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SOCI 130S.01: Sociology of Alternative Religions

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Sociology 130

SOCIOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS

Spring, 2016

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Office hours:

Monday – 10:00-11:30, 2:00-3:00

Tuesday – 10:00-12:00

Wednesday – 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 four issues raised by the cult scare: how new religions begin, why people join them, how members become deeply committed, and whether studies of Western cults can help us explain the conversion of Westerners to radical Islamic sects. In the final

segment of the course, we will examine how new religions change with age. First, 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 new religious movements, 2) variation in belief systems and forms of social organization in new religions, and 3) the experiences of individual members.
- \$ understand how new cults and sects originate and change over time.
- \$ use social science concepts and theories to understand contemporary controversial new religions 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:

1. Be on time for class. If you must arrive late, please use the back door.
2. Please keep the chitchat down and don't use your computer for anything other than taking notes. These are very distracting for others.
3. Turn off your cell phone.
4. If you have to leave early, please use the back door.
5. 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 evening extra-credit videos, assign points to extra-credit papers, and hold regular office hours (TBA). They 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 two books required for the course, you will need to use Moodle to access the reading (see below).

Required reading

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

You are expected to read two books, available at the UM bookstore, and a collection of articles, which can be accessed through Moodle. The books are shown directly below, but the list of Moodle articles appears at the end of the syllabus. Readings pertinent to each lecture are indicated by author on the course outline. Except for the books, all readings should be accessed through Moodle. Just go to the daily schedule and click on the relevant article.

At first glance it looks like there is a huge amount of reading. Do not panic. The books are short, as are most of the Moodle readings. Many of the readings are just two to four pages including pictures, and several are optional. Most are purely descriptive and easy reading. Before each exam you will receive a study guide highlighting the key points in each selection. The books are:

- Stephen Stein. Communities of Dissent: A History of Alternative Religions in America. Oxford, 2003. (Two copies are on reserve at the front desk in the library)
- Brent W. Jeffs. Lost Boy. Broadway, 2009. (Jeffs is a nephew of the infamous Warren Jeffs, leader and prophet of the polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints.)

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.

Technically, the final exam will not be comprehensive, but because each section of the course will build on previous ones, I have no qualms about using old terms when asking questions about new material. Terms and names from previous exams that are most likely to appear on the final will be listed on the study guide.

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, however much you can squeeze on a page, as long as that page is no larger than 8½" x 11". No electronic aids allowed.

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 two books required for the course, you will need to use Moodle to access the reading (see below).

Exceptions to normal procedures

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.

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.

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

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.

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 or videos. 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- or two-page synopsis of the video/presentation before leaving. 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 weekend 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 it was intended to illustrate. 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. Memorized definitions are useless if you can't apply them to the real world, and stories are just stories unless you know what they mean. What is important is the connection between concepts and real life.

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, if any.

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 in parentheses and can be found in the class schedule in Moodle. 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

- Jan. 25 Overview (Stein book, Introduction)
- Jan. 27 Churches & sects (Stein, chaps. 1-3, 6; Stark)
- Jan. 29 Cults & controversy (Stein 7)

Basic concepts – Inside a UFO cult

- Feb. 1 “Walking out the door of your life” (Moran, “Salvation from the Stars,” pp. 48-65)
- Feb. 3 Concepts for studying belief systems and leadership
- Feb. 5 Totalism: Inside the cocoon
- Feb. 8 Riding the roller coaster: Trying to sustain commitment

Millennialism – Doomsday or Heaven on Earth?

- Feb. 10 Varieties of millennial movements (Stein, chap 4; Dawson)
- Feb. 12 Cross-cultural and historical examples
- Feb. 15 Presidents Day – no class

The Great American Cult Scare – Part 1

- Feb. 17 Protestors, hippies, and new religions (Stein chap 7; Ellwood & Partin; Stevens*; Moran 34-37 on Unification church; 42-43 on Transcendental Meditation; 44-47 on ISKCON; 68-69 on Satanism, 84-85 on Children of God; 88-91 on Manson Family)

FIRST EXAM – Monday, Feb. 19 (Stein, Introduction & ch, 1-4,6; Stark; Dawson; Ellwood & Partin; Moran selections on UFO cults & notorious groups of 1960s & 70s)

The Counterculture and new religions – Case study of the Love Family

- Feb. 22 Heaven on Earth, dangerous cult, or benign social experiment?
- Feb. 24 Building commitment through community
- Feb. 26 Social hierarchies: Status, power & gender
- Feb. 29 Charisma & commitment

The Cult Scare – Part 2: The New Age Movement

- Mar. 2 Overview of the New Age movement (Stein, ch. 5; Siegler; Pike; Moran on Rajneesh, 38-41; Moran on Satanism 96-99; Melton; Buchanan*, Todd*, Jenkins*)
- Mar. 4 Metaphysics and the New Age (Stein, ch. 5; Siegler; Pike)
- Mar. 7 Church Universal and Triumphant: Origins and beliefs (Prophet ch. 5; Prophet ch 1-4*)
- Mar. 9 More on CUT: Failed prophecy and worse

- Mar. 11 Self-initiation: Unlocking the secrets of Revelation
- Mar. 14 Charisma and control in Self-initiation

SECOND EXAM – Wednesday, March 16 (Stein ch 5; Siegler; Pike; Moran 38-41, 96-99; Melton; Prophet Ch 6)

