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SOCI 130S.01: Sociology of Alternative Religions

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Sociology 130

SOCIOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS

Spring, 2017

Instructor – Rob Balch

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Office hours (Social Sciences 325):

Monday –10:00-11:30, 1:00-2:00

Wednesday & Friday – 10:00-11:30

Or by appointment

Course Description

This course examines religious communities that dissent from the established religions of a society. Sociologists commonly refer to these as sects and cults. Sects are radical versions of established faiths, whereas cults are new faiths based on either new revelations or beliefs drawn from other religious traditions. Although some attention will be given to sects, our primary focus will be on cults, especially those that are genuinely new religions.

To most people the word “cult” conjures up images of sex scandals, violence, and mass suicide. These things do occur and will be examined in class, but most cults are benign, and some have positive impacts on their members and the communities where they are located. In this class, the term has no pejorative connotations; a cult is simply a religion that is new and different in a society.

Though commonly viewed as a fringe phenomenon, both cults and sects have existed throughout history, and today they can be found in almost every society. By challenging traditional assumptions and injecting new ideas into society, they can be a significant source of social change. Some sects evolve into accepted denominations, and a few cults may ultimately win acceptance as bonafide religions. Arguably, all world religions in existence today began as cults.

The course is divided into four sections, each concluding with an exam. The first introduces basic concepts, and examines historic and cross-cultural examples of cults and sects. The next section focuses on the “cult scare” that swept the United States between 1965 and 1985. In the third, we will address three issues raised by the cult scare: how new religions begin, why people join them, and how they become deeply committed. In the final segment of

the course, we will examine how new religions evolve over time. We will look at late 20th century groups that ended in scandal, violence, and mass suicide, and then we'll conclude by examining the rarest of outcomes, public acceptance--as well as the formation of fundamentalist sects that inevitably follows worldly success.

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) variation in their belief systems and forms 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

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.
- Please keep the chitchat down and don't use your computer for anything other than taking notes--both are very distracting for others.
- Turn off your cell phone.
- If you have to leave early, please use the back door.
- And please do not begin packing up until the lecture is finished.

Preceptors (office hours to be announced)

The preceptors are undergraduate students who received an A in this course the last time it was offered. They will conduct review sessions before each exam, show any evening extra-credit videos that might be scheduled, assign points to extra-credit papers, and hold regular office hours (TBA).

The preceptors are useful resources who can help you do well in this class. Not only are they familiar with the course material, but they understand how I test and can help you prepare. In addition to answering questions about lectures and readings, they can help with procedural problems, e.g., questions about the syllabus, extra-credit issues, or clarification of an announcement.

Using Moodle

Announcements, study guides, and grades will be communicated through Moodle. You should check it regularly because announcements are unpredictable and may be cause for joy or gloom. Except for the textbook, you will need to use Moodle to access the reading (see below).

Required reading

The reading is important. Some of it supplements class lectures, but a lot deals with topics that I don't have time for in class. I make a point of covering every reading on the exams.

Readings consist of one book and a collection of articles on Moodle. The book is New Age, Neopagan & New Religious Movements by Hugh Urban (2015). For the Moodle readings, go to the daily schedule on Moodle and click on the link to the relevant reading. Optional readings are indicated by an asterisk (*).

A list of the Moodle readings, with a brief description of each, appears at the end of the syllabus.

Exams and grading

There will be four exams, each worth 25% of your grade. All exams will consist of multiple-choice questions and will be graded on a percentage basis: 90% and above = A, 80% = B, etc. I do not use the plus-minus system.

Much of the information in this course is cumulative, i.e., new information will build on material covered on previous exams. After Exam 1, questions on each subsequent test will presume knowledge of concepts covered on the previous exams. The final will be comprehensive.

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.

The preceptors will conduct a review session shortly before each exam, but you will need to come with questions. Don't expect them to tell you what will or will not be on the exam, or to provide capsule summaries of lectures you missed.

