

REL3076: Cults and New Religious Movements

I. General Information

Meeting days and times: MWF 7 1:55-2:45 PM

Class location: Matherly Hall 117 (MAT0117)

Instructor:

Name: Yaniv Feller

Office Building/Number: 122 Anderson Hall

Email: yfeller@ufl.edu

Office Hours: M 11:30-12:30 and by appointment using the link:

<https://calendly.com/yfeller-1/30min>

Catalog Course Description: Investigates significant new religious movements such as the People's Temple and the Branch Davidians. The origins, internal structure, popularity, and functioning of these movements as well as claims of manipulation and discrimination.

Expanded Description: This course examines the “cult” and “new religious movement” in the context of modernity. Students will explore common typologies of religious groups, the dynamics of charismatic leadership, the sociology of small-group behavior, millennialism and apocalypticism, schism, violence, and government response, along with models of conversion—including “brainwashing.” They will trace the dynamics of tension and accommodation as groups change over time and investigate how new religious groups push the boundaries of social norms concerning family, sexuality, work and community. Specific groups to be reviewed include the Mormons, Peoples Temple (Jonestown), Rajneeshies, Branch Davidians, and Scientology. Methodological approaches include sociology and religious studies. Students will develop a toolkit for evaluating the phenomenon of new religion through close reading, discussion, and written and oral presentation. Classes will often include a short clip of a film, TV show or documentary that can be further explored by students outside class.

Prerequisites: None.

Course Materials

- Lorne Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Course Reserves has just one copy, please rent/purchase)
- David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (also available online through UFLib). [Here](#). Note that you might need to be connected to VPN or be on campus)
- All other materials via Canvas. See schedule below for full bibliographical information.

II. Student Learning Outcomes

Student Learning Outcomes:

Identify major academic approaches to the study of cults and new religious movements, including sociological, psychological, historical-critical, and religious studies perspectives.

Explain key concepts such as charisma, conversion, millennialism, apocalypticism, and typologies of religious groups.

Describe the historical development of significant new religious movements, including Peoples Temple, the Branch Davidians, and Wicca.

Apply theories of religious violence to analyze case studies of controversial movements.

Evaluate a specific new religious movement using multiple methodological perspectives in a structured writing project.

III. Graded Work

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found in the [Catalog](#).

Graded Components

Active Participation (10%): Includes attendance, contribution to class discussions, and completion of in-class polls and assessments. To achieve full credit for participation, students should be consistently prepared, engage in discussion, actively take notes, and offer informed questions and comment. You are allowed one unexcused missed class, no question asked. See below for participation rubric. See also the grading rubric below. For more on attendance policy, see: [Attendance Policies < University of Florida](#)

10 PRE-CLASS Weekly Response (10x2%=20%): You are required to submit one reflection paper per unit, for a total of seven. Units are marked in Roman numerals (I, V etc.). You cannot submit more than once for per unit. **Deadline is BEFORE class that day at 9am.** For example: for August 25 you will submit on Amanda Montell, but for Aug. 29 on Dawson, chapter 2. This would allow me to read it before and prepare the class based on your interests and what you got from the text. These very short papers are a chance for you to reflect on the readings and how they engage your own life experience. Each reflection paper should have the following components:

1. A one sentence **quote** from the reading(s). Be sure to provide the page number, not based on the pdf but on the actual pages of the book/article where available.
2. A 3-5 lines **explanation** on why you chose this quote. They can be analytical (this is the main argument, it reminds you another reading etc.) or personal (this quote relates to me because...).
3. One analytical question about the content or argument of the text.

For a response to count it needs to fulfill the following conditions:

- A. Be submitted before 9 AM (late responses would not be accepted)
- B. You need to attend the class in which the text is discussed.
 - a. Note: You might be asked to explain your thoughts on it in class, which is why you should **most certainly NOT use AI in any form for this assignment** (see AI policy below for further information).

If you have an excused reason for a late submission for an entire unit, please let me know. You are not allowed to use AI for this assignment and may be asked to talk about it in class.

Pro Tip: In my experience teaching this class several times, it is not always advisable to wait until the end of a unit to submit, even if it is how the deadline appears on Canvas. Instead, try to figure out a reading that really interests you in advance or figure out when might be a good time for you (for example, you have an easier Tuesday, so Wednesday might work better or vice versa).

Single-group review (20%): Write a three-page review of a single new religious movement that has not been and will not be taught in class (a list of those taught would be provided). You will need to find reliable academic sources, cite them properly, and apply at least one of the methodologies reviewed in class or reading (600 to 750 words plus bibliography). Deadline: Sep. 26, 1:50 PM.

Midterm Exam (20%): The midterm will take place in class. It will cover all lectures, readings, and class discussion up to that point. Oct. 15, in class.

