

Religion and Cults in America:
Religious Extremism and the Search for Meaning

TRS 2707-20

July 7-Aug. 8, 2025

Mon-Thurs

DRAFT SYLLABUS

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Office Hours: By appointment

Summer, 2024
Mon-Thurs 10:45-12:40
Car Barn 302

Religious extremism is a reaction to the perceived chaos and loneliness of modern life, and understanding why people join and how people leave is crucial. This course will take a socio-psychological approach to understanding how cults in America originate, who is attracted to joining, and the legal issues cults generate.

We will explore such issues as:

- Are cults Constitutionally protected under ‘religious liberty’ laws?
- Who gets to say what a ‘cult’ is?
- Why are some cults prone to violence?
- Is ‘brainwashing’ real?

Goals of course:

1. To develop the human value of reflection on difficult phenomena and discern how people search for meaning.
2. To develop understanding of the guru-disciple relationship in both healthy and toxic dimensions.
3. To develop discernment on what constitutes, for oneself, radical personal responsibility for one’s choices in the pursuit of one’s goals—not blaming the outcome on others.

Required Texts:

The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion, Hugh B. Urban, \$12.99

Online: Excerpts from

“Georgetown Student Cult Story”, Washington Post

“How Cults Recruit and Indoctrinate Members”, Michael Bluejay

“NXIVM Keith Raniere Rolling Stone” article

Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities, Len Oakes

Armageddon in Waco: Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict, ed. Stuart A. Wright

Branch Davidian Waco Timeline of Events

Releasing the Bonds, and Combatting Cult Mind Control, Steve Hassan and the ethics of deprogramming

Course Assignments:

1. 1 5-page paper: “Is Scientology a ‘cult’?”
2. 1 1-page paper: “3-Ways the Branch Davidian crisis could have been handled differently”
3. 2 ‘graded discussions’
4. 1 5-page final paper applying cult characteristics to an everyday group

These tasks will count toward the final grade in these percentages:

Scientology paper.....20%
Branch Davidian paper.....20%

Graded Discussion “Prophetic Charisma”	10%
Graded Discussion “Does brainwashing exist?”	10%
Final paper.....	20%
Course Discussions/Participation.....	20%
Course Grade Weight Total.....	100%

Course Management Policies:

1. In accordance with Georgetown’s Academic Regulations, students are expected to attend all classes, turn in all assignments by assigned due dates, and actively participate in class discussions.
2. Arrive awake, with two thoughts to contribute to class that day
3. Grades will be reduced for late assignments, tardiness, missing more than 3 classes, and/or lack of class participation. Students risk failure of the course if they have more than three unexcused absences.
4. Late papers will be subject to a ‘grade lowering’ policy of 1 full letter grade per day.
5. **There will be no computers or phones used in the classroom.** All electronic devices must be turned off when class begins. If someone must take notes on the computer for medical reasons, please let the instructor know and accommodations will be made.

Grading Policy:

An “A” grade means “truly exceptional work which exceeds the expectations of the task and peer submissions”

A “B” grade means “very good quality work, above peer submissions”

A “C” grade means “average work, equal to the average of peers”

A “D” grade means “below expectations, needs significant improvement”

An “F” grade means “submission failed to meet all expectations and did not fulfill the requirements”

Participation grade: Class attendance and active participation are required. Participation grades will reflect your ability to come to class having read and reflected on the material. To assess the participation grade, the professor will analyze the student’s ability to make intelligent contributions which raise the intellectual level of classroom discussion. Roster sign-in sheets will be distributed at each class session.

Honor Code: All research must be thoroughly cited and attributed to avoid the charge of plagiarism. The Georgetown University Honor Code requires all professors to present suspect work immediately to the Honor Board.

Title IX Syllabus Statement (endorsed by Faculty Senate):

Georgetown University and its faculty are committed to supporting survivors and those impacted by sexual misconduct, which includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, and stalking. Georgetown requires faculty members, unless otherwise designated as confidential, to report all disclosures of sexual misconduct to the University Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator. If you disclose an incident of sexual misconduct to a professor in or outside of the classroom (with the exception of disclosures in papers), that faculty member must report the incident to the Title IX Coordinator, or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. The coordinator will, in turn, reach out to the student to provide support, resources, and the option to meet. [Please note that the student is not required to meet with the Title IX coordinator.]. More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the Sexual Misconduct Website:

<https://sexualassault.georgetown.edu/resourcecenter>.

If you would prefer to speak to someone confidentially, Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professional resources that can provide support and assistance. These resources include:

Health Education Services for Sexual Assault Response and Prevention: confidential email sarp@georgetown.edu

Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS): 202.687.6985 or after hours, call (833) 960-3006 to reach Fonemed, a telehealth service; individuals may ask for the on-call CAPS clinician

More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the Sexual Misconduct Website.

