

Religion 320: Cults and Covens: Theory and Practice of New Religious Movements

Instructor:

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Institution:

Syracuse University (Private Research University)

Course Level & Type:

300 level undergraduate course; lecture & seminar

Hours of Instruction:

Three hours per week (3 approximately 1hour sessions) over a 15 week semester

Enrollment & Year last taught:

13 students; spring 2007

Pedagogical Reflections:

This course will investigate New Religious Movements (NRMs) largely within the contemporary American context. This area of study is fraught with complexity, ambiguity, and controversy. As such the course is designed to engage a variety of theoretical perspectives of and approaches to the phenomena of NRMs; address the popular understandings of these groups commonly known as “Cults” in an attempt to critically deconstruct inflammatory and biasing misconceptions; and to discuss the beliefs, practices, organization, and histories of a number of contemporary NRMs.

In addition the Department of Religion has articulated the following educational goals as desirable learning objectives for its courses, and this course tries to promote them. The grades in this course will - in part- reflect the ability to attain these goals.

- to think critically about religion;
- to become more aware of the diversity of perspectives within the study of religion, and about the nature of religion;
- to know and better understand diverse instances of religion within human culture, and to be better able to describe and interpret them.

In general the students met these goals and the course was a success. At times the reading load was cumbersome for the students but achievable. The use of multimedia resources worked very well and I would hope to incorporate more of these in future iterations of the course. The student presentations/projects also worked very effectively in expanding the amount of material that we could cover in the semester. The only major problem was in the scheduling as I was perhaps too ambitious for the time allotted. In the future I might pare down the number of traditions covered and thus also strip out some of the required readings.

Religion 320: Cults and Covens: Theory and Practice of New Religious Movements

Monday, Wednesday, Friday: 9:30-10:25am
Building Crouse-Hinds, Room 101

Professor: Shawn Krause-Loner
Office Hours: By Appointment - (available M,
W, & F mornings before and after class)
Email: (sckrause@syr.edu)

General Introduction, Purpose and Goals:

This course will investigate New Religious Movements (NRMs) largely within the contemporary American context. This area of study is fraught with complexity, ambiguity, and controversy. As such the course is designed to engage a variety of theoretical perspectives of and approaches to the phenomena of NRMs; address the popular understandings of these groups commonly known as "Cults" in an attempt to critically deconstruct inflammatory and biasing misconceptions; and to discuss the beliefs, practices, organization, and histories of a number of contemporary NRMs.

Disclaimer:

In this course we will be discuss a number of perspectives and religious traditions that may seem "odd," "weird," "wacko," "deviant," "evil," or "just plain nuts." While these are popular and perhaps normal mainstream reactions, they are not appropriate in this classroom context. Our goal is to discuss and investigate, not to evaluate.

Educational Objectives:

The Department of Religion has articulated the following educational goals as desirable learning objectives for its courses, and this course tries to promote them. Your grades in this course will - in part- reflect your ability to attain these goals.

- to think critically about religion;
- to become more aware of the diversity of perspectives within the study of religion, and about the nature of religion;
- to know and better understand diverse instances of religion within human culture, and to be better able to describe and interpret them

Required Readings:

There are three required "textbooks" for this course. These can be purchased at the University Bookstore. In addition to these texts, there are a number of required readings which have been put on electronic reserve through Bird Library and/or will be handed out in class (designated **ER** on the class schedule). We will also be utilizing certain religious websites which I will announce in class.

