**U. S. Cults:**

**Religious Extremism and the Search for Meaning**

**LSHV 377-01**

Dr. Lauve H. Steenhuisen Spring, 2021

Tues. 6:00-8:30pm Jan. 19-May 4, 2020

ONLINE

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

“NXIVM Keith Raniere Rolling Stone” article

“How Cults Recruit and Indoctrinate Members”, Michael Bluejay

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

Armageddon in Waco: 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: All assignments must be emailed to professor

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. 1 ‘graded discussion’ on brainwashing

4. PowerPoint presentation on a cult group

5. Final Paper: 5 page application of cult characteristics to everyday group

**These tasks will count toward the final grade in these percentages:**

Scientology paper…………………………………….……..20%

Branch Davidian paper………….…………………….…….10%

Graded Discussion “Does brainwashing exist?”………….…10%

Final paper…………………………….………………..…….20%

PowerPoint Presentation………..…………….…….………..20%

Course Discussions/Participation………………….…………20%

Course Grade Weight Total…………………………………..100%

**Course Management Policies:**

1. In accordance with Georgetown’s Academic Regulations, students are expected to attend all classes, turn in all assignments by assigned due dates, actively participate in class discussions.

2. Despite the evening hour, arrive alert, with two thoughts to contribute to class that evening.

3. Grades will be reduced for late assignments, tardiness, missing more than 3 classes, and/or lack of class participation. Students risk failure if they have more than three unexcused absences.

4. **Grading Policy:**

An “A” grade means “truly exceptional work exceeds expectations of task & peer submissions”

A “B” grade means “very good quality work, above peer submissions”

A “C” grade means “average work, equal to the average of peers”

A “D” grade means “below expectations, needs significant improvement”

An “F” grade means “submission failed to meet all expectations did not fulfill the requirements”

**5. Honor Code:** All research must be thoroughly cited and attributed to avoid the charge of plagiarism. The Georgetown University Honor Code requires all professors to present suspect work immediately to the Honor Board.

6. General Learning Goals and Outcomes The Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Georgetown University offers a course of study which engages students in reading, research, reflection, discussion, and writing. In the pursuit of the degree, students are to discern and wrestle with the content generally associated with the “liberal” arts in the root meaning of that term, namely, what it means for human beings to be endowed with freedom and what ennobles and enhances human freedom. The two general goals of the program, therefore, are to analyze and assess human values (who are we and what ought we to do?) to undertake study in an interdisciplinary fashion.

7. Disability Notice: Please note: if you believe you have a disability, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgeeetown.edu) for further information. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.

Schedule of Classes

Class1: Jan. 19: 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.**

Class 2: Jan. 26: Why People Join

Why are cults so attractive to so many people?

What are cult members looking for in their lives?

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

Class 3: Feb.2: How Cults Recruit

Cult dynamics of recruitment and retention. The readings for tonight are important as we will refer to them the rest of the semester.

**Task: Read and contribute on: 1. “How Cults Recruit and Indoctrinate Members” Michael Bluejay, 2. “BITE Model” by Steve Hassan, 3. “NXIVM Keith Raniere Rolling Stone article” on Canvas.**

Class 4: Feb. 9: 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: *What kind of person becomes a cult leader?*

T**ask: Read 1. “Intro”, 2. Chap. 2 ”Charisma”, and Chap. 9 “The Soul of the Prophet”, in Prophetic Charisma, Oakes on Canvas.**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Tues. Feb. 16th No Class Only Mon. Classes Meet This Evening\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

Class 5: Feb. 23: 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.**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Tues. Mar. 2 No Class Spring Break\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Class 6: Mar. 9: 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.**

Class 7: Mar. 16: 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. Email to professor by start of class tonight in Word.doc**

Class 8: Mar. 23: 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.**

Class 9: Mar. 30: 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: By start of class tonight email ‘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.**

Class 10: Apr. 6: Cult Presentations

1: Keith Raniere and NXIVM

2: Jetsunma Akhon Lhamo and Kunzal Paylul Choling

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Class 11: Apr. 13: 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.

Class 12: Apr. 20: Cult Presentations

5: Marshall Applewhite and Heavens Gate

6: Jim Jones and People’s Temple

Task: Other than by presenting group, none.

Class 13: Apr. 27: Brainwashing, Deprograming, and the Politics of Mind Control

We will start tonight’s class by asking: “What themes did we see in the cults we just saw?”

Graded discussion: 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.**

Class 14: May 4: 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.**

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**“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’?

G**uideline Sheet for “Is Scientology a Cult?” Paper**

**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).