

Sociology/Religious Studies 130
SOCIOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS
Spring, 2008

Instructor: Rob Balch

Office hours (SS 325): Tuesday & Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 1:10-3:00; Thursday 10:00-12:00
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Preceptors (SS 325, x4697)

The preceptors are undergraduate teaching assistants who took this course last spring, received an A in the class, and took part in the field trips. Besides attending class every day, they will conduct review sessions before each exam and will be available to meet with you individually, either before the test or afterwards to go over questions you missed. The preceptors are in charge of scoring the exams and recording grades so please direct any questions about grades to them. They will hold office hours (to be announced in class) before and after each midterm and before the final. If you can't make their office hours, you can make an appointment to meet at another time.

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Overview of the course

This course is about unconventional religious and spiritual movements in American society. These groups are unconventional in the sense that their beliefs and practices differ significantly from the dominant religious traditions in North America, namely Christianity and Judaism. Alternatives to the Judeo-Christian tradition include Native American religions and world religions such as Buddhism or Islam that have been transplanted to the United States from other societies. But the alternatives also include a bewildering array of homegrown religions: UFO cults, ascended master activities, channeling groups, racist religions, utopian societies, Satanic cults, neo-paganism, and so on.

In this course we will focus primarily on religions in the second category. Unlike transplanted religions that follow existing traditions, these religions are genuinely new. They break with the past, reject old formulas, and experiment with new beliefs and lifestyles, often changing rapidly in the process. By studying these groups we can gain insights into how religions begin—how they are born and how they grow, but also why most die in infancy while a few launch new traditions of their own. Traditionally sociologists have called these groups cults to distinguish them from sects, which are variations on established faiths. Unfortunately in popular usage the word cult has taken on negative connotations, but in this class nothing pejorative is implied by the term. Bear in mind that every world religion began as a cult.

In this course we will examine new religious movements from a sociological perspective, using two levels of analysis. At the group level, we will explore how new religions begin, analyze common themes in their belief systems, and trace how they evolve over time. At the individual level, we will focus on why people join, how conversion occurs, and why some members become fanatically devoted while others become disillusioned and leave. Both levels of analysis will be used to explain cult-related violence which, though unusual, raises important questions about the extent to which groups of any kind can command the allegiance of their members. Case studies of contemporary new religious movements will be used to illustrate common types of new religions as well as useful concepts and principles for understanding them.

Required reading and DVD

The reading consists of 30 articles and book chapters on electronic reserve (eres). Thirty may sound like a lot but they are nontechnical and several are very short (e.g., all the selections from Moran's book). A table of contents appears at the end of the syllabus. To access eres, go to <http://eres.lib.umt.edu>. Click on "Course Reserves" and go to "Course Reserves and Pages by Instructor." Go to Balch and click on my name, then Search. Click on Soc 130, then type in Balch for the password and click on "Accept."

The course outline below shows which readings are most relevant to each class meeting. For some topics there are several readings whereas other have none. It is important to read this material because most of it will not be covered in class, and anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of the exam questions will come from the reading.

You also are expected to watch the 2007 PBS documentary, *The Mormons*. We will have two evening showings, and then the DVD will be put on reserve in the library. It is two hours and forty minutes long. I encourage you to attend one of the group showings because there will be only one copy on reserve and (since it's my copy) you will not be able to check it out overnight. The documentary will be covered on the final exam, and I will give you a study guide for it before the first showing so you will know what I think is most important.

Exams and grading

There will be two midterms and a comprehensive final worth 30%, 30%, and 40%. All exams will consist of multiple-choice questions. The midterms will be given during the first hour of class. Exams will be graded on a percentage basis: 90% and above = A, 80% = B, etc. Different versions of each exam will be distributed in alternating order to prevent cheating (same questions, different order). Cheating in any form will result in an F on the exam and possibly failing the course. I do not use the plus-minus system.

I will give you a study guide before each exam, but not much before. If you have done the reading by the time you get it, it will be easy to find the relevant points, but if you save the reading until you've got the study guide in hand, you're likely to be in trouble. The TA's will conduct a review session shortly before each exam. Don't expect the TA's to tell you what will or will not be on the exam, or to provide capsule summaries of lectures you missed. The purpose of this session is clarify concepts, theories, and factual information, and to discuss similarities and differences between groups described in the lectures and readings.

Exam scores (percent correct) will be posted on the Sociology web page (where you found this syllabus). I will not return the exam questions, but I strongly encourage you to see one of the TA's to go over your exams. The TA will return your answer sheet and let you look over the key. However, the key cannot be copied or leave the Sociology Department. Since the final will be comprehensive, reviewing the keys will be a good way to prepare (even though the exam will have different questions).

