

SCAR 2QQ3 – CULTS, CONSPIRACIES, AND CLOSE ENCOUNTERS Winter 2022

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Office Hours: By Appointment via Teams, Zoom or In Person

Lecture: BSB 147: Tuesdays @ 7:00PM-9:00PM

Lecture audio released as podcast each week + ppt slides



SOCIAL SCIENCES
Department of
Religious Studies

McMaster
University



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Course Overview

■ Land Acknowledgement

I recognize and acknowledge that McMaster University is located on the traditional territories of the Mississauga and Haudenosaunee nations, and within the lands protected by the “Dish with One Spoon” wampum agreement.

■ Course Information

Is there a difference between a new religious movement (NRM) and a religion? Why do people join NRMs (are they brain-washed)? How do conspiracy theories and alien encounters relate to each other? How can we make sense of the violence associated with cults and conspiracies?

In this course, we will explore the evolution and social impact of so-called cults, conspiracies and close encounters, and examine the historical, cultural, political and religious dynamics that inform all three using a variety of critical methods.

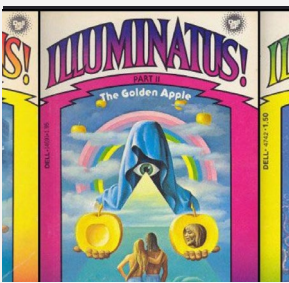
We will explore models of conversion, belief maintenance, cognitive biases, charisma, and secularization theories by examining a number of groups and communities. These include, but are not limited to, Scientology, the Branch Davidians, the Raëliens, Nation of Islam, Q-Anon, health and wellness culture, and others.

You will also have opportunities to meet a number of guests during the semester, including members of new religious movements, scholars of religion and violence, and members of UFO/paranormal groups.



Course Objectives

This is an introductory course offered by the Department of Religious Studies. I do not assume you have any prior knowledge of the topics discussed, or any background in the social scientific study of religion. All are welcome!



■ Introductory Survey

To provide you with an introductory survey of selected aspects of the cultural, historical, political, and religious considerations around new religious movements, conspiracy theories, and close encounters, including social responses to them.

■ Interconnections

To discover how new religious movements, conspiracy theories, and close encounters are often interconnected phenomena.

■ Critical Thinking

To cultivate analytical, reflective and critical thought regarding your own and others' attitudes towards the concepts and themes in this course.

■ Empathy

To focus on our shared collective humanity, and learn to articulate the power of empathy.

Course Evaluation

You are responsible for completing all the assigned weekly readings, attending lectures, and attending tutorials. These will prepare you for the course assignments.

PowerPoint slides will be made available each week.

■ Course Delivery

- In Person Lectures
- Lecture released as podcast each week
- The course uses Avenue2Learn
- Tutorial details TBD

■ Required Texts

- Journal Articles via McMaster Library
- Chapters are on Teams
- Videos are all publically available. Watch videos on your own time.



The main thing that I learned about conspiracy theory, is that conspiracy theorists believe in a conspiracy because that is more comforting. The truth of the world is that it is actually chaotic. The truth is that it is not The Illuminati, or The Jewish Banking Conspiracy, or the Gray Alien Theory. The truth is far more frightening: Nobody is in control. - Alan Moore



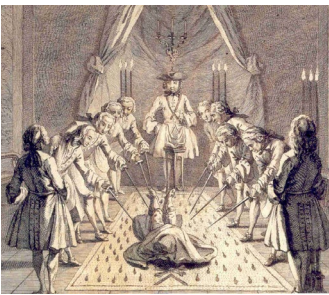
Course Assignments



■ Introduction (5%)

Introduce yourself to the class and answer the following questions: Who are you? Why are you taking this course? What are your learning objectives for this semester? What is one academic skill that you most want to improve (ex: writing, reading comprehension)?

Due Date: January 25th, 2022.



■ 'Ungraded' Participation (10%)

You are expected to attend tutorials as part of this course. Participation in this course can take a number of forms, including speaking in class/tutorials and thoughtful discussion posts on Avenue. Participation grades will be based on your learning objectives, a self-assessment and input from TAs. More information available on Avenue.

* <-- Tutorial rituals may vary from image.



■ Quizzes (20%)

There will be 3 short online quizzes during the semester. The quiz covers the concepts presented in the readings and lectures for that module (no need to memorize dates). The goal of each quiz is to strengthen your knowledge of the topics discussed, and there will be opportunities to reflect on your answers during and after each quiz.

Due dates: February 14th, March 21st, April 11th



■ Guest Interview Reflections (30%)

Throughout the course we will have opportunities to speak to a number of guests, including members of new religious movements, scholars of religion and violence, and members of UFO/paranormal groups.

You will write a short reflection after each visit or virtual interview (3 in total) detailing your thoughts, what questions you have, and how each interview relates to course material.

