

## Religious Studies 132W Sects, Cults, and New Religious Movements

Fall 2009

CLASS MEETS TUESDAY/THURSDAY 1:00P - 2:15pm IN 115 WAGNER

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Please note: I check my e-mail regularly (obsessively?) and this is an excellent way to get in touch with me if you have a quick question or if you want to make an appointment for a more substantial discussion.

### *The Course*

This course discusses the beliefs and practices of new, fringe, and dissenting religious groups which are often known by the slightly dismissive or even sinister terms “sects” and “cults”. We will consider what factors make a religious group a “cult” as opposed to a “religion.” Is it simply a matter of the group’s size, its wealth, or its endurance? To understand these issues, we will look both at the dissenting groups themselves, and the larger mainstream groups with the power to attach to them a label like “cult”. We will consider a variety of religious groups, chiefly from the history of the United States.

### *Grading*

During the course of the semester, you will be expected to write a research paper (described below). The paper should be at least eighteen pages in length, fully referenced. I will expect you to submit a preliminary draft, which I will then discuss with you on an individual basis during office hours. This draft should then be revised to create a final version due for presentation in the final examination period. Please do note that this “draft” is a full-length version of the paper, fully referenced, as opposed to a two or three page “concept paper”, and it should thus be in connected prose, not in point form. That then gives you a couple of weeks to do any necessary fine-tuning. Needless to say, grading will take account of issues such as grammar and punctuation.

There will also be two examinations, both of essay format, and both take-home. Neither will be comprehensive. Grading for the course will therefore be based on these components:

- |  |              |
|--|--------------|
| a. Research paper                                      | = 40%        |
| b. Two essay examinations, each 20% of the total grade | = 40%        |
| c. Class participation                                 | = <u>20%</u> |
|  | <u>100%</u>  |

### *Term Paper*

For your term paper, you will write on the following. You are to imagine that someone close to you – a friend or sibling – has become involved with a new or fringe religious group, is spending a lot of time with it, and seems likely to become a full member. Your friends and family are worried that it might be a dangerous cult, and have asked you to find out about it

urgently. Your paper will represent an investigation of the group, and the kind of information that you would want to pass on to your friends.

One effect of the Internet is that it is possible to research controversial groups and organizations directly without having to become too personally involved with them. For this project, therefore, you will choose one new or fringe religious movement that has generated controversy at some point over the past 25 or 30 years. Chiefly using Internet resources (and any other materials you can obtain) you will describe that movement, its development, and its characteristic beliefs or practices. You should focus on the means by which the group tries to present itself to the public. Here are some of the relevant questions to ask – not all will be relevant in every case:

- How sophisticated are its materials, rhetorically and/or technologically?
- How does it try and reach and convert people (if it does)?
- What sort of audience is it trying to reach?
- Is it aiming for particular racial or ethnic groups, people of particular ages?
- What level of education or sophistication does it assume in its audience?
- Do its materials seem deceptive or manipulative?
- How does it present itself?
- Does it acknowledge criticisms that have been made of it?
- Does it counter-attack critics?
- How does the group view other religious organizations and beliefs?
- Does it seem intolerant?

You will ALSO survey the materials of hostile groups who try and attack the group in question. You should answer the same kinds of question about the anti-cult group as you do about the so-called cult. Again, not all will be relevant in every case:

- Where are these people coming from?
- Do the critics seem trustworthy?
- How and why do they attack the group?
- Are their arguments convincing?
- Do they claim that the group is criminal, subversive, dangerous, theologically misguided, or what?
- Do they use materials by “defectors” who have left the group?
- How convincing do these apostates or defectors seem?

When you have considered both sides of the issue, your conclusion should try and evaluate the arguments of both sides, and give a considered evaluation of the group. Is it a cult? What makes it one? Should people be advised to stay away from it?

A couple of points of information. First, before doing this project, you will have to tell me *which* specific group you will be choosing, and I have to approve your choice. This is important. If you write me with a suggested topic, and I reply (eg) “Well, this is a good idea, but I need to see more of X, or you need to focus more on Y,” that topic is not approved until I officially say yes to the final revised version. Once that topic is approved, it cannot be modified without my further written consent. The moral is: when you hand it your final draft, I don’t want any surprises.

