



## *Teaching New and Alternative Religious Movements*

Eugene V. Gallagher and Benjamin E. Zeller, Guest Editors

### *Spotlight on Teaching*

Frederick Glennon and Ellen Posman, General Editors

The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Lerone Martin, Chair) sponsors *Spotlight on Teaching*. It appears twice each year in *Religious Studies News* and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**W. Michael Ashcraft** is a professor of religion at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. He received his PhD in American religious history from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. His first book was entitled *The Dawn of the New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and American Culture*, published by the University of Tennessee Press in 2002. He has edited and contributed chapters to collections and is the book review editor for *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. He is currently working on a book about the history of the study of new religious movements. He regularly teaches undergraduate courses on ethics, world religions, religions in America, gender and religion, method and theory in the study of religion, new religious movements, and peace studies. He is married to Carrol K. Davenport, an Episcopal priest and hospice chaplain. They have two daughters.

**Carole M. Cusack** is professor of religious studies at the University of Sydney. She trained as a medievalist, and her doctorate was published as *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (Cassell, 1998). She teaches contemporary religious trends including pilgrimage and tourism, modern Pagan religions, new religious movements, and religion and popular culture. She is interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning and worked for the University of Sydney's Institute for Teaching and Learning in 1993–1994. Her books include *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Ashgate, 2010) and *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Cambridge Scholars, 2011). She was pro-dean (Teaching and Learning) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 2013–2014, and received a Faculty Excellence in Teaching Award in 2004, a Humanities and Social Sciences Excellence in Supervision Award in 2006, and a Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research Higher Degree Supervision in 2010.

**Marie W. Dallam** is an assistant professor of American religion and culture at the Honors College of the University of Oklahoma. Her publications include *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (New York University Press, 2007) and the coedited volume *Religion, Food and Eating in North America* (Columbia University Press, 2014). Her next project is an interdisciplinary study of the Cowboy Church Movement in Oklahoma and Texas. She presently serves as the chairperson for AAR's New Religious Movements Group.

**Eugene V. Gallagher** is the Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College. He teaches a course on new religious movements annually and uses material about new religions in his introductory courses, "Religion and Globalization" and "Holy Books: Scripture in the Western Tradition," among other courses. Among his publications on new religions is *Reading and Writing Scripture in New Religious Movements: New Bibles and New Revelations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). He is a co-general editor of *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* and associate editor of *Teaching Theology and Religion*.

**Megan Goodwin** is the 2014–2016 Mellon postdoctoral fellow in pedagogical innovation for the Department of Religious Studies at Bates College. She earned her doctorate in religion and culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2013 and is the coeditor of the *Religions in the Americas*

section of *Religion Compass*. Her research emphasizes minority religions, gender, and sexuality, with particular attention to the ways normative sexuality shapes contemporary American religious and national identity. Her article on the role of sexual and religious panic in perpetuating ritual abuse discourse during the 1980s is forthcoming in *Literature and Medicine*.

**Jeremy Rapport** is assistant professor of religious studies at the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio. He is the author of several journal articles, book chapters, and encyclopedia entries on topics related to new religions, including “Corresponding to the Rational World: Scientific Language and Rationales in Christian Science and the Unity School of Christianity,” in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emerging Religions*; “Christian Science, New Thought, and Scientific Discourse,” in *Religion and the Authority of Science* (Brill, 2010); “Join Us! Come, Eat! Vegetarianism in the Formative Period of the Seventh-day Adventists and the Unity School of Christianity,” in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* (Columbia University Press, 2014); and “New Religious Movements: Nineteenth Century,” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* (CQ Press, 2010). He is currently revising a book manuscript on the early history of the Unity School of Christianity. In his spare time he enjoys bicycling, bird watching, craft beer, and barbeque.

**Catherine Wessinger** is Rev. H. James Yamauchi, SJ Professor of the History of Religions at Loyola University New Orleans. She is the author of *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism, 1847–1933* (Edwin Mellen, 1988); editor of *Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (University of Illinois Press, 1993); editor of *Religious Institutions and Women’s Leadership: New Roles inside the Mainstream* (University of South Carolina Press, 1996). She is author of *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (Seven Bridges, 2000) and editor of *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse University Press, 2000). She is the editor and coeditor of three Branch Davidian autobiographies. She is the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* (2011). She is co-general editor of *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, and she is editor of the Women in Religions series at New York University Press. She has written articles and chapters on women’s religious leadership, new religious movements, millennialism, apocalypse and violence, charismatic leaders, the Branch Davidians, and the “cult” discourse in America.

**Lydia Willisky** is an assistant professor of religious studies at Fairfield University with a focus on American religion. She received her PhD from Vanderbilt University in May 2013 and her MTS from Harvard Divinity School in 2007. She has published articles in *The New England Quarterly* and *Nova Religio*. Her first book project, *Between Scripture and Progress: American Unitarianism and the Protestant Search for Religious Authority*, is due from Lexington Books in 2015. The book examines the question “does Protestantism have an established sense of religious authority” through the lens of nineteenth century Unitarian history. Her research involves Unitarians and the Bible, “alternative” scriptures, and liberal Christian and Transcendentalist women and social reform

**Benjamin E. Zeller** serves as assistant professor of religion at Lake Forest College, in the Chicago metro area. His research and teaching focuses on religion in America, specifically on religious currents that are new or alternative including new religions, the religious engagement with science, and the quasi-religious relationships people have with food. He is author of *Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America* (New York University Press, 2010), *Heaven’s Gate: America’s UFO Religion* (New York University Press, 2014), and coeditor of *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* (Columbia University Press, 2014) and *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He is co-general editor of *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*.

## Teaching New and Alternative Religious Movements: Guest Editors' Introduction

Eugene V. Gallagher, Connecticut College

Benjamin E. Zeller, Lake Forest College

Topics falling within the category of “new religious movements” have become increasingly prominent in religious studies classrooms over the past few decades. Often tracking media coverage, students have particular interest in groups such as Scientologists, the Westboro Baptist Church, the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints and their Yearning for Zion Ranch, and various New Age gurus ebbs and flows, but their overall fascination with new and alternative religiosity has remained a common feature in our classrooms. Yet instructors face the question of how to translate student interest in these groups into actual student learning. While such a task falls most obviously on those teaching courses focusing on new or alternative religious movements, instructors teaching on a wide array of topics and multiple subfields may wish to engage students in the critical study of this topic. The essays gathered in this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* directly consider the question of how to teach about new religious movements in a variety of contexts.

Interest in teaching and learning about new religions reflects important transformations of our field over the last 50 years. One prominent trend in teaching about religion in higher education since the *Abington v. Schempp* decision by the US Supreme Court in 1963 has been the broadening of the subject matter that has fallen under the purview of the academic study of religion. In 2008, the American Academy of Religion’s [“White Paper on the Religion Major and Liberal Learning”](#) characterized that trend as a shift from a “seminary model” for the religion curriculum—in which the study of Christianity was virtually coextensive with the study of religion—to a “comparative” model in which many different religions come under consideration. Of course, that transition has been gradual and very uneven across institutions. In many institutions courses about Christianity still dominate the religious studies curriculum, whether there is an explicit argument for that preponderance or not. There has also been vigorous discussion about the continuing effects of the privileging of Christianity as the primary example of “religion.”

At virtually the same time that the discipline and teaching of religious studies were being reshaped, public attention was being drawn to an array of new religious movements that appeared to be sweeping the United States. The passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act lifted restrictions on immigration and promoted the movement of a variety of religious teachers to the United States, particularly from Asia. Various trends in the counterculture of the 1960s also promoted interest in new religious movements. As groups like the Children of God, which started in Huntington Beach, California, in 1968, and the Unification church, which sent its first missionaries to the United States in 1959 and

whose leader Rev. Sun Myung Moon relocated to the United States in 1971, attracted adherents especially from the burgeoning youth culture, they also provoked hostile reactions from a loose aggregation of parents of members, various mental health professionals, and other activists. The contemporary anti-cult movement, which was especially suspicious of many new religious groups and which often, in its early years, promoted forcible removal of group members and their “deprogramming,” first surfaced in organizational form with the formation of FREEMAN (Free the Children of God) in the early 1970s. The ensuing “cult wars,” which soon spread internationally, dominated the 1970s and have continued, though sometimes in muted form, to this day. The 1978 murder-suicides of the members of Jim Jones’s People Temple in Guyana, the 1993 storming and subsequent fire at the Branch Davidian’s Mount Carmel Center outside of Waco, Texas, and the 1997 suicides in California of all active members of the Heaven’s Gate UFO group injected a new focus on violence and death into popular and academic discourse on new religions.

The apparent proliferation of new groups drew the attention not only of the public, which seemed to have an unshakeable appetite for dramatic tales of loss and rescue, but also of social scientists interested in the dynamics of social movements, including the processes of recruitment, conversion, and departure from groups. Those various research programs eventually coalesced into a distinctive subdiscipline of new religions studies. And that research began to find its way into the classroom where it often found an audience of students eager to learn more about those saffron-robed members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness who they encountered hawking literature in airports and other public places, the perplexing mass weddings held in well-known venues like Madison Square Garden, and the apparent affinity between various movie and TV stars and the Church of Scientology.

By 1999–2000, more than 18% of the institutions participating in the [survey of undergraduate programs](#) by the American Academy of Religion reported that they offered courses on new religious movements (see p. 10). The study of new religions had thus clearly begun to participate in the diversification of teaching about religion in higher education. As a group, the essays in this issue of *Spotlight* show how material about new religions can be used, not only in courses dedicated to the topic, but in a variety of the most frequently taught courses in the undergraduate curriculum. They clearly show how the study of new religious movements can be productively introduced into a variety of pedagogical settings.

Catherine Wessinger shows how material about new religions can enrich the teaching of religious studies generally. She argues that the study of new religions promotes students’ religious literacy, and she describes how exploring themes such as millennialism and women’s leadership from a new religions perspective illuminates our understanding of religion in historical and current contexts. Jeremy Rapport makes the case that studying new religions gives students multiple opportunities to cultivate the types of skills that are central to a liberal arts education, including critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. Marie Dallam focuses on the fundamental processes of evaluating source materials, particularly in a comparative context. Her assignment that requires students to contrast memoirs of members or former members and more scholarly treatments of a religious group encourages students to identify and evaluate critically the point of view from which an author writes, the multiple perspectives that can be brought to bear on a group, event, idea, or person, and to develop an understanding of the complexities of rendering an accurate account of any group based on multiple sources of information.

Lydia Willsky shows how course design strategies can be used to promote higher-order thinking and uses William Perry’s well-known [scheme of cognitive development](#) as a guide to devising constructive comparisons between groups and alternative stories about them. Her strategy of juxtaposing cases that are usually thought of as being quite different is echoed by Megan Goodwin’s emphasis on the

marginality, rather than the novelty, of various new religious movements. By putting familiar groups like Peoples Temple and Scientology alongside Roman Catholics and Signs Following (“serpent handling”) Protestants, she also enlarges the comparative context for understanding new religions by showing how much they have in common with other religious groups that have been assigned minority status.

All of the contributors share the concern of getting students to understand new religions precisely *as religions* rather than aberrations of various sorts. They share Carole Cusack’s skeptical attentiveness to how the category of “religion” can be constructed to include some forms of religion as legitimate but to raise questions about others, as the application of the term “cult” in English-speaking countries and “secte” or “sekte” in French and German-speaking countries respectively, has done for a very wide range of religious groups. W. Michael Ashcraft’s adaptation of the site visit also serves as a way of encouraging students to view the members of new religions as human beings like them. Ashcraft also shows how the multisensory environment of the site visit promotes forms of learning that cannot be easily duplicated in the classroom.

