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:


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.


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?


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.


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.


****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, Deprogramming, 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.

“Kumare” Video Discussion Questions
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 “Armaggedon 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).