

Sociology 488
Field Studies of Unconventional Religions
(upper-division writing credit)
Spring, 2008

Instructor

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Office hours – Tues & Wed, 10:00-12:00 & 1:10-3:00; Thurs, 10:00-12:00

Preceptor – Damon Nelson, 370-7552

Course description

In this course we will investigate religious communities whose beliefs and lifestyles are widely regarded as strange or even threatening. Some unconventional religions are fundamentalist versions of established faiths; others have been transplanted to North America from societies with very different cultures; and still others are genuinely new religions. Despite the huge diversity among these groups, they all face similar problems of survival. Externally they may face hostility from outsiders, and even the most isolated groups must still meet their physical needs within limits imposed by the American economy. Internally they need to find ways of allocating resources, establishing lines of authority, sustaining the commitment of members, and so on. Because groups that don't solve these problems will fail, we will pay special attention to the subject of group survival. Other issues will emerge from class discussions and field trips.

We will visit several religious communities to learn about them through first-hand observation. We will begin by discussing the nature of field research and what we can hope to accomplish in a few brief field trips. At least three field trips are required. They will take place over weekends, usually Friday through Sunday, as well as spring break. Class time will be devoted to planning each trip and discussing our observations afterwards.

Because Soc 488 is both a sociology class and a writing course, you will learn how to write about ethnographic research for a professional audience. We also will focus on the mechanics of writing, such as organization, paragraphing, and sentence construction. In addition to writing assignments during the semester, you will submit a final report in journal format comparing two or three of the groups you have visited.

Required reading

American Sociological Association. 2007. *American Sociological Association Style Guide*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.

Shook, Somer, Wesley Delano, and Robert W. Balch. "Elohim City: A Participant-Observer Study of a Christian Identity Community." *Nova Religio* 2:245-265.

Hacker, Diana. 2004. *A Pocket Style Manual*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. 1972. *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Stark, Rodney. 2001. "Doing Field Studies of Religious Movements: An Agenda." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 40(3):379-392.

Articles about particular groups will be added once we know exactly where we are going. It will also be helpful to read each group's website before the field trip.

Class attendance and participation in field trips

Attendance is required. If you miss more than two classes I will ask you to drop the course. You also must go on at least three field trips and participate in class discussions of those trips. Going on a trip means the entire trip, not showing up late or leaving early. You must pay all your own expenses and share gas costs. Aside from gas, your major expenses will be for meals and lodging, though we may be able to camp later in the semester, and some groups may provide accommodations. A schedule and details about specific trips, including cost estimates, will be provided in class. If we go to Canada, you will need a passport or birth certificate and photo ID.

Grading

I assume that you will attend class and take part in the trips, so your grade will be based on your writing and class participation.

Contribution to class discussion & trips	10%
First writing assignment	10%
First draft of comparative paper	10%
Final paper	70%

Print name

Phone

email

If you have a car in good working order, have liability insurance, and would be willing to drive:

Vehicle make & year

Number of passengers with luggage

Which trips would you most like to go on?