Final Paper Proposal (5%): 3-page long. This is your chance to explore some of the themes we have learned throughout the semester and develop new ideas. You will provide your research questions, tentative description, and an annotated bibliography. Creative projects would be considered but be sure to talk to me about it in advance before submitting the proposal. Deadline: Nov. 10, 1:50 PM

Final Paper (30%) Write a paper of 3000 words. The paper topic can be either an in-depth treatment of a single group (including the same one as for the single-issue review) or a comparison of two groups, using more than one methodology.

TOTAL: 100%

Bonus events (1% per event, up to 3%): There are many opportunities to enhance your learning outside the classroom. I will post in advance some academic events that are of interest. You will attend the talk at the given date, and upload a one-page summary of what you took to be the key takeaway and one or two questions you had afterwards. **Deadline:** no later than a week after the event.

First speaker would be on **Sept. 4 6:30pm** (reception with free food!): James Loeffler (Johns Hopkins University), “How Charlottesville Changed America.” Event is free but registration required: <https://shorstein.ufl.edu/forum-for-fairness-in-discourse/>

Grading Scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade
A	100-93
A-	92-90
B+	89-87

Letter Grade	Number Grade
B	86-83
B-	82-80
C+	79-77
C	76-73
C-	72-70
D+	69-67
D	66-63
D-	62-60
E	59-0

See the UF Catalog's "[Grades and Grading Policies](#)" for information on how UF assigns grade points.

Participation Rubric¹

	Excellent 9-10	Good 8	Average 7	Insufficient 6	Unsatisfactory 0-5
Knowledgeable: Shows evidence of having done the assigned work.	Consistently makes excellent contributions to the overwhelming majority of class discussions in a way that shows excellent preparation of the relevant class materials.	Contributes to most class discussions in a way that shows good preparation of the relevant class materials.	Regularly contributes to class discussions and is able to explain their position based on the reading.	Sometimes contributes to the discussion in ways that do not necessarily show good preparation of class materials.	Never or rarely contributes to class discussions, and the contribution do not prove evidence of reading.

¹ Coming to class, having done the readings and ready to discuss them, is essential for your success in this course, and for the enjoyment of all of us. If you cannot make it to class because of a valid reason (religious observance, illness etc.) please let me know as soon as possible. Other than that, see the "attendance policy" above.

Thoughtful: Evaluates carefully issues raised in assigned work.	Consistently makes excellent contributions to the overwhelming majority of class discussions by raising important questions, relating to other comments, or making connections across readings.	Contributes to most class discussions by raising important questions, relating to other comments, or making connections across readings	Regularly contributes to most class discussions by raising important questions, relating to other comments, or making connections across readings.	Sometimes contributes to the discussion in ways that show the ability to carefully evaluate issues raised.	Never or rarely contributes to class discussions, and the contributions do not amount to careful evaluation of the material.
Considerate: Takes the perspective of others into account and listens attentively. ²	Always respectful to others, and takes their comments seriously.	Respectful to others and attempts to engage their comments.	Respectful, and sometimes relates to others' comments	Rarely takes into account how others might perceive one's comments.	Does not take into account other people's feelings and perspectives.

IV. Calendar (readings might slightly change depending on class discussion and unforeseen events such as hurricanes)

Preliminaries (NO RESPONSE Needed)

Aug. 22: Syllabus; Matthew Nastuk, dir. "One Angry Lisa," *The Simpsons* S34E2 (selections in class) – no response

1 The Language We Use

Aug. 25: Amanda Montell, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 10-21.

Aug. 27: Dawson, "Why Study NRM?," 1-13

² Religion is a sensitive topic for many people. You may come from a faith tradition, or you may not. We are here together to learn more, so any question that comes from an honest desire to learn is a good question. Our goal is to explore and learn, but not to judge either each other's traditions, or ignorance about them. You do not ever need to volunteer anything about your own beliefs, traditions, practices or opinions (or lack thereof) but if you do, make sure that you speak in the first person, thereby making clear that you are representing yourself and not an entire tradition in the discussion.

Aug. 29: Dawson, chp. 2, "What are NRM?," 14-38

2 The Emergence of NRM (Case Studies: Sabbatanism)

Sep. 1: Labor Day – No Class.

Sep. 3: Dawson, chp. 3, "Why Did Religious Movements Emerge?," 39-59

Sep. 5: Dawson, chp. 2 continued, 60-70

Sep. 8: Aaron Tapper, "Messiahs," in *Judaism(s)* (Berkley: UC Press, 2016), 60-71

3 Membership and Belonging (Case Study: Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple)

Sep. 10: Dawson, chp. 4, "Who Joins and Why?," 71-94

Sep. 12: David Chidester, *Savlation and Suicide*, "Introduction," 1-12 and "Religiohistorical Interpretation," 46-50.

Sep. 15: Chidester, "Classification of Humans," 51-78.

4 Space and Time (Jonestown Continued)

Sep. 17: Excursus on religion and space: Thomas Tweed, "Space," in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, 223-230

Sep. 19: Chidester, "Orientation in Space," 79-104

Sep. 22, Chidester, "Orientation in Time," 105-128

Sep. 24: Chidester, "Salvation and Suicide," 129-159

5 Violence and Interpretation (Case study: Branch Davidians)

Sep. 26: Dawson, chp. 6, 125-141 **SINGLE GROUP ASSIGNMENT**

Sep. 29: Dawson, chp. 7, 142-161

Oct. 1: William Pitts Jr., "Davidians and Branch Davidians, 1929-1987," in *Armageddon in Waco*, ed. Stuart Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 20-42.

