

**U. S. Cults:  
Religious Extremism and the Search for Meaning  
LSHV 377-01**

Dr. Lauve H. Steenhuisen  
Tues. 6:30-9:30pm

Spring, 2020  
Jan. 14-Apr. 28, 2020

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, why people join, why they stay, and how charismatic leaders control their members.

We will explore such issues as:

- Are cults protected under 'religious liberty' laws?
- What defines a religion?
- Is 'brainwashing' an actual phenomenon?
- Are cults always 'bad'?

Text required:

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

On Canvas excerpts from:

“Georgetown Student Cult Story”, Washington Post

“How Cults Recruit and Indoctrinate Members”, Michael Bluejay

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

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

Branch Davidian Waco Timeline of Events

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

Course Assignments:

1. 1 5-page paper “Is Scientology a ‘cult’?”
2. Submission: 1-page “3-Ways the Branch Davidian crisis could have been handled differently”
3. 2 ‘graded discussions’ on presentations and on brainwashing
4. PowerPoint presentation on a cult group
5. Final Paper: 5 page application of cult characteristics to everyday group

## Schedule of Classes

### Week 1: Jan. 14: 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: Jan. 21: Why People Join

- Why are cults so attractive to so many people?
- What are they looking for in their lives?

Task: Read "Georgetown Student Cult Story"; and Prophetic Charisma, Chap. 7- "Followers and Their Quest" on Canvas.

### Week 3: Jan. 28: How Cults Recruit

Cult intentional dynamics of recruitment and retention.

Task: Read and contribute on: 1. "How Cults Recruit and Indoctrinate Members" and 2. "BITE Model" by Steve Hassan on Canvas.

### Week 4: Feb. 4: Gurus

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

Task: Read 1. "Intro", 2. Chap. 2 "Charisma", and Chap. 9 "The Soul of the Prophet", in Prophetic Charisma, Oakes on Canvas.

### Week 5: Feb. 11: Kumare Video

Tonight we view a video by Vikram Gandhi called "Kumare". Video is 1:30 and we'll break and then discuss.

Task: None.

Week 6: Feb. 18: Scientology: "Going Clear" video discuss

Before tonight's class, watch and take notes on the documentary "Going Clear" by Alex Gibney. We'll discuss the video and begin discussing CoS by Urban.

Task: Start reading The Church of Scientology, Urban.

Week 7: Feb. 25: 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'?*" using guideline sheet in syllabus packet.

Week 8: Mar. 3: 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 1. Armageddon in Waco, Wright Chap. 4 "Construction and Escalation", and 2. "Waco: Chronology of Events", on Canvas.

\*\*\*\*Tues. Mar. 10 No Class Spring Break

Week 9: Mar. 17: 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' 1-page memorandum paper in which you assert ways the Branch Davidian situation could have been handled better. Consult guideline sheet in syllabus packet.

Week 10: Mar. 24: Cult Presentations

1: Keith Raniere and NXIVM

2: Jetsunma Akhon Lhamo and Kunzal Paylul Choling

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Week 11: Mar. 31: Cult Presentations

3: Elizabeth Clare Prophet and Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT)

4: Shoko Asahara and Aum Shinrikyo

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Week 12: Apr. 7: Cult Presentations

5: Marshall Applewhite and Heavens Gate

6: Jim Jones and People's Temple

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Week 13: Apr. 14: So, what have we learned?

Graded #1 discussion of *'What have you learned about cults from these presentations?'*

Task: Bring to class verbal unifying themes from 6 presentations to contribute to **graded discussion** on what have you learned from these presentations?

Week 14: Apr. 21: Brainwashing, Deprograming, and the Politics of Mind Control

Graded discussion #2: This class will explore "coercive environments" and how they work. We will try to determine if 'brainwashing' exists.