Exceptions to normal procedures

Make-up exams will be allowed if you have a compelling reason why you can't take the exam at the scheduled time. I may ask for written documentation. If you wish to reschedule, you must make arrangements with me *before* the exam date. If you don't make prior arrangements, you may still take the exam, but you will be docked one letter grade.

To receive an Incomplete, by University policy you must have a D or better after the midterms *and* experience circumstances that make it impossible to complete the course. Bad grades or potential loss of financial aid are not acceptable reasons for receiving an Incomplete.

If you do not return borrowed materials (e.g., books, videos, articles) by the last day of class, you will receive an Incomplete, which will turn into an F if the items are not returned or replaced.

Extra credit

At least four extra-credit videos will be shown. Each is worth one percentage point to be added to the weighted average of your exam scores. To receive credit you must *arrive on time* and submit a one page synopsis of the video before leaving. Sessions will begin at 7:00 pm sharp. Late arrivals may stay but will not receive credit. Dates, times, and locations will be posted as soon as they are known.

Field trips

There may be one or two optional field trips this semester, but because of scheduling problems we could be two or three weeks into the class before I know for sure. Assuming everything works out, these would be weekend trips, leaving Friday afternoon and returning late Sunday night. To make sure that only the most interested people go on these trips, participants will not receive extra credit and will have to pay their own expenses. Information will be announced in class as soon as possible.

Taking notes

It is important to learn good note taking skills, so I don't post class notes online. If you have a compelling reason for missing class, you may copy one of the TA's notes, but only if you see me first. When taking notes, you need to pay attention to the examples I use as well as the concepts and theories they are intended to illustrate, because you can't fully understand those concepts and theories if you're unable to relate them to the real world.

Course outline

All topics and exam dates are tentative and may be changed. You are responsible for keeping abreast of changes, which will be announced in class. Required readings are noted after each topic by author and reading number in the *eres* table of contents. Two main topics will be covered during each class period with a 15-minute break in between.

January 22 – Getting started

- Introduction: what we will cover, my perspective, controversies, course requirements
- Defining terms: Churches, sects, and cults

Readings

1. Palmer – studying new religions
2. Stark – introduction to sociology of religion
3. Stein – the Pentecostal movement
4. Stein – 19th century religious communes
5. Kanter – the Oneida community

January 29 – Perspective and basic concepts

- Salvation in a UFO: case study of a new religion
 - Concepts for understanding new religions
6. Moran – UFO cults (photos)

February 5 – Explaining the appeal of new religions

- Historical & cross-cultural evidence
 - The sixties & the great American cult scare
7. Stevens -- psychedelics in the sixties
 8. Sides – Rainbow Gatherings

February 12 – New religions in the hippie counterculture

- The magic kingdom: the Love Israel Family
9. Johnson – Hare Krishnas in the sixties
 10. Moran – Unification Church (photos)
 11. Moran – Transcendental Meditation
 12. Moran – Children of God (photos)

February 19 – Millennial themes in new religions

- Doomsday & utopia: Catastrophic vs progressive millennialism
 - When prophecy fails: The Baha’is Under the Provisions of the Covenant
13. Stein – 19th century apocalyptic movements

February 26 – How religions begin

- *FIRST EXAM* (1 hour)
 - Three models of cult formation
14. Bainbridge & Stark – origins of Scientology
 15. Reitman – Scientology today

March 4 – Becoming a member and an introduction to the New Age movement

- Why & how people join radical religions
 - The eighties & beyond: The New Age movement
16. Stein – 19th century forerunners of the New Age movement
 17. Jorstad – New Age religion in the eighties
 18. Pike – Neopagans & New Agers
 19. Todd – Ashland, Oregon, as New Age mecca

March 11 – New Age religion and the “alternative reality”

- Metaphysical themes in the New Age movement
 - Church Universal & Triumphant: The ascended master tradition and New Age apocalypticism
20. No author – CUT publicity pamphlet (photos & illustrations)
 21. Moran – Rajneesh comes to Oregon (photos)

- 22. Moran – Satanism (photos)
- 23. Alexander – the Satanism scare
(The inclusion of Satanism & the Rajneeshees in this section does not imply any connection with CUT.)

