

## HTS 3018 -- NEW RELIGIONS AND CULTS IN AMERICA

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Fall Semester 2005  
M, W, F, 10:00 a.m.

The United States has always provided fertile soil for new, unorthodox, and persecuted religious groups. Particularly during crisis periods in American life, many individuals have turned to new religions or have sought to return to their roots by revitalizing older faiths. The past several decades have witnessed one such period of religious turmoil and ferment. Beginning as something of a fringe counter-cultural phenomenon in the 1960s and 70s, new religious ideas and practices have spread today into "mainstream" religious organizations as well. At the same time, tragic excesses of certain groups such as the People's Temple in Guyana, the Branch Davidians in Waco, and Heaven's Gate in California have also highlighted the potential dangers of new religious and cultic movements.

This course will focus on four of the most interesting new religious movements that have been especially important during the past several decades:

- (1) The neo-Pentecostal movement or Charismatic Revival, both in mainline Protestant and in Catholic churches, has brought ecstatic phenomena and spiritual healing into the lives of middle class Americans, much to the surprise of some scholars who thought that such phenomena were only appealing to the poor, downtrodden, and uneducated.
- (2) The Nation of Islam, or "black Muslims"--developing among poor African Americans and being controversial for many Americans because of the group's original philosophy of hostility toward whites as literal "devils"--has been transformed into several groups, the largest of which has moved away from its early stridency to become an increasingly respectable and orthodox Muslim organization.
- (3) The Mormons--once viewed as anathema because of their unorthodox religious beliefs and their now-discarded practice of polygamy--have achieved remarkable success, increasing their membership twelve-fold since 1945 and becoming the fifth largest religious denomination in the United States.
- (4) And numerous religious groups influenced by New Age, Occult, and Non-Western religious traditions--while still viewed with great suspicion by many Americans--have nevertheless proliferated and attracted widespread attention.

Each of these groups, appealing to different types of people and needs, suggests aspects of the current sense of crisis and ferment in America.

Evaluation in the course will be based on three exams covering specific topical areas (indicated below in the "outline"), on class participation, on a book review or special project, and on a final comprehensive exam. The exams will be based both on the readings and on the lecture/discussions.

In addition to the handouts and items on library reserve, the following books are required reading:

Harvey Cox, Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century  
 Malcolm X, with Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X  
 Lawrence Foster, Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community  
 Susan Jean Palmer, Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions

The class sessions will combine both lecture and discussion. Since the required readings provide only a taste of the extensive literature on these movements, each student will be expected to do a special project as well. The basic project is to choose a book on one of these movements, clear that book with the instructor, and write a 6 to 10 page analytical book review. As an alternative to the book review, some students may wish to develop more complex special papers or research projects. The book or special project will provide knowledge and perspectives which students may share informally with the rest of the class in our discussions.

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**NOTE WELL:** Students are expected to attend class regularly, come on time at the scheduled beginning of class (no later than 10:05 a.m.), and be ready to participate actively in class discussions on the assigned readings. Class roll will be taken.

Class roll will be taken after the first week. More than six (6) unexcused absences from class (the equivalent of 2 full weeks of class) may be grounds for reducing the student's overall course grade by as much as one full grade level (10 points).

Throughout this course, all students are expected to follow the Georgia Tech Honor Code.

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OUTLINE OF CLASS SESSIONS, ASSIGNMENTS, AND EXAMS:

*I. Introduction to the Study of New Religious Movements and Cults in America*

August 22, 24, 26, 29, 31, September 2, 7

Readings: Articles on the Branch Davidian Tragedy in Waco  
Newsweek and Time articles on Jim Jones and related topics  
 Albert K. Bates, "What Really Happened at Waco? 'Cult' or  
 Set-up?"

Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Mazeway Resynthesis"

Toby Lester, "Oh, Gods!"

Films: "Holy Ghost People"

"Waco: A New Revelation"

NO CLASS: Monday, September 5--Labor Day

*II. The Neo-Pentecostal Movement in Mainline Protestant and Catholic Churches*

September 9, 12, 14, 16 19, 21, 23

Readings: Harvey Cox, Fire From Heaven, entire

Erling Jorstad, ed., The Holy Spirit in Today's Church, pp. 9-28,  
 58-118 (Library book reserve)

Videos or speakers on the charismatic revival

EXAM #1 on Topics I and II: Monday, September 26

*III. The Nation of Islam and its Transformation*

September 28, 30; October 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 14

Reading: Autobiography of Malcolm X, entire

Videos or speakers on the Muslim movement

EXAM #2 on Topic III: Friday, October 19

*IV. The Mormons: Yesterday and Today*

October 21, 24, 26, 28, 31; November 2, 4

Readings: Lawrence Foster, Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the  
 Mormons, and the Oneida Community, chapters 1, 4, 5, 6

Articles on Mormonism (Library on-line reserve)

Videos or speakers on the Mormons

NO CLASS: October 18--Mid-term recess

EXAM #3 on Topic IV: Monday, Nov. 9

V. *New Age, Occult, and Eastern Wisdom Movements since the 1960s*

November 9, 11, 14, 16, 18, 21, 23, 28, 30; December 2, 5, 7, 9

Readings: Susan Jean Palmer, Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religious Movements (entire)

“Understanding the Cultist: Snapping or Transformation?” in

Melton and Moore, The Cult Experience, pp. 36-71

Videos or speakers on New Age and Eastern religious movements

NO CLASS: November 26-- Happy Thanksgiving!

FINAL EXAM: Thursday, December 15, 8:00 a.m.