

# CULTS & SECTS

*IS RELIGION DANGEROUS?*

Spring 2021 • #NUcults • PHIL4390



*THE PANDEMIC IS  
STILL HAPPENING*

Nothing about this semester will be normal. Sorry. Let's try to be patient with ourselves and one another.

*THIS IS A  
HARD CLASS*

PHIL4390 is a senior seminar. We are going to read. A lot. Of hard stuff. This hard stuff is important. Not sorry.

*JUST KEEP  
SWIMMING*

I'm not expecting you to do your best work in the midst of a global crisis.

**No one is falling this class.**

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# ABOUT THIS CLASS

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"Cult" is a word that gets used a lot, but what exactly IS a cult? Most often, cult describes beliefs we don't like or that make us uncomfortable, practices we think are stupid or exploitative, and groups we worry are dangerous. But is religion dangerous? Or do we use religion in dangerous ways? This class considers some ways "cult" gets used (by popular media, law enforcement, journalists, and even scholars) to criticize, discourage, and punish minoritized groups who do religion *too* differently – especially when those groups use religion to challenge white supremacy in what is now the United States.



## WHAT WE'RE READING

You will need:

- Butler, *Parable of the Sower*
- Butler, *Parable of the Talents*
- Weisenfeld, ***New World A-Coming***

Everything else is on Canvas.

## *CHALLENGING MEDIA*

Butler's work is AMAZING, but it's often violent and painful to read. That's true for many of the sources we'll tackle this semester.

Please take care of yourself while we work with this material and let me know if you need an alternate assignment or a break.

OCTAVIA E.  
BUTLER



# CLASS FORMAT

COVID19 + immunocompromised professor = we're doing this thing **remotely and asynchronously**. At the time of this writing, I do not intend to have the class meet via Zoom or any other kind of video conference. If the group is strongly in favor of doing so, we can revisit this option.

Each unit requires you to review the assigned materials in advance of

our discussions (so you should complete readings, podcasts, etc. *by* the date on the syllabus). Several topics include clips from feature films or documentary screenings. I'll be initiating each discussion on our **Medium** page during our scheduled meeting time. You can join the conversation there, publicly or privately. Review the **opt-in grading** instructions for more information and feel free to ask me questions!

**"AND HAVE BROUGHT HUMANITY TO THE EDGE OF OBLIVION: BECAUSE THEY THINK THEY ARE WHITE."**

**JAMES BALDWIN, "ON WHITENESS AND OTHER LIES"**





# CLASS EXPECTATIONS

OR, WHAT TO EXPECT  
WHEN YOU'RE STILL  
EXPECTED TO LEARN  
THINGS IN THE MIDDLE  
OF A GLOBAL CRISIS

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Let's be honest: **none of us know what this semester will look like.** I'll do my best to provide clear, timely information as we continue to navigate this unprecedented historical moment. In return, I ask that you try to be as patient as you can with yourself, your fellow classmates, and with me, with the understanding that we're all doing our best at a time when getting *anything* done often feels overwhelming if not impossible.

That said: this is a senior seminar, and I've chosen our materials accordingly. You should have some familiarity with humanities scholarship, if not the discipline of religious studies. If you're *not* familiar with humanities research, these materials will be especially challenging. I strongly encourage you to check out the guidelines on how to read research articles and listen to academic podcasts.

**Treat every person in this class and every concept you encounter with scholarly respect.** As scholars of religion, we don't evaluate the truth or validity of any religious tradition. We examine the evidence we have to position that tradition's practices, beliefs, teachings, and products in the broader context of religion(s) and culture(s).



## TECHNOLOGY

I am really trying to keep us off Zoom, y'all, for both professional and ethical reasons. We *will* be listening to podcasts; we're also using Medium (a writing forum) for discussions, Twitter for our live-tweet sessions, Kanopy for streaming video, and the quiz & chat functions on Canvas.

Nothing we're doing requires you to be a computer whiz, but if you start feeling lost or overwhelmed, please ask me for help. If you don't have access to high-speed internet and need alternate assignments, let me know and we'll work something out.

## PARTICIPATION

In "normal" semesters, I have a whole chart about how to earn participation credit. This semester? **Let's all just do the best we can.** Any engagement beyond what is explicitly required = awesome. I hope you'll want to talk about the material we'll be covering beyond what's explicitly required, but I won't penalize you for being short on the ability to even right now.

If you're having trouble keeping up, please let me know as soon as you can. **You do not have to have a registered disability to request accommodations** – but I won't know you need help or more time unless you tell me so. You don't have to tell me *why* you're having a hard time, but getting in touch means I can come up with a plan to get you what you need.