As a group, these essays show that the study of new religions can lead students into fundamental questions about topics such as the nature and definition of religion, the roles of charismatic leaders in religious movements, the complex relations between religions and gender, and numerous other topics. Accordingly, the study of new religions can be incorporated into many of the courses typically offered in religion curricula: from surveys of world religions and courses on religions in America or any other geographical area to classes focusing on women and religion and courses specifically dedicated to new religions, such as those discussed by Jeremy Rapport and Carole Cusack. In fact, adding treatments of new religions to courses where students might not expect them offers the chance for instructors to challenge students’ assumptions about the fundamental categories and concepts that we study. New religions offer many topics on which students can hone their critical reading, thinking, and writing skills, their abilities to render accurately the concerns, practices, and commitments of others who may be very different from them, and their capacities to make informed judgments on topics of broad concerns, among many other skills that are central to undergraduate education.

New religions are good to think with not only because they offer an array of provocative and intriguing case studies but also because they bring into the classroom material with which students are familiar from other contexts. From *South Park*’s mockery of Tom Cruise and the Church of Scientology, through Marilyn Manson’s association with Satanism, to movies like *The Craft* and TV shows like *Charmed* that introduce elements of witchcraft and contemporary Paganism, new religious movements play an important role in the popular culture with which most college students are familiar. Incorporating some of that material not only grabs students’ attention, but also gives teachers the opportunity to show how the study of religion can help students develop a more sophisticated understanding of the worlds in which they live.

Taken together, these essays show how attention to new religions can enrich the academic study of religion at the same time that it helps teachers and students pursue some of the most general and important learning outcomes of an undergraduate education. The AAR “White Paper” mentioned earlier discusses the four essential learning outcomes for an undergraduate education proposed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities in its 2007 report, [College Learning for the New Global Century](#). They are 1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, 2) intellectual and practical skills, 3) social and personal responsibility, and 4) integrative learning. As W. Michael Ashcraft, Catherine Wessinger, and Megan Goodwin emphasize, encounters with new and alternative religious movements clearly demonstrated the richness and diversity of human culture on such fundamental questions as human sexuality, gender roles, definitions of the family, the role of work, and

the meaning of history. Jeremy Rapport, Lydia Willsky, and Marie Dallam show how working on materials from new religions can help students to refine fundamental intellectual and practical skills. Considering the role of the state in events like the assault on the Mt. Carmel Center or Wounded Knee or the denial of Aboriginal rights and immigration rights in Australia certainly offers fertile ground for the consideration of many topics of personal and social responsibility. And the essays give multiple examples of how the study of new religions can promote integrative learning, from Jeremy Rapport's and Marie Dallam's paper assignments to W. Michael Ashcraft's site visits.

In both the public arena and in the classroom, new religions of every sort deserve careful consideration precisely *as religions*. That they have frequently incited prejudicial responses in broader society calls for careful consideration and careful analysis rather than simple affirmation or rejection. Studying new religions offers students opportunities to grapple intellectually, and morally, with the dynamics of the origination, reception, and transformation of religious traditions. In itself, that grappling argues for their inclusion in undergraduate religion curricula.

## **Integrating New Religions Scholarship into Religious Studies Courses**

Catherine Wessinger, Loyola University New Orleans

I have been researching and writing about new religious movements (NRMs) ever since I unwittingly chose a new religions topic for my dissertation: the lifelong evolving millennial thought of the Englishwoman Annie Besant (1847–1933) who lived in India while serving as the second president of the Theosophical Society and carrying out numerous projects for social, educational, political, and religious uplift and reform. I have been teaching at Loyola University New Orleans for more years than I care to tell my students. There I have taught numerous sections of the course “Religions of the World.” I also teach “Women in World Religions,” “Women in Christianity,” as well as courses on Asian religions, millennialism, and New Orleans religions. I have been integrating what I have learned in new religions studies into these courses.

The study of new or alternative religions is not an area separate from the general study of religions. Analysis, categories, issues, and information from new religions studies are relevant to diverse religious studies courses in addition to courses devoted specifically to NRMs. New religions studies sheds light on manifestations of charisma, the routinization of charisma into institutionally authorized forms of leadership, and varieties of millennialism. Important issues examined in new religions studies that are relevant to the study of religions more broadly include the maturation processes of new movements, canon formation, gender, roles of women, women’s religious leadership and the factors that support it, the dynamics of religious violence, and the connection of many violent episodes with millennial worldviews.

I will discuss briefly some approaches I have taken in “Religions of the World” and my courses on women in religions based on my study of new religious movements.

### **Religions of the World**

New religions studies is relevant in the “Religions of the World” course well beyond the now obligatory chapter on NRMs in world religions textbooks. Analytical categories and data derived from new religions studies are congruent with promoting students’ religious literacy, which enables them to understand religious traditions that shape our world, critically evaluate information about religions, and be informed citizens knowledgeable about religious groups and movements reported in the news.

In addition to discussion of “charisma”—which I define as followers’ belief that a leader, text, or place has access to an unseen source of authority—I introduce my students to the types of millennialism that frequently manifest in the world’s religions. My study of NRMs indicated the need to develop a definition of millennialism built on, but also going beyond, the classic definition given by Norman Cohn in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1970). Therefore, I define “millennialism” as the expectation of an imminent transition to a collective salvation, either on Earth or in heaven or both, which may be effected by superhuman intervention or by humans exerting effort according to what they regard as a

sacred plan. Millennial ideas frequently motivate the founding of NRMs, some of which may grow to become dominant religious traditions (as did Christianity and Islam).

I introduce my students to the categories of “catastrophic millennialism” and “progressive millennialism,” which I developed to expand the old categories of premillennialism and postmillennialism beyond their rootedness in Christian theology. Catastrophic millennialism is the belief that an imminent transition to a collective salvation involves the catastrophic destruction of the old order. Progressive millennialism is belief in progress and that humans working according to a divine or superhuman plan can imminently create a collective salvation. I stress that catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism are not mutually exclusive; believers may combine traits of each or shift from one to the other in response to events. The study of NRMs demonstrates that messianism is frequently associated with catastrophic millennialism *and* progressive millennialism, but it is not a necessary feature of either.

Contrary to my assumption when I first started studying about millennialism and violence, not all progressive millennialists rely on benevolent social work to create the millennial salvation on Earth. As shown in chapters in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence* (Wessinger 2000), some progressive millennialists, for example the German Nazis, Maoists, and the Khmer Rouge, resort to force or violence to remove anyone perceived as standing in the way of their desired collective salvation for the designated elect.

I also introduce my students to the category of nativist millennial movements, which may take catastrophic or progressive manifestations. Nativist millennialists are responding to the destruction of their traditional way of life and removal from their sacred land, and they hope for a collective salvation that restores their idealized past way of life. There is also “avertive apocalypticism,” which motivates believers to take steps to avert feared imminent apocalyptic destruction. They may resort to religious practices, as do the followers of the Marian apparition messages received by Veronica Lueken (1923–1995) in Bayside, New York, who dedicate themselves to renewing their traditional Catholic faith, personal penance, praying the rosary, and attending Masses to avert God’s chastisement of humanity. David Redles (2011) argues in his chapter on “National Socialist Millennialism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism* that the Nazis carried out the “final solution” as the means of averting what they believed was imminent apocalyptic destruction of the German race by a Jewish plot. Given the continued influence of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the world today, it is important to educate students that this text is spurious.

Study of the types of millennial movements and the dynamics of millennial groups that use violence is directly relevant to understanding historical and current events. Millennial groups involved in violence may be assaulted. They may initiate violence because of fragility caused by stresses internal to the group and pressures applied from outside. They may be revolutionary. On the revolutionary end of the millennial spectrum there is convergence between catastrophic millennialism and progressive millennialism because both types of adherents possess extreme dualistic worldviews that dehumanize perceived opponents.

Today’s students are perplexed by the violent conflicts involving Islamic movements. I find that even Muslim students do not know the meaning of the term “Islamist” used in the news. I emphasize the difference between ordinary faithful Muslims, and Islamists (moderate or radical) who want to create an Islamic state that enforces their understanding of *sharia*. The Islamist goal is a millennial one. Jeffrey T. Kenney gives an excellent overview of the goal and diverse methods of Islamists in his chapter, “Millennialism and Radical Islamist Movements,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*. Radical

Islamist millennialism is very much in evidence in the current military drive of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, which on June 29, 2014, announced it had established a caliphate that should be known as the Islamic State and its leader should be known as Caliph Ibrahim.

Today's students were also born after the conflict between federal agents and the Branch Davidians in 1993 that caused the deaths of four Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) agents and 82 Branch Davidians including 22 children. This incident represents the largest loss of life in law enforcement action in the United States. The tank and gas assault of the Branch Davidian residence on April 19, 1993, by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents is the largest use of CS gas—which is intended for outdoor crowd dispersal—in an enclosed space. In “Religions of the World,” I acquaint students with this case and encourage them to use it to think critically about the implications of a religious group being labeled a “cult” by the state and about the types of interactions with religious believers that contribute to a violent outcome.

I assign my short profile of the Branch Davidians on the [World Religions and Spirituality Project \(WRSP\) website](#). In class I show and narrate a PowerPoint slide show (also available on the WRSP website) of photos of Branch Davidians, their residence, and the BATF and FBI assaults. In the future I will also assign a [short paper](#) I presented at the 2014 Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) meeting, “The Siege of the Branch Davidians’ Mount Carmel Center according to the FBI” (also available at my [academia.edu](#) page), which discusses findings in the internal FBI logs and memos concerning the case. These documents reveal that FBI decision makers were well informed of the Branch Davidians’ apocalyptic theology of martyrdom when the tank and CS gas assault was planned and implemented. For students wanting more information, I have an extended profile on the Branch Davidians on the WRSP website and academia.edu.

### **Women in Religions**

New religions frequently provide social spaces for experimentation with alternative theologies supportive of women’s empowerment, women’s religious leadership, and broadened gender roles. But they have also been spaces where patriarchal roles are promoted and enforced with the typical abuses that arise in such contexts. Assigning and discussing materials about women in new religions increases understanding of the variety of roles that women can claim in religions in general. The study of new religions, as well as dominant religious traditions, demonstrates the ways that gender roles and religious beliefs are interrelated and affect one another. Studying about women in new religions elucidates types of women’s leadership roles and theologies that are now being incorporated into mainstream religious traditions. Learning about women’s creativity and efforts for equality in NRMs sheds light on women’s struggles for equality and changing gender roles in mainstream religious institutions.

When I began teaching about women in religions, I was interested in exploring with students the characteristics supportive of women’s religious leadership. I assigned Mary Farrell Bednarowski’s 1980 article, “Outside the Mainstream: Women’s Religion and Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-century America.” After comparing the Shakers, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and Theosophy, Bednarowski concludes that women achieved leadership positions and status equal to men in new religions that (1) deemphasized the masculine deity either by stressing an androgynous deity, a female deity, or an impersonal ultimate principle; (2) reinterpreted or denied the doctrine of the Fall (blamed on Eve); (3) had forms of leadership alternative to an ordained clergy; and (4) had views of gender that did not stress marriage and motherhood as the only roles for women.

Bednarowski kindly gave me permission to use her article as the jumping off point for examinations by

scholars who contributed to my edited book (1993), *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*. In it, authors further explored characteristics supportive of women's religious leadership. The chapters examine the Shakers, Pentecostals, Spiritualism, Christian Science, the Theosophical Society and its offshoots, the New Thought movement, Hindu and Buddhist groups in America, African American Spiritual Churches of New Orleans, Wicca, and the Women-Church movement. Bednarowski's chapter examines theological writings of Mormon women, Roman Catholic women, and women in the Theosophical movement. I assigned chapters in my courses "Women in World Religions" and "Women in Christianity."

