

# **CULTS AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS (REL 366)**

**Monday 9:35AM-10:55 AM & HYBRID (EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING)  
Cooper Street Building, Room 104**

**Fall 2022**

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Office Hours: Mondays 11:15 AM-12:30 PM, and by appt.

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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course examines religious groups in the United States that have been labeled in the public as “cults” (new religious movements, or NRM’s). This course will examine an array of such groups, but will have a concentration on “cults” or NRM’s that fall under the umbrella of UFO religions. UFO religions make up a large number of the newest NRM’s; they also highlight interesting and important topics in the study of “cults” and NRM’s including the apocalypse, prophecy, and even violence/suicide. We will also focus on the “cult” or NRM of the Satanic Temple, since this group is not only one of the most feared NRM’s, but also because its study highlights important and interesting conversations about religion and the study of religion itself, as well as recent and culturally relevant conversations about religion and American society.

In studying these groups, we will investigate their beliefs about the world, the self, the divine, and the “good life,” as well as their histories, recruitment strategies, social dynamics, commitment to social and political causes, and relationships with the public. Focus will be on building a scholarly toolkit by which to understand these religious groups in an objective and critical manner. Toward this end, we will examine critical debates on the growth of new religious movements, charges that converts to these groups are “brainwashed,” the ways in which these groups are portrayed in the media, and how we might best understand these groups as scholars of religion. Last but not least, as a class we will examine debates (and debate ourselves) about whether these groups deserve the label of “cult” at all.

**Course materials will include textual readings, audio and a video clips, and a number of in-class films.**

## **PANDEMIC POLICIES**

### **Masks:**

For the Fall 2022, Rutgers University has implemented a mask mandate policy, which means that all students, faculty, and staff are required to wear masks at all times in all indoor learning settings, regardless of vaccine status. This policy will be strictly enforced in this class. All students, as well as the professor, are required to wear a mask at all times in class and during office hours and other appt. times. Further, masks must be properly worn by all parties, meaning that the mask must fully cover the nose and mouth. Please note that bandanas and other open-bottomed cloth coverings are not counted as masks by university policy.

### **Food and Drinks:**

Because of the Rutgers mask policy, there can be no eating or drinking in class. If you need to eat or take a sip of water, please step outside the building to do so.

### **Breaks (because we all will need them):**

There will be a 5-minute break during the class period each time we meet so that we can all get some water, go outside to remove our masks and breathe a little, etc.

## **Books**

### **Required for Purchase:**

Zeller, Benjamin E. 2014. *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion*. New York & London: New York University Press.

Palmer, Susan J. 2004. *Aliens Adored: Raël's UFO Religion*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

Laycock, Joseph P. 2020. *Speak of the Devil: How the Satanic Temple is Changing the Way we Talk about Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**\*All other course readings will be available on Canvas.**

### **General Education: & Learning Objectives:**

This course meets the General Education requirements for **United States in the World (USW)** in the following ways:

1. Requires students to describe the political, social, economic, cultural, and religious contexts that give rise to new religious movements in the United States, as well as those that foster the complex interactions between these groups and the broader US society. It also requires students to reflect on how new religious movements in the United States grow (and are re-packaged from) from broader religious traditions and movement outside the United States.
2. Helps students identify the religious practices, institutions, and ideas of NRM's in the United States, and teaches them to use the religious practices, institutions, and ideas of these new groups as lenses to understand the way those of more established ones in the United States have been constructed, applied, and contested.
3. Evaluate evidence and create their own arguments in relation to existing arguments with respect to new religious movements in the United States and terms such as "cult," "brainwashing," etc.

## FORMAT & GRADING

### FORMAT:

This course is a designated hybrid course. For the traditional component, we will meet one day a week (Mondays) for eighty minutes each session. While I will lecture during some of our class meetings, we will also have a lot of discussions and debates, listen to interviews, and watch movies and YouTube clips. In other words, **this class is primarily discussion based**; it is run **seminar-style**, and will involve open and ongoing discussion of the material that we all engage in together.