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

Special accommodations

If you have a disability, please contact me as soon as possible and I will make reasonable accommodations. UM assure equal access to instruction through the collaboration of students with disabilities, their instructors, and Disability Services. "Reasonable" means UM permits not fundamental changes in academic standards or retroactive modifications.

If English is not your second language, you may obtain notes from the preceptors and use a translator during exams, but check with me first.

Other 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 five percentage points. Missed exams must be made up before the exam is returned to the rest of the class.

To receive a grade of 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.

Cheating in any form will result in an F on the exam and possibly failing the course.

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

You can earn extra credit by attending one or more night-time extra-credit presentations. Each is worth one percentage point to be added to the average of your exam scores. To receive credit you must arrive on time and submit a one-page response to a question about the presentation. Unless otherwise

announced, sessions will begin at 7:00 p.m. sharp. Late arrivals may stay but will not receive credit. Dates, times, and locations will be announced in class and on Moodle.

Field trip

There may be an optional field trip. News on this front will be announced in class and details posted on Moodle.

Taking notes

Unless you are blessed with perfect recall, you will not do well in this course without taking good notes. Good notes are thorough notes—more is always better than less. If you can't pay attention and take good notes at the same time, then write out a complete set of notes as soon as possible after class.

My lectures will include lots of concepts and stories to illustrate them. You should take notes on both. Some of you will be tempted to ignore the story and write down only the concepts. Others will write down lots of details about the story but ignore the concepts. In either case, you are likely to have trouble on the exams. Count on exam questions that will ask you connect concepts with real-life examples, some of which may be purely hypothetical.

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

I will post most of my powerpoints, but they are not a substitute for being in class and taking good notes. They are mostly pictures with brief captions.

COURSE OUTLINE

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

Readings that are most relevant to each topic are noted, by author, in parentheses and can be found in the class schedule in Moodle. "Urban" refers to the textbook. All other names refer to Moodle readings. If nothing appears in parentheses, there is no particular reading for that day. Optional readings (not covered on the exam) are marked with an asterisk (*).

Introduction

- 01/23/2017: Overview of the course
- 01/25/2017: Churches & sects (Stark pp. 387-391 & 395-405)
- 01/27/2017: Cults & controversy (Urban Ch.1, 2, 5; Stein Ch.3)

Inside a world-rejecting UFO cult

- 01/30/2017: Walking out the door of your life – Joining up (Moran, 48-65; Urban 14)
- 02/01/2017: Caterpillars to butterflies -- Belief systems
- 02/03/2017: Inside the cocoon -- Totalism
- 02/06/2017: Tuning into the fathers – Learning to think like a member

Visions of the end times –The millennial theme

- 02/08/2017: Doomsday or heaven on earth? (Stein on apocalyptic movements); *Balch, Farnsworth & Wilkins)
- 02/10/2017: Cross-cultural & historical examples

The Great American Cult Scare – 1965-1985

- 02/13/2017: Setting the stage – Upheavals of the 1960s (Urban 11; Ellwood & Partin; *Stevens on LSD in the counterculture)
- 02/15/2017: **EXAM 1** – Urban 1, 2, 5, 14; Stein chapters on communitarians & apocalyptic movements (Lecture & readings for Feb. 13 will be covered on Exam 2)
- 02/17/2017: The sudden popularity of radical religions (Stein on late 20th century groups; Eskridge on Jesus People; Moran sections: 34-37 on Unification Church, 42-43 on TM, 44-47 on ISKCON, 84-85 on Children of God, 88-91 on Manson Family, 96-99 on Church of Satan)
- 02/20/2017: Presidents Day – no class

The Love Family – “America’s Most Dangerous Cult”

- 02/22/2017: Diverging paths in the counterculture – the Rainbow Family & the Love Family
- 02/24/2017: We Are One – Building commitment through community
- 02/27/2017: No equality in Heaven – Status, power & gender
- 03/01/2017: Charisma –The divine gift

The New Age and Neopagan movements – 1980s & '90s

- 03/03/2017: The “alternative reality” – Emergence of the New Age movement

(Urban 4, 8, 9; Jenkins)