By reading and discussing chapters in *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, students come to a variety of conclusions concerning women in religions more broadly. They discover that a female deity—or deities in themselves—do not necessarily result in broadened gender roles for women in society and religion. As Marjorie Procter-Smith writes in her chapter on the Shakers, "a female deity or image of the divine being is empowering to women only insofar as it remains independent of and critical of existing patriarchal social structures and experiences" (36). Students find that women have participated in leadership roles or even founded new religions that are not reliant on ordained clergy. They learn that when there is an increased social expectation of equality, and therefore a view of gender that does not restrict women solely to the roles of wife and mother, new religions may develop ordained leadership roles open to women. Parallel to the centuries of strategies of male religious leaders in patriarchal religions, women leaders in new religions frequently strive to legitimate their religious leadership by highlighting significant foremothers and a feminine aspect to the Divine. Women religious leaders may also promote belief in a nongendered ultimate reality.

As lessons from the study of women in NRMs are applied to mainstream religious institutions, students discover that if the religion does not admit women into its leadership roles as the social expectation of equality increases, women begin to demand admission to institutional forms of leadership. If the religion does not yet have a theology that stresses alternatives to the patriarchal male deity, women leaders will begin to introduce alternative conceptions of deity. If the religion has a mythology that has been used to justify subordination of women, women intellectuals and leaders will offer rationales to reject or reinterpret that myth and the doctrines based on it. Students also learn that feminist women have cultivated new religious movements, such as the Women-Church movement and Wicca, in which religious leadership is shared. Students learn that men choose to participate in religions strongly shaped by women and that emphasize female deities. All of these developments in a number of NRMs foreshadow similar developments occurring in mainstream religious institutions that are open to change.

Through assigned readings, including chapters in *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, students learn that charisma is the basis of the first type of religious leadership available to women in highly patriarchal societies. Frequently the media will present the "charismatic leader" of a new religious movement as an individual to be feared. While it is important to avoid uncritically attributing authority to any individual, the comparative study of women in religions, including new religions, demonstrates that charisma cuts through the restrictions of patriarchy for a woman—though not without a struggle—and empowers a woman to speak up about matters that concern her. As women gain access to education and earning power, they are increasingly shifting from reliance solely on charisma to credentials as a basis for their religious leadership. An overview of this process is given in my fall 2007 Yamauchi Lecture in Religion at Loyola University New Orleans, "Charisma and Credentials: Women's Religious Leadership in America."

The first three volumes in the Women in Religions series at New York University Press, written for use in

courses, will be published in spring 2015. Barbara R. Ambros in *Women in Japanese Religions* and Rebecca Moore in *Women in Christian Traditions* examine women in new religious movements as well as mainstream religious cultures. They assume that women's roles in all religious groups and movements are worthy of study. Laura Vance in *Women in New Religions* examines primarily women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, The Family International, and Wicca, in addition to other NRMs. Vance demonstrates that conclusions drawn from new religions studies shed light on gender and women in religions in general.

Each of these volumes is short enough (about 60,000 words) to be assigned along with other texts in a course, and they are in-depth enough to be used as the primary textbook with supplementary assignments in primary and secondary sources. Currently, I am successfully using Vance's *Women in New Religions* in my "Women in World Religions" course. As evidenced in oral and written discussions, students readily grasp the implications of Vance's gender analysis in relation to new religions for women's roles in mainstream religious traditions as those religions develop from new movements into dominant movements, and as they institutionalize and make decisions concerning the religious leadership and roles of women. Vance's treatment of new religions demonstrates to students that the gender ideology articulated by a religious movement is affected by its social context. As social understandings of gender change, there is pressure on religious organizations to change their definitions of gender and the roles of women and men. The current diversity of views on gender is prompting religious institutions to take positions concerning their gender ideologies.

### **New Religions Studies and Religions of the World**

Scholars of new religions have long stressed that the word "cult" as popularly used is pejorative and dehumanizes believers. Most scholars in new religions studies strive to use neutral and descriptive terms for groups and movements, which are in fact *religions*. New religions scholars also stress the great diversity of characteristics of alternative religious groups and movements. This always bears emphasizing in the classroom, because of the success of the anticult movement and the media in propagating the "cult" stereotype.

The examination of new religions reveals dynamics, issues, analysis, and categories that are relevant to the general study of religions. The study of new and alternative religions *is* the study of the religions of the world.

### **Resources**

Cohn, Norman. 1970. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.

Wessinger, Catherine, ed. 2000. *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Wessinger, Catherine, ed. 2011. *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wessinger, Catherine, ed. 1993. *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

## Teaching New Religions at a Liberal Arts College

Jeremy Rapport, College of Wooster

### Introduction

I am assistant professor of religious studies at the College of Wooster, a small, private, liberal arts college in Northeast Ohio. There I teach the course "New Religions and the New Age." The class is a part of our department's regular catalogue; in fact the job description under which I was hired was written partly with this class in mind, and so I teach the class at least once per academic year, usually during the spring semester. The class is expected to enroll twenty students, although in the five times I have taught it at Wooster, it usually has between twenty-two and twenty-five students. It surveys major new and alternative religious groups and issues. As a 200-level class, it is open to nonmajors, and it also fulfills our "religious perspectives" general education requirement. All of this means, in effect, the class is introductory level, and for the most part I teach it as such.

Although I enjoy teaching "New Religions and the New Age" a great deal (after all, how many scholars at small colleges get to teach regularly a class exactly in their research area), I also find it very challenging at times. The purpose of the class within the religious studies curriculum and its place as possibly fulfilling a distribution requirement for all students limits my ability to teach specialized knowledge or skills. While I find this frustrating, I now try to approach the pedagogy of the class as an opportunity to teach liberal arts critical thinking, reading, and writing skills in the context of the study of new religions. Because investigating new religions necessarily involves careful and critical source analysis, close reading of complex texts of many types, and the ability to clearly communicate research findings to frequently skeptical audiences, I believe it is an ideal topic for teaching classic liberal arts skills.

### Case Studies for Critical Thinking

My primary goal for the course is for the students to research and write a final paper in which they analyze a specific new religion or an issue involving new religions. Thus, the majority of the class focuses on case studies that are demonstrations of the type of work I want the students to engage in for their final project. My case study approach is also informed by inductive reasoning, and I have found that starting with specific instances and moving to possible general conclusions both allows for the uncertainty inherent in claims making about religion and helps me to better focus on the lived reality of the people and groups under study.

We begin the class with a case study of Robert Matthews, better known as the Prophet Matthias, an early nineteenth century American who was seeking to overturn the rising tide of the evangelical middle class by recreating the patriarchal, Reform Christian society in which he grew up. We read Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz's *The Kingdom of Matthias* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2012), a book derived largely from popular press reports on Matthias and his Kingdom, which came to an ignoble end when internal strife resulted in the Prophet's arrest and trial for murdering one of his followers.

I like this book and this case study as an introduction to the study of new religions for several reasons. First, because the events took place during the first half of the nineteenth century, the book makes clear that new religions, and by extension the issues surrounding new religions, are not in fact a new development. Second, many of the issues that still shape the study of new religions are found in this story: the role of charismatic leaders in the development of communities; the primacy of affective bonds in the development—and breaking—of religious identities and ties; the role of gender and family issues in new religions; the role of sex and communal lifestyles in the development of controversy; and the role of the popular press in developing controversies about new religions. Third, the book is fairly short and deals with a lot of issues that many students seem to find interesting: unstable and eccentric personalities, unusual religious activities, and unconventional sexual behaviors. *The Kingdom of Matthias* is, in other words, an excellent bait to get students into the issues and methods involved in the study of new religions. As part of my pedagogical strategy, *The Kingdom of Matthias* allows me both to present cult stereotypes and the issues they raise as well as begin to point to more fruitful strategies for engaging such issues.

In the case of *The Kingdom of Matthias* we proceed inductively through the book, looking at the specific incidents described by Johnson and Wilentz and then working out toward a more theoretically based explanation for the incident. For example, the book juxtaposes chapters about Robert Matthews's (Prophet Matthias's name prior to his religious mission) childhood in rural New York in a strict, Calvinist environment with Elijah Pierson's (Matthews's first wealthy convert) story of becoming a new evangelical concerned with reforming a society riddled with prostitutes, drinking, and poverty. Our class discussions turn on the ways the two men's backgrounds might have informed their religious decisions and how the situations of each man help us to understand how Elijah Pierson might have found the Prophet Matthias convincing. Thus we are led into a discussion of religious conversions and the factors that might lead people to find certain religious claims credible.

That is the basic model I use throughout the rest of the class. Using primary documents, most of which come from Dereck Daschke and W. Michael Ashcraft's (2005) edited volume, *New Religions: A Documentary Reader*, we read the material created by members of the groups we study and work our way out to a more theoretical discussion of the issues at play in the particular example. Theoretical issues are described and explained in more detail with Lorne Dawson's (2006) *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*.

### Teaching Methods

My pedagogical goal for my religion classes is to teach students ways of describing, analyzing, and explaining religious life, thought, and behavior in a reasonably impartial manner in order for them to be better able to encounter and experience the people in their world. I tell my students that our concern as scholars of religion is for understanding and explaining the facts on the ground regardless of how those facts may make us feel about our own religious identities or lack thereof (the rise of the vocal atheist is, I have found, as much of an issue in a new religions class as is the committed evangelical Christian). Moreover, many of my students come into this class with preconceived notions about new religions, as well as about specific new religious groups, that reveal just how problematic mainstream discourse about these religious groups has become. Many students seem to assume that charismatic leaders always are out to deceive their followers, that nonconventional religious behavior, whatever that may be, is always problematic, and that no one in a right state of mind could choose to be a member of a new religion. In short, they have learned the lessons of our culture's anticult stereotypes extremely well. So a major part of my work in the class is teaching the facts about new religious groups and ways to find facts about new religions. In addition, I frequently find myself correcting students' "facts" that come

from popular discourse about new religion. Lately, the Church of Scientology is the major group about which students hold a host of incorrect assumptions. An important part of my job, then, is to teach them ways to understand new religions that do not assume that such groups are dangerous or deviant. I have found that two teaching methods are particularly helpful with this goal: the "Devil's advocate" method and the aforementioned inductive method.

The "Devil's advocate" method is more or less what one might expect it to be, teaching about unfamiliar points of view by taking the adherents' beliefs and actions as natural and logical given their experiences and situations. By the end of the semester, my goal is that my students are able to do the same thing. One example where I have found this approach useful is discussing why the Branch Davidians, in 1993, might have chosen to remain in their burning house instead of escaping the fire and being arrested. I try to get the students to imagine making a choice between suffering and dying in a fire and suffering for eternity in hell. When we discuss Scientology, a religion that many students assume must be terribly manipulative, I talk through the auditing process, trying to emphasize how the Scientologist's presuppositions about the mind and its powers are widely shared by the mainstream culture. My students tend to do an excellent job of asking the questions and raising the points that allow the class to work through the process, the assumptions that inform it, and its goals. My intention in these situations is to explain clearly the beliefs and practices of practitioners of the religions and to break down prejudices by putting myself in the position of the person who sympathizes with the adherent. Part of my job leading the class is to make it more difficult for prejudices to endure by making the voice of the Other as loud and clear as possible. I understand this to be not only a more accurate way to convey religious others, but also an important part of helping my students understand how investigation biases function. Because these teaching methods and materials are complex and controversial, grappling with them in this way is central not only to the study of new religions, but also to the basic goals of liberal arts education.

In addition to helping students better understand and employ theoretical tools, the inductive method I described in the previous section is also very helpful in getting students to develop reasonable ideas about adherents' motivations and behaviors. I begin case studies by focusing on primary texts and the observed realities of the group we are studying. Admittedly, the category of "observed reality" is problematic, but for me that constitutes one of the challenges to be overcome. I must model for my students ways to describe behaviors that attempt to avoid value judgments. Our discussions of the texts and religious behaviors of the people in the group frequently bring up cult stereotypes. Students have learned the lessons of the anticult movement well and know when to describe certain behaviors as "weird" or "dangerous" or "manipulative." What I end up using in most cases is Thomas Robbins's (1984) concept of "transvaluational conflict," which is when the same behavior or idea is understood very differently depending on who is performing the behavior or espousing the idea. Scientology provides numerous examples, but the one my class frequently discusses is auditing. In Scientology, auditing is a counseling process that attempts to identify unconscious memories of physical or psychological pain using a machine called an electropsychometer, or e-meter. Students, who rarely know even of the existence of this counseling ritual, readily understand its purpose when I compare it with more conventional counseling methods, especially psychotherapeutic methods. Thus an inductive approach to specific new religious practices helps students better understand the practice and recognize its origins and links with their own milieu.

