

History / Religious Studies 4910  
New Religious Movements in American Religious History

Instructor: Christopher Blythe  
Office: Graduate Assistant Office in the History Department  
Office Hours: Available By Appointment  
Phone Number: (304) 550-4550  
Email: [christopher.blythe@aggiemail.usu.edu](mailto:christopher.blythe@aggiemail.usu.edu)

**Course Purpose**

This course is an introduction to New Religions in the United States from the colonial period to the present. Through a study of emerging religions, students will become familiar with processes that occur in all religions at their earliest moments. In addition, the intersection of these American sects/cults with mainstream religious movements, the media, and the law will be explored. As a class, we will explore questions such as: What is true of society's perceptions of alternative religious movements? What makes one person's religious beliefs normal and another's deviant? Why do people join cults or sects? How do religious schisms occur? In addition, students will learn how to conduct research in religious movements.

**Religious Studies, Not Religion**

While attending Religious Studies courses, it is important to remember that in the university, we do not teach for Religion or against Religion, but we teach ABOUT religion. The processes and historical events that will be explored in this course, neither confirm, nor disprove any religious belief. A major theme in this course will be the question of tolerance for unconventional religious thought.

**Required Texts**

*Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

*J. Gordon Melton, The Church of Scientology*. Signature Books, 1997.

Fredrico Squarcini, *Hare Krishna*. Signature Books.

James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995.

Additional Reading Assignments will be provided via email the week before they are due.

**Assignments and Grading**

**Quizzes** (15%)

Quizzes will be held five times during the semester on September 4, September 18, October 2, October 30, and November 13. They will be given in 5-10 minutes and will contain three questions, which will come from the previous two weeks of lecture and reading. Quizzes are not

designed to be difficult, but to assess whether you have done the reading and paid attention in class.

**Research Report** (35%) 5-7 Pages.

Students will select one New Religion (Sect or Cult) founded in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries – preferably in the past fifty years. The report does not need a thesis, but instead provides information for further study on the movement. The report will be divided into seven sections (each roughly one page.)

- 1) Origin of the Religion (Brief Founding History)
- 2) Community
- 3) Creed
- 4) Code
- 5) Cultus
- 6) Avenues for Further Research
- 7) Bibliography

The purpose of this assignment is to demonstrate your ability to research a group. I recommend that you write your final paper on the group that you have studied as a part of your research report. However, this is not a requirement.

**Final Paper** (50%) 10-12 Pages.

Students will write their Final Papers on a topic of their choice, as approved by the instructor. Topics must involve New Religious Movements in the United States. The Final Paper will be graded as follows. The statement of topic/introduction will count 5 points; the mechanics/format will count 5 points; the bibliography will count 5 points; the annotation will count 5 points; the conclusion will count 5 points; and the content will count 30 points. A formal bibliography of no less than six sources (**not** including course texts or Internet resources) must be utilized in the preparation of the paper, and notations (Chicago Manual of Style) must be employed throughout the paper.

**Grading**

**A** 93-100

**A-** 90-92

**B+** 87-89

**B** 83-86

**B-** 80-82

**C+** 77-79

**C** 70-76

**D** 60-69

**F** 59 and below

**Academic Integrity**

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, plagiarizing, fabricating of information or citations, facilitating acts of academic dishonesty by others, having unauthorized possession of examinations, submitting work of another person or work previously used without informing the instructor, or tampering with the

academic work of other students. Please see the USU General Catalog for explicit descriptions of Academic Dishonesty. Any instances of Academic Dishonesty in this class will result in an automatic grade of "F."

### **Disability Access**

The university encourages qualified people with disabilities to participate in its 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.

### **Calendar for the Course**

[NOTE: Reading Assignments are written on the date in which they are expected to have been read.]

#### **Section I: Introducing the Study of New Religions**

Monday - August 24

*Class Expectations*

Wednesday – August 26

*Cults, Sects, and Churches*

Cults and New Religious Movements, Intro and Chapter One.

Friday – August 28

*Classifying New Religions*

Cults and New Religious Movements, Chapter Three.

Monday – August 31

*“Cult Formation”*

Cults and New Religious Movements, Chapter Four.

Wednesday – September 2

*Dissent, Schism, and the Development of the Sect*

Edwin S. Gaustad, *Dissent in American Religion*, Intro. (Via Email)

Friday – September 4

*Legitimization and De-legitimization Strategies*

James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, Intro and Chapter One. (Via Email)

Monday – September 7

LABOR DAY – NO CLASSES

Wednesday – September 9

*Joining New Religious Movements*

Cults and New Religious Movements, Chapters Seven and Eight.

