

SocSci 3300: New Religious Movements

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Class Hours: Wed. 1-4 pm
Location: 610 S. Michigan, Room 707

Course Description

The term “New Religious Movements” refers to a number of contemporary practices or communities outside the mainstream religion of a given culture. It has been adopted as an alternative to “cult” – which is now considered pejorative. In this course, we will examine both the general concept and particular examples of such movements. We will cover social science methods for the study of religion, asking general questions about religious movements. How did these groups come to be? Are they best understood in terms of their organizational structure, or in terms of the beliefs they profess? What motivates someone to join such a group? We will also examine some of the assumptions that inform these methods, and potential limitations which they might cause. Finally, we will consider the role religion plays in culture, and how knowledge about the beliefs and practices of others is important for members of a pluralistic and democratic society.

Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to:

1. Read texts closely, identifying the argument of the text and restating it clearly and fairly in their own words.
2. Identify methods and assumptions in the sociological study of religions.
3. Critically assess arguments in terms of the assumptions made and the structure of reasoning to a conclusion.
4. Formulate and defend a thesis with evidence and careful reasoning both in speech and writing.

Required Readings

- Dawson, Lorne. *Cults and New Religious Movements*. This is available at the bookstore.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. 1963. *Cat's Cradle*. This is available at the bookstore.
- Various readings available (as PDFs) Canvas. I will update these in advance of our classes, and you will be notified during class meetings, and be sent a message via Canvas.

Course Policies

Please read and understand the policies listed below. You are responsible for abiding by and understanding all of these policies. If you e-mail a question for which The Answer Is On The Syllabus, I will respond "TAIOTS."

General

Use of Technology in the Classroom

I strongly advise taking notes on paper (cf. "materials" below). Please do not allow your laptops, tablets, phones, etc. to be a distraction to you, to your fellow students, or to me. Take care of all socializing (e.g. facebook, texting, emails) outside of our classroom. If you need to use your phone for whatever reason, you may quietly leave the classroom and return when you are finished.

Email

Please read the syllabus and the *Frequently Asked Questions* section of the course website before e-mailing. If the answer to your question is on the website or the syllabus, I may not respond. I encourage you to email me if you have substantive questions concerning the material we are discussing in class. If you send me an e-mail, please show up to the next class. If several students have similar questions, I may answer your question in class. I may deem that it is better to speak with you in person to answer your question immediately before or after our class. Please do not e-mail me to ask what you missed if you were absent. There will be regular quizzes designed to test you on the material covered up to that point in the term. There will be no make-up quizzes offered – the same holds true for the essay assignments and conferences.

Canvas

Major assignments, revisions to the syllabus, and grades (i.e. course progress) will be posted to Canvas. You will receive a notification when a change has been made. The print copy of the syllabus is for your convenience; the authoritative version is online. If you miss class or forget to write the assignment down, check Canvas first and then ask another student in the class. Do not email me to ask what the assignment is.

Materials

1. Course materials will be made available on Canvas advance of their due date. You are responsible for getting copies of materials from classes you missed. Bring every text – including the syllabus and course documents – to every class meeting. This serves two purposes. First, part of our work this term will be the comparison of texts, which means we will often be referring to multiple texts, regardless of the day's assigned reading. Second, Your studies are intended to prepare you for future employment. Being responsible for documents over the entire term is an excellent way to practice important organizational skills, and develop a sense of responsibility.
2. In order to learn your names and so that your colleagues can address you respectfully, I provide materials for a name plate for your desk. You are responsible for this throughout the term. If you lose your name plate, please create another one before the start of class.
3. You are required to bring paper and a pencil or pen to each class. There may be quizzes and short writing assignments to be completed and turned in during the class. Loose leaf or detachable paper is suggested for this purpose. I strongly recommend that notes be taken on paper. I strongly discourage taking notes on your computer. This will actually be to your advantage, because we may use symbols, diagrams, and tables, all of which are difficult to format on a computer at the pace we will be proceeding.
4. The works we will be reading have a long and rich tradition of scholarship. Many, many people have read these texts, and there are no doubt countless study guides and interpretive essays that may be easy to find online. Rather than spending time reading these guides about our texts (scholars call these secondary sources), you should spend that time re-reading the texts themselves (the primary sources). Do not be tempted to plagiarize from these guides– if you can find it, it is likely that I can find it as well, and this will result in a failing grade (see academic integrity) . All of my students have the integrity to do their own work. Cheating will not help you to understand the material, but will actually prevent you from learning it. More importantly, whatever points you think you might earn from cheating are not worth compromising your integrity. At the end of your life, you probably will not remember or care about the grade you made in this class. You will reflect on whether you lived with honesty and integrity.

Credit Will Be Given For The Following:

- **Participation (20%)** This class will rely heavily on discussion. For this reason, it is vital that you come to each class prepared (having read the assignment, and ready to discuss them in depth). I recognize that some people feel uncomfortable speaking up in a classroom setting. If this is you, I encourage you to use the short reflection papers (below) as a basis for your contributions. Select at least one question, interesting moment, or notable theme from the text in advance to discuss. Do not worry about asking questions that seem obvious – you will find that often the answers are not obvious after all. Also, remember that the basis of evaluation will not be the brilliance of your contributions, but your willingness to help us grow in understanding through conversation.