It is 100% okay to be struggling to retain new information or keep up with schoolwork right now. Again: we are living through a crisis (several, honestly) and that stress affects our moods, our energy, and our cognition. **I will never judge you for needing more time or an alternate assignment, but I can't help you if you don't tell me you need help.**

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## YOU ARE WELCOME HERE

I am committed to making our campus and classroom (including its online analogs) a supportive learning environment for people of all races, genders, ethnicities, abilities, classes, ages, sexualities, and statuses of documentation.



## KNOW YOUR IX

Despite recent efforts to the contrary, gender- and sex-based harassment is still a Civil Rights offense and survivors are still entitled to confidential support. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you're entitled to help. **Here are Northeastern's resources.**



## PLEASE DON'T CHEAT

Cheating is the only way to fail this class. Just: please don't. Complete the **plagiarism tutorial** by 26 January so I know that you know what plagiarism is. Check out the resources on Canvas for more info. **Short version: do your own work & cite everything!**



# OPT-IN GRADING

YOU DECIDE HOW  
MUCH YOU CAN  
HANDLE & HOW MUCH  
YOU HAVE TO GIVE

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There's a lot of evidence to suggest that grading isn't (and maybe can't be) 100% objective, and that often grades reflect unconscious instructor biases. This is class hopes to challenge & disrupt white supremacy. So let's try something different, shall we?

Opt-in grading = you decide what kind of and how much energy you can devote to this course. Given current crises, here's the plan.

**Option F:** failure is not an option.

**Option D:** turn in literally any work assigned for this class. Congrats, you've got yourself a D. It's not fancy, but you pass.

**Option C:** turn in at least 75% of your reading notes (13/17). Bam! That's a C.

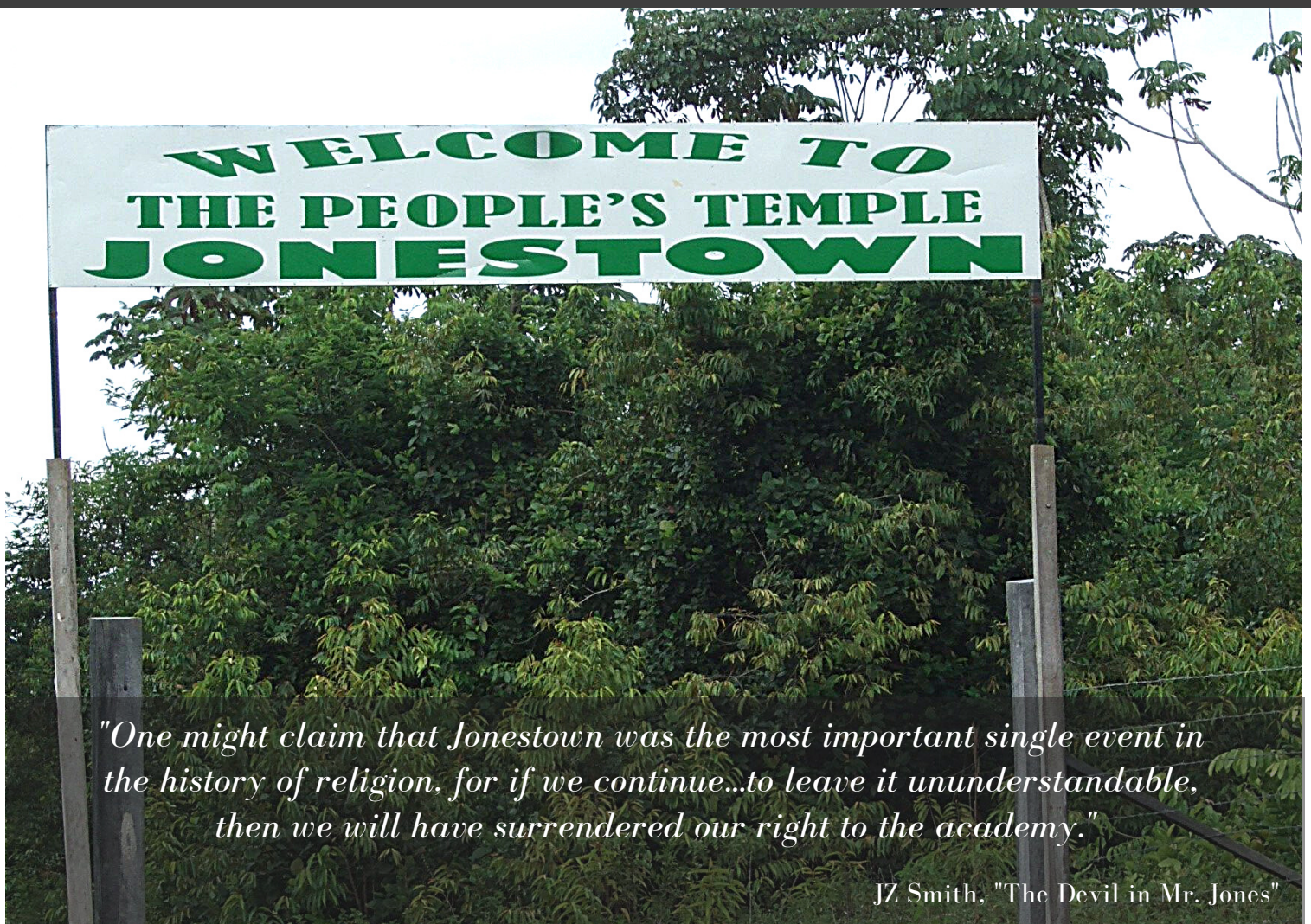
**Option B:** turn in at least 85% of your reading notes (15/17) + participate in most class discussions (minimum 20/25) + at least two film analyses. Mazel tov on your B.

