

RS 2QQ3: Cults, Conspiracies and Close Encounters

Online – Summer 2020

Department: Religious Studies at McMaster University

Instructor: Dr. David Penner

Website and Email: Avenue

Office Hours: By Email or Appointment on Zoom

Course Description

The term “cult” is a unique word of perception that has come to describe religious or cultural movements that stand outside the grip of mainstream thinking or belief. As such the presence of the cult is perpetually tied to the presence of a mainstream and there is a flowing relationship between the two: what was once cult often becomes the standard and vice versa. This course is interested in the way we perceive the idea of acceptable religion and how we define what it means to be an outsider. We will pursue this question through two separate but connected paths.

First, we will consider the premise of all religions as cultish. In this first third of the course we will ask about the ways that religious belief is connected to the culture, or world, within which it is housed. We will consider this connection both in terms of the potential offensiveness of religious faith to secular ways of being, thinking and loving; and we will also think about the taming of this account of offensive religion by secular demands for normalcy and the influence of liberal, democratic truths.

The second two thirds of the course will try to articulate and consider another level in the relationship between what is perceived as outside of the range of acceptable religious practice and belief in light of the way it is understood by secular society. In this section we consider actual cults as representative, not of a separation from popular understandings of what is true and good, but rather as the logical extension of these common ideas. Through examinations of Jim Jones, the Branch Davidians, and various other movements we will consider the meaning behind the common eschatological understanding of many of cults; the meaning behind their depiction of the divine, of mystery, and of human knowledge; and finally we will consider the connection between their accounts of the human self, as sexual and social being, in their understanding of holy truth. We will ask and consider whether the cult is in fact more representative of the mainstream than the religions that are firmly established and respected and furthermore we will consider what this all says about our own religious expectations and choices, doubts and fears, and how we measure truth.

This course promises its students something different and deeper than a survey of North American religious cults and cult movements and the supposed ideas that fuel them. Rather, we seek to consider and think about cults, through particular historical examples, as an existential term that both describes the ways we may seek to alienate the foreign and domesticate the mysterious.

Readings and Films

All readings and films to be considered in this course will be posted on Avenue.

Tutorials

Tutorials are not mandatory in this course. However, if you are interested in participating in an online tutorial, I will be a Zoom tutorial once a week. Students will be asked to register, and given a choice of times and will then be forwarded a Zoom invitation. A Zoom account is available through McMaster University. Further information will be posted online.

Office Hours

Students are encouraged to write me through Avenue with any and all concerns. For students who would prefer to discuss concerns or ask questions face to face, Zoom appointments can be arranged.

Method of Evaluation

For all assignments the student is expected to demonstrate their own insights and thoughts in relation to the questions asked of them. They are to use the lectures as provocations for their own thinking and considerations. Replication of the thoughts of the instructor is not adequate for a good standing in this course.

All assignments must be uploaded into the Electronic Dropbox on the Avenue Course Site.

Midterm Take Home Exam: 30% - One week before the midterm take home exam is due you will be provided with four exam questions. You are to write a short essay in regards to one of the questions. The questions will ask you to utilize two separate lecture sections in your response. Responses should not exceed five double spaced pages. The midterm is due on July 9th, 2020 for students seeking comments along with their grade.

Essay: 35% - Essay topics will be provided after the midterm exam and will refer to material studied after the midterm. You are encouraged to develop your own essay topic. However, any essay topic that are developed by the student must refer to material after the midterm exam and must be approved by the course instructor. Your essay topic must argue a thesis and pertain only to films and materials studied in this course. There should be no use of secondary materials in your essays. The essay should be approximately five pages, double spaced in 12 pt font. The essay is due on July 23rd, 2020 for students seeking comments along with their grade.

Note: For students who either need more time or are not concerned about receiving comments about their work, the final deadline for the Midterm and the Essay, without late penalty, is August 6th, 2020.

Final Exam: 35% - The final exam will be identical in structure to the midterm. It is due on

August 13th, 2020.

Grade Appeals: If you think that your essay or midterm exam has been inappropriately graded please take the following steps. Write a note explaining why you think the grade is inappropriate and send it to the instructor. If you are unsatisfied after discussing it with the instructor, bring it to the attention of the Chair of the Department of Religious Studies. Appeals of final exams are made through the registrar office.

