

CONNECTICUT COLLEGE
RELIGIOUS STUDIES 346
CULTS AND CONVERSION IN MODERN AMERICA
SPRING SEMESTER, 2003

Pedagogical Information

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Connecticut College is a highly selective, private, four-year, residential Liberal Arts College with some 1700 students.

REL 346, "Cults and Conversion in Modern America," is an advanced intermediate course for second- and third-year students. It has a prerequisite of REL 101, "The Study of Religion." It meets three hours a week over a 14 week semester. It is offered every Spring and typically has an enrollment of between 35 and 50 students.

Over the last few years I have added a specific set of learning objectives to the syllabus of the course and I continue to refine them each time the course is offered. After a theoretical and historical introduction to the general topic, the course is structured as a series of case studies. That approach has enabled me to be flexible in including new cases as events occur and as new readings or other materials become available. For example, I was teaching the course in 1993 when the Branch Davidian standoff happened and again in 1997 when the Heaven's Gate suicides occurred. In each case, I revised the syllabus so that we could investigate those breaking stories. This year, because of the controversy over their claims to have cloned a human being, I've included a case on the Raelians. Since most of the students in the course have had at least cursory encounters with groups identified as "cults," this course allows me to capitalize on their cultural familiarity with its subject matter and use that familiarity to raise some fundamental questions in the study of religion about the formation of individual and group identities, the interactions of religious groups with their competitors and other dimensions of their social contexts, and religious phenomena such as rituals, myths, conversion, and other topics.

Instructor: Eugene V. Gallagher, Blaustein 306, ext. 2169, box 5452; Office: TT 9:00-10:00 and by appointment.

Description:

This course will investigate new religious groups outside of the mainline denominations in contemporary America and the controversies about them. Our goal is to improve our understanding of certain aspects of contemporary religious activity and the general societal response to them, and, hence, of the general phenomenon of "religion." Our task is not to commend or to condemn particular religious groups, but rather to attempt to reach some understanding of them, first on their terms and then on ours, and in the appropriate historical, social, and religious contexts.

Goals for the Course

Students who complete this course will have demonstrated some degree of mastery over several essential topics. It may help to conceive of our general task as involving three interrelated operations: description ("what is it"), analysis ("how does it work") and interpretation ("what does it mean" or "why does it matter"). Effective description involves the marshaling of appropriate evidence and the preliminary sifting, sorting, and organization of it. Effective analysis involves the identification in the evidence of salient relationships, generative principles, and crucial problems; it seeks to identify the dynamics of a religious movement, an individual life, or a particular incident. Effective interpretation involves making the material interesting, important, and significant by relating it to broad questions in human life and substantial issues in the study of religion. It also involves discerning and evaluating the specific interpretive points of view embedded in all of the material you have considered.

Listed below are the primary learning objectives of the course, brief descriptions of them, and indications of how they are linked to specific assignments.

1. Develop an understanding of the multiple contexts in which new or alternative religious movements exist in the contemporary U. S. Both the terms "new" and "alternative" indicate that the groups that we will be studying are ordinary understood *in contrast to* other religious groups. The same certainly goes for the frequently pejorative term "cult," which has as its implicit opposite "legitimate religion." Common terminology thus suggests some of the contexts in which our subject matter is placed. Groups themselves will also signal contexts in which they intend to be understood; consider, for example, the uses of the Bible by the Branch Davidians and the Peoples Temple, or the appeal to the wisdom of the East in Theosophy indicate important interpretive contexts for those groups. In addition, scholarly approaches from the sociology of religion, history of religions, history and other fields will also help students develop contextual understandings of our topic.

All of the course reading is relevant to this goal. All of our readings will situate specific evidence in a variety of interpretive contexts. Critical paper assignments are designed to hone your analytical and interpretive abilities, particularly by charging you to ferret out the specific analytical and interpretive agendas in the material that you review. Discussion starters, your analysis of “Holy Smoke,” and your final paper directly address this goal.