**Option A:** 95% (16/17) of your reading notes + participate in 90% of class discussions (23/25) + three film analyses. You earn an A, also several naps. Just kidding, everybody deserves naps.

Tell stories  
Filled with  
Facts.

Make People  
Touch and  
Taste and  
KNOW.  
Make People  
FEEL  
FEEL!  
Feel!





## ASSIGNMENTS: READING NOTES

THE ONE NON-OPTIONAL  
PIECE OF YOUR OPT-IN  
GRADE OPTIONS

Ultimately, this class has two central goals: to help you think more carefully and critically about what religion is and what people do with it; and to help you become a more careful and critical thinker and reader/consumer of media, period. This assignment is designed to help you meet both goals.

Before each discussion, you'll complete your reading notes assignments on Canvas through the "quizzes" function. For each **bolded reading** on the syllabus, identify the argument (1 sentence), the evidence used to support the argument (3-5 sentences), and the significance of the argument (3-5 sentences). Basically, what does the author want you to think, what are they using as proof to trying to convince you, and why does it matter? (This, by the way, is something you should ask of every single thing you read.) Cite all references to assigned sources and consult the assignment sheet for more instructions. **You must closely follow instructions to receive credit for completing this and all assignments.**

# CLASS DISCUSSIONS

SHARE YOUR  
THOUGHTS,  
QUESTIONS, AND  
CONCERNS WITH  
ME AND YOUR  
CLASSMATES

My "lectures" this semester will be on our Medium page. (Any copyrighted material I reference will be on Canvas.) I'll post breakdowns of the materials, related links & resources, and ask you to reflect on what you read/ listened to/watched.

You can respond publicly or privately on the page. Review the directions on Medium for more information about participating in class discussions.

**Please note:** you must complete all the work required to opt-in for a B if you're planning to opt-in for an A. Which is to say: don't sleep on our class discussions! You need to contribute to at least 90% of them to opt-in for an A, regardless of how many film analyses you turn in.

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# FILM ANALYSES

WATCH SAD STUFF  
AND EXPLAIN WHY  
IT MATTERS TO  
THE STUDY OF  
RELIGION

We'll be watching three films in class: *Father's Kingdom*, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, and *Let the Fire Burn*. I won't lie: these documentaries will be hard to watch, but the stories they tell are important. We'll live-tweet the films in class and you'll have the opportunity to analyze them in conversation with other assigned sources. Check out the assignment sheet for the rubric and more explicit instructions.