- 03/06/2017: Seekers & gurus (Moran 38-41 on Rajneesh)
- 03/08/2017: Ramtha's School of Enlightenment (Urban 11; *Buchanan)
- 03/10/2017: Ramtha & the Experts (*Melton)

How new religions begin

- 03/13/2017: Divine revelation – The psychopathology model (Lowe)

EXAM 2 – – Urban 4, 8, 9, 11; Ellwood & Partin; Stein on apocalypticism; Eskridge; Jenkins; Moran selections (March 13 lecture & reading by Lowe will be covered on Exam 3)

- 03/17/2017: Religion as business – The entrepreneurial model (Urban 7; Bromley & Cowan)
- 03/20/2017: Spring break!
- 03/27/2017: From restaurant crew to new religion – the subculture-evolution model

Conversion & Commitment

- 03/29/2017: Deciding to join a radical religion (Bromley & Shupe)
- 03/31/2017: From verbal to total convert (Hassan)
- 04/03/2017: The brainwashing controversy – active & passive views of conversion
- 04/05/2017: Charisma & control – unlocking the secrets of Revelation ("Holy Hell" documentary – Netflix)
- 04/07/2017: Doing the unthinkable ("Holy Hell")

Late 20th century – scandal, violence & mass suicide

- 04/10/2017: **Exam 3** - Urban 7; Lowe; Bromley & Cowan; Bromley & Shupe; Hassan; "Holy Hell" documentary (April 12 lecture covered on final exam)
- 04/12/2017: Money, sex, drugs & downfall
- 04/14/2017: The Jonestown mass suicide (Urban 12; Moran 68-83)
- 04/17/2017: Self-fulfilling prophecies: The Waco catastrophe (Urban 13; Moran 76-79)

The Heaven's Gate mass suicide

- 04/19/2017: The suicide & flashback to the beginning (Moran 68-75 on Aum Shinrikyo & Order of the Solar Temple)
- 04/21/2017: Surprise
- 04/24/2017: Astronaut boot camp –Creating a predisposition to extreme behavior
- 04/26/2017: The "exit" – from predisposition to action

Success & sectarianism

- 04/28/2017: Origins of the Mormon Church (Urban 3; *Anderson)
- 05/01/2017: From persecution to public acceptance (Urban 3)
- 05/03/2017: The price of success --Fundamentalist sects (Urban 3)
- 05/05/2017: America's Most Wanted – Warren Jeffs & the FLDS (Urban 3; *Moran 92-93 on the "Mormon Manson")

FINAL EXAM – Wednesday, May 10, 10:10-12:10 – Urban 12, 13, 3; Moran 68-75 + review of previous material

READINGS ON MOODLE

To access the readings, go to the daily schedule on Moodle and click on the readings shown after the lecture topic. Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are optional–i.e., not covered on the exams. Readings are listed in the order that they should be read.

The first reading that appears on Moodle consists of excerpts from an illustrated book by Sarah Moran that covers some of the most notorious late-20th century groups (The Secret World of Cults, Quadrillion, 1999). Different selections from this book will be covered on each exam.

FOR EXAM #1

1. Stark, Rodney. 2007. "Religion." Pp. 387-411 in Sociology (10th ed.). Thomson Wadsworth.
(A sociological perspective on religion that emphasizes the importance of cult movements)
2. Stein, Stephen. 2003. "Communitarians Living on the Margins". Pp. 49-68 in Religions of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America. Oxford.
(Communal societies in early American history, religious & secular)
3. Moran, Sarah – "Salvation from the Stars" (pp. 48-65)
4. Stein, Stephen. "Apocalyptic Traditions: Watching and Waiting for the End". Pp. 69-79 in Religions of Dissent
5. *Balch, Robert, Gwen Farnsworth, and Sue Wilkins. 1983. "When the Bombs Drop: Reactions to Disconfirmed Prophecy in a Millennial Sect." Pacific Sociological Review 26 (April): 137-58.
(Missoula in the news – local group goes underground)