IF YOU MISS A TEST OR REQUIRE AN EXTENSION ON AN ASSIGNMENT... You must receive authorization from your faculty office (e.g., Social Sciences, Humanities, Business, etc.; whichever faculty you are registered in) for any accommodations to be considered. If you are not a Social Science student, you must find out what the procedures are in your faculty. In Social Science, students take the appropriate documentation (e.g., physician's note) to the faculty office. Personnel there determine whether it is an acceptable, properly documented reason. If it is, they will send the course instructor a notice authorizing alternate arrangements to be made with you. Doing so is entirely at the discretion of the instructor; the faculty office simply authorizes us to permit them or not. It is up to the instructor to determine what sort of accommodations to make. Possible examples are: a makeup test; reallocation of marks; extra work; etc. Instructions for assignments will include information about late assignments without permission and the late-submission penalties. These will be enforced in any case where the above procedure for extensions has not been followed, without exception.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

It is up to students to familiarize themselves well with McMaster's rules of academic integrity. Often, students may have no intention of contravening such rules, but do so because they are not thoroughly familiar with them. It is your responsibility as a university student, however, to be so, and not the responsibility of instructors to inform you of them after the fact. A thorough discussion of the topic can be found at:

http://www.mcmaster.ca/senate/academic/ac_integrity.htm Take special note of Appendix 3. There will be strict enforcement of academic honesty in written assignments and during all tests. Students found to be, or seriously expected of being, in breach of the rules of academic integrity will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Keep all notes and drafts you make when writing a paper. If there is any question of the integrity of your paper, you will be given the opportunity to submit these notes and drafts as evidence of the work you did. Also, retain an electronic copy of your final submission. Do not delete it until the course is over and final grades have been received.

University Policies

1. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY

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. 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. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at

www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

2. TURNITIN.COM LANGUAGE FOR COURSE OUTLINES

In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal plagiarism. Students will be expected to submit their work electronically to Turnitin.com and in hard copy so that it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to submit their work to Turnitin.com must still submit a copy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, etc.). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity

3. LANGUAGE FOR AVENUE TO LEARN OR OTHER ON-LINE COMPONENTS

In this course we will be using 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.

4. ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone 905525-9140 ext. 28652 or e-mail sas@mcmaster.ca. For further information, consult McMaster University's Policy for Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities.

5. POLICY FOR MODIFYING A COURSE:

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check her/his McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

6. E-MAIL COMMUNICATION POLICY:

Effective September 1, 2010, it is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all email

communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account.

This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion. Email

7. MCMASTER STUDENT ABSENCE FORM:

The McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF) (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/msaf/>) is a selfreporting tool for Undergraduate Students to report MEDICAL absences that last up to 5 days and provides the ability to request accommodation for any missed academic work (that is less than 30% of the course grade). Please note, this tool cannot be used during any final examination period. You may submit a maximum of ONE Academic Work Missed request per term. It is YOUR responsibility to follow up with your instructor immediately regarding the nature of the accommodation. If you are absent for more than 5 days, exceed one request per term, are absent for a reason other than medical, or have missed work worth 30% or more of the final grade, you MUST visit your Faculty Office. You may be required to provide supporting documentation. This form should be filled out when you are about to return to class after your absence.

DISABILITY ISSUES

If you require special accommodations due to an impairment, please contact the Centre for Student Development for more information: <http://csd.mcmaster.ca/> Do this at the start of the term, if at all possible. Note that all accommodations must be specified at the outset.

Class By Class Outline

Note: Any and All of These Dates and Themes are Susceptible to Changes

All Lecture Material will be Posted Online for Students to Download or Stream. The following dates designate when students should expect material to be posted.

June 22nd: Introduction

Religion and the World We Live In

June 24th Religious Understanding in the Modern World

June 29th Film: *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (Durkin) Lecture: Who Named You?

July 1st: Film: *The Village* (Shyamalan)

Lecture: Desperate for Something and Ending Up Desperate

Religion as Conformity and Rebellion against the World

July 6th Lecture: The Family Cults (Family International and Kashi

Ashram)

July 8th Lecture: The Out of this World Cults (Heaven's Gate and Eckankar)

July 13th: Lecture: Going Further Than the Basics (Unification Church, Twelve Tribes and The Brethren)

July 15th: Lecture: Satanism

July 20th: Film: *Going Clear* (Gibney)
Lecture: Scientology

July 22nd: Film: *Jonestown: Life & Death of Peoples Temple* (Nelson)
Lecture: Cult, Crisis or Conviction?

July 27th: Film: *Waco: Rules of Engagement* (Gazecki)
Lecture: After All This: What Do We Think of the Branch Davidians?

July 29th: Film: *Jesus Camp* (Ewing and Grady)
Lecture: What is a Cult Again?

August 3rd: The Internet and Digital Humanity –
The Future of Cults?

August 5th: The Normal Conspiracy

August 6th: All Course Work Must Be
Submitted

August 15th Final Take Home Exam Due by
5:00 PM

Final Exam Due on August 18th at 5:00 PM