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# CLASS SCHEDULE

Date	Topic	Assignment
T 19 January	What's religion?	KI101 E102, "Who Gets Left out of Religion?" KI101 E106, "Religion Is Not Done with You"
F 22 January	What's a cult?	KI101 E110, "Cults" <b>Barker</b> , from <i>Making of a Moonie</i> Moore, "The Brainwashing Myth"
T 26 January	What does race have to do with religion?	KI101 E202, "Intersectionality" KI101 E203, "Race and Religion in What's Now the US" <b>Chan-Malik</b> , "Race" Gerbner, "Race"
F 29 January	What does race have to do with cults?	Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in My Mind" <b>Rana</b> , "Race" Evans, from <i>MOVE: An American Religion</i> Weisenfeld, from <i>New World A-Coming</i>
T 2 February	<i>Parable of the Sower</i> (1)	Jemisin, "Three Reads" Butler 1993, Ch 1-12
F 5 February	<i>Parable of the Sower</i> (2)	Butler 1993, Ch 13-25
T 9 February	Catch up day	
<b>RADICAL RELIGIOUS INNOVATION &amp; RESISTANCE</b>		
F 12 February	Religion as "barbary"	Mueller, "Prologue" <b>Mueller</b> , "Race on the Page, Race on the Body" Marr, "Turkey Is in our Midst" Mueller, "Is Mormonism Still Racist?"
T 16 February	Religion as white supremacy	<b>Weisenfeld</b> , "Framing the Nation" Baker, "Birth of the Klan's Nation" <i>Birth of a Nation</i> (1915, clips) <i>A Mormon Maid</i> (1917, clips) <i>BlackKKKlansman</i> (clips)
F 19 February	Religion as nativism	1924 Immigration Act 1965 Immigration Act <b>Baker</b> , "The Klan's Nationalism" Baker, "White Skin Will Not Redeem a Black Heart" Baker, "Guardians of Privilege" Minhaj, "We Cannot Stay Silent about George Floyd"
T 23 February	<i>Black Gods of the Metropolis</i> (1)	Savage, "Forward" Fauset, "Introduction" <b>Fauset</b> , "Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North"
F 26 February	<i>Black Gods of the Metropolis</i> (2)	Fauset, "The Negro and His Religion" Fauset, "Why the Cults Attract" <b>Hardy</b> , "No Mystery God" Greene Hayes, "Black Gods Among Us"
<b>RELIGIO-RACIAL IDENTITY</b>		
T 2 March	Screening: <i>Father's Kingdom</i>	Live-tweet during scheduled meeting time Weisenfeld, intro & conclusion
F 5 March	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (1)	<b>Weisenfeld</b> , "Narratives" (Part 1, pp 23 – 88)
T 9 March	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (2)	<b>Weisenfeld</b> , "Selfhood" (Part 2, pp 89 – 166)
F 12 March	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (3)	<b>Weisenfeld</b> , "Community" (Part 3, pp 167 – 278)

# CLASS SCHEDULE

Date	Topic	Assignment
T 16 March	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (4)	Conversation with Dr. Weisenfeld (podcast) Weisenfeld, "The House We Live In"
<b>RELIGION AND WHAT COMES AFTER IT</b>		
F 19 March	Screening: <i>The Life and Death of Peoples Temple</i>	Live-tweet during scheduled meeting time Moore, Pinn, & Sawyer, "Introduction"
T 23 March	Religion as revolution	Lincoln & Mamiya, "Daddy Jones and Father Divine" Moore, "Demographics and Black Religious Culture" Milk, "In Defense of Jim Jones" Peoples Temple Songbook
F 26 March	Revolutionary suicide as religion	Harris & Waterman, "To Die for the Peoples Temple" Newton, "The Way of Liberation" Q042 Transcript, FBI Transcription
T 30 March	Remains of religion	Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion" Hutchinson, "Black Women and the Peoples Temple" Hutchinson, <i>White Nights, Black Paradise</i> (short)
F 2 April	Catch up day	
T 6 April	Screening: <i>Let the Fire Burn</i>	Live-tweet during scheduled meeting time Move timeline Evans, "Introduction"
F 9 April	Defining religion (1)	Evans, "Progress" Evans, "Policing Religion"
T 13 April	Defining religion (2)	Evans, "Building a Cult" Evans, "Conclusion" Demby, "Still Trying to Make Sense"
F 16 April	<i>Parable of the Talents</i> (1)	Butler 1998, prologue – Ch 11 Butler, "Devil Girl from Mars"
T 20 April	<i>Parable of the Talents</i> (2)	Butler 1998, Ch 12 – epilogue
T 27 April	All coursework due	



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# CULTS & SECTS

MEDIUM.COM/CULTS-SECTS



**DR. MEGAN GOODWIN**

*IS NOT ON CAMPUS  
THIS SEMESTER*

## PHIL4390 NU ATTRIBUTES

- Engaging Difference and Diversity (DD)
- Interpreting Culture (IC)

But you can email her at [me.goodwin@northeastern.edu](mailto:me.goodwin@northeastern.edu) or find her on twitter [@mpgPhD](https://twitter.com/mpgPhD)

**Appointments available**  
via Canvas chat or GoogleMeet  
TR 3:25-5:05 pm