## Conclusions

By the end of the semester, if I have done my job well and my students have engaged the class material and ideas, I expect to see a research paper that reflects a nuanced understanding of the topic and argument that shows an ability to gather and evaluate evidence and draw appropriate conclusions based on that evidence. These are, of course, relatively standard goals in the context of any college writing curriculum, but I find that with the added difficulty of writing about religious groups considered deviant and/or dangerous, students tend to work harder at employing the academic skills of critical reading and thinking in order to understand and interpret the groups and issues they study. Rarely do I find uncritical acceptance of cult stereotypes or thoughtless critiques of unconventional religious groups. Moreover, because of the care required to search for and evaluate sources and to create useful, nuanced arguments, my students learn a great deal about the process of critical, analytic writing.

Teaching new religions in the liberal arts college setting is some of my most interesting and challenging pedagogical work. This work has forced me to think very carefully about how I teach any religious behavior or group, and for that I am thankful. I understand much more clearly that what is at stake in describing and analyzing religious behaviors is not only technical knowledge, but also strategies for respecting and understanding others. I know I am a better teacher overall because I teach “New Religions and the New Age.” At the same time, since I teach at private school with different expectations about teaching religion than those that exist at most public institutions, I have also come to recognize how important it is to facilitate students’ thoughts and judgments about new religions. To put it bluntly, my students learn through me both facts about new religions and methods for interpreting those facts; thus a critical part of my job is to teach them interpretive methods that facilitate both honest critiques and fair judgments about unconventional religions. It is not fair, nor even possible, to ask them to accept all religious beliefs and practices, but I can insist that they learn to understand them before passing judgment.

## Resources

Ashcraft, Michael, and Dereck Daschke, eds. 2005. *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

Dawson, Lorne. 2006. *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, Paul and Sean Wilentz. 2012. *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Robbins, Thomas. 1984. “Constructing Cultist ‘Mind Control’.” *Sociological Analysis* 45 (3): 241–256.

## Using Memoirs to Learn about NRMs in the “Mini Review Essay”

Marie W. Dallam, University of Oklahoma

### Genesis of the Idea

From my earliest days of teaching, I have been a proponent of students thinking “outside of the box” about the types of sources they use for learning. While I am not typically a fan of popular online forums to which many students gravitate, I do think there can be real value in sources that are not of the strict academic-words-on-paper type. I often create assignments that require the use of both academic and nontraditional sources, such as events and site visits, and I include a component in which students reflect critically on the nature and value of all of their sources of information. This became more challenging for me when I left a major metropolitan area and began teaching in the small college town of Norman, Oklahoma, where the range of such sites is limited, as is student mobility. I had to find new ways to have students embrace unusual combinations of sources. The “mini review essay” discussed herein is one possibility for such an assignment. I designed it for an upper-level honors seminar on new religious movements (NRMs), a class of approximately twenty students, and I have been using it since 2010.

The idea first emerged when I was writing a review essay of four apostate memoirs by female authors for the journal *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. As I read and wrote, one of the questions that I kept returning to was whether any of the books could be valuable in the classroom. The books were popular sources, and as academics we tend to quickly dismiss anything that has not been vetted and rewritten ten times over. I realized, though, that these popular titles could function similarly to other unconventional sources that I encourage students to pursue. Aesthetically, I did not like the books uniformly, but there was nonetheless something deep in each one about religious or spiritual struggle. I felt strongly that any of them could be used to educate students about NRMs, provided it was appropriately contextualized and interrogated. Perhaps, I thought, I could even have students themselves interrogate memoirs.

The biography genre seems to be found with increasing frequency in religious studies classrooms. In fact, a recent issue of the journal *Religion and American Culture* (Winter 2014) invited five scholars to discuss biography’s impact on scholarship and teaching in a special “forum” segment. The authors explored what can be gained about broader religious understanding via the individual story, and they also revealed their own experiences—often fraught—of writing biographies. Matthew Avery Sutton, for one, pointed out that biography can function as microhistory, providing readers a way to learn about a culture through the experiences of one person. Memoir’s loose boundaries make it a somewhat more troublesome genre than biography (and it was not the focus of the forum segment) yet it can function the same way. Because memoir is so personal, it is even more likely than biography to lay bare the highs and lows of a given religious framework, allowing students to feel, for a few fleeting moments, that they understand what it is like to hold a specific religious perspective or live a particular kind of religious life. Perhaps for that reason alone I find memoir, as well as biography, worth using in the religious studies

classroom—and most especially in any course on NRMs, where the religious viewpoint of the Other may be even more unrecognizable to the average twenty-year-old.

### **The Assignment**

The mini review essay—a midterm paper—combines my predilection for mixing unusual sources with my interest in memoir. Though I specifically use it for teaching about NRMs, it is readily adaptable to many other religious studies courses. The students' multistep assignment first requires each person to select a particular NRM that they would like to read about. In order to prevent the situation in which every single student chooses either Scientology or Peoples Temple, I familiarize them with a broad range of groups from the present, the near past, and the distant past. I also invite them to think more broadly about not only chronologically new religions, but also alternative religions that occupy a somewhat marginal social status, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Hasidic Jews. Each student then finds two monographs to read about the group: one popular, the other academic, and submits the titles to me for approval. For the popular source, I encourage them to use memoirs, even of the "tell-all" apostate type, and most do so; however, I will also approve books that are more strictly confessional in nature, such as one by a member whose intent is proselytism.

This professor-approval step is where a big piece of the education occurs, because, as it turns out, most students do not fully understand the nature of sources (this is unfortunately true even when they are upperclassmen and honors students). Despite my lengthy in-class explanations about academic presses and peer evaluation, they will still submit memoir titles to me for the academic book. But I don't merely tell them "no": I explain why the book in question is not academic, hoping to reinforce what I have already communicated in class. At other times, they will submit the title of an academic anthology, which they are bafflingly unable to recognize as a multiauthor work. Even more confounding, they sometimes submit academic titles for their popular book, at which point I slap my head, weep a little, and provide a diplomatic explanation.

Ultimately I have to work with most students individually to discuss what books will be okay for the assignment. It is extremely time-consuming work for me. Could I simply hand them a list of book pairs, and eliminate all the hassle? Absolutely. However, I consider understanding the nature of a source to be a necessary and valuable skill, and if I just hand them a list they will miss a big chunk of learning. Hence, I spend as much time as needed helping each student through the selection process in hopes that I am teaching them something that will have transferrable value.

A second level of the book selection process is finding two books that actually work well together. For instance, a book about the Illuminati from the 1800s will not easily fit with one written last year, and a book about the Nation of Islam focusing on the 1950s and 60s will be an awkward fit with one that focuses on the more recent Farrakhan years. Thus, the temporal and geographic settings of each book need to be a consideration too so that the two texts will actually speak to some of the same issues or situations. I give the students the responsibility of thinking about this element, but it is not uncommon that I need to remind them about it again—and again after that.

Once students have read their books, they are asked to write ten pages in which they evaluate how the two books function as sources for learning about the NRM they have chosen. Although I do want them to provide a brief overview of each text, the paper is not meant to be a book report, nor should it tell me the story of the NRM itself. Rather, it should be a critical analysis of the two texts, especially how they relate to each other. As much as possible, I urge students to put the two books in conversation and explain what a person will learn about the NRM when reading this particular combination of texts. How

useful are these sources, both individually and combined? Answers to these questions are the heart of the paper.

### Goals and Outcomes

Students usually like this assignment because it gives them freedom to read about whatever NRM they are most interested in, and, furthermore, they consider memoirs “easy reading.” They also like it because from that point on they become our classroom “expert” about their chosen group; throughout the rest of the semester I call upon them to tell us how their group relates (or does not relate) to the topic of the day, such as “prophecy,” “charismatic leadership,” “transfer of power,” et cetera.

From my perspective, the most important learning outcomes have to do with sources. Those outcomes are met both in the book-selection stage and in the paper-writing stage. Learning about types of sources is important for those who want to do serious research in the humanities, but it is also important for *anyone* who is trying to intelligently evaluate information presented to them. College sometimes teaches students that popular sources are uniformly *bad* and academic sources are always *good*. I disagree with that; I think there are valuable forms of education beyond just the peer-reviewed text, be they in the form of an interview or conversation, a museum visit, a form of artistic expression, or a memoir about one person’s religious experiences. If students read with a critical eye and incorporate additional information for comparison, a popular source can be perfectly useful. The value of a text is not just about what the writer has put into it, but about the reader’s skills of interpretation.

The way I ease students toward these learning goals is through the writing of the paper. I give them a set of guiding questions to answer as they write, all of which push them to consider things such as structure, tone, intended audience, source material, omissions, and the author’s place in the work. They have to answer these questions for both the academic text and the memoir. In terms of content, students may find that the two books address some of the same issues or incidents, yet approach them very differently, and this is often enlightening for them. Some of my brightest students relish in these fine distinctions and analyze them at length: not just how the content differs, but what it *means* that they differ. In other cases, the two books take such divergent perspectives of the NRM that students begin to question what can reasonably be known about a marginalized group and how that knowledge can be unearthed. All of these are critical thinking skills applicable not only to learning about unfamiliar religions but also about unfamiliar subjects of many types. As one student wrote at the end of the semester, this assignment “made me feel more comfortable being critical about sources we read in class, which I think is immensely valuable.” Yes, me too.

In spring 2014 I asked each student in my NRMs course to complete an anonymous evaluation of the assignment. I inquired about what they liked best and least about it as well as whether it helped them think about the nature and potential value of different sources. I was pleased that most seemed to have found it useful in the ways I had intended. Many students specifically wrote about how it made them consider more carefully an author’s role in any book he or she writes, no matter how objective that author appears to be. As I leafed through the evaluations at the semester’s end, page after page mentioned a heightened consciousness about the “author’s purpose,” “author’s background,” “author tailoring for the audience,” and “author’s interpretation.” Several others pointed to a new awareness about how a given source is put together. As one student wrote, “It was enlightening to be forced to think critically about how the formal and structural aspects of a book affect the way it shapes the reader’s interpretation of its contents.” Another agreed, commenting that: “It helped me understand nuances better and to look for missing information.” Many also found a way to incorporate the memoir they had read into their second assignment, a longer research paper.

Questioning our sources—their nature, their origin, their biases—is something I learned to do in college, and I am grateful for it. We professor-types can easily forget that this skill set does not necessarily come naturally to most college-age people. If we want them to become wise readers of both popular and scholarly information, we have to teach them how to do it. The mini review essay that incorporates a memoir is just one possibility. In courses on NRMs, the use of memoirs can also communicate what it feels like to be on a less-traveled religious path, balancing the academic thrust of the course content by offering mood, emotion, and personal stories of religious experience.