For the hybrid component, students will be required to visit three religious centers, attend a ritual program at each, and document their visit as part of an ethnographic, anthropological study of new religious movements. See the grading section for more details on this requirement.

### GRADING:

This course utilizes a radical grading policy whereby grades are assigned based on student engagement with the course and materials as well as their own critical and attentive reflection on the learning process with respect to course materials. Grades in this course are based entirely on four components: **attendance, prepared participation, self-reflection, and ethnographic field site visits**.

#### Attendance and Prepared Participation

**Attendance and prepared participation constitute 25% of the final course grade.** This grade will be based on students' attendance in class, as a start, but more importantly their contributions to the class conversations each day. Weighing very heavily in this grade will be the requirement that students do the reading each day, and come to class with notes on the reading, and questions and comments about it to contribute to the discussion. Each daily class discussion will presume that students have completed the reading for the day; and, students' attendance and participation grades will largely be based on the degree to which their participation in class indicates that they completed the reading assignments. Along these lines, then, I welcome you—both in class and/or in my office hours—to freely ask questions, raise ideas/doubts, and bring into the discussion your personal areas of expertise.

I take this requirement seriously and expect students not only to show up to class on time each day, but also to do the assigned reading *before* each class (**and bring it to class each session**), as well as to actively participate in class discussions and complete any small “bring to class” assignments. You should come to each class having done the readings, and prepared to contribute to the class discussion. Class participation (coming to class, being prepared by having done and thought about the reading, asking questions/making comments and observations in class, etc.) is an easy way for you to earn a 100% as 25% of your final grade; however, if you fail to take this requirement seriously, it is also an easy way to fail the course. This is a seminar-style course. You will need to do the reading each day in order to score a passing grade for this requirement.

\*In addition, please note that the course attendance policy is as follows: because this class meets only once a week, students are **only allowed 1 free absence** during this semester. This means that you may miss 1 week, with no questions asked, and without losing any attendance points. With this free absence, you needn't contact me to tell me that or why you are missing class: it is free for you to use as you wish. Any additional absences will require valid medical, legal, military, or university-sponsored documentation in order to be excused.

**Please note that lateness and distractedness in class (texting, talking, etc.) will be counted as an absence.** There will be no exceptions to this policy. SEE ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION RUBRIC FOR MORE DETAILS.

**\*In addition to the above and what is detailed on the rubric, the Attendance and Participation grade is also based on the small “homework” assignments** that students will be given at different days on the syllabus, invitations to bring in material found online, etc.

### **Self-reflections**

**Self-reflections, combined, are 30% of the final grade.** On two occasions during the semester—students will be required to do a self-reflection exam. These self-reflections are 15% of the final grade each (**for a combined total of 30%**). **Self-reflection 1 will be online and due on Canvas on October 30<sup>th</sup> by 5 pm.** **Self-reflection 2 will be in class, during class time, on December 12<sup>th</sup>** (Please note that free absences cannot be used on the self-reflection exam day, and that late or make-up reflections **will not be accepted** unless the student can provide **reliable medical or legal** documentation that he/she/they could not do the self-reflection at the scheduled time).

**Self-Reflection 1 will be open book/open note. Self-reflection 2 will not be open book/open note, but you may bring in 1 page of prepared notes (8.5 x 11 in, typed or hand-written, front side only).**

Each self-reflection will consist of the following questions:

1. A. What challenges did you encounter in understanding the material in this section? Which ideas were the most challenging to understand and why? Discuss three examples.  
  
B. Explain the steps you took to come to a better understanding of the material detailed above that you found challenging. What specific steps did you take to come to a better understanding? Explain in detail the ways in which your understanding changed as a result of the steps you took.
2. Which ideas from this section were you most excited about and why? Discuss three ideas and explain what about them most excited you.

3. Pick one idea from those we discussed in this section and explain how it has changed or might change your thinking on a completely unrelated topic: that is, how might it cause you to think differently about an unrelated question, idea, group of people, or set of events that you encounter outside of this course.