2. Develop an ability to apply theoretical concepts to the interpretation of new and alternative religions. *All interpretations, from the seemingly casual observation that “he’s nuts” to the multi-volume treatment of a particular group, depend upon certain theoretical assumptions.* Often, especially towards the more casual/popular end of that spectrum, the theoretical presuppositions are largely implicit and unspoken. In order to develop your own interpretation of the material at hand, you first need to be able to identify and evaluate others’ interpretations, including those embedded in the material. Originality in interpretation does not mean ignoring everything else in order to make up something by yourself. It involves making a thorough inventory of what has already been said about the material, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each position, and then positing your own interpretation as a superior account of the evidence. For some discussion of what makes an argument persuasive, see the section, “Values that Guide the Evaluation of Your Paper,” in “A Guide to Writing Papers” on the course website.

All of the course reading is relevant to this goal, especially the reading in Stark and Bainbridge. In class discussions, your discussion starters, review of “Holy Smoke” and your final paper, it will be crucial to identify others’ interpretive agendas and to develop one of your own.

3. Develop a familiarity with at least some of the groups that are frequently mentioned as alternative or new religions or “cults.” A surprising amount of the public discourse about “cults” is based upon very little evidence. Not many people who offer their opinions, including those in the media, government, or law enforcement, have had prolonged exposure to members of those groups either directly or through the study of the products of their religious lives (texts, rituals, etc.). Informed participation in the contemporary controversies about “cults,” including the brainwashing/deprogramming argument, statements about the connections of cults to violence, and other volatile topics, demands a deep familiarity with the evidence.

All of the course reading is relevant to this goal, especially the case studies of individual groups. Your final paper will give you the opportunity to study a particular movement in detail.

4. Develop a Sense of the Historical Context of Contemporary Cult Controversies. Many people, particular anti-cult activists, argue that the appearance of ‘cults’ during the past few decades is an unprecedented event in American history. In doing so, they betray their historical ignorance. New religions have been present on the North American continent at least since the first explorers and settlers. Some scholars would also claim that “new” or “alternative” religious movements can also be observed in other historical periods and in other cultures.

Your reading in Jenkins will be helpful on this topic, but we will have frequent recourse to other examples, including the rise of Christianity and the development of Islam, in our discussions.

5. Develop the ability to make persuasive comparisons, generalizations, and judgments.

Accurate description is essential to both effective analysis and persuasive interpretation; thorough analysis is essential to convincing interpretation. Description, analysis, and interpretation are fundamental to the processes of making comparisons, generalizations, and judgments. Comparison, which depends on the recognition of both similarities and differences and leads to a thorough accounting for their specific patterns in given instances, can be a key element of interpretation. Generalizations, which depend for their power on the consideration of a large number of cases, can also help to generate interpretations. Also, although our academic task is not to commend or to condemn particular religious groups, there will likely be contexts (e.g. law enforcement, work with members of groups or their families) in which interpretive judgments will be necessary. In popular discourse interpretive judgments abound, but they are rarely anchored in thorough description, analysis, and interpretation.

Virtually immediately you will be drawn into a welter of comparisons, generalizations, and judgments in your consideration of the anti- and counter-cult movements. In that phase of your reading your task will be primarily to examine the statements of others. As you become more familiar with the case studies you will have the opportunity to make your own comparative, general, and evaluative statements. For some guidance on this process see “generating an Argument Through Description, Analysis, and Interpretation” under “Guides” on the course website. Your final project will offer you the opportunity to employ comparisons and generalizations in the service of your argumentative point.

6. Refine your general skills of information retrieval and evaluation, critical reading, argumentative writing, and oral presentation. Refining those skills is a life-long project, and they may well be the most valuable, and transferable, skills that you can develop.

Information retrieval and evaluation is a fundamental component of any research. You need to be able to identify what you need to know, where to find it, how to evaluate what you do find, and what to do with it once you have found it. The cluster of skills that you need to master is crucial when dealing with library resources, popular media, and, particularly, information found on the web. Retrieval and evaluation of information must always be accompanied by accurate citations of the material that you have used. For some help on these topics see the material assembled by the information services team on the college website at <http://www.conncoll.edu/is/info-resources/subject-guides>. In particular, consider the material under the following headings: “[Evaluating Web Resources](http://www.conncoll.edu/is/info-resources/subject-guides/webevaluation.html)” at <http://www.conncoll.edu/is/info-resources/subject-guides/webevaluation.html> and “[Citation Guides for Print and Electronic Resources](http://www.conncoll.edu/is/info-resources/subject-guides/citationguide.html)” at <http://www.conncoll.edu/is/info-resources/subject-guides/citationguide.html>.