## Accepting Ambiguity: A Conscious Style of Course Design and Comparison for Teaching New Religious Movements

Lydia Willsky, Fairfield University

For many undergraduates, engaging with the undefined and the ambiguous can be uncomfortable. It is far simpler when ideas or people fit into neat categories like “good,” “evil,” “true” or “false.” Yet reality is rarely this neat, particularly in the study of new religious movements (NRMs). This article presents a model of conscious course design focused on revising the narratives surrounding certain controversial NRMs and on creative alternative comparative contexts, both of which help to guide students away from a position of mutual exclusivity and towards the notion that the people involved in NRMs are neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but a mixture of both. I employ William Perry’s scheme of intellectual and ethical development to illustrate students’ progress from a “fully dualistic” point of view to a more relativistic, or less “mutually exclusive” worldview.<sup>1</sup>

### Establishing “Mutual Exclusivity”: A Strategy of Course Design and Assessment

During the first week of most of my courses, students write a short paper addressing their perceptions and presuppositions about the given topic of the course. Sometimes I provide them with prompts such as, “What is the ideal relationship between religion and society? Does America achieve this ideal?” At other times I have them poll their peers about a given issue. These papers serve as points of departure for the course and as excellent assessment tools at the conclusion of the course—a way of showing them, “look how far you have come in your own understanding of religion.” In my course, “New Religious Movements,” taught at Whittier College in Spring 2014, I asked the students to read and respond to John Barbour’s (2013) book, *Renunciation*, a fictionalized account inspired loosely by Barbour’s own time as a member of 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, a Sikh-derived new religion).<sup>2</sup> The book traces the story of two brothers, one who is a member of an NRM and the other a PhD student of religious studies, and their respective grappling with their own religious identities, as well as the younger brother’s conversion to the fictional Bhakti Dharma. Students were asked to contemplate their own reactions and responses to NRMs using the novel as a lens. Among the questions I used to prompt my students were the following: “How do you perceive the leaders and the members of NRMs? What characteristics do you believe leaders and members of NRMs possess, respectively? Why?” Their answers, with one notable exception, all pegged leaders as master manipulators and followers as the manipulated—a fully dualistic point of view.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the course, I asked the students to reread their *Renunciation* papers and assess whether their views of NRMs had changed, if they had, in what ways, and if they had not, why. In reflecting upon his answers to these questions, one of my students responded that he did not necessarily feel any differently toward NRMs as institutional entities, but that his perspective on the leaders who begin such movements and the followers who join them had changed. He noted that the pivotal shift in his perception of NRM members from mindless automatons bewitched by a charismatic leader or false

promise to active and engaged religious persons with their own agency came during our unit on the Branch Davidians. David Koresh, noted this student, was the best example of someone who was both good *and* bad. He said it was the Davidians that allowed him to understand and abandon the concept of mutual exclusivity and move toward a position where leaders and followers of NRMs could be manipulating and manipulated, respectively, as well as genuinely devoted believers in a religious message. I had purposefully placed the unit of the Branch Davidians not with its constant companion, The Peoples Temple, but in the segment of the course entitled “Alternative and Millennial Christianities.” In a unit that included Latter-day Saints, Christian Science, and Transcendentalism, I sought to show Waco as the culmination of a long history of experimentation in reading, interpreting, even adding to the Bible.<sup>4</sup> I hoped to change the narrative about Waco to allow the students to push the bounds of mutual exclusivity by simply changing the historical and theological context in which it often appears—as Jonestown redux. Introducing new comparisons and crafting a story that showed the Branch Davidians to be active participants in a religious lineage founded on biblical “language,” helped students to see them as genuine believers and active agents rather than the manipulated and the manipulator.

### **Finding a Common Language: The Branch Davidians and the Theory of “Relativity”**

I had first encountered students’ struggle with moral ambiguity and mutual exclusivity—the stage that Perry refers to as “full dualism” (discussed below)—within NRMs in general and the Branch Davidians, specifically, in an introductory course with the rather broad title of “Religion and Society.” The course examined how various religions, religious people, and religious identities interacted and engaged with American society across four primary themes: the relationship of church and state; religious protest and social movements; religion and “the law”; and religion and popular culture. The class on the Branch Davidians stood in the third unit, religion and the law, a unit devoted to examining the limits of pluralism in the legal system and in engagements with law enforcement. Given the fact that my students had little training (at least in my course) in dealing with NRMs and, therefore, hoping to give them point of reference, I purposefully juxtaposed the Lakota Sioux Ghost Dancers with the Branch Davidians on the syllabus. Unsurprisingly, the students were overtly sympathetic to the Lakota Sioux and their apocalyptic, militaristic ghost dance and overtly suspicious of the similarly apocalyptic, militaristic Branch Davidians. The Lakota Sioux, after all, were a historically oppressed minority whose harsh treatment at the hands of the US government is accepted as historical fact. And the Branch Davidians? Well, they were entrapped and led to their deaths by a megalomaniacal leader—hardly another Wounded Knee. In the particular stage of intellectual development described by Perry as “full dualism,” many students believe that “truth and falsity are easily distinguished” and that “the world is divided into those who know and those who don’t.” Filtered through narrow portrayals in the media, my students came equipped with their own settled understanding of what was good and what was bad. What came out during these two days of class was that students tended to believe that the Lakota Sioux were the “good” victims reacting to the “bad” government, whereas the Branch Davidians were the “bad” antagonists to “good” government agents trying to remove a dangerous man from his deluded flock.

It was this sort of dualism that led to the crucial moment in the class when one of my students drew a comparison between the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians. He expressed empathy for the Sioux massacred at Wounded Knee, noting that they were victims of an oppressive government, unwilling to “speak their language,” which he then contrasted to the situation between David Koresh and FBI negotiators at Waco. Unknowingly, this student had offered an entry point into my particular thesis of that class, namely that the tragedy at Waco was a result of a similar unwillingness to speak the language of this NRM. To illustrate this breakdown in communication, I came to class equipped with a handout of the transcript between David Koresh and the FBI Negotiator on April 18, 1993, the day before the fire. I

had planned originally to have the students read the transcript toward the end of the class, but this student precipitated the need to address this concept of a “different language.” I hoped with this unscripted segue and my handout to show that just like the Lakota Sioux, the Branch Davidians, and Koresh especially, were true believers and moral agents whose own “language” was woefully ignored and to devastating consequences.

The greater goal of this particular exercise was to have students move from a fully dualistic to a relativistic view of the Branch Davidians. In Perry’s scheme, separating full dualism and relativism is the interim stage of “multiplicity.” Multiplicity involves a transition to the idea that established authorities may not “have all the answers” and may not be wholly righteous, either. This stage involves a realization that there may or may not be any definitely right answers, but rather, that everyone perceives situations and ideas differently, thus leading to vastly different interpretations and responses. This stage can lead to open rebellion against established authorities and the view that all opinions are “equally valid.” As Perry notes, this can lead to the filtration of students’ ideas through their own experience—there are no facts but those that make sense within my own scope of experience. Generally, students’ experiences with NRMs have been either nonexistent or simply based on what they have seen or read through various media. Thus, their opinions during this stage do not necessarily change drastically. However, the notion that one’s experiences help to shape perception does open the door to the next stage, relativism.

The tag line used to describe relativism is, “It all depends.” The notion that context matters, that certain situations are not necessarily straightforward, and that the concepts of good and evil are relative arise during this stage of development. All sides are examined and the notion of “truth” is examined, not as an absolute category, but as something that can mean something different to each person. “This is possibly the most uncomfortable of all the stages,” writes Perry and yet, I would argue, one of the most productive for the study of NRMs. I have found that one of the hardest realities that students must cope with is the notion that there might not be a right or wrong answer. Asking students to exist in the liminal and to allow for all possibilities seems to go against some primal, human need to categorize and define. It is certainly easier to categorize David Koresh as bad, but this is neither the most accurate nor the most helpful characterization for trying to understand the man and his religious community.

Like all the best laid plans, my lesson for that day was delightfully hijacked by a much more productive conversation about the importance of understanding religious people on their own terms and in their own language. The comparison between the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians helped students to reshape their schema about both groups, to see them as sharing a similar story—one that highlighted the tragic results of miscommunication with the government. My students were better able to understand (if not whole-heartedly accept) that the Branch Davidians were whole people with an active investment in their faith and with the same flawed humanity as the initially much more sympathetic Lakota Sioux.

Of course, it was unrealistic to hope that in 50 minutes students would achieve full relativism. At best, my students recognized (intellectually at least) that there were similarities between Wounded Knee and Waco, between the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians. However, the two lessons on the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians helped me to create a model of course design and pedagogy for my future courses on NRMs. What was clear to me was that structuring the course to allow for this particular comparison enabled my students and me to reshape the story of the Davidians and to establish the possibility that “good” and “bad” were not mutually exclusive categories when describing the people of Waco. Comparison seems to be a very simple tool, but as the discipline of comparative religions reveals, comparison is a useful tool for creating a mental and emotional bridge between concepts that seem foreign, strange, or bad and concepts that are familiar, comfortable, or good. For

example, the Branch Davidians become far more human, relatable, and sympathetic when compared to the Lakota Sioux. In the case of this class, this impromptu comparison was crucial in establishing a nuanced, scholarly stance toward this controversial subject matter among my students.

### **Making New Stories, Creating New Dialogue**

I often tell my students that “stories matter.” As teachers, we are storytellers, but with the added obligation of crafting the most inclusive and balanced story possible. Further, as much as we may struggle against this at times, we cannot lecture our students into accepting a particular point of view; rather, they must become invested in the story before they can internalize it. We can aid them, however, in interpreting and understanding a given story. What I have found in my experiences teaching NRMs is that syllabus creation is crucial. Placement of certain NRMs away from their more conventional pairings and in new comparative contexts opens up new channels of discourse. In one course, avoiding the juxtaposition of the Branch Davidians and Jonestown and instead placing Waco in the context of a narrative that focused on a lineage of Bible-minded people, helped to direct our discussion away from the violence of cults and toward the millennialist interpretive tradition from which David Koresh drew. In the other course, setting the Branch Davidians in comparison to the Lakota Ghost Dancers helped students better understand the two groups as closely related in terms of their religious language and anti-government posture, rather than as crazy people and poor “Indian” victims, respectively.

Creating a new narrative and a new comparative context, in turn, enables students to regard Koresh from a different angle, one that complicates the traditional narrative and also urges them to reconsider their more dualistic understanding of Waco. In other words, carefully selecting which topics come before a controversial subject in the syllabus can fundamentally affect students’ perceptions and can even help them adopt a more scholarly and objective stance—a practice that could be applied to courses on NRMs more specifically, and courses on religion or history more broadly. Though not all of my students fully accepted the idea that Koresh was *both* a prophet *and* a man who used his power for personal gain, several did move toward Perry’s fourth and final stage of development, “commitment,” where a student commits to a particular set of moral beliefs, which in this case this meant committing to accept that the labels of “good” or “bad” were problematic categories. Moving beyond labels and accepting ambiguity is not always the most comfortable intellectual space in which to exist, but it is often generates constructive destruction and is particularly helpful for students engaging religions both strange and new.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The scheme is also found in William G. Perry, Jr., 1970. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. Perry’s fourfold scheme can also be found on the following website: <http://www.cse.buffalo.edu/~rapaport/perry.positions.html>.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Barbour, 2013. *Renunciation*. OR: Resource Publications.

<sup>3</sup> The one student who provided a more nuanced answer had actually participated in two NRMs herself and came to class with a tremendous level of sympathy and openness toward NRMs.

<sup>4</sup> I used the same sort of placement to change the narrative around Jonestown, placing it in the context of utopian movements or religions of protest, to provide intellectual context for many of the ideas of Jim

Jones.

### **Resources**

Barbour, John D. 2013. *Renunciation*. OR: Resource Publications.

Perry, William G. 1970. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

## Everything New is Old Again: New Religious Movements as American Minority Religions

Megan Goodwin, Bates College

This article situates the teaching of new religious movements (NRMs) within the scope of scholarship on American minority religions. In the course that serves as my primary example, readings and class discussions considered 20th century NRMs in light of American enthusiasms for—and anxieties about—shifting attitudes toward race, gender, class, and sexuality, particularly since the 1940s. Assignments included unconventional approaches to working with primary sources and student creations of hypothetical new religions, contextualized within NRM members' experiences of support and scorn by mainstream legal, media, and popular culture sources. Students noted key similarities in intolerant rhetoric toward American minority religions, examined challenges specific to radical religious innovation in an American framework, and challenged the primacy of “newness” in the study of marginal American religiosity.