(Above statement and TIX faculty resources found at:

<https://sexualassault.georgetown.edu/get-help/guidance-for-faculty-and-staff-on-how-to-support-students/>)

Schedule of Classes

Mon. 7/7: Introduction to cult issues and controversies.

What constitutes a religion? What is a 'cult'?

-Definitions

-U.S. Constitutional protections for free exercise of marginal groups

-U.S. v. Ballard decision: Supreme Court's refusal to define "religion"

-Cult definitions and characteristics

Task: None.

Tues. 7/8: why People Join

Today we will examine what people are looking for when they seek spiritually. We will discuss the story of a former Georgetown student from Northern Virginia and how she got caught up in a cult group on our campus. The BIMP Model will be presented, and we'll discuss what it takes to commit passionately to a vision and a dream.

Task: Read "Georgetown Student Cult Story"; and Prophetic Charisma, Chap. 7- "Followers and Their Quest" on Canvas.

Wed. 7/9: How Cults Recruit

Today we will examine how cults harness spiritual hungers and manipulate people's needs for belonging and meaning. cult dynamics of recruitment and retention.

Task: Read 1. "How Cults Recruit and Indoctrinate Members", and 2. "BITE Model" by Steve Hassan on Canvas.

Thurs. 7/10: **Graded discussion #1: "Prophetic charisma"**

What makes a 'guru'? What is 'charisma'?- And narcissism, grandiosity, manipulateness—in Len Oakes crucial study of prophetic leaders.

Today we will have a graded discussion to examine the intra-psychic development of a person into a 'guru'. There is a certain specific quality that 'hooks' a certain kind of member-narcissistic charisma which is narcissism, grandiosity, manipulateness—in Len Oakes crucial study of prophetic leaders.

Task: Read 1. “Intro”, 2. Chap. 2 ”Charisma”, and Chap. 9 “The Soul of the Prophet”, in Prophetic Charisma, Oakes on Canvas

Friday, 7/11: No class

Monday, 7/14: Video viewing: “Kumare

During this class we will view a video about a guru-in-the-making. Take notes on the people involved, and present your insights into guru-disciple dynamics next class. There are Kumare video discussion questions in your syllabus packet.

Task: Watch *Kumare* video in class, read discussion question sheet at end of this schedule of classes, take notes, think about issues, present insights into guru-disciple dynamics and the role of the guru in spiritual growth for next class.

Tues. 7/15: Video discussion “Kumare”

We complete the documentary viewing and discuss.

Task: Present your thoughts on the video in class today using the discussion questions.

Wed. 7/16: Scientology: Hubbard and Dianetics

This class will explore the origins of the Scientology faith as presented in the Urban book.

Task: Bring in ideas from the Urban book.

Thurs. 7/17: Scientology: the Creation of Scientology

This class will explore how Hubbard created Scientology and how it works, Sea Org, etc.

Task: Bring in ideas from the Urban book.

Fri. 7/18: No class

Mon. 7/21: Scientology: "Going Clear" Video Viewing

Task: Take notes on video.

Tues. 7/22: Video completion and discussion

Wed. 7/23: Scientology paper delivery and Discussion.

Is Scientology a 'cult' will be explored in a 5-page paper due this class.

Task: Submit 5-page paper answering the question: "Is Scientology a 'cult'?" as per guidelines in your syllabus packet. Email paper to: steenhul@georgetown.edu by NOON today.

Thurs. 7/24: **Graded Discussion #2:** Brainwashing: Does it exist?

This class will explore "coercive environments" and how they work. We will try to determine if 'brainwashing' exists.

Task: Today is a 'graded discussion' day: Your contributions to class will be graded for intellectual content, so come to class with your opinions based on today's readings: 'yes' brainwashing exists, 'no' it doesn't and be able to explain your opinion. Read on Canvas: 1. "How Brainwashing Works" Singer; 2. "Brainwashing Doesn't Exist", Haag; 3. "Fights Over Brainwashing Theory", Allen.

Fri. 7/25: No Class

Mon, 7/28: Waco Issues & Timeline

Today we will dig down into the events surrounding the Branch Davidian crisis in Waco Texas in 1993, in which 84 people died.

Task: Read 'Waco: Timeline', and Armageddon in Waco chapters by Stuart Wright. The '3-ways' paper must be based on the Timeline and the Chapters.

Tues. 7/29: Video viewing "Waco: Rules of Engagement"

This class we will watch a video on the Branch Davidian group in Waco, Texas and the U.S. government siege and take-down of their compound in which 84 people died.

