

CHS640: AMERICAN CULTS AND SECTS
Nazarene Theological Seminary
Summer Session, June 30-July 11, 2008
8:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.
3 hours credit
Dr. Harold Raser

CATALOG DESCRIPTION

A study of the numerous perimeter or alternative religious movements in American religious history. Along with their beliefs and practices, attention is given to the historical and sociological factors that have contributed to the flourishing of such groups in America. Includes a survey of contemporary "cult" movements.

COURSE NARRATIVE AND RATIONALE

"Religions on the perimeter," "alternative altars," "fringe religions," and "New Religious Movements" (NRM) (as well as "cults" and "sects") are some of the descriptions that have been applied to the numerous religious movements in American history that have deviated significantly from the Christian "mainstream" embraced by most religious Americans. Such groups are an important part of the story of religious life in the United States.

This course is designed to survey some of the more important alternative, perimeter, or new religious groups (especially those with Christian roots and connections) which have appeared with regularity in America from the seventeenth century up to the present time. The origins, development, and principal beliefs and practices of these groups are examined along with the various factors that contribute to the formation and appeal of such groups in different historical contexts. Also, some attention is given to a variety of theological, legal, and pastoral issues raised by the presence of such groups in American society.

This course directly addresses concerns articulated in the goals and objectives of all NTS degree programs, which call for students to develop an understanding of the history and heritage of the Christian faith as well as familiarity with the context in which ministry takes place today.

COURSE OUTCOMES

Conscientious investment of oneself in the learning activities of the course should enable students to:

1. Acquire familiarity with important “cults,” “sects,” and “New Religious Movements” in the United States.
2. Gain knowledge of the broad history of such movements in America.
3. Develop understanding of such groups as something more than simply odd, weird, deviant, or aberrant – rather, as religious systems that provide a coherent and meaningful way for their adherents to order and live their lives.
4. Understand the important factors (both historical and contemporary) that encourage the formation and survival of “alternative” religions, the reasons why some people are attracted to and join these kinds of groups.
5. Gain awareness of important theological, legal, and pastoral issues related to the presence and influence of “cult” type religious groups in American society.
6. Develop ability to relate as a Christian (minister) to contemporary alternative religious movements and their adherents in an informed, sensitive, and redemptive manner.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND COURSE MATERIALS

1. *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, Philip Jenkins.
2. *Understanding New Religious Movements* (2nd edition), John A. Saliba.
3. *New Religious Movements and the Theological Imagination in America*, Mary Farrell Bednarowski.
4. *The Mormons*, Thomas F. O’Dea -- out of print – **on library reserve** (also used copies are available for purchase from several sources online).

FORMAT AND PROCEDURE

Class periods are given to a variety of learning activities, including instructor presentations, class discussion of lecture content and assigned reading material, films and videos, small group activities, presentations by guest resource persons, and at least one off-campus group visit to some local sites that have played an important role in the history of “alternative religions” in the United States.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND REQUIREMENTS

A. PRE-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

1. Reading *Mystics and Messiah: Cults and New Religions in American History* by Philip Jenkins **prior** to the beginning of class.

On or before the first day of class (Monday, June 30) students are to submit a 3-4 page double-spaced reflection essay discussing how the book has informed their thinking about the issues addressed by the book. There is an **"assignment"** section for the class on **NTS Blackboard** where the essays may be posted/submitted.

2. Reading ***Understanding New Religious Movements (2nd edition)*** by John A. Saliba, pp. 1-67 **prior** to the beginning of class. No written report of this reading is required, but students should be prepared to discuss this material in the first class meeting (Monday, June 30).

B. IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

1. Reading ***The Mormons*** by Thomas F. O'Dea and participating in class discussion of this book (no reading report required). The book will be discussed in class on **Thursday, July 3.**

2. Reading ***New Religious Movements and the Theological Imagination in America*** by Mary Farrell Bednarowski and submission of a 3-4 page double-spaced reflection essay discussing how the book has informed the student's thinking about the issues addressed by the book. **The written report is due Thursday, July 10.**

3. Reading ***Understanding New Religious Movements (2nd edition)*** by John A Saliba, pp. 75-276 and participating in class discussion of this material (no reading report required). This section of the book will be discussed in class on **Friday, July 11.**

4. An in-class mid-course **exam** will be administered on **Tuesday, July 8.**

5. Regular attendance and participation in class learning activities. Since class only meets nine times during the summer session **it is imperative that students be consistent in their attendance.** Students that miss more than the equivalent of one day of class may have their final grade in the class significantly reduced.

C. POST-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

1. Completion of a **take-home end-of-course exam.** Instructions for this assignment are given prior to the final class meeting. Completed exams are due no later than **Friday, July 18.**

2. Completion of a research project. This is to be broadly a "conversation" between an American "alternative religion" and the student's own religious tradition. The particular form this takes may vary as may the specific content. This could take the form of a written report on research (traditional "term paper"), or could involve an interview with a person, a discussion between several persons, etc., and could utilize audio, video, or computer technologies. This can be as creative as you care to make it, but it must be a work of substance, providing evidence of careful research, reflection, and preparation. Each project, whatever form it takes, should be accompanied by a **bibliography** of sources that have informed the work. Research projects are due no later than **Friday, August 8**.