Self-reflections will be graded on the depth of engagement that each student can demonstrate. That is, I want to see evidence in your reflections of a high-level of evaluation of course material and documented examples of the ways in which you worked to understand and think about the material in the section. Stellar self-reflections will: cite specific readings (and sections of readings) across the various questions; indicate specific measures students took to understand or gain mastery over the material; demonstrate that the student thought closely and carefully about the topics of the section and did the reading thoroughly; show that the student tried to understand how class concepts in the section relate to events, topics, and groups outside of those discussed in the course. Key to success on these reflections, will be a careful documentation of participation in class each day—including careful notetaking in class, close reading of the assigned texts, and careful marking up of the texts (students should indicate the reading's key points, interesting points, and confusing points each day).

### **Three Field Site Visits and Field Site Reports**

This course is a hybrid course, which means that only part of the course is completed in the classroom. The other part of the course involves students attending three field site visits outside of class time. I will provide more details in class, but the basic requirement is that students need to attend the religious services of three religious groups that have been labeled a “cult.” Students may choose from the list on the next page (p. 7) or may consult with the professor if they wish to choose a group not on the list. Students need not attend a ritual at an official center: for example, many groups have meetings in gymnasiums, hotel lobbies, rented halls, etc. However, all events students attend must be public events: that is, do not attend an event in a private setting, someone's home, etc.

For each visit, students must attend a ritual service (broadly understood) in its duration and complete the report (three pages, including two photos) for that visit. **Students can find the assignments and the specific requirements/guidelines on Canvas under “assignments.”** Importantly, students are not being asked to participate in the ritual, but rather to observe it as would anthropologists or journalists and document and analyze it in writing. **Each field site visit report is 15% of the grade for a combined total of 45%.**

***\*\*\*All three reports are due by December 1 at 5 pm. Students can complete them on their own schedule, but you are strongly encouraged to not wait until the last minute to do them. There will be no late assignments or make ups accepted.***

**\*I am here to help you with any questions you have about these visits.**

## Possible Places to Visit

Hare Krishnas, or International Society for Krishna Consciousness  
Brahma Kumaris  
Scientology  
Church of Satan  
Satanic Temple  
LDS Church, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (formerly, Mormons)  
Jehovah's Witnesses  
Wicca  
3HO  
Pagan traditions  
Christian Science  
Raëlians  
Church of Christ, Scientist  
Bahá'í Faith  
Bawa Muhaiyyadeen Fellowship  
Pentecostal Church  
Reiki Center/Event  
People of Hope  
Eckankar  
Soka Gakkai  
Transcendental Meditation  
Kundalini Yoga  
Unitarian Universalism  
Jediism  
Amma (guru) event  
Science of Spirituality  
Osho/Rajneesh Movement

## **COURSE GRADING SCALE**

### Course Grade (out of 100%)

A (90 or higher): outstanding;

B+ (85) or B (80): good;

C+ (75) or C (70): satisfactory;

D (60): poor;

F (fewer than 60 points): failing.

