

(REL 200)

# AMERICAN MINORITY RELIGIONS



goddesses, guns, and gurus

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Americans often claim to value religious freedom and diversity. But how do we respond when religious minorities take more than one spouse, interact with aliens, or stockpile weapons for the end of the world? **This class explores common characteristics and popular depictions of minority religions in contemporary American culture.** Students will read the speeches and correspondence of charismatic leaders, consider American religious innovation since the 1920s, and analyze popular culture portrayals (including films, graphic novels, and fiction) of minority religions in the United States. In particular, we will attend to the ways gender, sexuality, race, and class influence practices, beliefs, and popular (mis)understandings of American minority religions.

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify and analyze ways religious worldviews shape diverse communities
- Use critical and theoretical tools to examine primary and secondary sources
- Recognize and explain how religious practices and beliefs shape and are shaped by American culture, politics, and economics.

### {required texts}

*Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America since 1945*

Eds. Harvey and Goff

*Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood

*Salvation on Sand Mountain*

Covington

All other readings available on BB

# EXPECTATIONS

This is an intermediate course. While I do not expect that you know anything about the traditions we will discuss or about American religion in general, I do assume a basic familiarity with the humanities as a discipline. If you are unfamiliar with humanities scholarship—particularly reading and analyzing scholarly articles or writing scholarly essays in keeping with standard humanities styles—you might find some course assignments challenging. Please be sure to read directions closely and seek additional assistance as needed well in advance of deadlines.

Regardless of your academic background, you must **treat every student and every concept you encounter in this class with scholarly respect**. Challenge your assumptions and your position(s) of privilege. Speak from your own experiences and understandings of the issues, and assume that each class member operates from their own best intentions. As scholars of religion and American culture, **it is not our job to evaluate the truth or validity of any tradition**. We only scrutinize the evidence we have, so that we might position that tradition's beliefs, practices, teachings, and products in the broader context of American



## CLASS FORMAT

Each class will center on discussion of the assigned texts; some will combine lecture, online, and presentation elements as well. None of these work unless you **attend regularly and read the assignments**. Please come to class ready to analyze and respond to the primary documents and secondary sources assigned, as well as to the contributions of your fellow students. (The handouts on Blackboard, "How to Read a Primary Source" and "How to Read a Secondary Source," will come in handy here.) Participating in the discussions will be easier if you bring your readings to class with you, so be sure to print them ahead of time.

**Your active engagement in these exercises is essential.** Please note that "engagement" includes attentive listening as well as speaking.

### How do I know if I'm [PARTICIPATING?]

Attendance isn't enough. To succeed in this class, you must fully engage in activities and discussions. These criteria determine your participation grade. In short: speak up!

### EXCELLENT

You're present, prepared, & engaged. You consistently refer to the readings, lectures, & class discussions from other weeks. You encourage other students' comments & questions in a productive and respectful manner.

### GOOD

You're present and prepared, and offer thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate your preparation for discussion and attention to readings and lectures.

### ADEQUATE

You're present and prepared, but limit your contributions to several surface-level observations or clarifying questions about lectures or readings.

### MINIMAL

You usually make a single comment during discussions in response to another student's observations or insights. ("I agree with them.")

# GRADING

In this course, you will be graded on **how** you think, not **what** you think.

In other words, **you will not be graded on your beliefs, opinions, or the positions you advance.** You will be graded on how well you articulate your thoughts and positions, how closely you read the assigned texts, and how much your ability to think **critically and synthetically** about course themes develops throughout the semester.

## Percentages

- 5% Media Literacy
- 5% Leading Discussion
- 10% Participation
- 15% Final Project
- 20% Midterm 1
- 20% Midterm 2
- 25% reading notes

## Rubric

- A = 94–100
- A- = 93–90
- B+ = 89–87
- B = 86–83
- B- = 82–80
- C+ = 79–77
- C = 76–73
- C- = 72–70
- D+ = 69–67
- D = 66–60
- F = 59 and below



## Clarification

- A work far exceeds basic requirements. The work is of excellent quality.
- B work exceeds basic requirements. The work is good or very good.
- C work meets basic requirements. The work is satisfactory.
- D work does not meet most of the basic assignment requirements. The work is poor but passing.
- F work fails to meet most of the requirements of an assignment or of the course.

