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SOCI 130S.01: Sociology of Alternative Religions

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Sociology of Alternative Religions
Soci 130S, CRN 34040
Spring, 2022

Instructor Information

Instructor -- Rob Balch

Office -- SS 325

Email -- rob.balch@umontana.edu

Office hours – 10:00-11:45 a.m., Monday, Wednesday & Friday, or by appointment

Phone – during office hours 406 218-6391; other times 406 728-6508 until 8 pm

Class Assistants

Austin Wald (austin.wald@umconnect.umd.edu) is the Preceptor for this course. He received an A in the course in 2019 so he will be a valuable resource. This semester he will attend class every day, take detailed notes, help with grading, be available to answer questions about the syllabus and lectures, and conduct review sessions before the exams.

Also helping with the class is Sara Wozniak. Sara is a graduate teaching assistant who will provide tech help and assistance in the event that covid forces changes in the class.

Course Description

The course will examine controversial new religions in North America from 1950 to the present. Commonly known as “cults”, these religions offer new beliefs and ways of living that challenge mainstream assumptions about reality. As a result, they often experience intense opposition, including ridicule, harassment, lawsuits, and occasionally violent attacks.

Among sociologists, a religious cult is a religion that is new and different in society, but to the general public the word conjures up images of brainwashing, sexual abuse, violence, and mass suicide. Extreme actions do occur and will be examined in class, but most cults are benign and some have positive effects on their members and the communities where they live. Nonetheless, the word “cult” has been so tainted that today most sociologists have replaced it with neutral terms such as “new religious movement” or “alternative religion”.

Though commonly viewed as fringe phenomena, cults are found worldwide and throughout history, and they are an important source of religious and social change. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century Spiritualism promoted gender equality and the abolition of slavery, and the new religions of the 1960s and '70s helped fuel a resurgence of Evangelical Christianity.

The topics we will cover include:

- \$ New religions in American history, especially mid-20th century to the present
- \$ Belief systems and social organization
- \$ Millennialism and the end-times
- \$ How new religions begin
- \$ Joining and conversion
- \$ Charismatic leadership
- \$ Commitment and the “brainwashing” controversy
- \$ Prophecy failure and the persistence of faith
- \$ How new religions change – accommodation and compromise, corruption and group disintegration, violence and mass suicide, success and sect formation

Course Objectives

By the end of this course you should be able to:

- \$ use social science concepts to describe 1) societal conditions influencing the appeal of unconventional religious movements, 2) variations in belief systems and types of social organization, and 3) the experiences of individual members.
- \$ understand how cults and sects originate and change over time.
- \$ use social science concepts and theories to understand contemporary controversial new religious groups and their impact on individuals.
- \$ understand and evaluate research on unconventional religions

Required and Recommended Reading and videos

The required reading consists of one textbook and three readings on Moodle. You also are expected to watch three short videos on Moodle (15 to 35 minutes).

The text is New Age, Neopagan & New Religious Movements by Hugh Urban (2015). It is available in the UM bookstore or online.

The readings and/or videos pertaining to each class meeting are noted in the daily outline (see below). The author’s name appears parentheses after the topic of the day. Optional readings (not covered on the exams) are noted as such. Some optional readings give more detail on topics covered in lectures. Others cover topics that we won’t have time for in class, and a few provide a perspective that differs from mine.

Several recommended readings come from The Secret World of Cults by Sarah Moran, 1999. Intended for a popular audience, it covers the most notorious new religious movements of the late 20th century, devoting three to four pages to each, with pictures. The entire book is on Moodle and the relevant page numbers are

noted in the course outline.

Using Moodle

Announcements, study guides, and grades will be communicated through Moodle. You should check Moodle regularly because announcements are unpredictable and may be cause for joy or gloom. To access readings on Moodle, just click on the link next to the topic for a particular date.

Exams and Grading

There will be three exams--two midterms and a comprehensive final. Each midterm is worth 30% of your total score and the final 40%. All exams will consist of multiple-choice questions and possibly fill-in-the-blank or short-answer questions. Exams will be graded on a percentage basis: 90% and above = A, 80% = B, etc. For final grades, I do not use the plus-minus system.

A study guide will be posted on Moodle before each exam. If you have done the reading by the time you get it, it will be easy to find the relevant points. If you wait on reading until you've got the study guide, you're likely to be in trouble.