Critical reading will be a necessary prerequisite for each class session. You will demonstrate your mastery of that skill in your discussion starters and any voluntary contributions to our

ongoing discussion. The assignments that require you to define crucial passages from the reading or important questions about it are designed to enable you to improve your critical reading skills, as well as your argumentative writing and oral presentation.

Argumentative writing involves making a point; in other words, having a thesis. Fundamentally, a thesis is a general statement that someone can disagree with. It is not a description of your topic, not a statement of your intentions, not a question. Your thesis is the answer to a question, the specific point that you are trying to persuade your audience is true; it is your whole argument in a nutshell. In addition to being pointed and argumentative a good thesis has to be important, interesting, and significant. Its importance is often determined by relating it to fundamental human and theoretical issues, topics, or questions. Without a thesis you have no reason to write a paper, and your audience has no reason to read it. You will have the opportunity to demonstrate your skills in argumentative writing in every paper you submit. For more comments on writing, see the “Guide to Writing Papers” on the course website.

Oral presentation is a skill that is often ignored—but not in this course. Although effective oral presentations share some things in common with effective written ones, they also require some distinctive capabilities, such as the ability to speak conversationally with a minimum of notes, the ability to modulate one’s voice in order to maintain interest, the ability to combine words with gestures and other visual aids, among other things. You will be able to practice this skill in assigned classroom presentations but you should think of refining it every time you speak in class.

Readings:

Extensive reading will be assigned in the following books. They will be available on reserve in Shain library and for purchase in the bookstore:

W.S. Bainbridge, THE ENDTIME FAMILY
M. Brown, THE CHANNELING ZONE
D. Chidester, SALVATION AND SUICIDE
P. Jenkins, MYSTICS AND MESSIAHS:
A. LaVey, THE SATANIC BIBLE
S. Pike, EARTHLY BODIES, MAGICAL SELVES
R. Stark & W. S. Bainbridge, THE FUTURE OF RELIGION
J. Tabor & E. Gallagher, WHY WACO?

Readings available on the course website under “reserve” are marked ®.

Requirements:

1. Read the goals for the course carefully. Consult the “Guide to Writing Papers” before you hand in any written material. Tour the course website as soon as you can in order to familiarize yourself with its contents. Download any materials that you need for class well in advance in order to avoid last minute problems.
2. Informed participation in class is essential. All readings listed for a specific class session should be completed in advance. Both excellent participation and poor performance in class will have an impact on your final grade. **I reserve the right to assign a grade of "F" to anyone who misses more than three class sessions.** Late papers will not receive extensive comments and may only be returned at the end of the semester. All assigned work must be completed in order to receive a passing grade. For grading values see “A Guide to Writing Papers” on the course website.

Graded assignments

3. You will also be asked to work with at least two other students to develop a response to the film “Holy Smoke” that will serve as the basis for our discussion on Jan 23. The paper should be at least five pages in length. It will be based on your critical analysis of the film and should address the questions “What do we need to know about ‘cults,’ ‘new religions,’ ‘conversion,’ and any other issues that the film raises?” and “How can we find out?” The issues and questions that you identify in this paper as being important and worth sustained investigation will ones to which you will return in other assignments for the rest of the course. This paper focuses on your ability to analyze, synthesize, and move towards interpreting. For more on group papers see the course website under “Guides.” This paper is due at the beginning of class on Jan 23; since it will form the basis for that day’s discussion no late papers can be accepted. This paper will be worth 20% of your final grade.
4. You will submit, on your own, two three-page research reports. In connection with one of the case studies, you will research one of the issues (e. g. anti-cult arguments, the role of the news media, conversion, etc.) you identified in your first, group, paper. You will present what you have learned in a three page paper that focuses on description (one page), analysis of how your reading applies to the specific case study (one page) and what further questions, answers, issues, etc. it suggests for our common task (one page). These papers will focus on the skills of description, analysis, application, comparison, extrapolation, and generalization. These papers will each be worth 10% of your final grade, for a total of 20%.
5. With your group you will also be required to conduct a research project on a particular group and submit a substantial research paper of approximately 20 pages. A formal paper proposal and an annotated list of sources will need to be submitted by April 1, but I would eagerly review proposals before March break. Your paper should have a strong