# ATTENDANCE & PARTICIPATION

Please note that there is no attendance grade for this class – **you must participate in the conversation to receive credit for attending.** Unless granted an exception due to hospitalization, family emergency, or another extenuating circumstance, students who miss three or more classes will lose two points per missed class from their final grades. **Students must meet with me once before the midterm.** Contact me **before 21 February** to schedule this meeting.

Please don't arrive late for class: it distracts me and your classmates, and it's very rude. Also, please turn off your cell phones before arriving for class. Anyone found using their phones, laptops, tablets, etc., for reasons unrelated to class will be asked to leave the discussion and may not make up any missed work.



# TECHNOLOGY

Unless you have specific learning accommodations which require their use, **laptops and other devices are only permissible in the classroom for specified class activities.** You are also required to use certain technologies to complete your assignments. Most importantly, you need to know how to create a PDF document and

submit such documents via Blackboard in a timely manner. You are responsible for learning how to negotiate these technologies; please come see me if you need help. I only accept electronic submission in PDF format via Blackboard. **I will not accept assignments as \*.doc or \*.docx files or assignments sent to my email address.**

# PLAGIARISM AND CHEATING

You plagiarize when you present someone else's thoughts, words, or ideas as your own without proper attribution. Please don't cheat or plagiarize – you will fail the course. You must complete this **plagiarism tutorial** and submit a passing certificate via Blackboard before **24 January** if you intend to remain in the course.

If you're still unclear about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult the "What is Plagiarism?" handout available on Blackboard or SU's **Academic Integrity Policy**. "I didn't know" is not a valid excuse. Go know.

# SOURCES

All sources consulted for this class and for your projects must be of scholarly import. Scholarly sources are written by experts with formal academic training in the areas in which they are writing and are published by academic presses. For each and every assignment, **every source you use—whether you're directly quoting or merely referring to it—must be cited.** Religious Studies as a discipline uses Chicago style; use Chicago style citations for all class assignments. See the Chicago style quick guide on Blackboard for further instructions.

There are very few circumstances under which websites are permissible as sources for assignments in this class. If you're using a website as a reference, it must be a credible academic website. (Hint: **about.com and Wikipedia are not academic websites.**) Some websites that might be of interest:

- **Religion Dispatches**
- **Religion in American History**
- **Religion and Politics**
- **Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life**





# ACADEMIC ACCESSIBILITY AND SUPPORT

If you need in-class or testing accommodations because of accessibility issues, if you have emergency medical information, or if you need special arrangements in the event of a building evacuation, please inform me as soon as possible.

Students who require accommodations for testing must pre-register with SU's [Office of Disability Services](#) and inform me of these accommodations during the first week of class. Please note that you are responsible for making timely arrangements with Disability Services and me regarding your testing accommodations.

## WRITE BETTER

There are a number of helpful handouts and guidelines for writing on our Blackboard site, including a handout on writing for religious studies. For further assistance, please come to office hours, make an appointment with SUs [Writing Center](#), or visit their [website](#).



## ASSIGNMENTS

### { leading discussion }

Each student will be required to lead a class discussion during the course of the semester. If you are leading discussion, you must submit a one page (single-spaced) report on the material we'll be covering in class. State each article's argument/main point in a single sentence; provide a brief (3-5 sentence) summary of each source we'll discuss; and include possible responses to the day's discussion questions

with examples from the texts. Some classes might have multiple discussion leaders. You are allowed—and encouraged—to work together on your plans for the class; however, you must each submit a separate report.

Submit your report as a PDF via Blackboard no later than 48 hours before the session in question.

### { media literacy }

Critical awareness of mainstream media coverage of minority religions is a key part of students' media literacy. To cultivate this awareness, students will retweet and analyze no fewer than five news items pertaining to contemporary American minority religions over the course of the semester. Confirm that the story is being provided by a credible news source (a skill we will cultivate in class), and in a threaded tweet, explain its pertinence and overlap (or lack thereof) with course materials and discussions. We will also live-tweet all film screenings (*Life and Death of Peoples Temple*) and novel/memoir readings (*Handmaid's Tale*, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*) for this class. Review the pertinent assignment sheets for further instructions.

