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SOCI 130S.01: Sociology of Alternative Religions

Robert W. Balch

University of Montana - Missoula, rob.balch@umontana.edu

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Sociology 130
SOCIOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS
Spring, 2019

Instructor – Rob Balch – Office: SS 325; rob.balch@umontana.edu; 728-6508

Office hours:

Monday –10:00-11:45, 1:00-2:00

Tuesday – 10:00-12:00

Wednesday & Friday – 10:00-11:45

Or by appointment

Class assistants

Katie Kepler, Preceptor – kathryn.kepler@umontana.edu

Candice Odum, Teaching Assistant – candice.odum@umconnect.umt.edu

Office – (to be announced) Please call for an appointment.

The class assistants will attend class, take notes, conduct review sessions before exams, help with grading, and be available to help you do well in this course. 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 announcements.

Course Description

This 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, legal actions to limit their activities, and even 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 in the 1960s the challenge posed by new religions helped fuel the rise of the Christian Evangelical movement.

Topics we will cover include:

- New religions in American history
- Belief systems and social organization
- Millennialism and the end-times
- How new religions begin
- Why people join
- 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, achieving public legitimacy, 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) 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.
- 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.

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. I will also post a few required readings on Moodle, as well as many that are optional.

Required reading & videos

The required reading consists of one textbook and six articles on Moodle. You also will be expected to watch four videos on Moodle, ranging in length from 15 to 35 minutes. The text is New Age, Neopagan & New Religious Movements by Hugh Urban (2015), available in the UM bookstore or online.

In the course outline (see below), the readings and/or videos pertaining to each class meeting are noted in 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. To access the material on Moodle, just click on the link next to the topic for a particular date. Complete references for articles and videos are included in the daily schedule on Moodle.

Some readings, both required and recommended, 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.

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.

The class assistants 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.

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 stay for the entire 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.

For those who can't attend evening sessions, the presentations will be recorded. To receive credit you must submit a two-page response to a question that I will give you after you have listened to the recording. Be forewarned: Recordings will vary in quality. If you choose this option you must let me know by 5:00 pm the day after the presentation. You will have one day to submit your paper. Papers must be typed double-space with standard font and margins. Either email or paper is fine.

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

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.

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 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 first.

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. "Urban" refers to 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

- Jan. 11 Overview of the course
- Jan. 14 Mainstream religion – Churches & sects (Recommended: Stark on religion, churches, sects & cults)
- Jan. 16 New religions in American history (Required: Urban Ch.1, 2, 5; Recommended: Stein on 19th c. communal societies & Moran on Nation of Islam 116-119)
- Jan. 18 Cult controversies – A look at the experts
- Jan. 21 Martin Luther King Day – No class

Basic concepts – Inside a world-rejecting UFO cult

- Jan. 23 Walking out the door of your life – The mystery of sudden conversion (Recommended: Moran on UFO cults 48-65)
- Jan. 25 Caterpillars to butterflies -- Belief systems
- Jan. 28 Inside the cocoon -- Totalism & boundary control

Jan. 30 Being on the process – Struggling to believe

The millennial theme – Visions of the end times

Feb. 1 Cross-cultural, historic & contemporary millennial movements
(Recommended: Worsley on cargo cults & Stein on U.S. millennialism)

The Great American Cult Scare – 1965-1985

Feb. 4 Baby boomers & the counterculture (Required: Ellwood & Partin on the 60s. Recommended: Morgan on the counterculture; Stevens on LSD)
Feb. 6 The collapse of idealism & turn to religion (Required: Urban ch.10, Eskridge on Jesus People & Moran on '60s groups: 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 – Hippie cult, communal experiment, utopian society, new religion

Feb. 8 Rainbow Gatherings, new religions & the Love Family
Feb. 11 Origins & beliefs – creating perfection on Earth
Feb. 13 Social structure – the divine hierarchy
Feb. 15 Charismatic leadership – the divine gift
Feb. 18 Presidents Day – no class

Feb. 20 FIRST EXAM – Urban chapters 1, 2, 5, 9, 10; Ellwood & Partin; Eskridge; Moran selections (see Feb. 6 for pages)

The New Age Movement & Neopaganism – 1980s & '90s

Feb 22 World affirming religion & the metaphysical tradition (Required: Urban Ch. 4, 7, 8, 11 & review pp. 5-6 & 11-13 in Ch. 1; Recommended: Jenkins on Satanism scare)
Feb. 25 Metaphysics, seekers & gurus (Recommended: Balch on a New age sex cult; Todd on New Age religion in Pacific NW)
Feb. 27 The New Age in Montana – Church Universal & Triumphant (Required: Dictation video)
March 1 Channeling and Ramtha's School of Enlightenment (Required: Ramtha videos. Recommended: Melton on Ramtha's School & "Ramtha Riled" on Ramtha's dirt)

Research on new religions: How they begin

March 4 The psychopathology model – A professor & a nurse become messiahs (Required: Lowe on a classic case)
March 6 Subculture-evolution – Restaurant crew becomes new religion
March 8 The entrepreneurial model – Scientology (Required: Urban ch. 7)

Why people joined

- March 11 A model of religious conversion
March 13 Verbal vs total converts

The brainwashing controversy

- March 15 The Love Family – classic mind control...
March 18 Or not – competing explanations (Required: Lindholm on Manson Family;
Recommended: Bromely & Shupe on joining new religions & Hassan on
mind control)

Prophecy failure & the stubbornness of faith

- March 20 Doomsday in Missoula – Baha'is Under the Provisions of the Covenant
March 22 What happens when prophecy fails? (Recommended: Balch, Farnsworth
& Wilkins on BUPC)

March 23-31 – SPRING BREAK!

Surviving the first generation – How new religious movement evolve

- April 1 The fragility of charisma – Elizabeth Clare Prophet and Church Universal
& Triumphant
- April 3 SECOND EXAM – Ideally this exam would come before starting a new
unit, but I postponed it give you a breather after the break. The
material on April 1 will not be covered on this exam. But these will be:
Urban 4, 7, 8, 9, 11 &, pp. 5-6 & 11-13 in Ch. 1; Lowe; Lindholm;
Ramtha videos)
- April 5 Assimilation & accommodation – The Jesus People & the Twelve Tribes
April 8 Corruption scandals – See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil
April 10 Winning legitimacy – the Mormons, part 1 (Required: Urban Ch 3)
April 12 The Mormons – part 2

Radical outcomes – Deviance amplification

- April 15 The Jonestown mass suicide (Required: Urban Ch. 12 on Peoples
Temple & 13 on the Waco incident. Recommended: Moran on violent
religions–Solar Temple 68-71, Aum Shinrikyon 72-75, Branch Davidians
76-79, Peoples Temple 80-83; Church of the Lamb of God [the “Mormon
Manson”] 92-93)
- April 17 The Heaven's Gate Mass suicide – Part 1 – “the cult of cults” (Required:
Urban, ch. 14 on Raelians)
- April 19 Heavens' Gate, part 2 – Creating a predisposition to extreme behavior
April 22 Heaven's Gate – part 3 –From predisposition to action

Into the 21st century

- April 24 Mormon fundamentalism & the plural marriage subculture
26 The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints & the
"Cult of Warren" (Recommended: Moran 92-93 on Church of the Lamb
of God)
- May 3 FINAL EXAM – Friday, 10:10-12:10. Urban ch. 3, 12, 13, 14 plus review
of previous material. The final is comprehensive.