You may bring one page of notes to each exam. You may write on both sides, however much you can squeeze on a page, as long as that page is no larger than 8½" x 11". No electronic aids allowed.

Class Rules

To help make this class a worthwhile experience for everyone, please observe the following courtesies:

- \$ Be on time for class. If you must arrive late, please use the back door.
- \$ Don't cause distractions for others or me. Keep the chitchat down and don't use your computer for anything other than taking notes.
- \$ If you have to come in late or leave early, please use the back door.
- \$ And please do not begin packing up until the lecture is finished.

Special Accommodations

If you have a disability, please contact me as soon as possible and I will make reasonable accommodations. UM assures equal access to instruction through the collaboration of students with disabilities, their instructors, and Disability Services. "Reasonable" means UM permits no fundamental changes in academic standards or retroactive modifications.

If English is not your second language, you may obtain notes from the assistants

and use a translator during exams. However, you must check with me first.

Other Exceptions to Normal Procedures

- \$ **Absences** – I don't take attendance, but you are responsible for all class material whether you are able to attend or not. You may get notes from the preceptor, but only if you have a legitimate excuse (determined by me) for missing class and are unable to borrow notes from another student. You will be expected to pay for copies.
- \$ **Make-up exams** – You will be allowed to make up an exam 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 five percentage points. Missed exams must be made up before the exam is returned to the rest of the class.
- \$ **Incompletes** – By University policy, to receive a grade of Incomplete you must have a D or better after the midterm 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.
- \$ **Cheating** – Cheating in any form will result in an F on the exam and possibly failing the course.
- \$ **Failure to return borrowed materials** – Any materials borrowed from me (e.g., books, videos, articles) must be returned by the last day of class or you will receive an Incomplete which will turn into an F if the items are not returned or replaced within one month of the final exam.

Tips for Doing Well in the Course

Do the reading and attend class. The exams will cover both. Even when the same topic is covered in both the text and lectures, either the information or emphasis is likely to be different. In any case, most lectures will be illustrated, whereas book has only a few pictures.

Because so much of the course material is visual, I will use a lot of PowerPoints. These will be posted on Moodle shortly after each lecture. However, they are not a substitute for attending class and taking notes because the text accompanying each picture will be bare bones.

To make best use of the PowerPoints, you should review them soon after class and be sure you understand how each picture (or the story I tell about it) illustrates the point I was trying to make.

You are responsible for taking your own notes. You may use a computer as long as you only use it for taking notes. If you miss class, you may borrow notes

from the preceptor, but only if you have a compelling reason for not being able to get notes from another student and if you get my approval first.

Daily Outline

All topics and exam dates are subject to change. You are responsible for staying abreast of changes, which will be announced in class and on Moodle.

Readings that are most relevant to each topic are noted by author (in parentheses). "Urban" is the author of the textbook. All other names refer to readings and videos on Moodle. Optional but recommended material is also noted. If nothing appears in parentheses, there is no particular reading for that topic.

Introduction to Alternative Religions

- \$ Jan. 19 Overview of the course
- \$ Jan. 21 Defining terms – Religion, church, sect & cult (Recommended: Stark chapter on religion)
- \$ Jan. 24 Cults in American history (Required: Urban Ch.1, 2, 5; Recommended: Stein on 19th c. communal societies)

Basic Concepts – Case study of Human Individual Metamorphosis

- \$ Jan. 26 "Walking out the door of your life" – The mystery of sudden conversion (Recommended: Moran on UFO cults, pp. 48-68)
- \$ Jan. 28 Caterpillars to butterflies -- Belief systems
- \$ Jan. 31 Inside the cocoon -- Totalism
- \$ Feb. 2 Being "on the process" – Struggling to believe

Studying Fringe Religions

- \$ Feb. 4 The two cults of the experts – The anti-cult movement & cult apologists

The Enduring Millennial Theme

- \$ Feb. 7 Visions of the End Times in history & around the world (Recommended: Worsley on cargo cults, and Stein on millennialism in the U.S.)