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This spring, I taught an advanced intermediate course on [American minority religions](#) at Elon University, a private liberal arts university in the American South. While roughly half of the traditions covered by the course lie within the murky boundaries of “new religious movements,” I wanted to concentrate on the marginality, rather than the novelty, of the traditions in question. I adopt a similar approach in [my research](#), which focuses on the prevalent suspicions of sexual abuse and exploitation faced by minority religious communities, especially their women and children members. Because I wanted the students to focus on the power implicit in the act of defining religion—and particularly in the exclusion of specific religious beliefs, practices, and people from the category of American religion—I used religious intolerance (see Neal 2010) as the primary approach to this topic. I encouraged the class to consider key similarities among popular responses to and condemnations of minority religious beliefs and practices, particularly since the early 20th century. I attempted to disrupt students' understandings of what (and who) makes for “normal” or “real” or “true” American religion(s), and why those distinctions matter.

Designing this syllabus presented two key challenges. First, who were we talking about when we talked about “minority religions?”



Teaching American minority religions through the lens of religious intolerance. Image: Cover of sheet music for the song, "We are all Klansmen" (1923). By Bcrowell at en.wikipedia [Public domain], from [Wikimedia Commons](#)



President John F. Kennedy speaks on the nation's space effort, Rice University, Houston, Texas. September 12, 1962. [JFK Library Online](#)

Second, how were we to understand the category of “minority?”

### Locating American Minority Religions

Drawing heavily on primary source material (Corrigan and Neal 2010), I tried to show my students that the suspicions, challenges, and concerns minority religions face are not unique to sects, cults, or emergent religious movements. Groups the American mainstream now widely recognizes as bona fide Religion have in recent decades encountered accusations of disingenuousness, irrationality, coerciveness, sexual misconduct, and the disruption of good order within the American body politic (see Davis 1960). These same suspicions plague [modern radical religious innovators](#), both within and beyond established traditions. Thus the class's guiding hypothesis was that the marginality of minority religions owed less to the movements' novelty than to their failure to approximate mainstream Protestant beliefs and practices.

For this reason, I divided the class into four sections. We spent the first quarter defining “American religion” as a category and discussing how best to understand minority within that category (about which more in the following section). The second quarter explored what I called “mainstream minority religions”: Indigenous religions; Judaism; Islam; and Roman Catholicism. Given my university's large concentration of Roman Catholic students, class members found the idea of disenfranchised Catholicism hard to fathom. But American Roman Catholicism served as a trenchant example of a formerly maligned minority religion now accepted as mainstream by the American public. I assigned [Kennedy's 1960 speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association](#) to illustrate American Catholicism's lingering foreignness well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I intentionally began with more familiar and better established minority traditions to establish the terms on which we would discuss subsequent traditions. As our primary sources illustrated, each tradition faced popular suspicions of sexual predation or perversion, sedition, and similar allegations that would likewise plague subsequent, less familiar movements.

The third quarter of the semester focused on innovations within mainstream Protestantism(s), primarily Pentecostalism, charismatic Christianities, and evangelicalisms. It was at this point that students began describing their literary interlocutors as “weird,” “crazy,” or otherwise suspect. We returned often to the texts, identifying the scriptural precedents and internal logic to contextualize practices and beliefs the students found strange and sometimes unsettling. For their midterm assignment, the class as a whole curated an imaginary museum exhibit using correspondence, news articles, census data, and images pertinent to the Azusa Street revival. Engaging both the [biblical precedents for charismatic Christianity](#) and the [intramovement discourse](#) helped humanize and contextualize unfamiliar practices and foregrounded the role race and class played in popular condemnations of early American Pentecostalism.

At the semester's midpoint, we moved from Pentecostalism primary sources to Dennis Covington's ([1995] 2009) *Salvation on Sand Mountain*. We paired Covington's account of Appalachian [Signs Following](#) congregations with Robert Orsi's chapter “Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth”(2005). This conversation in particular surfaced concerns and rhetoric about the rationality of

minority belief and practice. As with Pentecostalism and other charismatic Christianities, we considered issues of biblical literalism—here, literal interpretations of [Mark 16:15-20](#), which Signs Following Christians interpret as promising immunity to serpents' venom (among other signs) as proof of conviction. We debated the merits of Orsi's "suspensive" approach to religious studies, which challenges scholars to move beyond "otherizing," denying, or redeeming such unfamiliar practices and acknowledge the material realities of lived religious difference (2005, 202–3).

We drew upon this approach often throughout the final quarter of the semester, which explored radical American religious innovation. In particular, David Chidester's excellent "Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead" (1988) helped students understand and articulate the logic underlying unsettling NRM theologies like those of Jim Jones, David Koresh, and Tom Cruise. The latter might sound like a facetious inclusion, but one of our more productive close reading exercises put Tom Cruise's [motivational Scientology video](#) (made [infamous by Gawker](#)) in conversation with the Church's [public statement on theology and practice](#). Though students initially dismissed Cruise's passionate monologue as "insane" and "bizarre," critical reading of the Church's creed demonstrated that—while Cruise's manner might be off-putting—his statements were firmly grounded in Scientological canon. This exercise stands out in part because my students, mostly juniors and seniors, struggled far more with critical reading practices than I had anticipated. I will return to considerations of critical reading in the conclusion of this article.

### The Making of Minority

The second challenge in designing this class was to define the category of minority within American religion. As I noted above, I wanted to emphasize the marginality, not the novelty, of the movements in question. My own work interrogates articulations of religious intolerance grounded in assumptions about normative American sexuality. Such assumptions [intersect](#), build on, and reinforce gender, racial, and class norms. For this reason, the class categorized the conditions of movements' marginalization in terms of systemic inequalities among America's races, classes, genders, and sexualities. Cultural norms about race, class, gender, and sexuality draw on and reinforce conditions that perpetuate systemic inequalities that privilege white/male/well-educated/affluent/heterosexuality. "American religion" both responds to and reinscribes inequality by conflating these conditions of privilege with mainline Protestantism(s) (cf. Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004; Fessenden 2007; Sullivan 2005).



Peoples Temple in Guyana.

Source: The Jonestown Institute, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>. See also [Wikimedia](#).



Not shown: religious minorities.

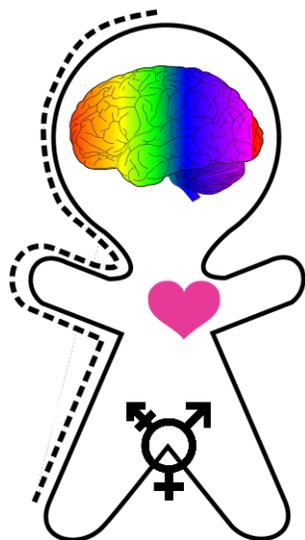
Image: Fair in Rutland, Vermont, September 1941. By Jack Delano, for the Office of War Information [Public domain], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

I wanted my students to understand that it is no small thing to dismiss a religious person as irrational or a religious practice as abnormal simply for failing or

refusing to approximate mainstream Protestant attitudes. To adapt R. Laurence Moore (1986, x), Americans' willingness to "ignore, or treat as sideshow events" the beliefs, practices, material culture, and aspirations of non-white, non-male, non-affluent, non-conventionally procreative-heterosexual non-mainline-Protestants perpetuates social inequality. Thus the message of this class: there is no race-, gender-, class-, or sexuality-neutral definition of American religion. Defining American religion—what the American public tolerates and what it will not abide as religious—is in itself a political act (Bivins 2008, 6; Orsi 2005, 202–3). And the ability to delimit and enforce that definition is an articulation of power.

Thus my class categorized minority religions as those traditions and people who had less access than mainstream (white, straight, middle-to-upper class, well-educated, male) Protestants to material wealth, representation in government, legal protections, and public respectability. By engaging tradition-specific case studies, students discovered that throughout American history, radical religious innovation has often targeted at least one of these systemic inequalities. Students further explored the vast disparity among minority traditions' attempts to correct or restore proper gender, sexual, class, and/or race relations.

Early in the semester, I needed to establish race, gender, sexuality, and class as categories of analysis in the study of American religions. In previous semesters, I've used canonical works to start these conversations: Peggy McIntosh's [Invisible Knapsack](#), Dorothy Allison's "[Question of Class](#)," Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. (I was never quite brave enough to try teaching Judith Butler to undergraduates.) These are brilliant and important works, but undergraduate conversations about them often get bogged down in peripherals: my mostly-white students dwelled on the idea that their classmates of color can't buy flesh-colored bandages that match their own skin tones; Allison's account is moving and stark but alienates students not conversant with LGBTQ literature or queer theory; Foucault's language can be overwhelming and obscure for the novice. I took a different approach this time. I used popular writings—smart blog posts, mostly—to introduce these categories. My approach was not nuanced or detailed, but these pieces hit home in a way the more traditional assignments never had. In particular, Sam Killerman's (2013) [The Social Justice Advocate's Handbook: A Guide to Gender](#) was a compelling way to acquaint students with the concepts of privilege, social justice, and systemic oppression.



A version of Sam Killerman's Genderbread Person. [Public Domain] via [It's Pronounced Metrosexual](#)

Subsequent readings examined minority religious discourse from within and without. Primary sources gave us a sense of what movements were saying about their own beliefs, practices, desires, and commitments, as well as how surrounding communities responded to the groups' innovations. Students read memoirs and newspaper clippings, watched newsreels and documentaries and *South Park*, and critiqued spoken word and musical theater numbers. Each session also included a scholarly analysis of the tradition in question. For example, Tisa Wenger's (2005) outstanding article, "We Are Guaranteed Freedom," demonstrated the political deployment of the category of religion during our session on Indigenous religions. Nuanced and accessible, this piece did a far better job of disrupting students' assumptions about religion as a native category than three previous weeks of my explanations had managed. My experiences suggest that, at least at an introductory level, students grasp abstract concepts more quickly through concrete examples of lived oppressions than through the

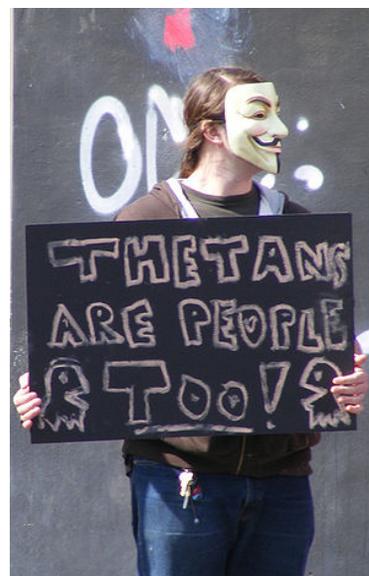
more nuanced theoretical texts themselves.

### Re-Making the American Religious Fringe

I'll be teaching an introductory/intermediate version of this class in the fall. As I approach my revisions, two design points stand out as in need of improvement.

#### Thinking Smaller

My enthusiasm for the material superseded pedagogical moderation. This was a great group, and the students learned a lot, but I tried to do too much in too short a time. The course had no prerequisites, and class members had vastly different levels of preparation and familiarity with American history and religious and cultural studies. Students with humanities backgrounds fared well, but my business majors and scientists struggled more than I expected with some basic concepts (like the social construction of race, or that religion is more than their personal feelings about God). This coming semester I plan to discuss race and class but will forefront gender and sexuality as our primary analytical lenses.



In a similar vein, students' inconsistent knowledge of contemporary American history—their relative ignorance about the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the like—slowed our conversations down more than I had anticipated. With this in mind, I intend to focus on the interactions between minority religions and the American public since 1945. I'm hoping that limiting the historical scope of the course will allow a more in-depth engagement with a likewise reduced number of traditions. (The one tradition that will absolutely remain, however, is Scientology. Student evaluations consistently ranked Scientology as the most interesting thing my class learned about all semester.) By reducing the number of traditions and shortening the scope of the class, I am creating space in our schedule to provide lectures on much needed historical context.

#### Reading Better

I made unfounded assumptions about the reading practices and abilities of my students while designing this syllabus. While I expected to fill in the gaps around major events in US history and anticipated the class's unfamiliarity with most of the traditions, I was unprepared for their lack of critical reading skills.