- **Presentation (25%):** In groups, you will give a presentation (approximately 15-20 minutes plus question and answer time) on one of the religious movements we will discuss. At the end of your presentation, you will turn in your presentation notes for me to review. **You must submit an outline of your presentation via e-mail by 5:00 pm on the Tuesday before you are scheduled to present.**
- **Reflection papers (20%):** For classes in which you are not presenting, you will submit typed short response papers (no more than 2 pages each) in which you do two things. First, I am asking that you summarize the reading for the day (if there is more than one reading, a shorter summary of each reading is okay, or you may choose to complete up to two summaries for a class meeting). Second, present a question that you would like to have answered in the class discussion. These will be due starting on the second week. You will turn them in at the end of class, so that you can refer to them for the discussion. At least ten responses are required, but I will accept as many as you would like to submit for consideration. You will be able to use submitted response papers for your final project.
- **Theses (20%):** An in-depth set of theses on one of the methodological pieces we will read for the class. You will sign up for these early in the semester. I will present the first set as a demonstration. You will bring enough copies for everyone in the class (including me) – for our class this is 23 copies. **You must e-mail me your theses by 5:00 pm the Tuesday before our class meets.**
- **Cumulative Discussion and Writing Project (15%):** Our final week will comprise a cumulative writing assignment and discussion of your essay. We will treat this discussion like a graduate-level seminar (I recognize that this is a challenge, but please refer to the section on “participation” above) You may use any reflection paper or theses you submitted to me as preparatory notes for this discussion.

Attendance Evaluation

Your work will be evaluated as Acceptable, High, Excellent, or Unacceptable. You must submit work for each category to earn credit for the course. You need to earn at least an “acceptable” on every assignment, and must earn a “high” evaluation for at **least**-**submission** of projects until they are at the expected level, but this does not mean I will accept late work that was not submitted initially. At least *some* work is required in order to be allowed a re-submission.

There are no make-up assignments or quizzes. I expect you to attend and participate every day. I will take attendance for my records. You will not be able to succeed if you are absent regularly, and your learning experience for the class will reflect this fact.

Academic Integrity

A helpful resource on academic integrity can be found at:

saic.edu/webspaces/library/plagiarism_packet.pdf

The SAIC prohibits “dishonesty such as cheating, plagiarism, or knowingly furnishing false information to the School” (Students’ Rights and Responsibilities, Student Handbook). Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. One plagiarizes when one presents another’s work as one’s

own, even if one does not intend to. The penalty for plagiarizing may also result in some loss of some types of financial aid (for example, a No Credit in a course can lead to a loss of the Presidential Scholarship), and repeat offenses can lead to expulsion from the School.

My policy for academic integrity in this course is very straightforward: I expect that any work submitted for this course will be your own. Never submit another's work as your own. This goes for any unit of writing, down to a sentence, or a memorable phrase. If someone else wrote it first, you must cite it, and give credit to the original author. Any submission of another's work as your own constitutes plagiarism. Any instance of plagiarism, intentional or otherwise, will result in a grade of zero for the assignment, and makeup will not be allowed. I will be happy to meet with you during office hours to discuss any questions you may have about what constitutes plagiarism.

Students With Disabilities

SAIC is committed to full compliance with all laws regarding equal opportunities for students with disabilities. Students with known or suspected disabilities, such as a Reading/Writing Disorder, ADD/ADHD, and/or a mental health or chronic physical condition who think they would benefit from assistance or accommodations should first contact the Disability and Learning Resource Center (DLRC) by phone at (312) 499-4278 or e-mail at saic.edu/dlrc. DLRC staff will review your disability documentation and work with you to determine reasonable accommodations. They will then provide you with a letter outlining the approved accommodations for you to deliver to all of your instructors. This letter must be presented before any accommodations will be implemented. You should contact the DLRC as early in the semester as possible. The DLRC is located on the 13th floor of 116 South Michigan Avenue.

Schedule

PART ONE: "RELIGION"

Week 01, 01/30 - 02/03: Introduction: What is "Religion"? Syllabus distributed, introductions, etc. Short writing exercise. Facts, Opinions, and Positions.

Week 02, 02/06 - 02/10: J.Z. Smith: "Religion, Religions, Religious"; Dawson: Chapter 1

Week 03, 02/13 - 02/17: Robert Baird: Interpretive Categories and the History of Religions"; Dawson: Chapter 2

Week 04, 02/20 - 02/24: Dawson: Section II (Chapters 3 and 4)

Week 05, 02/27 - 03/03: Section IV

Critique Week, 03/06 - 03/10: No classes!

Week 06, 03/13 - 03/17: Cat's Cradle: a "New Religion" that doesn't exist.

Week 07, 03/20 - 03/24: Section VII. (I know that Spring Break is this week. It's an abomination that it only lasts for three days, but we will still have class.)

Week 08, 03/27 - 03/31: Section V

Week 09, 04/03 - 04/07: Section VI

PART TWO: "THE MOVEMENTS"

Week 10, 04/10 - 04/14: Presentations

Week 11, 04/17 - 04/21: Presentations

Week 12, 04/24 - 04/28: Presentations

PART THREE: "NEWNESS"

Week 13, 05/01 - 05/05: Old "New" movements

Week 14, 05/08 - 05/12: Final Project in class.