March 18 – Channeling as a religious movement

- Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment

- 24. McMorris – the story behind *What the #*%! Do We Know?!*

April 1– Commitment and the power of social influence

- *SECOND EXAM*
- Charisma & control in a metaphysical cult

April 8 – Explaining extreme behavior

- Mass suicide at Heaven’s Gate

- 25. Bromley & Shupe – the cult apologist view of recruitment & conversion
- 26. Hassan – the anti-cult view

April 15 – Internal and external causes of violence

- Jonestown & Waco
- Racist religions

- 27. Moran – recent episodes of cult violence (photos)
- 28. Mathews – what happened at Jonestown
- 29. Gardell – white racist religions

April 22 – Charisma and defection

- Charismatic leadership & the corruption of authority
- Leaving totalistic religions

- 30. Singer – leaving radical religious groups

April 29 – A rare success story

- The Mormons: From new religion to mainstream church
- Mormon polygamous sects

Required DVD – *The Mormons*

May 6 – FINAL EXAM (6:00 p.m. in our regular classroom)

Table of contents for eres

1. Susan Palmer, “Caught Up in the Cult Wars: Confessions of a Canadian Researcher.” Pp. 99-122 in Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (eds.), Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field. University of Toronto, 2001.
2. Rodney Stark, “Religion.” Pp. 393-416 in Rodney Stark, Sociology (9th ed.). Wadsworth, 2004.

3. Stein, Stephen J. "Sectarians in the City." Pp. 105-110 in Stein, Communities of Dissent. Oxford, 2003. (excerpt on Pentecostalism)
4. Stephen Stein, "Communitarians Living on the Margins." Pp. 31-68, Communities of Dissent.
5. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "A Refuge and a Hope," Pp. 1-18 in Kanter, Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective. Harvard University, 1972.
6. Sarah Moran, "UFO Cults: Salvation from the Stars." Excerpts on Aetherius & the Raelian movement, pp. 48-57 in Moran, The Secret World of Cults. Quadrillion, 1999.
7. Jay Stevens, "The Counterculture" and "It Came From Inner Space." Pp.291-308 and pp. 334-44 in Jay Stevens, Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream. Harper & Row, 1987.
8. Hampton Sides, "Welcome Home, Brother." Pp. 63-97 in Hampton Sides, Stomping Grounds: A Pilgrim's Progress Through Eight American Subcultures. William Morrow, 1991.
9. Gregory Johnson, "The Hare Krishna in San Francisco." Pp. 31-51 in Charles Glock and Robert Bellah (eds.), The New Religious Consciousness. University of California, 1976.
10. Moran, "The Unification Church." Pp. 34-37, Secret World of Cults.
11. _____, "Transcendental Meditation." Pp. 42-43, Secret World of Cults.
12. _____, "Children of God." Pp. 84-85, Secret World of Cults.
13. Stein, "Apocalyptic Traditions: Watching and Waiting for the End." Pp. 69-86, Communities of Dissent.
14. William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, "Scientology: To be Perfectly Clear." Sociological Analysis, v. 41, 1980, pp. 128-136.
15. Janet Reitman, "Inside Scientology." Rolling Stone, March 9, 2006.
16. Stein, "Healers and Occultists." Pp. 87-104 in Communities of Dissent.
17. Erling Jorstad, "New Age Religion: The Future is Now." Pp.167-184 in Erling Jorstad, Holding Fast/Pressing On: Religion in America in the 1980s. Praeger, 1990.
18. Sarah Pike, "Introduction to the Religious Worlds of Neopagans and New Agers." Pp. 13-38.
19. Douglas Todd, "The Last Paradise on Earth." The Vancouver Sun. Section C:1-3, 2004.
20. "Profile: Elizabeth Clare Prophet/Teachings of the Ascended Masters." Summit University Press, 1989.
21. Moran, "Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh." Pp. 38-41 in Moran, Secret World of Cults.
22. Moran, "Satanism." Pp. 96-99, Secret World of Cults.

23. David Alexander, "Giving the Devil More Than His Due." The Humanist, v. 50, March/April, 1990, pp. 5-14, 34.
24. Christine McCarthy McMorris, "Channeling Bleep." Pp. 20, 21, 24 in Religion in the News. Winter, 2005.
25. David Bromley and Anson Shupe, "Joining the New Religions: Brainwashing or Conversion?" Pp. 92-127 in David Bromley and Anson Shupe, Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare. Beacon Press, 1981.
26. Steven Hassan, "Understanding Mind Control" and "Cult Psychology." Pp. 53-94 (Chapters 4 and 5) in Hassan, Combating Cult Mind Control. Park Street Press, 1990.
27. Moran. Excerpts on violence in new religions (Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo, Branch Davidians, Nation of Yahweh). Pp. 68-79 & 94-95, Secret World of Cults.
28. Tom Mathews, et al., "The Cult of Death," Newsweek, December 4, 1978, pp. 38-66.
29. Mattias Gardell, "White Racist Religions in the United States: From Christian Identity to Wolf Age Pagans. Pp. 387-422 in James R. Lewis & Jesper Aagaard Petersen (eds.), Controversial New Religions. Oxford, 2005.
30. Margaret Thaler Singer, "Coming Out of the Cults." Psychology Today, January, 1979, pp. 72-82.