Issues raised by the cult scare – How new religions begin

- Mar. 18 Subculture-evolution: The Source
- Mar. 21 The psychopathology model: Heaven's Gate (Lowe)
- Mar. 23 The entrepreneurial model: Scientology (Hellesoy)

Conversion and commitment

- Mar. 25 Predisposing and situational factors (Bromley & Shupe)
- Mar. 29 From verbal to total convert (Hassan)
- Mar. 30 Why Westerners convert to Islam
- April 1 Conversion to radical Islam (Wood)
- April 2 Spring break begins!
- April 11 The brainwashing controversy: Active and passive models of commitment (Bromley & Shupe; Hassan; also read Dawson on violence as background for the last segment of the course)

THIRD EXAM – Wed., April 13 (Hellesoy; Bromley & Shupe; Hassan; Wood; Dawson)

Late 20th century – scandal, violence & mass suicide

- April 15 Money, sex, drugs & downfall
- April 18 Violence: The Jonestown mass suicide (Mathews; Moran 68-83)
- April 20 Self-fulfilling prophecies: The Waco catastrophe (Moran 76-79)
- April 22 Mass suicide at Heaven's Gate
- April 25 Heaven's Gate, part 2: Creating a predisposition to extreme behavior
- April 27 Heaven's Gate, part 3: From predisposition to action

Success and sectarianism

- April 29 Origins of the Mormon Church (*Anderson; *Woodward)
- May 2 From persecution to public acceptance (*Woodward)
- May 4 The price of success: Fundamentalist sects (Jeffs, entire book)
- May 6 Warren Jeffs & the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints

FINAL EXAM – Monday, May 9, 10:10-12:10 (Mathews; Moran selections; Jeffs book)

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. Moran, Sarah – "Salvation from the Stars" (pp. 48-65)
3. *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.
(Local history – prophecy failure in a Missoula group)
4. Dawson, Lorne. 2006. "Surviving the Failure of Apocalyptic Prophecies." Pp. 168-175 in Dawson, Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements (2nd ed.). Oxford.
(What other studies have found about reactions to prophecy failure)
5. *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)
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. 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)

FOR EXAM #2

8. Siegler, Elijah. 2007. "NRMs [New Religious Movements] as Esoteric Revival." Pp. 37-51 in Siegler, New Religious Movements. Pearson.

(Considerable overlap with Ch. 5 in Stein's book, but includes history that Stein doesn't mention, as well as info about contemporary esoteric groups)

9. Pike, Sarah. 2004. "Introduction to the Religious Worlds of Neopagans and New Agers." Pp. 13-38 in New Age and Neopagan Religion in America. Columbia University Press.
(two overlapping movements that became popular in the 1980s)
10. *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)
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. *Prophet, Erin. 2009. Chapters 1-4 in Prophet's Daughter: My Life with Elizabeth Clare Prophet Inside the Church Universal and Triumphant. Lyons Press. (Background on CUT from someone who not only was at the center of everything, but was being groomed to be the next "messenger" for the ascended masters)
15. Prophet, Erin. Chapter 5, "The Followers" (data on the social and psychological characteristics of CUT members)
16. Moran on Satanism – 96-99
17. Jenkins, Philip J. 2008. "Satanism and Ritual Abuse." Pp. 221-242 in James R. Lewis (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements. Oxford.
(Brief history of Satanism; dispels myths about Satanic ritual abuse)
18. *Petersen, Jesper Aa. 2014. "Carnal, Chthonian, Complicated: The Matter of Modern Satanism." Pp. 257-269 in James R. Lewis and Jesper

Aa. Petersen (eds.), Contemporary New Religions (2nd ed.). Oxford.
(for those with a serious interest in the darker side...)

FOR EXAM #3

19. 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)
20. Hellesoy, Kjersti. 2014. "Scientology: The Making of a Religion." Pp. 257-269 in James R. Lewis and Jesper Aa. Petersen (eds.), Contemporary New Religions (2nd ed.). Oxford.
(Contains info about the group & controversies that won't be covered in class)
21. 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)
22. 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.)
23. Wood, Graeme. 2015. "What ISIS Really wants." The Atlantic. March, 79-94.
(ISIS as a millennial Islamic sect. Also of interest is its attraction to young people from Western societies)
24. Dawson, Lorne L. 2007. "Why Do Some New Religious Movements Become Violent?" Chapter 5 in Comprehending Cults. Oxford.
(A good summary of the research on factors related to violent outcomes. It will be covered on Exam 3 to prepare you for the last section of the class. Plus, reading it now will lighten the load for the final.)

FOR EXAM #4

25. Moran selections on notorious violent groups – 68-83
(Order of the Solar Temple, 68-71; Aum Shinrikyo, 72-75; the Branch

Davidians, 76-79; Peoples Temple, 80-83)

26. Mathews, Tom, et al. 1978. "The Cult of Death," Newsweek, December 4, pp. 38-66.
(Old but good illustrated report on Jonestown mass suicide and events leading up to it)
27. *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)
28. *Moran on Ervil LeBaron's Church of the Lamb of God – pp. 92-93
(Fundamentalist Mormon sect, responsible for 20+ murders)
29. *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)
30. *Woodward, Kenneth. 2001. "A Mormon Moment." Newsweek, Sept. 10.
(Brief history of the Mormon Church, including beliefs, practices, social organization, and controversies)