Due Dates: February 28th, March 15th, April 5th.

Course Assignments



■ Create A New Religion (35%)

There are an estimated 10,000 unique religions around the world, with roughly 20 new religions formed each year. Religions are dynamic and always-evolving entities. For your final assignment, you will think critically about the formation of new religions using the theories and case studies in this course.

You will create a 'new religious movement', complete with a leader(s), a membership base, a cosmology, and a founding myth. Your NRM can exist in the past, the present, or the future.

This is a creative project that will have you think analytically and theoretically about religion and religious life. Who are the members of your NRM? Why did they join? What are its' belief systems? How would your NRM handle negative media attention or a large scandal? What are the social dynamics of your group? How does leadership operate? What is your NRMs' relationship to surrounding communities?

You are also encouraged to design logos, draw deities, create a promo video or pamphlet to attract new members, etc. **Creativity encouraged!**

While this is technically a final assignment, we will work together throughout the semester in order to develop your socially dynamic religion.

Proposal (10%): March 7th @ 11:59PM

Final (25%): April 13th @ 11:59PM

Details and instructions posted to Avenue.

Weekly Schedule

■ Week One: Jan 11th

Introduction

- Overview of the course, assignments and learning objectives.
- Brief introduction: What is a cult? What is a conspiracy? What is a close encounter?

■ Week Two: January 18th

Cult, or New Religious Movement (NRM)? Why Study NRMs?

- Miller, Timothy. "New Religious Movements in American History" In *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*. Edited by Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft 1-22.
- Cowen, Douglas and David G. Bromley. 2008. "Cults and New Religions: a Primer" In *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*. Edited by Douglas E. Cowen and David G. Bromley. xiv-11.

■ Week Three: January 25th

Charisma, Conversion, and Brainwashing - Why Do People Join NRMs?

- Watch: "How cults rewire the brain" www.youtube.com/watch?v=NL0uxDscjdo
- Richardson, James T. 2003. "A Critique of "Brainwashing" Claims About New Religious Movements" In *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. Edited by Lorne Dawson. 160-166.
- Gallagher, Eugene V. "Leadership in New Religious Movements" In *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*. Edited by Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Michael Ashcraft. 23-42

■ Week Four: February 1st

What Makes for a Successful New Religion?

- Stark, Rodney. 2003. "Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model" In *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. Edited by Lorne Dawson, 259-269.
- Beckford, James. 2003. "The Continuum Between "Cults" and "Normal" Religion" In *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. Edited by Lorne Dawson, 26-32.

■ Week Five: February 8th

Moral Panics and the Media

- Watch: "Satanic Panic & The Dangers of Cultural Hysteria" www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j3tzxxijvo
- Cowan, Douglas E, and Jeffrey K Hadden. 2004. "God, Guns, and Grist for Media's Mill: Constructing the Narratives of New Religious Movements and Violence." *Nova Religio* 8: 64-82.
- Beckford, James. "The mass media and New Religious Movements" In *New Religious Movements Challenge and Response*. Edited by Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell 103-121.

Weekly Schedule

■ Week Six: February 15th - Scientology: Approaching Controversial New Religions

- Watch: *What is Scientology?*: youtu.be/fzAPbr1_uGY
- Watch: *What is Scientology? (different from first video)*: youtu.be/tX3ueQuRHPM
- Watch: *Scientology Beliefs and Practices: Introduction to Auditing*: youtu.be/hRY67sD5k0I
- Lewis, James R. 2015. "Scientology: Sect, Science, or Scam?" *Numen* 62: 226–42.

■ WEEK SEVEN - WINTER BREAK!

■ Week Eight: March 1st Religion and Violence

- Watch: Waco: Rules of Engagement: mcmaster.kanopy.com/video/waco-rules-engagement
- Wright, Stuart A., and Susan J. Palmer. 2016. "The Branch Davidians" In *Storming Zion Government Raids on Religious Communities*. 99-129.

■ Week Nine: March 8th - Guest Interview with Religious Extremism Expert A History of Violence. The Origins of Jewish Conspiracy Theories

- Watch: "Why the Jews: History of Antisemitism" www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/what-is-antisemitism/why-the-jews-history-of-antisemitism
- Byford, Jovan. 2011. "Conspiracy Theory and Antisemitism" In *Conspiracy Theories*. 95-119.