- Adler, Margot. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today.*
- Dawson, Lorne. *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*
- Miller, Tim, ed. *America's Alternative Religions.*

Electronic Reserve:

- Melton - "What is a Cult?" in *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*

- Robbins - “New Religions and Alternative Religions”
- Weber - “The Pure Types of Legitimate Authority” & “The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization” in *On Charisma and Institution Building*
- Barker - “Watching for Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of Five Types of Cult-Watching Groups” in *Cults, Religion, and Violence* (pgs. 123-148)
- Kaplan - “The Anti-Cult Movement/Watchdog Groups” in *Radical Religion in America* (pgs. 127-163)
- Melton & Bromley - “Challenging Misconceptions about the New Religions - Violence Connection” in *Cults, Religion, and Violence* (pgs. 42-56)
- Bromley - “Dramatic Denouements” in *Cults, Religion, and Violence* (pgs. 11-41)
- Tabor & Gallagher - “Why Waco”
- Kaplan - “Christian Identity” in *Radical Religion in America* (pgs. 47-68)
- McCarthy Brown - “Mama Lola”
- Daschke & Ashcraft - “The Rastafarians” in *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader* (pgs. 205-210)
- Hausman - “from: The Kebra Nagast: The Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom and Faith from Ethiopia and Jamaica” in *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader* (pgs. 211-216)
- Daschke & Ashcraft - “Soka Gakkai” in *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader* (pgs. 119-121)
- Causton - “from: The Buddha in Daily Life: An Introduction to the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin” in *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader* (pgs. 124-135)
- Heelas - “The New Age Movement”
- Partridge - “Understanding UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities” in *UFO Religions* (pgs. 3-42)
- Chryssides - “Scientific Creationism: A Study of the Raëlian Church” in *UFO Religions* (pgs. 45-61)
- Palmer - “Aliens Adored: Raël’s UFO Religion”
- Starhawk - “Witchcraft as a Goddess Religion”
- Crowley - “Wicca as Modern Day Mystery Religion” in *Pagan Pathways*
- Kaplan - “Odinism and Ásatru” in *Radical Religion in America* (pgs. 69-99)

Multimedia resources:

- Film: *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (2004)
- Television: *South Park, Episode 912: Trapped in the Closet* (2005)

Grading and Requirements:

This course will be a lot of work. As there is a great deal of religious “ground” I wish to cover, the readings are of utmost importance for the success of this course. It is the responsibility of the student to engage the readings, sometimes in greater depth than what we can discuss in class. Students are required to keep up with the readings and come prepared to discuss them in class.

Attendance and participation are a must in this course. I will be keeping a record of your attendance in class. More than two unexcused absences will lower your final grade by one level (from A to A-, for example) for each unexcused absence beyond the initial two. An excused absence means that

you have spoken to me and I have found the reason for your absence to be valid. Sending me an email after class stating why you were not there is not acceptable. Absences due to illness will be excused with proper documentation. As well, participation will play a part in the determination of your grade and is required in one form or another. (Note: The returning of the “syllabus pledge” at the end of this document will count as part of your participation grade).

There are three exams for this course. Each exam covers approximately one-third of the course material, scheduled at the end of each section. The exams consist of short answer and essay components designed to allow the student to demonstrate their knowledge of the material and their ability to utilize and apply concepts. There is no final exam in this course.

In addition to the exams, there is a research paper and presentation component to the course. The paper is to engage and report upon one NRM that is not covered in class, discussing the history, beliefs, and practices of the religion as well as applying some of the theoretical perspectives and themes that we have discussed. Midway through the semester, students are to turn in an abstract detailing the religious movement that will be addressed in their paper and a preliminary bibliography. The paper is due by noon on the last day of the Final Exam period, to be turned in to the Religion Office HL 501. The paper is to be 8-10 pages, in 12 point News Times Roman font. The pages are to be numbered and the margins no larger than 1.25 inches.

Students are also required to present in class on the religious movement that they are researching. Students should be prepared to present for approximately 25 minutes (half a class period) and include audio-visual material as appropriate. We will discuss the requirements of paper and presentation as the course progresses.