comparative dimension and it should take account of both print (scholarly books, scholarly articles, popular articles, newspapers and magazines, etc.) and electronic resources and may even involve some fieldwork. You should consult T. Miller, ed., America's Alternative Religions, J. Gordon Melton, An Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults, or Jeffrey Hadden's website (<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/>) for possibilities. Your paper should be prepared as if you were going to submit it as part of a volume to be published by Greenwood Press, New Religious Movements in America: A Critical Guide. (The best papers may actually make it into that volume in some form.) Greenwood Press's guidelines will be posted on the course website. Your research paper will count towards 50% of your final grade. I will review and comment on drafts received by April 29. Relevant guides are on the course website under "Guides for Assignments." For specific help see the services offered by the Information Services team at <http://camel2.conncoll.edu/is/info-resources/subject-guides/researchsupport.html>.

Evaluated but Ungraded Assignments

6. You will be responsible for two reports to the class on the readings. The purpose of the reports is to generate and guide discussion of the assigned material. One will identify the most telling passage (of no more than 3 consecutive sentences) in the assigned reading and offer a one-page (no more than 300 words) explication of it. The other will pose three questions designed to get to the heart of the assigned reading; each question must have a 75-100 word rationale that explains why you think it is significant (one page, no more than 300 words). The focus of these short papers is on the evaluation of information, analysis, and interpretation. Responsibility for those reports will rotate through the class, as assigned by the instructor, beginning on Jan 28. Your papers will be circulated to the class via the course website, through the mail function (click mail, click compose message, at "send to" click browse, select all members of the class by scrolling down, click done; enter a subject title, paste your paper in the message area [do not attach it], and click send in the bottom left), and must be available twenty-four hours before our discussion of the reading. For further guidance, see the handout on "Discussion Starter" papers on the course website under "Guides for Assignments."
7. You will also make two appearances as a discussion leader for a day's class. This task will involve reviewing the discussion starters that have been submitted, discussing them with your professor, and deciding on a strategy for conducting class. The focus in this assignment will be on your ability to evaluate analytical and interpretive papers, to translate passive knowledge into active learning, and to improve your ability at oral presentation.
8. At any point during the class, you may post queries or observations to the class discussion board through "E-Talk." I will visit E-Talk virtually every day and recommend that you check it several times a week. A "flash" icon will appear then there are new messages.

9. Evaluated but ungraded work will be taken into account in determining the 10% of your grade that is reserved for class participation.

Communication about the Class

Please route all e-mail communications about the course through the mail function on the course website on WebCT. Feel free to stop by the office at any time during posted office hours, or to make an appointment at a mutually convenient time. I will always try to schedule an appointment within 24 hours of the request. Consult the course website at least a few times a week for announcements, updates, and other breaking news.

Due dates:

Jan 23	Group paper on “Holy Smoke” (five pages)
Jan 28-	Discussion Starters (one page)
Jan 28-	Research Reports
Apr 1	Research Paper Proposal and Annotated List of Sources
Apr 29	Last Day to Submit Drafts of Research Paper for Review
May12	Final Paper

CLASS SCHEDULE

I. Contemporary Cult Controversies

JAN	16	Introduction: begin film: “Holy Smoke”
	21	Finish film: “Holy Smoke”
	23	Discussion: What Do We Need to Know and How Can We Find Out? *****First Paper Due*****
	28	Setting the Terms of Discussion: A Contemporary Moral Panic: Jenkins, chs. 8-9; Melton, “The Modern Anticult Movement in Historical Perspective”®;
	30	Review carefully one of the following websites: American Family Foundation (www.csj.org); Rick Ross (www.rickross.com); Steve Hassan (www.shassan.com); Christian Research Institute (www.equip.org); Spiritual Counterfeits Project (www.scp-inc.org); Jews for Judaism (http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/j4j-2000/index.html)
FEB	4	Setting the Terms of Discussion: An Academic Perspective: Stark & Bainbridge, chs. 1-4

