

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

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

Lecture: LRW B1007: Thursdays @ 7:00PM-9:00PM

Lecture audio + PPT slides uploaded to Avenue each week



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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.

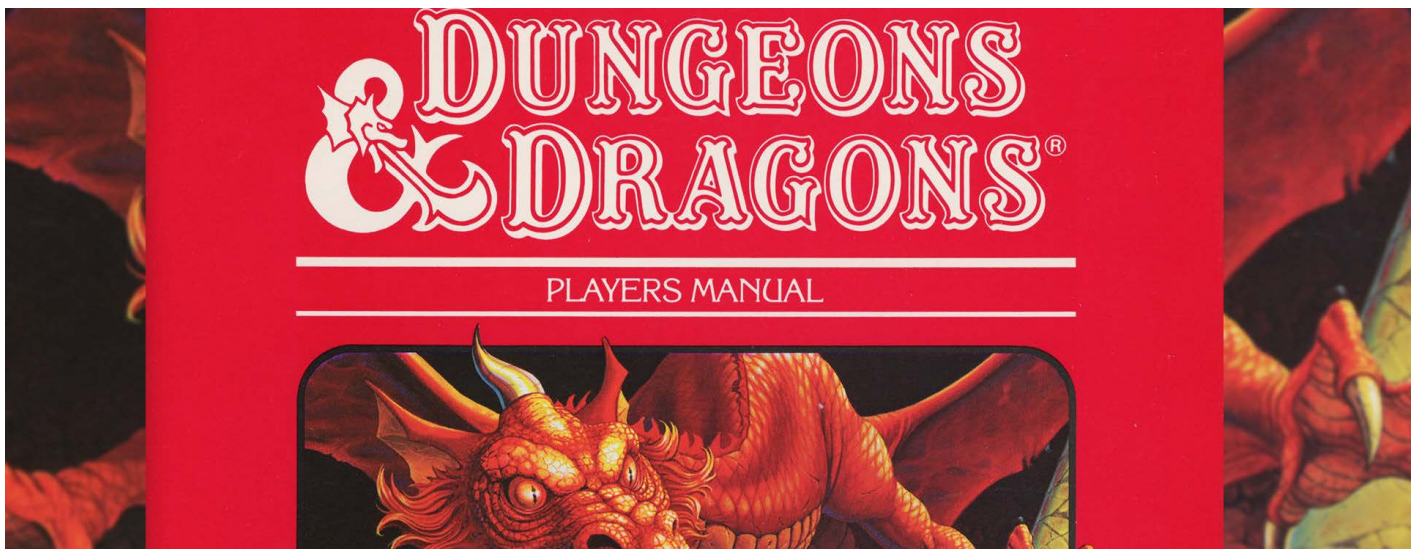
COURSE INFORMATION

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

We will explore the evolution and social impact of “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’ll examine 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, Q-Anon, health and wellness culture, and others.

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



Course Objectives

This is an introductory course offered by the Department of Religious Studies (SCAR). 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, and religious considerations around emergent religions, conspiracy theories, and close encounters, including social responses to them.



CONNECTIONS & CURIOSITY

To develop your intellectual and creative curiosity by recognizing how religion and other themes in the course are connected to your daily life and educational goals.



CRITICAL THINKING

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



EMPATHY

By examining our rich mosaic of life more generally, you will 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 publicly available and should be watched on your own time.



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 and answer the following questions: Who are you? Why are you taking this course? What are your learning objectives this semester and how will you reach them? What is one academic skill that you most want to improve?

Due Date: September 22nd @ 11:59pm

SELF-ASSESSMENT PARTICIPATION (10%)

As part of an effort to make grading fairer, participation is not based on tutorial attendance alone. Participation can take several forms, including attending tutorials, 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 -->*



MEDIA REFLECTIONS (30%)

Throughout the course we will watch several documentaries. We may also have opportunities to meet members of new religious movements, and members of UFO/paranormal groups.

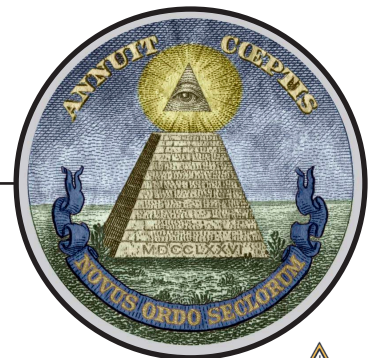
You will write a short reflection detailing your thoughts, what questions you have, and how each film or interview relates to course material.

Due Dates: October 7th, November 21st, TBD.

SHORT QUIZZES (20%)

There will be several very short online quizzes during the semester. The quizzes cover the concepts presented in the readings and lectures.