A Note about **Plagiarism** and **Academic Dishonesty**: I take Plagiarism very seriously. If any student is found to have plagiarized from any source, whether it is from the textbook, additional readings, a fellow student, or internet source, that student will be reported to the Dean of Students office and will fail the entire course. Honesty and producing one’s own intellectual work are virtues prized most highly. I know that each of you is capable of producing interesting and challenging work, so don’t cheat. If you are unfamiliar with what constitutes plagiarism or how to properly cite sources please ask or familiarize yourself with the school’s code of conduct and appropriate style guides.

Grading:

Exam #1: 20%
Exam #2: 20%
Exam #3: 20%

Research Presentation: 15%
Final Research Paper: 20%
Participation: 5%

I encourage each of you to keep track of your grades throughout the semester.

Class Schedule:

In general each week will deal with a specific issue/theme or religious tradition. (Unfortunately some topics will get less time than others. This is not an evaluation of importance but simply a practical issue). This will greatly reduce the depth of that which we can cover in this course but increase the breadth of traditions/themes that can be introduced. It is a precarious balancing act but one that will hopefully prove fruitful as a way to whet students’ curiosity and appetite for further exploration.

Not all days have an assigned reading. On those days I will be lecturing and we will be continuing our previous discussions. The fact that no particular reading is assigned does not mean that nothing will be done on those days.

Section I:

- Section I will introduce the concept of Cult/NRM and address many of the theoretical and academic perspectives on the phenomenon. The class will also engage the popular understandings of the term cult and the connotations thus associated with these groups. Certain characteristics such as Charismatic Authority, Violence, and Member Demographics will be addressed and theorized.

Week 1: (1/17-1/19) - Introduction

W: Introduction to the Course and the Subject matter.

F: Problematizing Terms – What is a Cult?

Reading:

- *Melton - "What is a Cult?" (ER)*

Week 2: (1/22-1/26) - The Theoretical Landscape (Sociology and Religious Studies)

M: Cults and New Religious Movements

Reading:

- *Dawson: Chapters. 2 & 4*

W: Cults and New Religious Movements

Reading:

- *Dawson: Chpt. 3*
- *Robbins - "New Religions and Alternative Religions" (ER)*

F: Charismatic Authority

Reading:

- *Weber - "The Pure Types of Legitimate Authority" & "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization" (ER)*

Week 3: (1/29-2/2) - Watchdogs and "Rescuers"

M: Who Joins NRMs and Why?

Reading:

- *Dawson: Section IV - Chpts. 7 & 8*

W: The Question of Brainwashing

Reading:

- *Dawson: Section V- Chpts. 9-11*

F: Anti-Cult Movements

Reading:

- Barker - "*Watching for Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Roles of Five Types of Cult-Watching Groups*" **(ER)**
- Kaplan - "*The Anti-Cult Movement/ Watchdog Groups*" **(ER)**

Week 4: (2/5-2/9) - NRMs and Violence

M: Understanding Violence and NRMs

Reading:

- Melton & Bromley - "*Challenging Misconceptions about the New Religions - Violence Connection*" **(ER)**
- Bromley - "*Dramatic Denouements*" **(ER)**

W: NRM/Violence Case Study: The Branch Davidians and the Waco incident

Reading:

- Miller: *Chpt. 15*

F: continuing discussion of the Waco incident

Reading:

- Tabor & Gallagher - *selections from: "Why Waco"* **(ER)**

Week 5: (2/12-2/16) – Exam # 1 & Christian Identity

M: Exam # 1

Section II:

- Section II continues the discussion of NRMs by exploring a number of movements that have been classified or are currently understood to be Cults/NRMs/ARMs.

W: Christian Identity

Reading:

- Miller: *Chpt. 11*
- Kaplan - "*Christian Identity*" **(ER)**

F: Christian Identity (continued)

Week 6: (2/19-2/23) – Afro-Caribbean Traditions

M: Vodou/Santeria

Reading:

- Miller: *Chpt. 28*

W: Vodou/Santeria (cont.)

