

U. S. Cults:
Religious Extremism and the Search for Meaning
Liberal Studies
*****Draft Syllabus In Creation*****

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Fall, 2016

Religious extremism is a reaction to the perceived chaos and loneliness of modern life, and understanding why people join and how people leave is crucial. This course will take a socio-psychological approach to understanding how cults in America originate, who is attracted to joining, and the legal issues cults generate.

We will explore such issues as:

- Are cults protected under 'religious liberty' laws?
- What defines a religion?
- Why are some cults prone to violence?
- Is 'brainwashing' an actual phenomenon?
- Are cults always 'bad'?

Texts:

The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion, Hugh B. Urban, \$12.99

Online: Excerpts from

The Making of a Moonie, Eileen Barker

Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change, Flo Conway

Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities, Len Oakes

Cults: Faith, Healing and Coercion, Marc Galanter

Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict, ed. Stuart A. Wright

Releasing the Bonds, and Combatting Cult Mind Control, Steve Hassan and the ethics of deprogramming

The Wrong Way Home: Uncovering the Patterns of Cult-Like Behavior in American Society, Arthur J. Deikman

Course Assignments:

1. 1 5-page paper "Is Scientology a 'cult'?"
2. Submission: "3-Ways the Branch Davidian crisis could have been handled differently"
3. 2 'graded discussions' on topics during semester
4. PowerPoint presentation on a cult group
5. Final Paper: 5 page application of cult characteristics to everyday group

Draft Schedule of Classes

Week 1: What constitutes a religion? What is a 'cult'?

- Definitions of religion
- 503 c 3 IRS Tax Code and what constitutes a 'religion'
- U.S. Constitutional protections for free exercise of marginal groups
- U.S. v. Ballard decision: Supreme Court's refusal to define "religion"
- Cult definitions and characteristics

Task: None.

Week 2: Why People Join

- Cult dynamics of recruitment and retention
- Snapping: sudden personality change, psychological pressure
- Question for discussion: *Why are cults 'bad'?*

Task: Read Making of a Moonie, Eileen Barker and Snapping, excerpts on BB.

Week 3: Mystics, Messiahs, Gurus and Prophets

- "Prophetic charisma", enlightenment, and Eastern leadership/discipleship
- How to tell a good guru from a bad guru
- Question for discussion: *Do disciples make leaders psychologically destabilized?*

Task: Read excerpts Prophetic Charisma, Oakes on BB:

Week 4: Scientology: "Going Clear" video

Task: Start reading The Church of Scientology, Urban.

Week 5: Scientology: Book and Paper

This class will explore the group Scientology, its founder, leaders, and origins. Is Scientology a 'cult' will be explored in a 5-page paper due this class.

Task: Submit 5-page paper answering the question: "Is Scientology a 'cult'?"

Week 6: Branch Davidians: the limitations of government intervention

We'll build a chronology of events as we seek to understand how a Christian sect became the target of the BATF/FBI.

Task: Read Armageddon in Waco, Wright excerpts on BB.

Week 7: Branch Davidians

Further exploration of the dynamics of reaction to the Branch Davidians in Waco. How could the situation have been handled better? Why do 'cults' generate such explosive reactions?

Task: Bring to class 3 ways in which the Branch Davidian situation could have been handled better.

Week 8: Cult Presentations

- 1: EST/Landmark Forum/Werner Erhard
- 2: Amrit Desai and Kripalu Yoga Center

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Week 9: Cult Presentations

- 3: Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT)
- 4: Aum Shinrikyo

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Week 10: Cult Presentations

- 5: Heavens Gate
- 6: People's Temple

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Week 11: So, what have we learned? And *Kumare* Video

Graded discussion and in-class submission of *'What have you learned about cults from these presentations?'*

Task: Bring to class unifying themes from 6 presentations and prepare for graded discussion on what have you learned?

Week 12: Brainwashing, Deprogramming, and the Politics of Mind Control

This class will explore controversial issues in cult-phenomena. We will have a "graded discussion" on "Does brainwashing exist?" and "Is deprogramming ethical?"

Task: Read on BB: Snapping, and Steve Hassan excerpts.

Week 13: Last class & Final paper

Task: Read the Deikman excerpts from The Wrong Way Home, choose an organization or group, and apply our 'cult characteristics' to this group, arguing why it is a 'cult'. 5 page paper demonstrating your mastery of course concepts and cult dynamics.

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