METHOD FOR SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS

All written work should be submitted to the "Assignment" section of Blackboard. The professor is able to access your completed work there. If you are unable to post completed work on Blackboard, you may submit printed copies to the instructor instead.

POLICY REGARDING LATE WORK AND RESCHEDULED OR MISSED EXAMS

All reading reports are due no later than 8:00 a.m. of the day they are due. The end-of-course take home exam and the post-class research assignment are due no later than 11:59 p.m. of the day they are due. Late work is reduced ½ letter grade for every three days (or portion thereof) overdue.

Exam #1 will be given in class. **Exams may be rescheduled or made up only through petition to the Dean's Office.**

COURSE GRADING

All written work is expected to demonstrate graduate level writing skills and this will be given due consideration in grading. In addition, all students are expected to be familiar with the *NTS Handbook for Inclusive Language* (available from the Dean's Office) and to follow its guidelines in the preparation of written work.

For all written assignments **the following criteria are employed in evaluation and grading:** 1) **"A" quality work** - is superior in every way - writing is clear, essentially without errors in grammar, syntax, word usage, spelling, etc. - content evidences careful reflection, insight, and originality; 2) **"B" quality work** - is above average - writing is generally clear, with few errors of grammar, syntax, spelling,

word usage, etc. – content evidences careful preparation and meets the expectations of the assignment; 3) **“C” quality work** – average – writing is adequate, but may have errors – content is adequate, meets the minimum expectations of the assignment, but lacks insight and originality; 4) **“D” quality work** – below average – writing is poor, marred with frequent errors – content evidences lack of insight or lack of understanding of the assigned materials; 5) **“F” quality work** – failure to do satisfactory work – work evidences haste, lack of careful preparation, lack of basic understanding of the assigned material.

In determining the final grade for the course:

1. **Class participation** throughout the two weeks of class counts **20% of the final grade**. Students are evaluated on the consistency and quality of their preparation for and participation in class activities.
2. The **two required reading reports** together count **25% of the final grade**.
3. The **two exams** (one in-class and one take home) together **count 30% of the final grade**.
4. The post-class research project **counts 25% of the final grade**.

NOTE: NTS is committed to make every reasonable effort to facilitate the learning of students capable of graduate level seminary work. Any student who has a condition that may hinder full demonstration of his or her abilities (e.g. difficulty seeing or hearing, dyslexia or other learning abilities) should contact the instructor as soon as possible to discuss learning needs and mutually acceptable teaching and learning strategies to ensure the student’s full participation and appropriate evaluation in the course.

CONSULTING THE INSTRUCTOR

My office is room 352 (through the door behind the organ in the chapel, to the top of the stairs, and down the hall). I aim to be available to students outside of class as much as I possibly can. However, in the summer session, I may not be on campus all day. Therefore, please contact me in person in class, or by e-mail, if you wish to make an appointment to discuss course matters, or any other matters in which I might be of help to you. You can e-mail me at: school – heraser@nts.edu or home – hjderaser@aol.com

TENTATIVE COURSE CALENDAR

Date	Topic
Monday, June 30	I. Foundational Issues: A. Cults, Sects and New Religious Movements in History B. The American Historical Setting for Sect and Cult Formation C. Defining and Identifying "Cult," "Sect," and "New Religious Movement"

Required background reading: 1) ***Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History***, Philip Jenkins.

2) ***Understanding New Religious Movements*** (2nd edition), John Saliba, pp. 1-67.

Tuesday, July 1	II. "Hermetic," Sectarian, and Communitarian Religion in American in American History
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Required background reading: see Monday, June 30 above

Wednesday, July 2	III. The Mormons
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Thursday, July 3	III. The Mormons (cont.)
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Required background reading: ***The Mormons***, Thomas F. O'Dea (students should be prepared to discuss this book in class).

Friday, July 4	NO CLASS – AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE DAY
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Monday, July 7 **OFF CAMPUS CLASS GROUP "FIELD TRIP"**
 (instructions given at the first meeting of the
 class)

Tuesday, July 8 **EXAM #1 – IN CLASS**

IV. The Adventist Movement

Wednesday, July 9 IV. The Adventist Movement (cont.)

V. Jehovah's Witnesses

Thursday, July 10 V. Jehovah's Witnesses (cont.)

VI. New Thought and Its Various Expressions

Required background reading: ***New Religious Movements and the Theological Imagination in America***, Mary Farrell Bednarowski (a written report is due and students should also be prepared to discuss this book in class).

Friday, July 11 VI. New Thought and Its Various Expressions
 (cont.)

VII. Contemporary Cults and New Religious
 Movements – Sociological, Psychological,
 Legal, and Pastoral Considerations

Required background reading: ***Understanding New Religious Movements*** (2nd edition), John Saliba, pp. 75-276. (Students should be prepared to discuss this section of the book in class).