Due Dates: TBD



Course Assignments



FINAL: CREATE A 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 create a new religion and 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 in which you must think analytically and theoretically about religion and religious life. Who are the members of your NRM? Why did they join? What are their demographics? What are its' belief systems? 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 + Bibliography (10%): November 10th @ 11:59PM

Final (25%): December 8th @ 11:59PM

Weekly Schedule

Week One: Sept 8th

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: Sept 15th

CULT, OR NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT (NRM)? WHY STUDY NRMS?

- Cowen, Douglas and David G. Bromley. 2015. "Cults and New Religions: a Primer" In *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*. 1-17.
- Hexham, Irving. 2001. "New Religions and the Anticult Movement in Canada." *Nova Religio* 4: 281-88.
- **Optional:** "The Prophet and the Space Aliens" youtu.be/quUhHrY2hUY

Week Three: Sept 22nd

CHARISMA, CONVERSION, & BRAINWASHING

- **Watch:** "How cults rewire the brain" www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLOuxDsc-jdo
- James T. Richardson. 2021. "The Myth of the Omnipotent Leader: The Social Construction of a Misleading Account of Leadership in New Religious Movements." *Nova Religio* 24: 11-25.
- Coates, Dominiek. 2013. "New Religious Movement Membership and the Importance of Stable 'Others' for the Making of Selves." *Journal of religion and health*. 53: 1-18

Week Four: Sept 29th

WHY RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS SUCCEED OR FAIL

- **Watch:** Griesser, John. 2017. *Hare Krishna!: The Mantra, the Movement and the Swami Who Started It All*. Cargo Film. www.kanopy.com/en/mcmaster/video/1663823
- Stark, Rodney. 2003. "Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model" In *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. 259-269.

Weekly Schedule

Week Five: Oct 6th

RELIGION, VIOLENCE, & THE MEDIA

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

Week Six: FALL BREAK!

Week Seven: Oct 20th

CONTROVERSIAL NEW RELIGIONS: SCIENTOLOGY

- Urban, Hugh. 2011. "The "Cult of all Cults"?: Scientology and the Cult Wars of The 1970s and 80s" In *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion*. 118-154.
- Lewis, James R. 2015. "Scientology: Sect, Science, or Scam?" *Numen* 62: 226-42.

Week Eight: October 27th - NO CLASS (PRE-RECORDED LECTURE) A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE. THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH CONSPIRACIES

- 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.

Weekly Schedule

Week Nine: Nov 3rd

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED. HOW CONSPIRACY THEORIES WORK

- Infographic: "How to Start a Conspiracy Theory" www.popsoci.com/how-to-start-spread-conspiracy/
- Walker, Jesse. 2019. "What do we Mean When we Say Conspiracy Theory?" In *Conspiracy Theories and the People who Believe Them*. 53-62.
- Robertson, David G., 2019. "Conspiracy Theories and Religion: Superstition, Seekership, and Salvation." In *Conspiracy Theories and the People who Believe Them*. 411-422.

Week Ten: Nov 10th

CONSPIRITUALITY

- Watch: Michael, Kirk. 2020. *United States of Conspiracy*. www.kanopy.com/en/mcmaster/video/10930358
- Ward, Charlotte and David Voas. 2011. "The Emergence of Conspiritoriality" *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26: 103-121.
- 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*. 201-16.

Week Eleven: Nov 17th

Q-ANON & MODERN MORAL PANICS

- Rachel F. Gómez, Mignonette C. Guy & Julio Cammarota. 2022. "The psychological rages of Whiteness: acceptable casualties and the White American identity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 1-18.
- Wessinger, Catherine. "'Cult' Is an Inaccurate, Unhelpful and Dangerous Label for Followers of Trump, QAnon, and 1/6" - religiondispatches.org/cult-is-an-inaccurate-unhelpful-and-dangerous-label-for-followers-of-trump-qanon-and-1-6/

Weekly Schedule

Week Twelve: Nov 24th

RELIGION AND ALIEN ENCOUNTERS

- Watch: "Alien Gods, Jesus' Spaceship, & Operation Prayer Power: Welcome to The Aetherius Society" youtu.be/bDAKJNA7R2k
- Pusulka, D.W.,. 2019. "Introduction" In *American Cosmic: UFO's, Religion, Technology*. 1-16.
- Sentes, Bryan, and Susan Palmer. 2000. "Presumed Immanent: The Raëlians, UFO Religions, and the Postmodern Condition." *Nova Religio* 4: 86-105.

Week Thirteen: Dec 1st

ALIENS, RACE, AND HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

- Matthias Determann, Jorg. 2021 "Islamic UFO Religions" In *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life*. 105-140.
- 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

Week Fourteen: Dec 8th

NO LECTURE

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 if they plan on handing in an assignment late. Late assignments may be penalized at the discretion of the TA and/or professor.

AVENUE TO LEARN

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.

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](#), 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.