Task: Today is a 'graded discussion' day: Your contributions to class will be graded for intellectual content, so come to class with your opinions based on today's readings: 'yes' brainwashing exists, 'no' it doesn't and be able to explain your opinion. Read on Canvas: 1. "How Brainwashing Works" Singer; 2. "Brainwashing Doesn't Exist", Haag; 3. "Fights Over Brainwashing Theory", Allen.

Week 15: Apr. 28: Last class & Final paper

Task: 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.

### **Quotes for Discussion:**

- 1-“Faith begins as an experiment and ends as an experience.” William Inge
- 2-“It is an illusion that we are separate from God.”
- 3-“I’ve been looking for someone to help me look inside myself.” Kimberly
- 4-“You don’t need a guru, everything is inside yourself already.” Kumare

### **Questions:**

- 1-What do they hunger for in their lives?
- 2-What are the students attracted to in him?—what are the qualities he channels to them?
- 3-Did Vikram have good intentions?—Does that make a difference?
- 4-Why did Kumare have difficulty ‘unveiling’?

**Purpose of paper:**

~To develop strong, sharp **argumentation** for your determination of whether the new religious movement of The Church of Scientology is a “cult”.

~To demonstrate mastery of Hugh Urban’s The Church of Scientology book, although other resources, including the *Going Clear* video and course handouts may be used, the strength of Urban usage will be graded.

**Structure of paper:**

~1: Assert your thesis

~2: Defend your thesis through structured argumentation: E.g. “Point 1”, “Evidence for this thesis”

~3: Close the paper with a recapitulation of your thesis and how you have proven it

-Tips: Write with authority. Keep ‘evidence’ short and crisp, assume the reader knows your evidence’s ‘content’ and just use it in the service of your argumentation.

**Format:**

~Length: 5 pages, double-spaced, paginated

~Well cited, parenthetical citations and Works Cited page

## **Guideline Sheet for “3 Ways Branch Davidian” Paper**

### **Goal of paper:**

- ~ For the student to display mastery of the content of the “Armageddon in Waco” reading
- ~To assume an argument posture by authoritative assertion of ways of improvement for future such crises
- by referring to how the event was handled in detail and
- asserting alternative detailed options.

### **Format:**

- ~Length: 1-Page memorandum, single-spaced, well-cited parentheticals, Works Cited

## **PowerPoint Presentation Guideline Sheet**

### **“Groups Gone Bad: What Went Wrong”**

#### **Requirements:**

- ~At least 3 non-course sources
- ~Minimum of 20 slides
- ~Presentation length: 30 minutes
- ~Time for discussion: 15 minutes

#### **Include in your presentation:**

- 1~History/Timeline of group: Geographic location, leader/guru
- 2~Theology of group
- 3~What went wrong? (to the best of your ability, determine what were the darker dimensions of this group, use of violence, abusiveness, was it ‘bad’ from the beginning—or was there an external trigger?, etc.)
- 4~Current situation (e.g. still active, disbanded, diminished, thriving)
- 5~Discussion questions for the class

#### **Graded on:**

- ~Slide aesthetics
- ~High-density content
- ~Alignment of presentation with requirements
- ~Depth and scope of project
- ~Intelligence of how information is framed



## **Guideline Sheet for Final Cults Course Paper**

### **Purpose of paper:**

- ~1. To examine a modern-day group/movement/political-economic system (c. 1.5-2pp.)
- ~2. To apply cult definitions-characteristics to this phenomenon (c. 2pp)
- ~3. To argue that it is, thus, a 'cult'. (c. 1pp.)
- ~4. Answer the question: Despite your argument, does it provide BIMP?

### **Format of paper:**

- ~Length: 5 pages, double-spaced, well-cited parentheticals, paginated, Works Cited page
- 2 Outside sources required

### **Graded on:**

- Strength of argumentation
- Accuracy of application of cult characteristics

### **Tips:**

- Humor is allowed.
- Experience is allowed as a source (to document experience, provide notation "Observed during administrative position 2018-19" everywhere you use experience to evidence your argument).