finished product. You should subject your initial drafts to thorough review and revision. I am generally happy to go over completed drafts (after you have thoroughly revised them), if I receive them within a week of the due date of the assignment.

3. You will write an analytical and interpretive response to the film “Holy Smoke,” which will be shown in class during the first few sessions. Specifically *you should describe, analyze, and interpret the position on “cult” membership adopted by one of the major characters in “Holy Smoke” (e. g. Ruth, Baba, Ruth’s mother, P. J., etc.). Among the questions that you should address are: what are the underlying values that animate the position in question; what types of evidence does it count as persuasive; what chain of reasoning does it rely upon; what type of action does it encourage, and why?*

The paper should be c. 2,500 words in length. Please include a word count at the end of your paper. This paper focuses on your ability to analyze, synthesize, identify others’ interpretations and develop an interpretive agenda of your own. This paper will be worth 35% of your final grade. *You should do this paper with one or two other students as a group project. **All papers are due by Sunday, Jan. 21 by midnight; late papers will not receive credit since I will grade your papers on Monday and we will discuss them in class on Tuesday.*** Please deliver papers to me electronically through the drop box on the course website or through gallaghergv@cofc.edu.

4. During the semester you will undertake **an individualized program of reading and research**. You may choose a particular group (e. g. the Raelians, the Aetherius Society, the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints, or even one of the case studies we have treated in class), phenomenon (e.g. conversion or disaffiliation, the Christian or Jewish counter-cult movements, the production of new scriptures by NRMs), or other topic. You should write up an analytical account of your research (indicating, for example, how it relates to material in the common readings) in 3,500 – 4,000 words. This paper will count for 45% of your final grade. **All papers are due by midnight on April 22; late papers will not receive credit.** Please deliver papers to me electronically through the drop box on the course website.

Other Assignments:

The writing that you will do for these assignments is comparatively “low stakes;” it is more “writing to learn” rather than writing to present your fully considered opinion. Nonetheless, you should strive to be as clear and precise as possible, in part so that you can come to conclusions yourself and in part so that your audience can easily grasp what you have to say.

5. As part of your participation in class discussions, you will be responsible for *weekly* analytical reports on the readings (I will divide the class roughly in half, with one group posting for the Tuesday class and the other for Thursday). The purpose of the reports is

to guide discussion of the assigned material. I will ask some class members briefly to summarize and elaborate on their reading responses at the beginning of each class.

You will alternate between two formats: one will identify the most telling passage (of no more than 3 consecutive sentences) in the assigned reading and offer a one-page (no more than 250 words) explication of it. The other will pose three questions designed to get to the heart of the assigned reading; each question must have a 50-75 word rationale that explains why you think it is important, interesting, or significant (one page, no more than 250 words). Please include a word count at the end of each response. The focus of these short papers is on the evaluation of information, analysis, and interpretation.

The first reading reports will be for the class on Jan 25; therefore they will be due on Jan. at noon. Your papers will be circulated to the class via the course website, using the “forums” function,” and **must** be available by noon Monday for the Tuesday class and Wednesday noon for the Thursday class so that I and the other members of the class can **read** them before the class session. **You must complete a total of ten reading reports during the semester.** For further guidance, see the handout on “Discussion Starter” papers on the course website under “Guides for Assignments.” Along with your participation in class, **including leading at least one class discussion**, the “discussion starters” will count for 20% of your final grade.

Communication about the Course:

1. I will check gallagherg@cofc.edu at least once a day and if I am in town I will strive to get back to you within 24 hours. In cases of emergency, call 860-235-0305.
2. 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.

Due Dates:

Jan 25	Discussion Starters begin; due at noon on the day before class
Jan 21	Group paper on “Holy Smoke” due at midnight; no late papers accepted
Feb 19	Choice of research topic due, by midnight
Apr 1	Annotated list of at least 10 resources and statement of thesis due, by midnight
Apr 22	Final paper due by midnight

(Papers received by more than 24 hours in advance of the due date will be graded and returned within 24 hours)

CLASS SCHEDULE

I. What's At Stake in Studying New Religious Movements? And For Whom?

- JAN 9 *Introduction*; Definitions and Questions
- 11 *Dramatizing the Cult Controversy*: Film: "Holy Smoke, part I;" Miller: "New Religious Movements in American History" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, I: 1-22 ®
- 16 *Dramatizing the Cult Controversy*: Film: "Holy Smoke, part II;" Gordon Melton, "Critiquing Cults: An Historical Perspective" in Gallagher and Ashcraft I: 126-142; Cowan, "Evangelical Christian Countercult Movement" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, I: 143-164 ®
- 18 *Theoretical Orientation*: Lincoln, *Four Dimensions of Religion* ®; Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, ch. 2 ®; Exercise: Reconstructing a Religious World From Minimal Textual Evidence ®
- 23 Discussion of papers on "Holy Smoke"

II. New Religious Movements in the Eighteenth Century US: An Example

- 25 *An Eighteenth Century New Religious Movement: The Shakers*: orientation: Thurman, "The Shakers" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, II: 1-18 ®; Brief music and images: [here](#) and [here](#); read: *Shakers Compendium*, chs.1-9, 11 at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/shaker/sc/sc.htm>
- 30 *An Eighteenth Century Cult Controversy*: V. Rathbun, *An Account . . .* ®
- FEB 1 No Class: Professional Meeting