Mainstream media coverage of the Azusa Street Revival. [Public domain] via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

This is not a complaint, neither a jeremiad against No Child Left Behind nor an indictment of this particular university, but merely a practical observation. I needed to teach these students how to read at a college level—how to differentiate between what the author is saying, what *ze* wants the reader to think, what *ze* wants the reader to *do*, and why this message matters.

Most of my students had little to no experience working with primary source materials, which again made for unanticipated challenges—particularly given the course's emphasis on religious intolerance. Unless a piece appeared in our documentary history

reader, it often never occurred to most students that the author might be biased against the tradition in question. Several students consistently took at their word what I thought were obviously and grossly biased accounts of minority religious beliefs and practices. I had to explain that all newspapers were [not automatically trustworthy accounts](#) of actual events. Moving forward, I want to spend more time deliberately developing those critical skills and helping students learn to become more thoughtful, careful readers of both primary and secondary sources, perhaps through low-stakes critical reading exercises early in the semester. In short, I hope to do more with less material, while maintaining the same focus on the privilege and power at work in defining American minority religions.

## Resources

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## **Making Familiar the Unfamiliar: Teaching RLST 2626 “Witchcraft, Paganism, and the New Age,” at the University of Sydney**

**Carole M. Cusack, University of Sydney**

### **Australian Law and Non-Mainstream Religions and Spiritualities**

Australia is a notably secular country. Only around ten percent of the population attends religious services of any kind, yet Christianity has a substantial role in public discourse (due in part to an unusually high number of practicing Christians elected to the three levels of government: local, state, and federal). RLST 2626, "Witchcraft, Paganism, and the New Age," is a second-year unit (taught over a 14-week semester) in the studies in religion major, and the course covers occult and esoteric religion (chiefly Western in origin) from the formation of the Theosophical Society in 1875 to the present day. It is necessary for students to understand that since White settlement in 1788, Christianity has dominated “religion” in Australia; Christian institutions are prominent in public life, and Christian doctrines and practices are the model for normative religion. Other religions are marginalised, whether Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, new religions, Indigenous religions, or esoteric traditions. Therefore, the unit’s content tends to be unfamiliar to students and has the potential to be controversial (as it includes Witchcraft, Paganism, New Age, UFO religions, Western New Religious Movements (NRMs) including Scientology, and esoteric practices such as Tarot and Astrology). One pedagogical strategy to manage the content is the use of legal materials, such as government records, legislation, and court judgments, to demonstrate that “strange” religions and spiritualities can be framed to parallel the mainstream, established religions. Indeed, certain legal materials—the Constitution and case law, for example—refer equally to the Roman Catholic Church and to Jediism.

RLST 2626’s coverage of occult and esoteric religion is not limited to Australia, but the local context is given prominence in part because Sydney is a vibrant, cosmopolitan city in which approximately 240 languages are spoken, exotic cuisines abound, and one of the world’s eight spectacular Baha’i temples features among a myriad of other religious sites and structures. I ask students consider Section 116 of the Constitution of Australia, which is vital for the relationship of law and religion. This was drafted during the National Australasian Convention in March 1898 and was formalized as law when Australia federated in 1901. Section 116 states:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth of Australia’s Constitution borrows from both the American “separation of powers” and the British system. Fascinatingly for the student of “alternative” religion, the Seventh-day Adventists

were behind the protections of Section 116, as they were concerned that the mention of “Almighty God” in the Preamble could mean that mainstream Christian churches (effectively the Church of England) might use it to seek a greater public role, perhaps even the status of an established church. The Australian courts have to date interpreted only the “establishment” and the “free exercise” clauses—and both quite narrowly. The complicating factor is that the Section 116 protections refer only to the federal government and judiciary. As such, the six states and two territories are exempt and are the source of most of the contested legal materials that concern religion.

Another source of evidence is the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) five-yearly census that features a “religion question,” asking what is the respondent’s religion (in 1971 the note “If no religion, write none” was added). The question is voluntary, and 8.6% did not answer in 2011. In class we think of reasons why people may choose not to answer; anecdotal evidence suggests that people with ambiguous, multiple, or dual religious identity will not answer and that vulnerable refugee or migrant groups fear disclosing their religion, as do many members of ‘fringe’ religions, despite the census data being anonymous. We also discuss the ways that the line-count data is sometimes misleading. In 2011, the “no religion” cohort (Atheism, Humanism, No Religion, and various other answers) was 22.3%, paralleling the growth of the “[religious nones](#)” that has been observed in the United States and other Western countries. The total Christian affiliation was 61%, down from 68% in 2001. Yet when students identify other relevant data, and note that 70% of marriages in Australia in 2011 were nonreligious ceremonies, the picture looks somewhat different.

The “[Jedi Census phenomenon](#)” of 2001, in which 70,509 (0.37%) of Australians wrote “Jedi” or a variant thereof as the result of an e-mail campaign, is discussed during the course. This enraged the ABS, which originally refused to publish the count of avowed Jedi, but later gave in to public pressure and revealed the number, couched amid threats that falsifying census data could lead to the cancellation of social security benefits and other legal penalties and assertions that “Jedi” was not a recognised group under the Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups (ASCRG). A decade later, Jediism remains an unrecognized religion, though the 2011 number of Jedies was 65,486 and now includes Padawans and Sith Lords. As a scholar of “invented religions” I take pleasure in explaining to students that this refusal of recognition says a great deal about the narrowness and normativity of definitions of religion used in Australia, about which there is more below.

### **Indigenous Religions and Scientology: Controversial Minority Religions Lead the Way in the Debate Concerning the Definition of ‘Religion’**

When Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet arrived 1788, the small group of White settlers soon came to dominate the Indigenous people. When Australia federated in 1901, one of the more shocking (to twenty-first century students) laws the new government passed is the legislation collectively known as the White Australia Policy, which restricted immigration to White, predominantly English-speaking Christians. This policy was not repealed in full until the late 1960s. In class, students explore how pieces of legislation that are about “race” (meaning skin color) also limited and stigmatised many forms of religion. One example of this is how, until the late 1960s, Greek Cypriots (Orthodox Christians) were seen as White and permitted to migrate to Australia, and Turkish Cypriots (Muslims) were not.

My students are familiar with the discourse of Indigenous Australians being “spiritual” people, and they are usually shocked to discover that from 1788 to 1871 (when the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor published *Primitive Culture*), Whites in Australia were adamant that Aboriginal people had no religion. Such a misunderstanding was common in many colonial contexts; Columbus reached the same conclusion regarding the peoples of the Caribbean, for example. The model of “religion” Whites

used was based on Christianity, and as Aboriginal people had no written texts, dedicated priesthood, religious buildings, or Supreme Being, the colonisers assumed they had no religion. Tylor's study proposed a minimum definition of religion, "belief in spirit beings," which enabled Whites to recognize the ancestors of Indigenous culture as religious. Since modern Paganism has drawn upon Indigenous traditions, other legal texts that are studied include the 1967 referendum that granted citizenship to Indigenous Australians, and sundry state Witchcraft Acts that were in use until 2005 to harass Tarot card readers and astrologers as well as members of Pagan and New Age groups.

To continue the theme of the definition of "religion," the Church of Scientology's status as a "religion" in Australia is also considered. The first legal source is the [Report of the Board of Enquiry into Scientology](#) by Kevin Anderson (1965), a Queen's Counsel (senior legal advocate), commissioned by the state of Victoria. This report investigated Scientology and concluded, in highly emotive terms, that: "Scientology is evil, its techniques evil, its practice a serious threat to the community, medically, morally and socially, and its adherents sadly deluded and often mentally ill."

The second source is the 1983 Supreme Court of Australia case, *The Church of the New Faith v. Commissioner of Payroll Tax*.<sup>1</sup> In this judgment, Justice Lionel Murphy offered the following three examples of criteria that might be used to qualify a body as a religion:

- (i) Any body (i.e., organisation) which claims to be religious, whose beliefs or practices are a revival of, or resemble earlier cults, is religious;
- (ii) Any belief in a supernatural Being or Beings, whether physical and visible, such as the sun and the stars, or a physical invisible God or spirit, or an abstract God or entity, is religious belief;
- (iii) Any body which claims to be religious and offers a way to find meaning and purpose in life is religious. (cited in Hume 1997, 219–220)

The initial reason why I used a substantial amount of legal materials in teaching RLST 2626 was to counter two types of prejudice that students were likely to be influenced by: first, that of mainstream Australia, which is largely indifferent to religion while understanding it to mean 'Christianity'; and second, the insider accounts produced by Witches, Pagans, and members of esoteric spiritualities, which, at least when I began teaching the unit in the 1990s, often made the topic area seem less than objective and scholarly. Further, I was concerned to avoid the situation described by Stephen Brookfield (2007, 559) in which the inclusion of a unit on the contemporary manifestations of the Western esoteric tradition is an exercise in which "minority perspectives are always overshadowed by the mainstream one." I wanted to stress the commonalities that Witchcraft, the New Age, and Paganism had with traditional religions, and not have students see them as "obviously weird minority opinion" (560). The law was one clear path toward the kind of pedagogy to which I aspired, offering a collection of sources that were public, had impact on the lived reality of "fringe" religions and spiritualities, and which were generally applied fairly across the board to both religious and nonreligious citizens of Australia.

### **Implications of Using Legal Materials in the Study of Alternative Religions**

In the past 30 years, curricula in religious studies have moved away from the dominance of the world religions paradigm and have incorporated units of study on Indigenous religions, new religious movements, occult and esoteric religion, secular equivalents of religion, and a range of other innovative areas of study. These changes contribute to greater student choice in terms of units to take towards their religion major, and to the possibility of investigating topics such as race, class, gender, sexuality, consumer behavior, and all manner of diverse phenomena common to multicultural, multifaith societies (Billings 2004).

The greatest challenge in teaching such topic areas is the tension that exists between presenting Left

Hand Path groups such as the Temple of Set, for example, as exotic and challenging or as “simply a religion like any other religion,” and erasing the differences between, for example, the Church of England the Church of Scientology in the interest of fairness and diminishing the effect of the long shadow cast by Christianity over all other religions and over the study of religion (Pye 1994). Lynne Hume’s (1997) pioneering work, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia*, which remains a fine piece of scholarship, arguably erred in the latter fashion, presenting the activities of Australian Witches and Pagans in a very low-key and uncontroversial fashion in order to confer legitimacy on what was then a very new field of study (with which Hume was personally engaged). Reading Douglas Ezzy’s (2014) excellent recent publication, *Sex, Death and Witchcraft: A Contemporary Pagan Festival*, a study of a Pagan event pseudonymously termed ‘Faunalia,’ it struck me that little has changed in almost twenty years. Ezzy’s presentation of highly controversial material is respectful and moderate, embedded in academic methodology that renders the topic somewhat bloodless and less affective than it might be. Yet in teaching “nontraditional” religion, including contemporary groups within the Western esoteric tradition, the avoidance of the obvious pitfall of presenting unusual beliefs and practices as less valid or convincing than mainstream ones is essential. Ezzy, too, is a scholar-practitioner, and although he is not engaged in the business of Pagan theology, the question of the relationship between theology and religious studies does also arise. How is the issue of truth claims best handled in a classroom where the majority of students may not believe in God, but know that it’s more “reasonable” to believe in the biblical deity than in Baphomet or the Goddess of Wicca?