Section II: Exploring New Religions in American Religious History

Friday – September 11

*New Religious Movements in Nineteenth-Century America*

Cults and New Religious Movements, Chapter Five.

Monday – September 14

*Utopian Communities*

Reading Assignment Via Email

Wednesday – September 16

*Utopian Communities (Continued)*

*The Shakers*

Reading Via Email.

Friday – September 18

*Millennialism in the United States*

*Seventh Day Adventism*

Jonathan L. Butler, *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, Excerpts. (Via Email)

Monday –September 21

*The Anti-Cult, A Mormon Example*

Terryl Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myth, and the Construction of Heresy*,” Excerpts. (Via Email.)

Wednesday – September 23

*Supernaturalism in the Nineteenth Century*

*The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Irvingites*

Christopher Blythe, “Scientists of the Supernatural.” (Via Email)

Friday – September 25

Guest Speaker: Andrew Hamblin “Asatru in America”

Monday – September 28

Spiritualism in the Nineteenth Century, Continued.

Assignment Via Email.

**Topics for Research Reports Due!**

Wednesday – September 30

*New Religious Movements in the Twentieth Century*

Cults and New Religious Movements, Chapter Six.

Friday – October 2  
Charles Russell and the Bible Students  
Assignment Via Email.

Monday – October 5  
Jehovah Witnesses  
“When Prophecy Fails”: Disconfirmation Theory

Wednesday – October 7  
Disconfirmation Theory  
A Nineteenth-Century Mormon Example  
Nova Religio

Friday – October 9  
*From Sect to Denomination*  
*Worldwide Church of God*  
Watch: “Called to be Free” (Website to be Provided)

Monday – October 12  
*From Heterodoxy to Orthodoxy*  
*The Nation of Islam*  
Ansari, Zafar Ishaq. “Islam among African Americans: An Overview” in Bukhari, Zahid H., et al. *Muslims’ Place in American Public Square: Hope Fears and Aspirations*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004:222-267. (Via Email)

Wednesday – October 14  
*The Nation of Islam, Continued*.  
Assignment Via Email.

### Section III: The Cults of the Twentieth Century

Thursday – October 15 – FRIDAY SCHEDULE  
Metaphysical Religion in the United States  
Assignment Via Email.  
**Topics for Final Papers Due!**

Friday – October 16 (FALL BREAK)

Monday – October 19  
*UFO Religion*  
Legitimizing New Religions, Chapter Four (Via Email)

Wednesday – October 21  
*The Temple of the Vampire*

David and Kiara Falk, Vampire Religion in America, Sacred Tribes Journal.  
(www.sacredtribesjournal.org)

Friday – October 23  
No Classes (RESEARCH DAY)

Monday – October 26  
*The Church of Scientology (South Park Clip)*  
The Church of Scientology, Chapters One and Two.

Wednesday – October 28  
*The Church of Scientology*  
The Church of Scientology, Chapters Three and Four.  
**Research Reports Due!**

#### Section IV: Eastern Religions in the United States

Friday – October 30  
*Eastern Religions in the United States*  
Diane Eck, A New Religious America, Excerpts. (Via Email)

Monday – November 2 -  
*Soka Gakkai and the Democratization of Religion in America*  
Jane Hurst, “Nichiren Shoshu and Soka Gakkai in America: The Pioneer Spirit” in  
Prebish,\* Charles S. and Kenneth K. Tanaka. (edit.) *The Faces of Buddhism in America*.  
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. (Via Email)

Wednesday – November 4  
*ISKCON*  
Hare Krishna, Chapters One and Two.

Friday – November 6  
*ISKCON in America and Salt Lake*.  
Hare Krishna, Chapters Three and Four.

#### Section V: Cult Controversies

Monday – November 9  
*Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate in the Public Consciousness*  
Cults and New Religious Movements, Chapter Twelve.

Wednesday – November 11 -  
*Introducing the Branch Davidians*.  
Why Waco? Chapter One and Two.

Friday – November 13  
*The Theology of David Koresh.*  
Why Waco? Chapter Three.

Monday – November 16  
*The Standoff*  
Why Waco? Chapter Four.

Wednesday – November 18  
*The Standoff, Continued.*  
Why Waco? Chapter Five.

Friday – November 20  
Research Day

Monday – November 23  
Research Day

Wednesday – November 25  
No Classes  
Why Waco? Chapter Six.

Friday – November 27  
No Classes  
Why Waco? Chapter Seven.

Monday – November 30  
*The Folklore of New Religions.*  
Why Waco? Chapter Eight.

Section VI: So What?

Wednesday – December 2  
*Conclusion*

Friday – December 4  
*Conclusion*  
**Final Papers Due!**