III. New Religious Movements in the Nineteenth Century US: A Brief Sample

- 6 *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*: orientation: Givens, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, II 19-36 ®; read "Joseph Smith--History" [here](#); "A Brief Explanation About the Book of Mormon;" "The Testimony of Three Witnesses;" "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses;" [here](#).
- 8 *Cult Controversies and the Mormons*: E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*; intro, chs., 1-4 [here](#).
- 13 *The Theosophical Society*: orientation: Ellwood, "The Theosophical Society" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, III: 48-66 ®; read: HPB, "The Key to Theosophy," sections I-III [here](#).
- 15 *Cult Controversies and the Theosophical Society*: read: excerpts from the SPR report and Emma Coulomb: [here](#); another early critique: [here](#);

IV. New Religious Movements in the 20th and 21st Century US: The Paradigmatic Examples of “Cults”

- 20 *Jonestown: A Classic Example?* orientation: Moore, “The Peoples Temple: A Typical Cult?” in Gallagher and Ashcraft, II: 112-133 ©; Chidester, intro., ch.. 1, epilogue; the "White Night" or “Death” tape [here](#) (use the search function)
- 22 *Jonestown From Inside and Out*; Chidester, chs. 2-5
- 27 *Another Jonestown? The Branch Davidians*; Gallagher & Tabor, chs. 1-4; overview [here](#) (some explicit scenes): 911 call on Feb. 28 search “Waco 911 calls” on Youtube
- MAR 1 *David Koresh and Biblical Prophecy*; Gallagher & Tabor, chs. 5-8; Gallagher, “Negotiating Salvation” ©; videotape, “Inside Mt. Carmel” (in class)
- 6 *The Pattern Continues? Heaven’s Gate: UFOs and The Evolutionary Level Above Human*: Zeller, intro., chs. 1-3; watch some of “Last Chance to Evacuate Earth (Before It Is Recycled)” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m74KOFZYOWM>
- 8 *Heaven’s Gate and Religious Suicide*: Zeller, chs. 4-6, Afterword; watch some of the “exit statements” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHz9it70Tdl>

V. New Religious Movements in the 20th and 21st Century US: Further Examples

- 13 *The Nation of Islam*: Rubel, “The Nation of Islam” in Gallagher and Ashcraft V: 3-22 ©; interview with Elijah Muhammad, part 1: [here](#) and [here](#); interview on multiple subjects with Malcolm X at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkJL_32nmqc.
- 15 *The Nation of Islam Today*: read “The Late Imam, W. D. Muhammad” at <http://thenationsmosque.org/about/the-late-imam-wd-mohammed/>; read “Warith Dean Muhammad” at http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/warith_deen_mohammed.html#; watch Minister Louis Farrakhan at <https://www.noi.org/press2017/>; listen “God, the Black Man and the Five Percenters” at <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5614846>; read “The Meaning of the 5%: A Look at the Nation of Gods and Earths” at <http://hiphopwired.com/167698/the-meaning-of-the-5-a-look-at-the-nation-of-gods-and-earths/3/>;

MARCH 19-23: MARCH BREAK

- 27 *The Church of Satan In the Master's Own Words: LaVey, The Satanic Bible*; available at [http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/religion.occult.new_age/Satanism/The%20Satanic%20Bible%20\(Ed.2\).pdf](http://cdn.preterhuman.net/texts/religion.occult.new_age/Satanism/The%20Satanic%20Bible%20(Ed.2).pdf) (begin with Prologue and read through Book of Satan and Book of Lucifer; keep going if it attracts your interest); interview with LaVey at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHz9it70TdI>; review the background at www.churchofsatan.org;
- 29 *Satanic Panic: Survivors' Stories and Atrocity Tales*: selections from Smith and Pazder, *Michelle Remembers* ®; Gallagher, "Satanism and the Church of Satan" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, V: 151-168 ®
- APR 3 *Witches and Neo-Pagans*: orientation: Cowan, "Wicca, Witchcraft, and Modern Paganism," in Gallagher and Ashcraft, III: 176-199 and Berger, "Learning About Paganism" in Gallagher and Ashcraft, III: 200-216®; read "What Do Neopagans Believe" at <http://www.neopagan.net/NeopagansBelieve.html>.
- 5 *A Contemporary Pagan Teacher: Oberon Zell-Ravenheart*; watch "The Wizard Oz" at www.oberonzell.com and read his biography, chronology, and interview (under "writings")
- 10 *The Church of Scientology*: at www.scientology.org click the tab at the top for "What is Scientology" and read through; Hugh Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion*, intro, chs. 1-2
- 12 *The Continuing History of Scientology*: Urban, chs. 3-6, conclusion; Testimonials: search "I am a Scientologist" and "Meet a Scientologist" on YouTube and watch a bunch of the minute-long videos
- 17 View in class "The Master"
- 19 *Dissent in Contemporary Scientology: The Freezone and Other Independent Scientologists*: Park, "The Freezone and Scientology"®; sample Mark "Marty" Rathbun's blog at <https://markrathbun.blog/>

NB: the links and titles in the syllabus were correct when the syllabus was composed in January. Some sites may change; but the material most likely will still be there somewhere. Don't get frustrated if you have to do a little digging. You might even want to cruise YouTube for information on each group we cover.

The syllabus is subject to change, particularly if an interesting issue concerning new religious movements comes up.