Oct. 3: The Book of Revelation

Oct. 6: Tabor and Gallagher, "Unlocking the Seven Seals" in *Why Waco?* (Berkley: UC Press, 1993), 52-79

Oct. 8: How to write an academic research paper with Dr. Megan Daly, Religion Librarian

Oct. 10: Catherine Wessinger, "The FBI's 'Cult War' Against the Branch Davidians" in *The FBI and Religion*, 203-243.

Oct. 13: Dawson, chp. 7, 162-178

Midterm (no response)

Oct. 15: In-class midterm exam **You Got This!**

Oct. 17: Homecoming – No class.

6 Social Movements and NRM (Case Studies: Unification Church and MOVE)

Oct. 20: Unification Church and Shincheonji (reading TBD). Guest speaker: Professor Jeyoul

Choi

- Oct. 22: John Hannigan, "Apples and Oranges or Varieties of the Same Fruit? The New Religious Movements and the New Social Movements Compared," *Review of Religious Research* 31.3 (March 1990): 246-258. Guest speaker: Professor Anna Peterson.
- Oct. 24: Jason Osder, dir. *Let the Fire Burn* (2013), 1h35min.
- Oct. 27: Richard Evans, "Belief and Practice," *MOVE: An American Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 37-56.

7 The Brainwashing Debate (all studied so far)

- Oct. 29: Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," *Imagining Religion*, 102-120.
- Oct. 31: Dawson, chapter 5, 95-102
- Nov. 3: Dawson, chp. 5, 103-124

8 Female Leadership Roles (case studies: Theosophy, Angelus Church, Raëlism)

- Nov. 5: James Santucci, "Theosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 231-246.
- Nov. 7: Matthew Sutton, "'Between the Refrigerator and the Wildfire': Aimee Semple McPherson, Pentecostalism, and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy," *Church History* 72.1 (2009): 159-188.
- Nov. 10: Susan Palmer, "Playmates in Raelian Movement," *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 157-187.

PAPER PROPOSAL ASSIGNMENT

9 Remixed Religion (Case study: JewBus, Fitness)

- Nov. 12: Tara Isabel Burton, "Who Are the Remixed?," *Strange Rites*, chapter 1
- Nov. 14: 1. Jessica Gross, "The Church of Group Fitness," NYT July 26th, 2023. 5 pages;
2. Isabella Tara Burton, "Crossfit is My Church," Vox Sep. 10th, 2018. 10 pages.
- Nov. 17: Emily Sigalow, "Making Meditation Jewish," *American JewBu* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 99-122

10 What Makes a Religion? (Case study: Scientology, Millah Abraham)

- Nov. 19: Dell deChant & Danny L. Jorgensen, "The Church of Scientology: A Very New American Religion," in *World Religions in America: An Introduction*, 4th ed., ed. Jacob Neusner (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), pp. 293-312
- Nov. 21: NO CLASS
- Dec. 1: Hugh Urban, "'The War' and the Triumph of Scientology: Becoming a Tax-Exempt Religion in the 1990s," *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 155-177.
- Dec. 3: Jon Emont, "Why Are There No New Religions?," *The Atlantic* Aug. 6, 2017. 9 pages.

FINAL PAPER DUE DEC. 5

V. Course and University Policies and Resources

This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](#).

AI Policy

Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and others are a new and exciting development. At the same time, they can hurt our ability to think and grapple with difficult ideas, still “hallucinate” (make-up stuff) way too often, and using them uncritically can harm your development as a writer and thinker. On the other hand, they are here to stay, and can be very useful when used properly. We need to learn how to work with them. If you have never used any model, know that UF has an entire suite available for free! Check out the NaviGator website (note that you might need to be on campus or VPN):

<https://it.ufl.edu/ai/navigator-chat/>

The course policies regarding the use of AI are as follows:

1. You are **not allowed** to use these models during class. It is better to pay attention to the discussion! Using AI during class not only hurts your chances to succeed in the quizzes (which are worth 21% of the grade), it is also very disrespectful. It will result in 0 on the participation grade for the entire semester. In short, it ain't worth it :-)
2. You are not allowed to use AI for the shorter reading responses. These are meant to develop your ability to read and discuss the materials.
3. You are welcome to use AI for the larger assignments (Single Group Review, Final Paper Proposal, Final Paper). There will be some limitations. Full instructions will be given on each assignment.
4. In any case, you are **obliged to acknowledge the use of AI properly**, by providing a link to your entire transcript of the conversation(s) about class. Failure to do so constitutes a violation of the Honor Code and can result in anything from a 0 on the assignment to an Honor Board disciplinary hearing and potential suspension or expulsion. Again, ain't worth it!