## **GRADES:**

Attendance and Prepared Participation: 25%

Self-Reflection Exam 1: 15%

Self-Reflection Exam 2: 15%

Field Site Visits and Reports: 3 x 15% each for a total of 45%



ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION RUBRIC	Grade of A	Grade of B	Grade of C or D	Grade of F
Attendance / Promptness	Student is <b>always</b> prompt and regularly attends classes. Student is never distracted or distracting in class by talking at inappropriate times, texting, etc. *4 absences are free.		Student is <del>sometimes/not</del> <b>always</b> prompt and/or misses some classes. Student is often/sometimes distracted or distracting in class by talking at inappropriate times, texting, etc.	Student is <b>typically not</b> prompt and/or misses many classes. Student is regularly distracted or distracting in class by talking at inappropriate times, texting, etc.
Level Of Engagement In Class	Student proactively contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions <b>more than once</b> per class.		Student <b>only sometimes</b> contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions.	Student <b>never/hardly ever</b> contributes to class by offering ideas and asking questions.
Listening Skills	Student <b>always</b> listens when others talk, both in groups and in class. Student <b>always incorporates or builds off</b> of the ideas of others.		Student <b>only sometimes</b> listens when others talk, both in groups and in class. Student <del>seldom</del> <b>incorporates or builds off</b> of the ideas of others.	Student <b>does not</b> listen when others talk, both in groups and in class. Student often <b>interrupts</b> when others speak, does not pay attention when they speak, etc..
Behavior	Student <b>never</b> displays disruptive behavior during class.		<b>*Disruptive behavior is not tolerated. Grade is either A or F.</b>	Student is disruptive once or more than once.
Preparation	Student <b>is always</b> prepared for class with assignments and required class materials.  Student <b>always</b> brings up, questions, and makes insightful comments on reading materials in every class discussion, several times each class.  Student <b>always</b> evidences that they have read the day's reading assignments in their entirety when they speak and/or are called on.	Student is <b>almost always</b> prepared for class with assignments and required class materials.  Student <b>almost always</b> brings up, questions, and makes insightful comments on reading materials in every class discussion.  Student <b>almost always</b> evidences that they have read the day's reading assignments in their entirety when they speak and/or are called on.	Student is <b>only sometimes</b> prepared for class with assignments and required class materials.  Student <b>only sometimes</b> brings up, questions, and makes insightful comments on reading materials in every class discussion.  Student <b>only sometimes</b> evidences that they have read the day's reading assignments in their entirety when they speak and/or are called on.	Student is <b>almost never/never</b> prepared for class with assignments and required class materials.  Student <b>almost never/never</b> brings up, questions, and makes insightful comments on reading materials in every class discussion.  Student <b>almost never/never</b> evidences that they have read the day's reading assignments in their entirety when they speak and/or are called on.

\*Adapted from Teach-nology. <http://teachers.teach-nology.com/cgi-bin/classpar.cgi>.

## ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

**Any instances of plagiarism, cheating, or other forms of academic dishonesty will result in the student being reported to the Dean of Students Office for a formal investigation as an academic violation case.** Academic dishonesty is defined as any one or more of the following:

### CHEATING

- A. submitting material that is not yours as part of your course performance;
- B. using information or devices that are not allowed by the faculty;
- C. obtaining and/or using unauthorized materials;
- D. fabricating information, research, and/or results;
- E. violating procedures prescribed to protect the integrity of an assignment, test, or other evaluation;
- F. collaborating with others on assignments without the faculty's consent;
- G. cooperating with and/or helping another student to cheat;
- H. demonstrating any other forms of dishonest behavior.

### PLAGIARISM

- A. directly quoting the words of others without using quotation marks or indented format to identify them;
- B. using sources of information (published or unpublished) without identifying them;
- C. paraphrasing materials or ideas without identifying the source;
- D. unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers or other academic material.

Please note the academic dishonesty can involve “human, hard copy, or electronic copy.” For further details about academic dishonesty, please consult the Rutgers Student Code of Conduct.

**All work that you hand in for this class must contain appropriate citations. Additionally, all submitted work will be processed through a plagiarism software.**

I take academic dishonesty very seriously. If you have any questions regarding how or when to use citations, proper citation methods, etc., or if you need clarification on any of the above, please do not hesitate to consult the professor and see the Rutgers University Academic Integrity Policy here: <https://deanofstudents.camden.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity>



## **Office of Disability Services (ODS)—Students with Disabilities**

If you need academic support for your courses, accommodations can be provided once you share a Letter of Accommodation issued by the Office of Disability Services (ODS) that specifies your accommodations indicated. If you have already registered with ODS and have your Letter of Accommodation, please share this with your instructor early in the course. If you have not registered with ODS and you have or think you have a disability (learning, sensory, physical, chronic health, mental health or attentional), please visit the ODS website, email, or call (856) 225-6954.

Please Note: Accommodations will be provided only for students with a Letter of Accommodation from ODS. Accommodation Letters only provide information about the accommodation, not about the disability or diagnosis.