■ Week Ten: March 15th Everything is Connected, Man. How Conspiracy Theories Work

- Infographic: "How to Start a Conspiracy Theory" www.popsci.com/how-to-start-spread-conspiracy/
- Robertson, David G. 2015. "Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Alternative and Emergent Religions." *Nova Religio*, 19: 5–16.
- Ward, Charlotte and David Voas. 2011. "The Emergence of Conspiritoriality" *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26: 103-121.
- Novella, Steven. 2021. "We Are All Conspiracy Theorists" theness.com/neurologicablog/index.php/we-are-all-conspiracy-theorists/

Weekly Schedule

■ Week Eleven: March 22nd Health, Wellness, & Q-Anon

- Singler, Beth. 2015. "Big Bad Pharma: The Indigo Child Concept and Biomedical Conspiracy Theories." *Nova Religio*, 19: 17–29.
- Crockford, Susannah. 2021. "What Do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category 'Esotericism?': Spirituality, Neoliberalism, Secrecy, and Commodities." In *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*. Edited by Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, 201–16.
- **Optional Podcast:** The Wellness to QAnon Pipeline - maintenancephase.wixsite.com/home/episodes/episode/4cb21f27/the-wellness-to-qanon-pipeline

■ Week Twelve: March 29th - Interview with member of UFO Religion Religion and Alien Encounters

- Saliba, John A. 2006. "The Study of UFO Religions." *Nova Religio* 10: 103–23.
- Sentes, Bryan, and Susan Palmer. 2000. "Presumed Immanent: The Raëlians, UFO Religions, and the Postmodern Condition." *Nova Religio* 4: 86–105.
- **Optional:** Wilbur, Josh. 2021. "What would religious leaders do if aliens showed up?" slate.com/technology/2021/10/ufo-aliens-religion-clergy.html?utm_source=digg

■ Week Thirteen: April 5th What do Aliens and Conspiracy Theories Have in Common? -

- Flaherty, Robert Pearson. 2010. "These Are They": ET-Human Hybridization and the New Daemonology" *Nova Religio* 14: 84-105.
- Tromly, Lucas. 2017. "Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of Alien Abduction; Or, Why Aliens Do Not Abduct Asian Americans." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 50: 276-292.
- Halmhofer, Stephanie. 2021. "Did Aliens Build the Pyramids? And Other Racist Theories" www.sapiens.org/archaeology/pseudoarchaeology-racism

■ April 12th – Last Day of Class No Lecture - Final Assignment Q&A.

Student Resources

CAMPUS RESOURCES

- Food Collective Centre: www.msumcmaster.ca/services-directory/14-mac-bread-bin
- Indigenous Student Services: indigenous.mcmaster.ca/
- Sexual Violence Response Coordinator: svpro.mcmaster.ca/contact/
- Equity and Inclusion: equity.mcmaster.ca/
- Online Learning Support: studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/academic-skills/online-learning/
- Writing Support: studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/academic-skills/writing-support/
- Student Success Centre: studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/
- Ontario Crisis Resources and Helplines: www.camh.ca/en/health-info/crisis-resources
- Canada Suicide Prevention Service: www.crisisservicescanada.ca/en/

HOW TO CITE

- MLA: owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_in_text_citations_the_basics.html
- Chicago: www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html
- APA: guides.libraries.psu.edu/apaquickguide/intext

HOW TO AVOID UNINTENTIONAL PLAGIARISM

- www.lakeforest.edu/academics/resources/writingcenter/plagiarism.php

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY & PUNCTUATION RULES

- How to Write an Essay: advice.writing.utoronto.ca/general/general-advice/
- Reading and Writing for Academic Purposes: studentsuccess.mcmaster.ca/reading-and-writing-for-academic-purposes-2021/
- 13 Rules for Using Commas: www.businessinsider.com/a-guide-to-proper-comma-use-2013-9
- How to use the Semi-Colon: theoatmeal.com/comics/semicolon

Course Policies

SUBMISSION OF ASSIGNMENTS

All written assignments must be uploaded to Avenue in .docx or .pdf format (NO .pages).

GRADES

Grades will be based on the McMaster University grading scale:

MARK GRADE

90-100 A+

85-90 A

80-84 A-

77-79 B+

73-76 B

70-72 B-

67-69 C+

63-66 C

60-62 C-

57-59 D+

53-56 D

50-52 D-

0-49 F

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Students should contact their TA or professor if they plan on handing in an assignment late.

AVENUE TO LEARN

Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure.

If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

University Policies

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/), located at secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

AUTHENTICITY / PLAGIARISM DETECTION

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. A2L, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.).

For more details about McMaster's use of Turnitin.com please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

University Policies

COURSES WITH AN ON-LINE ELEMENT

Some courses may use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn (A2L), LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

ONLINE PROCTORING

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

CONDUCT EXPECTATIONS

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](#) (the "Code"). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, whether in person or online.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or sas@mcmaster.ca to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) policy.

University Policies

REQUESTS FOR RELIEF FOR MISSED ACADEMIC TERM WORK

[McMaster Student Absence Form \(MSAF\)](#): In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work”.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS, INDIGENOUS OR SPIRITUAL OBSERVANCES (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the [RISO](#) policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar’s Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

COPYRIGHT AND RECORDING

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, including lectures by University instructors

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.