II. Déjà vu All Over Again

- 6 Cult Controversies in American History: Jenkins chs. 1-3; Stark & Bainbridge, chs. 5-7
- 11 The Nineteenth Century: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; read the general material on the LDS Church at <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/>; read “Joseph Smith Jr” and “Angel Moroni Appears to Joseph Smith” at <http://www.apsalom.com/mormon/pgp/first-vision.htm>; “The Book of Mormon;” “The Account of Three Witnesses;” “The Account of Eight Witnesses;” and “The First Book of Nephi” at <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/mormon/browse.html>.
- 13 The Nineteenth Century: the Theosophical Society; orientation: read the general material on theosophy at <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/>; read the following items at <http://theosophy.org/tlODOCS/StudyOfTheosophy.htm>: “Study of Theosophy,” “What is Theosophy;” “The Three Fundamentals;” “Six Items of Cosmogony;” and “Propositions of Psychology.” Also, read the following at <http://www.theosophy.org/tlODOCS/FourGold.htm>: “The Four Golden Links;” “Aquarian Axioms;” and “The Seven Portals.”

III. Shaping the Public Perception: Three Cases

- 18 The Original Target of the Contemporary “Anti-Cult” Movement: The Family: Bainbridge, intro. chs. 1-4; “Statement of Faith” ®
- 20 Living in the Shadow of the End: Bainbridge, chs. 5-7, conclusion; “Family Musical Literature” ®
- 25 Jonestown: A Classic Example? Chidester, intro., ch. 1, epilogue; the “White Night” tape at <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~remoore/jonestown/death.html>
- 27 Jonestown From Inside and Out: Jeannie Mills' conversion story, “Concerned Relatives” accusations, “Dear Friend,” “Nightmare,” “Equal Rights,” all ®; Chidester, chs. 2-5
- MAR 4 Another Jonestown? The Branch Davidians; Gallagher & Tabor, chs. 1-4;
6 David Koresh and Biblical Prophecy; Gallagher & Tabor, chs. 5-8; Gallagher, “Negotiating Salvation” ®

*****March Break: No Class*****

IV. The Diversity of New Religious Movements Today

- 25 Re-orientation: Jenkins, chs. 4-7;
27 Survey of the American Scene: Stark and Bainbridge, chs. 8-11;
- APR 1 Satanic Panic: Survivors' Stories and Atrocity Tales: selections from Smith and Pazder, Michelle Remembers ®; David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam" killer) at www.inetworld.net/hutrc/testimony.htm; Candace, Lyn, and Vincent at www.christian-faith.com/testimonies. Richardson, Best, & Bromley, "Satanism as a Social Problem;" Bromley, "Satanism: the New Cult Scare;" Nathan, "Satanism and Child Molestation: Constructing the Ritual Abuse Scare;" ®
3 In the Master's Own Words: LaVey, pp. 9-105; background at www.churchofsatan.org.
- 8 Witches and Neo-Pagans: Pike, chs. intro..1- 3;
review carefully: www.thornecoyle.com
10 Practicing Neo-Paganism: Pike, chs. 4-6; Film: Otter and Morning Glory
- 15 The New Age: Channeling: Brown, chs. 1-4; Film: Lazaris
17 The New Age in Perspective: Brown, chs. 5-8
- 22 On the Border of Religion and Therapy: The Church of Scientology: Stark and Bainbridge, ch. 12; Church of Scientology, Theology and Practice of a Contemporary Religion, intro, chs 1-7, appendix 1 (available in PDF form at <http://theology.scientology.org/eng/pdf/Scientology-bonafide.pdf>)
24 Scholarly approaches to Scientology: Stark and Bainbridge, ch. 12; Theology and Practice, appendices 2-8
- 29 Greeting Our Space Brothers: the Raelians; watch "The Encounter" at <http://www.rael.org/int/english/>; at the same site read all the material under "Summary," "Philosophy," "Evidence," "Organisation," and "Embassy"
- MAY 1 Transforming Humanity: the Raelians; watch the videos "UFO Truth," "Age of Science," "Rael Speaks to Students," and "His Holiness Rael on CNN Q and A;" listen to the interview with Art Bell on cloning; audio and video clips can be accessed either through the "Seminars" or "News" sections of the site.
- 6 Discussion: What Have We Learned and What Do We Still Need to Find Out