I find that effective teaching about minority discourses generally succeeds best when clear, factual information is presented coolly and without value judgments in the lecture, and the tutorial and seminar time is spent with students working in small groups on tasks such as reading confessional Pagan documents side by side with academic treatments of the same tradition, exploring legal rulings and their reportage in the media, or analyzing “academic” television documentaries vis-à-vis scandalmongering television programs. One assessment task I often set is writing a book review of an “insider” text (for example, Fiona Horne’s [1998] *Witch: A Personal Journey* or David Spangler’s [1976] *Revelation: The Birth of the New Age*), asking students to comment on 1) the content, 2) the genealogy of the Western esoteric tradition to which the book belongs, and 3) the usefulness of the content for both the spiritual seeker and the university student. Research on teaching and learning indicates that students are more likely to learn effectively when tasks are connected to “real life” and to their prior knowledge. My specific strategy of using legal materials links every religious or spiritual group we cover to the context of their lived experience of Australia, and the constant comparison of insider and outsider accounts draws attention to the ways that they, too, are both “inside” and “outside” various contexts in their lives, both religious and nonreligious.

"Witchcraft, Paganism, and the New Age" is consistently well rated by students in survey quizzes; they say it challenges their presuppositions about religion, opens their eyes to aspects of the city of Sydney that are not exactly hidden, but that might be missed if one wasn't actually looking for them, and that it teaches them to think about the legal issues that arise when religion—for whatever reason—becomes visible within a secular society. That these positive responses from students are generated by my teaching in a unit that I simply love is a bonus. I designed the unit because I knew I was deeply interested in “alternative” religion, and after more than a decade I remain fascinated by the remarkable achievements of the Western esoteric tradition and regard being able to teach on such topics, to such interesting and interested students, as a privilege.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Antony Mason (Chief Justice), Lionel Murphy, Ronald Wilson, F. Gerard Brennan, and William Deane, *Church of the New Faith vs Commissioner For Payroll Tax* (Judgement). 1980. Canberra: High Court of Australia.

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## Field Trips in the Course on New Religions

W. Michael Ashcraft, Truman State University

### Introduction

In the fall of 1979, I was an MDiv student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and enrolled in a course taught by Dr. Bill Leonard entitled *The Church and American Utopianism*. One of the course requirements was a field trip on a Saturday morning to Pleasant Hill, a restored Shaker village near Lexington, Kentucky. I knew very little about the Shakers, and don't remember being too enthused about the field trip, but once I was there I was overwhelmed by the reality of Shaker social life. The residential buildings had separate stairs for men and women. The dining room had tables for lots of people, and the kitchen was as institutional as antebellum culinary technology could get.

And then it hit me, hard: they lived this alternative lifestyle in the midst of an America that was heavily influenced by Protestant Evangelicalism, which did not approve of the Shaker way of life. How was it that these people could see such a countercultural arrangement as “normal”?

That question eventually led me into research on new religions (hereafter NRs), and became the guiding theme of my dissertation on another alternative religious movement. But it was the experience of the field trip that got me there. Had I not seen the restored Shaker buildings, and the furniture and other paraphernalia of their daily existence placed within those buildings, it's quite possible I would not have been affected so deeply by the sheer otherness of Shakerism.

The experience of seeing, of being present bodily, was crucial to my transformation. Like many people, I learn visually. Although I was merely looking at the material remains of their community, that was enough, and the more that my other senses could be brought into play—smelling, tasting, hearing, touching—the more actively my imagination was engaged. As I walked up and down the stairs in communal homes, I thought about Shakers walking up and down those stairs, heading toward their jobs or to a meal or to worship.

### Teaching Strategy

Field trips (or excursions or site visits) are journeys made by instructors and students to locations where they can interact in meaningful ways with subjects associated with a specific NR. Visiting NR sites raises some fundamental questions about what is acceptable religion and what isn't. The field trip experience compels students to attend to what is in front of them. That act of attending then opens them, hopefully, to reimagining people or places, replacing whatever stereotyped images they had before the trip with more powerful, and usually more accurate, images.

I've led students on field trips for many years, visiting a variety of groups classified by scholars as NRs: Eckankar, the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Church of Scientology, Baha'i, Soka Gakkai, the Vedanta Society, Ahmadiyya, African American Spiritualist

churches, Unity School of Christianity, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Transcendental Meditation, and Mormonism. I've taught at a private liberal arts college and now at a public liberal arts and sciences university. The majority of students at these institutions have been white, middle- and upper-middle-class, and from Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, or Liberal Protestant backgrounds. They've been sheltered from the diversity of religious groups that comprise the American religious landscape. My course on NRs might be their first (and only) sustained and critical exposure to religious groups often portrayed in the media—as well as by the authorities in their own religious traditions—as strange and potentially dangerous. And so they embark on the field trip with understandable reservations and fears. Common questions students have before a field trip: What should I expect? Will they try to convert me? How can I avoid offending them? What do I do in the ritual or worship session? What should I wear? Is it all right if I leave early?

Most NRs are fairly benign, especially when receiving visitors. The most danger that a student might be in, based on whatever distorted images of NRs they may possess, is that they'll be "brainwashed" and their ability to make their own decisions rendered impotent. Proactive efforts on the part of NR members to connect with visitors can easily be misinterpreted through the brainwashing lens. That is a learning opportunity, however. If they have those fears, then before, during or after the trip are good times to open up assumptions about brainwashing prevalent in popular culture.

In answering these questions, I've tried different strategies. At times I haven't told them anything in advance of the field trip, other than a few basic items of information like what to wear. Of course, with access to the Internet, students will probably find information if you don't give them any. So I usually tell them the things I want them to know. You can't control how much they might find online, and some of that online information may not be very reliable. So I give them what I consider reliable information. I ask them to read about the group or groups from scholarly sources. Sometimes we read and discuss online sources together. Comparing what the group says about itself with what their critics say about them can be very instructive.

I also tell them what I expect of them while on the field trip. Each instructor will have different expectations, but it's reasonable to have the following at a minimum:

- Keep an open mind.
- Be respectful.
- Ask questions.
- Listen and observe.
- Participate only as much as you feel comfortable, based on your own understanding of what comfort is.

I usually structure the field trip as a one-day journey to one or two, perhaps three, field trip sites, all located within the same urban area. It's important to arrange these visits in advance. Most groups are prepared to welcome visitors and will provide a brief introductory lecture and perhaps a tour of their facility. Usually they also want to engage the students in conversation, not only to inform the students about their organization, but also to convert students to their worldview. Sometimes the field trip includes a ritual or worship experience that students are invited to observe and participate in. Before the field trip I stress several times that they do not have to participate any more than they feel comfortable.

After the field trip we debrief in class discussion for at least one or two sessions of an hour or so apiece. I encourage them to share whatever impressions and questions they have, from the most mundane to the most intricate. I've learned that different students react differently to the field trip. I usually also assign a written piece of some kind. I've tried reflective essays and short term papers with notes. Anything that allows them to share their thoughts in a systematic way through writing is better than none at all.

### **Background and Theory**

The field trip resembles ethnographic field work, though it is nowhere near as sustained as professional field work. In recent decades ethnographers have come to appreciate the reflexive nature of their work: Their presence in a setting impacts that setting— relationally, culturally, perhaps politically and economically as well. In turn, the subjects whom they observe and study impact them. The researcher is changed by the research experience, and these insights should be part of the written results of study.

The reflexive nature of the field trip can be illustrated by comparing it to other types of learning experiences commonly employed in college teaching. On a spectrum of learning activities used in college classes, the field trip is at the opposite end of the lecture. The lecture is instructor-controlled. The instructor directs the learning, at least formally, in the class, by controlling what is said in the lecture. Moving along the spectrum toward less instructor control, the learning activity that is used most commonly is in-class discussion. Students and instructors share in the course of learning. Then there's the field trip, which could be characterized by the phrase "control dispersal." Control is shared among the instructor, the students, the subjects or group being visited, the local social and cultural environment, even the relational context governing interactions between students and subjects. The environment of the field trip alters all who participate, including the students, who as infant ethnographers will be impacted by the field trip experience.

Another way I think of the field trip is through the idea of confession. People often want to tell you about their lives. They are eager to. Members of NRs are no different in this respect. If you care enough to visit them, they typically respond very favorably, even enthusiastically. In taking the field trip, you hope to hear what the lives of the subjects are like. That is, you hope that they will confess something important that you do not know. Just as confession happens within certain social or institutional settings, so the field trip usually occurs within certain boundaries, as well. Normally the trip includes observation of a ritual—perhaps attending a lecture or presentation—and definitely time spent, one on one, with people involved in the NR you're visiting. The confessions you and the students will hear are somewhat apparent in rituals or other communal settings, but the most valuable ones come from individuals who reveal the selves they want you to see, and perhaps the selves they don't want you to see, in individual interactions. These interactions are typically unscheduled: while waiting for the ritual to start or mingling after the ritual has concluded, while sharing refreshments or a meal, during chance encounters while searching for a bathroom or heading toward an exit or saying goodbye in a parking lot. During such experiences the students may have some of their most meaningful moments of the entire trip. They engage with NR members on a human scale, face-to-face, voice to ear, close enough to read nonverbal cues. The NR member might depart from their script in such moments and reveal intimacies to total strangers—the students—because they fear to reveal those intimacies to fellow members.

Here, then, lies the deepest value of a field trip: the near accidental, but always significant, encounter with someone whom the student assumes is an Other before the trip, but may discover afterward is startlingly human and known and familiar. For most of us, including our students, that requires seeing, tasting, smelling, hearing, touching. The more we are in face-to-face, real time contact with another, the

more likely we are to drop the stereotypes we normally use to keep others boxed away from our familiar world.

### Conclusions and Extensions

I hope that the field trip will rattle my students' cages. There are two reasons for this. One is that I find it sheer joy to visit and talk with religious people whose worldviews and commitments are perceived by larger society as bizarre. When I was growing up, I felt like I never fit in. I thought that feeling was unique to me, but have since discovered it's a common feeling. It's reassuring and invigorating for me to discover others who don't fit in either and seem content or happy (or not) in their alien status. I want my students to feel some of that joy as well. The other reason I hope a field trip will be unsettling is because I believe that discomfort can be a useful emotion for learning. I don't want my students to feel pain, but I do want them to feel the ground shifting under their feet—"Here's a group that thinks and does incredibly countercultural stuff, and they think it's normal! How can this be?" If the field trip can discombobulate them even a little, then maybe they will be inspired to learn what makes these NRs tick.

As an instructor, it's my job to be on hand to help them move from unsettled to intellectually curious, and then from intellectually curious to tolerant and broad-minded. Early on in my teaching career I wasn't very good at that. Students would return from field trips upset about some aspect of the NR they'd observed, and I would simply allow them to verbalize their feelings without further investigation. Later in my career I've improved somewhat. I require students to write a reflective essay on their experience, and in the debriefing sessions in class we focus on learning opportunities resulting from negative impressions that students had. Although I don't recall doing this in a course on NRs, in the future when I teach this course I will capitalize on students' discomforts and alarms, asking them to explore their feelings and pushing them to see the world from the viewpoint of the subjects they visited and apply any analytical and interpretive tools that could prove helpful.

How would a field trip to visit a NR be any different than visiting a synagogue, a church, a mosque, or any other religious site considered normal or mainstream by society today? Drawing on an adage that was useful when I was a pastor, and now a professor, the goal of a course like one on NRs can be summed up to some extent as "to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange." The strangeness of NRs is far greater than the strangeness of more familiar religions for most students. An instructor teaching about NRs faces higher hurdles, I believe, than an instructor teaching about a more socially accepted religion such as Christianity or Judaism. Students tend to bring not only more stereotypes about NRs to a NR course than they do stereotypes about accepted religions, but the stereotypes are more volatile, more dramatic, and more distancing. Our culture has embedded the most violent of NR-related incidents, such as Jonestown and Waco, into a discourse that divides religion and religious people into dyads: safe vs. dangerous, sane vs. insane, healthy vs. unhealthy, kind vs. unkind, free will vs. determinism. NRs usually are located in the more negative components of these dyads. These influences from larger culture can be challenged using tools of critical thinking, and one of the ways to put those tools to use is by taking a field trip. To actually go to a NR site, meet NR people, talk to them, share a meal with them, share worship space and time with them—at the very least will complicate the student's impressions of NRs, and perhaps even dispel some of those impressions.

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