Also, if you want to include large quotes from one of the websites, feel free to attach them in the form of appendices (which would not count towards the fifteen page guideline). Finally, let me stress that this is an exercise in handling PRIMARY materials, that is, most of your sources should be the opinions and ideas coming from the group itself and its enemies. You can use media sources for background, but do not rely chiefly on those second-hand comments. I want you to read and evaluate the words of the groups themselves. What I mean is that I am not asking you to write a report on Group X based on materials you find from TIME or NEWSWEEK.

#### *Note about Participation*

"Participation" carries a substantial 20 percent of the grade. What this means in practice is that I expect you to do the readings for every class, and I will be calling on people individually through the term to comment or respond on particular texts, or issues arising from them. If you do the readings, and take a full and regular part in class discussions, then that will have a major positive impact on your grade. On the other hand, consistently not participating, not doing the readings - or repeatedly being absent from discussions - is equivalent to missing an exam or failing to do the term paper. I don't expect perfect, 100 percent, attendance, but consistent non-participation will have serious consequences. It does NOT just mean that you will receive a slightly lower grade: just like refusing to do a paper or an exam, it means that you would simply have not completed the class, and would therefore receive a grade of F for the entire course. I think it's important to spell out that expectation from the outset. If you are not prepared to do the readings and participate fully, then please drop the class now.

#### *Class Policies*

Deadlines matter, and I intend to enforce them strictly. If you miss a deadline without getting an extension in advance, you get a non-negotiable grade of F on that particular exam, paper or project. Do not get in touch with me after the fact to explain why you missed an exam, unless you produce a proper medical note. Excuses must always be supported by documentation. Valid reasons include medical problems and the like.

This point about enforcing deadlines also applies fully to the various stages of the term paper project, which I view as a single process spread over most of the term. This project includes several stages, including letting me know the topic, handing in the synopsis, and completing the final draft, even though these elements do not individually carry specific grades. If you miss *any one* of these deadlines (without a legitimate excuse), then you receive an F on the entire term paper, which is 40 percent of the grade.

#### *Required Texts*

All are required; all are in paperback, except for *Prophet's Daughter*.

Tim Guest, *My Life in Orange: Growing Up with the Guru*. Harvest Books, 2005.  
ISBN: 015603106X

Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*. Oxford University Press, 2000.  
ISBN: 0195145968

Richard N. Ostling, and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America*. Harper San Francisco  
NB this must be the NEW EDITION from 2007. ISBN: 0061432954

Erin Prophet, *Prophet's Daughter*. Lyons Press, 2009.  
ISBN: 1599214253

I will also be circulating various materials electronically through the term, and these e-handouts should also be considered required reading. A course web-page can be found at <http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/j/p/jpj1/132wmaterial.html>

#### *General Note on Lectures and Materials*

Religion can be a sensitive issue in which it is easy to give offense. In this class, every effort will be made to ensure that all religious traditions are discussed with appropriate respect, and with due appreciation for the contributions which they have made to the human experience. Of necessity, however, the intellectual approach of this course is academic and critical in nature, emphasizing the insights of both history and social science. In such a context, it might well be that statements will be made - either by the instructor or particular authorities cited - that may cause offense to certain individuals. This may arise when discussing the credentials of religious leaders or the authority of scriptures. While such possible conflicts are regrettable, they are perhaps inevitable. Students are encouraged to engage freely in critical discussion about these and other issues arising from the course. And don't be offended if I happen to include a tradition you have a high regard for in a course on cults! Remember that I am dealing not just with cults, but also with "New Religious Movements" - and in that context, something like Mormonism fits perfectly. I am *not* listing Mormonism as a "cult"! *All* religions and denominations begin as new religious movements.

### **Syllabus of Classes**

#### 1. August 25

Introduction: what differentiates "sects", "cults" and "churches"?

#### 2. August 27

Formation and development of sects and cults. Conversion and recruitment; members and leaders.