## **Student Resources**

For a full list of Rutgers University, Camden student resources, please check out the following page: <https://studentaffairs.camden.rutgers.edu/student-resource-list>

## **SCHEDULE**

*\*Note: Some changes may be made in the assigned readings/lectures.*

**\*All homework and reading listed on the syllabus is to be done by the date under which is written, not on that date.**

### **PART ONE: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF “CULTS” OR NRMS**

#### **WEEK 1: Monday, September. 12. INTRODUCTIONS**

- Introduction to the class, syllabus etc.
- Introduction to “cults.” Class exercise about perceptions (lists from homework). Generate lists.

Homework: Come to class with a list of perceptions about “cults” (your own, from the web, etc.) and groups that you think fit the label

No Reading.

#### **WEEK 2: Monday, September 19. THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

- Discuss Clip and Gallagher Article (Gallagher.NRM)
- Discuss last week’s generated lists.

Homework: Watch this video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4mVx4AlFn4>

Reading: Gallagher.NRM. (Canvas)

#### **WEEK 3: September 26 THEORETICAL APPROACHES (CONT).**

- *FILM, IN CLASS. Truth and Lies: Waco:* <https://vimeo.com/264143037>

No Reading/Homework.

#### **WEEK 4: October 3 THEORETICAL APPROACHES (CONT).**

- Discussion of Film: *Truth and Lies: Waco*
- Discussion of Urban and implications of misunderstanding religious groups.

Reading: Urban Chapter (Canvas)

## PART TWO UFO “CULTS,” OR NRMS

### WEEK 5: October 10. HEAVEN’S GATE

- Introduction to Heaven’s Gate. Videos and discussion.

Reading: Zeller, Chapter 3

Homework: Browse Heavens Gate Website and bring something of note to class.

<https://www.heavensgate.com/>

### WEEK 6: October 17 HEAVEN’S GATE (CONT).

- Heaven’s Gate Joiners & Theology & Practices

Reading: Zeller, Chapters 4 & 5

### WEEK 7: October 24 HEAVEN’S GATE (CONT).

- Heaven’s Gate Suicides: Videos and Discussion and Reading Discussion

Reading: Zeller, Chapter 6

***\*SELF-REFLECTION EXAM 1 ON CANVAS DUE OCT. 30th BY 5 PM\****

### WEEK 8: October 31 THE RAËLIAN MOVEMENT

- Maitreya Raël: The Prophet and online videos & Beliefs and Practices

Reading: Palmer, Introduction, Chapter 1-3

Homework: Browse Raëlian website and bring something of note to class. <https://www.rael.org/>

### WEEK 9: November 7 THE RAËLIAN MOVEMENT

Raëlian Beliefs and Practices & Cloning in the Raëlian Movement

Reading: Palmer: 4, 8, 9

**PART THREE: “CULTS” OR NRMS & AMERICAN SOCIETY CASE STUDY: “SATANISM” &  
THE SATANIC TEMPLE**

**WEEK 10: November 14 THE CHURCH OF SATAN AND ‘SATANIC PANIC’**

- Introduction to the Church of Satan and Satanic Panic
- Ritual Clips (Satanic Ritual/Performance [YouTube-In class video])

Reading: Urban.COS (Canvas)

**WEEK: 11 November 21 THE SATANIC TEMPLE**

- IN CLASS *FILM: HAIL SATAN?*

No Reading/Homework

**WEEK 12 November 28 THE SATANIC TEMPLE (CONT.)**

- FILM DISCUSSION: HAIL SATAN?*

Reading: Laycock, Chapters 5 & 6

***\*THREE FIELD SITE VISIT REPORTS DUE DEC. 1<sup>st</sup> BY 5 PM\****

**WEEK 13 December 5 THE SATANIC TEMPLE (CONT.)**

- Temple of Satan and American Conversations about Religion and Evil
- Temple of Satan and American Conversations about Religious Pluralism

Reading: Laycock, Chapter 7

**WEEK 14 December 12 IN CLASS *\*SELF-REFLECTION EXAM 2\****

***This course has no final exam: have a great winter  
break!***