FOR EXAM 2

6. Ellwood, Robert and Henry Partin. 1988. "The Sixties and After." Pp. 66-71 in Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America (2nd ed.). Prentice-Hall. (The aftermath of the 1960s and the popularity of cults in the '70s)
7. Stevens, Jay. 1986. "The Counterculture" & "It Came From Inner Space." Chapters 22 & 25 in Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream. Harper & Row. (Turbulence of the 1960s and insights into the appeal of new religions in the hippie counterculture)
8. Eskridge, Larry. 2013. "Introduction: Remembering the Jesus Generation". Pp. 1-9 in God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America. Oxford.
9. Moran – Selections on Unification Church (34-37); Transcendental Meditation (42-43); ISKCON (44-47); Satanism (68-69); (Children of God (84-85), and Manson Family (88-91)
10. Jenkins, Philip J. 2008. "The Panic of the 1980s" Pp. 232-240 in James R. Lewis (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements. Oxford. (Excerpt from a chapter on Satanism describing more clearly than Urban the evidence against the Satanism scare)
11. Moran on Rajneeshpuram – pp.38-41 (Oregon's most notorious new religion, which appeared in the 1980s and drew most of its members from the New Age milieu)
12. *Melton, J. Gordon. 1996. "An Initial Encounter with Ramtha." Gnosis Magazine. Fall, pp.13-18. (A sympathetic perspective emphasizing the Gnostic elements in Ramtha's teachings. Ramtha's school has attracted many former members of 1970s cults)
13. *"Ramtha Riled." 2014. Intelligence Report. Southern Poverty Law Center. Summer, #154. (An unsympathetic view of Ramtha from a prominent human rights organization)
14. *Todd, Douglas. 2004. "The Last Paradise on Earth." Vancouver Sun. August 21, Section C, 1-3. (popularity of New Age religion in the Pacific Northwest, especially British Columbia)

FOR EXAM 3

15. Lowe, Scott. 2011. "The Taiping Rebellion." Pp. 314-317 in Catherine Wessinger (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism. Oxford.
(Classic example of the psychopathology model of cult formation)
16. Cowan, Douglas and David Bromley. 2015. Excerpt from "Transcendental Meditation: The Questions of Science and Therapy". Pp. 38-52 in Cults and New Religions. Wiley Blackwell.
17. Bromley, David, and Anson Shupe. 1981. "Joining the New Religions: Brainwashing or Conversion?" Pp. 92-127 in Bromley and Shupe, Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare. Beacon Press.
(The "cult apologist" argument written by two sociologists. This selection, like the next, is very old, but the arguments are the same now as then)
18. Hassan, Steven. 1990. "Understanding Cult Mind Control" and "Cult Psychology." Pp. 53-94 in Hassan, Combating Cult Mind Control. Park Street.
(An "anti-cult" viewpoint written by an ex-member of the Unification Church. Hassan is an "exit counselor" who helps members readjust after leaving high-control groups. A new edition is coming out, but the argument is unchanged)
19. Not a reading, but watch the documentary "Holy Hell", 1 hour 40 minutes, available on Netflix

FOR FINAL EXAM

20. Moran – 68-87 on Order of the Solar Temple murder/suicide, Aum Supreme Truth gas attack etc., Branch Davidian catastrophe, Peoples Temple/Jonestown mass suicide (and optional: Church of the Lamb of God, 92-93 – the "Mormon Manson")
21. *Lindholm, Charles. 1990. Excerpt from "Charles Manson and the Family." Pp. 123-136 in Charisma. Blackwell.
(Note the similarities between this group and others, such as the Love Family, which did not become violent)
22. *Moran on Ervil LeBaron's Church of the Lamb of God – pp. 92-93
(Fundamentalist Mormon sect, responsible for 20+ murders)
23. *Anderson, Scott. 1993. Chapter 2 in The 4 O'Clock Murders. Dell.
(Short history of the early Mormon Church that focuses on the roots of Mormon violence. The book is the story of Ervil LeBaron's bloody Church of the Lamb of God, a fundamentalist Mormon sect. See also Moran's book, pp. 92-93, for a capsule summary of the LeBaron saga)