Reading:

- McCarthy Brown - *selections from: "Mama Lola"* **(ER)**

F: Rastafarianism

Reading:

- *Miller: Chpt. 29*
- *Daschke & Ashcraft - "The Rastafarians" and Hausman - "from: The Kebra Nagast: The Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom and Faith from Ethiopia and Jamaica" (ER)*

Week 7: (2/26-3/2) – Rastafarianism & Hindu NRMs in America

M: Rastafarianism (cont.)

W: Hindu Yogis & International Society for Krishna Consciousness

Reading:

- *Miller: Chpt. 18-19*

F: ISKCON (cont.)

Research Paper Abstract and Preliminary Bibliography Due

Week 8: (3/5-3/9) – Evangelical Buddhism & Exam #2

M: Soka Gakkai

Reading:

- *Daschke & Ashcraft - "Soka Gakkai" and Causton - "from: The Buddha in Daily Life: An Introduction to the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin" (ER)*

W: Soka Gakkai (cont.)

F: Exam #2

Spring Break (3/11-3/18)

Section III:

- Section III will continue to address NRMs by focusing on the New Age and Resurgent Paganisms

Week 9: (3/19-3/23) – The New Age

M: The New Age (Historical antecedents and modern expressions)

Reading:

- *Heelas - selections from: "The New Age Movement" (ER)*
- *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*

W: The New Age (cont.)

F: UFO Religions

Reading:

- *Partridge - "Understanding UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities" (ER)*

Week 10: (3/26-3/30) – Aliens, Science & Religiosity

M: The Raëlians

Reading:

- *Chryssides* - “*Scientific Creationism: A Study of the Raëlian Church*” **(ER)**
- *Palmer* - selection from: “*Aliens Adored: Raël’s UFO Religion*” **(ER)**

W: Scientology

Reading:

- *Miller: Chpt. 40*

F: Scientology (cont.)

- *South Park: Trapped in the Closet*

Week 11: (4/2-4/6) – Resurgent Paganisms

M: Neopaganism

Reading:

- *Adler: Chpts 1-3*

W: Wicca and Witchcraft

Reading:

- *Adler: Chpts 4, 5, 7*

F: Wicca and Witchcraft (cont.)

Reading:

- *Starhawk* - “*Witchcraft as a Goddess Religion*” **(ER)**
- *Crowley* - “*Wicca as Modern Day Mystery Religion*” **(ER)**

Week 12: (4/9-4/13) – Neo-Vikings & Satanism(s)

M: Norse Paganism, Odinism and Ásatru

Reading:

- *Adler - Heathenism* (pgs. 284-299)
- *Kaplan* - “*Odinism and Ásatru*” **(ER)**

W: Norse Paganism, Odinism and Ásatru (cont.) & Satanism

- *Miller: Chpt. 42*

F: Exam #3

Week 13: (4/16-4/20) – Student Presentations

M: Student Presentations Begin

W: Student Presentations

F: Student Presentations

Week 14: (4/23-4/27) - *Student Presentations*

M: Student Presentations

W: Student Presentations

F: Student Presentations

Week 15: (4/30) – *Student Presentations & Wrap Up*

M: Student Presentations & Wrap Up

Final Paper: Due the last Day of Finals' Week [please place your essay in my Mailbox (or provided receptacle) in the Religion Department Office].

A Final Note about the Syllabus:

This syllabus represents a contract between you, the student, and me, the professor. However, there are always unforeseen situations that arise during the course of a semester. Therefore, I do reserve the right to change the scheduling of topics/readings and/or the evaluation process to accommodate any extraordinary circumstances or to address the evolving needs of the class as a whole.

To be handed in on the Second Day of Class:

I, _____, have read the syllabus for REL 320 in its entirety and have posed any questions that I might have had to the professor for clarification. I understand my responsibilities as a student in this course and agree to the requirements and criteria appearing here within. My signature on this sheet represents my understanding of the syllabus and my pledge to follow its guidelines.

Student Signature: _____
Student ID #: _____