DISCUSS Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs* chapters 1-2

#### 3. September 1

Cult milieux. Cults in American history

#### 4. September 3

Messianic and apocalyptic movements. The Radical Reformation and the Anabaptist tradition.

DISCUSS: materials to be handed out

#### 5. September 8

The first New Age

DISCUSS Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs* chapters 3-4, also chapters 6 and 7

6. September 10  
Racial fears and religious conflict.  
DISCUSS Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs* chapter 5
7. September 15  
The new cult boom  
DISCUSS Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs* chapters 8-9
8. September 17  
Cults and violence.
9. September 22  
Devil cults and doomsday cults  
DISCUSS Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs* chapter 10 and epilogue
10. September 24  
Case-study: Waco

I NEED TO KNOW THE TOPICS OF YOUR TERM PAPERS TODAY

11. September 29  
Waco, continued
12. October 1  
DISCUSS Tim Guest, *My Life in Orange*  
EXAMS DISTRIBUTED TODAY TO BE RETURNED BY OCTOBER 5
13. October 6  
EXAM ONE
14. October 8  
Healing
15. October 13  
Mormonism: Origins of a religion  
DISCUSS Ostlings, *Mormon America*, chapters 1-3
16. October 15  
FILM: Polygamists
17. October 20  
Mormonism: Into the mainstream  
DISCUSS Ostlings, *Mormon America*, chapters 4-11
18. October 22  
Mormonism: Of truth and history  
DISCUSS Ostlings, *Mormon America*, chapters 12-17

19. October 27  
Mormonism and the Christian mainstream  
DISCUSS Ostlings, *Mormon America*, chapters 18-22

20. October 29  
Real “Big Love”: Polygamy

PLEASE GIVE ME A TWO PAGE SYNOPSIS OF YOUR PROPOSED TERM PAPER,  
WITH THOUGHTS ON BIBLIOGRAPHY.

21. November 3  
Yearning for Zion  
DISCUSS: readings to be circulated

22. November 5  
Case studies

23. November 10  
Satanism. The mythology of ritual murder and the “cults that kill”.  
DISCUSS: readings to be circulated

24. November 12  
Ritual abuse  
FILM: The mythology of anti-Satanism.

25. November 17  
Construction and falsification of memory.

DRAFT OF TERM PAPERS DUE

26. November 19  
DISCUSS: Erin Prophet, *Prophet's Daughter*

I WILL DISTRIBUTE THE EXAMS AT THE END OF THIS WEEK  
TO BE RETURNED AFTER THE BREAK

NOVEMBER 23-27: THANKSGIVING BREAK

27. December 1  
EXAM TWO

28. December 3  
FILM: UFO's and abduction

29. December 8  
The legal conflict over regulating minority religious groups.

30. December 10

Summary of themes: conclusions.

*First day of final examination period:*

SUBMIT FINAL VERSIONS OF TERM PAPERS.

Please be sure to keep copies of your papers, because I will not be returning the originals. I will of course be happy to go over them with you if you wish, either later that week, or early in the following semester.

#### SELECTED UNIVERSITY POLICIES

*Academic Integrity Policy*

Academic integrity is the pursuit of scholarly activity free from fraud and deception and is an educational objective of this institution. Academic dishonesty includes (but is not limited to) cheating, plagiarism, fabrication of information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, unauthorized prior possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, and tampering with the academic work of other students (see Policies and Rules for Students, Section 49-20). Academically dishonest students may be punished with a minor penalty, typically a zero on a quiz or test, or with a major penalty such as a grade of "F" in a course. Please note that a student may not be forced to withdraw from a course for an academic integrity violation by the teacher alone. Students who are punished with major penalties may appeal the decision. Cases that are sufficiently serious to warrant disciplinary actions beyond academic sanctions may be referred by the faculty member to the Office of Judicial Affairs for further review.

*Disability Access Statement*

The Pennsylvania State University encourages qualified persons with disabilities to participate in this programs and activities and is committed to the policy that all people shall have equal access to programs, facilities, and admissions without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. If you anticipate needing any type of accommodation in this course or have questions about physical access, please tell the instructor as soon as possible.