Task: None

Wed. 7/30: Video viewing completed "Waco: Rules of Engagement"

This class we will watch a video on the Branch Davidian group in Waco, Texas and the U.S. government siege and take-down of their compound in which 84 people died.

Task: None

Thurs. 7/31: Waco video discussion

We will discuss the "Rules of Engagement" video.

Task: Present your thoughts on the Branch Davidian crisis in class.

Fri. 8/1: No class.

Mon. 8/4: Waco paper due

We'll discuss your paper ideas in class today.

Task: Submit 1-page memo-format paper: "3-Ways the Branch Davidian Crisis Could Have Been Handled Better" based on readings on Canvas. See guideline sheet in syllabus packet.

Tues. 8/5: Video Viewing: "Holy Hell: Buddhafield"

Task: None.

Wed. 8/6: Video Discussion: "Holy Hell: Buddhafield"

Today we discuss the Buddhafiield's group's charismatic leader, followers, and dynamics. What is the attraction? Why would people join? Do they acquire BIMP? Is sleeping with your followers 'wrong'; if so, why?

Task: Present your thoughts in class.

Thurs. 8/7: Last Day of Class. Final paper due. & Marianna Caplan Day

This class will discuss the self-responsibility and moral maturity necessary to leave cults. Marianna Caplan, a former cult group member herself, set out to become a psychotherapist after realizing she herself put herself into vulnerable positions and no one was to blame but herself. Using compassion, sharp self-insight, and moral maturity, Caplan is able to offer us a way forward in understanding disciples' roles in creating bad cult groups.

Task: Read "Eyes Wide Open" by Caplan on Canvas. Choose an organization or group, and apply our 'cult definitions and characteristics' to this group, arguing why it is a 'cult'. 5 page paper demonstrating your mastery of course concepts and cult dynamics. Your argumentation will be graded.

Fri. 8/9: No class.

“Kumare” Video Discussion Questions

Questions:

1-What do they hunger for in their lives?

2-What are the students attracted to in him?—what are the qualities he channels to them?

3-Did Vikram have good intentions?—Does that make a difference?

4-Why did Kumare have difficulty ‘unveiling’?

Quotes for Discussion:

1-“Faith begins as an experiment and ends as an experience.” William Inge

2-“It is an illusion that we are separate from God.”

3-“I’ve been looking for someone to help me look inside myself.” Kimberly

4-“You don’t need a guru, everything is inside yourself already.” Kumare

Guideline Sheet for “Is Scientology a Cult?” Paper

Purpose of paper:

~To develop strong, sharp argumentation for your determination of whether the new religious movement of The Church of Scientology is a “cult”.

~To demonstrate mastery of Hugh Urban’s The Church of Scientology book, although other resources, including the *Going Clear* video and course handouts may be used, the strength of Urban usage will be graded.

Structure of paper:

~1: Assert your thesis

~2: Defend your thesis through structured argumentation: E.g. “Point 1”, “Evidence for this thesis”

~3: Close the paper with a recapitulation of your thesis and how you have proven it

-Tips: Write with authority. Keep ‘evidence’ short and crisp, assume the reader knows your evidence’s ‘content’ and just use it in the service of your argumentation.

Format:

~Length: 5 pages, double-spaced, paginated

~Well cited, parenthetical citations and Works Cited page

Guideline Sheet for “3 Ways Branch Davidian” Paper

Goal of paper:

- ~ For the student to display mastery of the content of the “Armageddon in Waco” reading
- ~To assume an argument posture by authoritative assertion of ways of improvement for future such crises
 - by referring to how the event was handled in detail and
 - asserting alternative detailed options.

Format:

-Memo format:

To:

From:

Re:

~Length: 1-Page maximum, single-spaced, well-cited parentheticals of Wright, Works Cited

Guideline Sheet for Final Cults Course Paper

Purpose of paper:

- ~1. To examine a modern-day group/movement/political-economic system (Please, no 'Trump' papers) (c. 1.5-2pp.)
- ~2. To apply cult definitions-characteristics to this phenomenon (c. 2pp)
- ~3. To argue that it is, thus, a 'cult'. (c. 1pp.)
- ~4. Answer the question: Despite your argument, does it provide BIMP?

Format of paper:

- ~Length: 5 pages, double-spaced, well-cited parentheticals, paginated, Works Cited page
- 2 Outside sources required

Graded on:

- Strength of argumentation
- Accuracy of application of cult characteristics

Tips:

- Humor is allowed.
- Experience is allowed as a source (to document experience, provide notation "Observed during administrative position 2017-18" everywhere you use experience to evidence your argument).
- Does the group provide: Belonging, Identity, Meaning, Purpose?