The "Great Awakening" of the 1960s & '70s

- \$ Feb. 9 Baby boomers & the counterculture (Required: Urban Ch. 9 on Church of Satan; Ellwood & Partin on the 60s. Recommended: Morgan on the counterculture; Stevens on LSD)
- \$ Feb. 11 The collapse of idealism & turn to religion (Required: Urban ch.10 on ISKCON; Stein pp. 123-128 on best known '60s NRMs; Eskridge on Jesus People; Jenkins on lack of evidence supporting Satanism scare. Recommended: Moran pp. 34-37 on Unification)

Church, 42-43 on TM, 44-47 on Hare Krishna, 84-85 on Children of God, 88-91 on Manson Family, 96-99 on Church of Satan)

The Love Family – Heaven on Earth or “America’s Most Dangerous Cult”?

- \$ Feb. 14 Rainbow Gatherings, new religions & the Love Family
- \$ Feb. 16 Origins & beliefs – From LSD trip to new religion
- \$ Feb. 18 Social structure – the divine hierarchy
- \$ Feb. 21 Presidents Day – No class
- \$ Feb. 23 Charismatic leadership – the divine gift

FIRST EXAM – February 25 – Urban chapters 1, 2, 5, 9, 10; Ellwood & Partin; Eskridge; Jenkins)

The 1980s & '90s – The New Age Movement & Neo-paganism

- \$ Feb. 28 World affirming religion & the metaphysical tradition (Required: Urban Ch. 4, 8, 11 & pp. 5-6 & 11-13 in Ch. 1)
- \$ March 2 Metaphysics, seekers & gurus (Required: Ramtha videos. Recommended: Melton on Ramtha’s School; “Ramtha Riled” on scandals; Todd on New Age religion in the Pacific Northwest)
- \$ March 4 The New Age in Montana – Church Universal & Triumphant (Required: video of Elizabeth Clare Prophet. Recommended: Erin Prophet on CUT members)
- \$ March 7 Self-Initiation – a New Age client cult
- \$ March 9 The curious fate of Self-Initiation

How New Religions Begin

- \$ March 11 Divine revelation – How a professor & a nurse discovered they were the Two Witnesses prophesied in Revelation 11 (Required: Lowe on a classic case)
- \$ March 14 The Messiah in Missoula – Baha’is Under the Provisions of the Covenant
- \$ March 16 Subculture-evolution – Restaurant crew becomes a new religion
- \$ March 18 The entrepreneurial model – Religion as business (Required: Urban ch. 7 on Scientology)

SPRING BREAK!

Joining & Conversion

- \$ March 28 Why people join
- \$ March 30 From verbal convert to true believer

The Brainwashing Controversy

- \$ April 1 How commitment begins

- \$ April 4 Deepening commitment (Required: Lindholm on Manson Family. Recommended: Bromley & Shupe on joining new religions; Hassan on "mind control")
- \$ April 6 Prophecy failure & death of the founder – The Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant (**NOTE:** This lecture won't be on exam; it will be covered on the final instead.)

SECOND EXAM – Friday, April 8 – Urban chapters 4, 7, 8, 11 & pp. 5-6 & 11-13 in Ch. 1; article by Lowe; videos of Ramtha & Elizabeth Clare Prophet

How New Religions Change over Time – Common Trajectories

- \$ April 11 Soaring success/sudden decline – How prophecy failure affected Church Universal & Triumphant
- \$ April 13 From white hot to lukewarm – The effects of age, kids & capitalism on utopian dreams
- \$ April 15 Corruption scandals: See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil
- \$ April 18 Assimilation, accommodation & survival on the fringe –The Jesus People & the Twelve Tribes

How New Religions Change – Extreme Behavior

- \$ April 20 Deviance amplification: The Peoples Temple & Branch Davidians (Required: Urban 12 & 13. Recommended: Moran 76-79 on Branch Davidians & 80-83 on Peoples Temple)
- \$ April 22 The Heaven's Gate mass suicide, part 1: Astronaut boot camp begins
- \$ April 25 Heaven's Gate, part 2: Setting the stage for suicide
- \$ April 27 Heaven's Gate, part 3: "Final exit" (Required: Ch. 14 on the Raelians)

Success and Sectarianism – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its Offshoots

- \$ April 29 Origins & early history of the LDS Church (Urban 5)
- \$ May 2 The angel & the beehive – The perils of success
- \$ May 4 Sect formation – Plural marriage & the FLDS
- \$ May 6 The "cult of Warren" & near-demise of the FLDS

FINAL EXAM – MONDAY, May 9, 10:10-12:10