

Sociology 488w
FIELD STUDIES OF UNCONVENTIONAL RELIGIONS
Spring, 2012

Instructor

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Office hours: M-F 10:00-11:00 & M-W 2:00-3:00, or by appointment

Nature of the course

The purpose of this course is to provide experience doing and writing about field research on new and unconventional religious movements.

A new religious movement (NRM) is a group of people whose beliefs and practices break from the established religious traditions of a society. Commonly called cults, these groups have occurred throughout American history. Some represent religious traditions transplanted from other societies, whereas others are based on the claims of native-born prophets, messiahs, and spiritual teachers. Most disappear within a generation or two, but a few launch new underground traditions, and once in a rare while, one might even become a new world faith. Because the word “cult” has taken on so many negative connotations, most sociologists now use neutral terms, such as “new religious movement.”

In this course, we will examine two new religious movements, one less than 10 years old and the other is about 40. Besides age, these groups differ on a variety of dimensions. The newer one is still evolving and changing, whereas the other has an established structure and coherent doctrine. The older group claims one exclusive truth and requires members to live communally according to strict rules, unlike the newer group, which is non-communal and encourages members to explore different spiritual paths. By comparing these groups, the features of each should stand out more clearly.

In addition to learning about new religious movements, students will get firsthand experience doing ethnographic field research. An ethnography is an in-depth description of the complete way of life of a group of people, and the primary methods for collecting data are participant-observation and intensive interviewing. Projects will include reviewing relevant literature, writing a research proposal, participating in group activities, writing and analyzing field notes, and writing a formal paper, as if preparing to submit it for publication in a professional journal.

Writing will be a major component of the course. Three short papers will be required during the semester, as well as a journal-length ethnographic description of whichever group has been studied. Students will also submit copies of their field notes throughout the semester.

Reading – see annotations in brackets

Books – available in UM Bookstore or online

Digitalis, Raven. 2007. *Goth Craft: The Magickal Side of Dark Culture*. Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn. [Raven is co-founder of the OAO]

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. 1972. *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. [classic study of successful & unsuccessful 19th century communal societies]

Eres readings (relevance of each article noted in brackets; * = optional)

Balch, Robert W. 1998. "The Love Family: Its Formative Years." Pp. 63-94 in *Sects, Cults, & Spiritual Communities*, edited by William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky. Westport, CT: Praeger. [story form of ethnographic writing with analysis embedded in the story]

*Ellwood, Robert S. and Harry B Partin. 1988. "The History of an Alternative Reality in the West." Pp. 30-72 in Ellwood and Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. [describes historical roots of groups like the OAO]

*_____. 1988. "The Edenic Bower: Neo-Paganism." Pp. 151-178 in Ellwood and Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. [the tradition most closely related to the OAO?]

Esterberg, kristin G. 2002. *Qualitative Methods in Social Research*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

Lowney, Kathleen S. 1995. "Teenage Satanism as Oppositional Youth Subculture." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23:453-484. [analytical ethnographic writing]

*Palmer, Susan J. 1999. "Frontiers and Families: The Children of Island Pond." 153-171 in *Children in New Religions*, edited by Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte E. Hardman. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University. [12 Tribes children & child abuse allegations; Island Pond raid was defining moment]

Palmer, Susan J. 2001. "Peace, Persecution and Preparations for Yahshua's Return: The Case of the Messianic Communities' Twelve Tribes." Pp. 209-223 in *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco*, edited by Stephen Hunt. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University. [good overview of Twelve Tribes]

Shook, Somer, Wesley Delano, and Robert W. Balch. 1999. "Elohim City: A Participant-observer Study of a Christian Identity Community." *Nova Religion* 2:245-265 [descriptive formula writing – will discuss in class]

Whalen, Jesseca. 2010. "Magick in Missoula: An inside look at a modern-day coven."
The River Journal 19 (October):4-6. [the OAO]

Attendance & participation

Attendance is required. Please contact me if you must miss class. If you miss more than two classes, I may ask you to drop the course. Participation in class discussion is also expected. Anyone who fails to contribute to the group project, or whose actions proved detrimental to the progress of others, will be asked to drop.

Writing assignments

Four papers will be required: Church observation (including field notes), proposal for research on either OAO or Twelve Tribes, paper using Kanter to analyze Oneida, and final ethnographic paper. Each paper will require revision and re-submission. Papers will be graded on organization, development of ideas, clarity, sentence and paragraph construction, grammar and punctuation, and proper use of references.

Peer evaluations

At the end of the semester, you will be expected to submit a written evaluation of each of your research partners. These evaluations will be taken into consideration when I assign final grades.

Grading

Class participation	5%
Church observation assignment – field notes & paper	10
Proposal assignment	10
Oneida assignment	10
Project field notes	10
Presentation	5
Final paper	<u>50</u>
	100%

Tentative outline

Jan.	23	Introduction
	26	Kelly Webster, Writing Center; Getting started on OAO
	31	Participant observation

- Feb. 2 Writing notes – Assignment: observe church service
- 7 Submit notes & discuss observations – Assignment: write ethnographic description of service
- 9 Writing workshop with Kelly Webster (?) – read Shook, Delano, & Balch on eres
- 14 Ethnography of Elohim City – submit observation paper
- 16 Writing ethnography
- 21 Discuss observation papers – Assignment: revise & resubmit
- 23 Team reports – discuss background research and/or initial observations
- 28 Writing proposals – Assignment: write introduction, methods, lit review sections
- Mar. 1 Late 20th c. new religious movements
- 6 The Jesus Movement & metaphysical revival
- 8 Survival of new religious movements – Discuss Kanter
- 13 Studying the Love Family – submit proposals
- 15 Love Family ethnography – Assignment: Survival of Oneida
- 20 Love Family ethnography
- 22 Interviewing
- 27 Speaker? – submit Oneida assignment
- 29 12 Tribes pre-trip preparation
- 31 Spring break – Twelve Tribes trip
- April 10 Discuss 12 Tribes trip
- 12 Team meetings & discussion of final papers
- April 17 Open
- 19 Open
- 24 Open
- 26 Open
- May 1 Team presentation
- 2 Team presentation