# ASSIGNMENTS (CONTINUED)

## { reading notes }

Learning to read, understand, and think critically about challenging material is a key skill for liberal arts scholarship. (also citizenship, life, etc.). For this reason, one of our regular writing assignments will be creating reading notes for assigned primary and secondary sources. This will help you become a more careful reader of these texts and jump-start your preparation for your final project.

Detailed instructions for creating reading notes are available on Blackboard. You are responsible for providing reading notes for one source assigned on the days marked RN on the following schedule. Reading notes are due on Blackboard by midnight before class. You must also bring your reading notes to each class discussion. You are encouraged but not required to comment on the readings via the class hashtag, #SyrRelGGG, and to respond to other students' analyses as well. These responses count toward your participation grade.

## { final project }

For your final project, each research group will **create your own new religion**. Your group as a whole will present on its religion during our final class meetings; each group member will also submit an individual report on this project.

For your presentation: give your religion a name and explain its central teachings. (Does your religion have a deity or deities? If so, describe them. If not, describe the central principle(s) around which you've organized your religion.) Describe or create sacred texts, music, clothing, food, art, or other material culture objects relevant to your religion. Tell us what inspired the creation of this religion: what cultural needs, desires, inequities, or injustices are you responding to? To whom would your religion appeal and why?

In your paper, describe the content of your presentation and provide analysis of your new religion's teachings and practices. In what ways does your religion build on mainstream religions or other minority traditions we've discussed this semester? In what ways is your religion innovative? Finally, consider the significance of your religion. Why is this innovation important? What does it contribute to the American religious landscape? What resistance or intolerance might you face as a member of this religion?

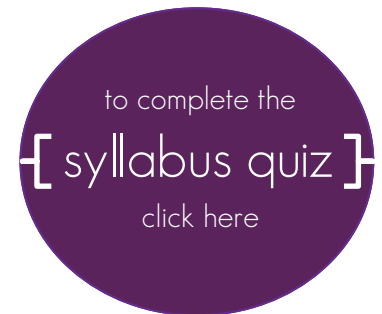
As with all projects, please consult the assignment sheet for further instructions.



**Sex and gender-based violence and harassment are Civil Rights offenses**, subject to the same kinds of penalties applied to offenses against other protected categories (such as race, national origin, etc.). Survivors are entitled to confidential support. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, **Syracuse wants to help**. **Here** are our resources.

# IMPORTANT DATES

24 January	Plagiarism tutorial and syllabus quiz due
31 January	Primary sources and credible news workshop
2 February	Book discussion: Atwood's <i>Handmaid's Tale</i>
21 February	Pre-midterm meetings must be scheduled by today
23 February	Midterm 1
6 April	Midterm 2
25 April	Book discussion: Covington's <i>Salvation on Sand Mountain</i>
2 May	Final project presentations



## NOTA BENE

**This syllabus is a blueprint, not a contract.**

As we progress through the semester, I may shift assignments and requirements.

But I promise I will not add more readings or assignments than are currently listed here.

## #SYRRELGGG

Your media literacy requirement calls for no fewer than five news posts over the course of this semester. But you are also welcome—and encouraged—to post other items of interest to the class hashtag as well. Feel free to share links to news items, videos, reviews of films or television episodes, or anything else you think might be relevant to class discussions. For those of you less comfortable speaking up in class, this is another way for you to earn participation credit.

Please keep all posts “safe for work.” Irreverent is okay; deliberately hostile or offensive is not. If you’re not sure if something is appropriate for sharing, ask me before posting.

## EXTRA CREDIT

For up to three points on your final grade, you may write a 750–1000 word analysis of a film that depicts a minority religion in the United States. Summarize the plot and discuss the way the film portrays the minority religion in question. Who directed and wrote the film? Who is the intended audience? Based on your viewing, what do you think the film wants you to believe about American minority religions? Does the film correspond with or contradict what we’ve learned in class? Be sure to refer to assigned primary and secondary sources. You may only avail yourself of this opportunity if you have submitted all other work for this class in a timely manner. This is the only extra credit assignment I will offer this semester. If you choose to take advantage of this opportunity, the assignment is due on Blackboard by **Monday, 1 May, at 11:55 pm.**

# SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

DATE	TOPIC	ASSIGNMENT
T 17 January	Introductions	
R 19 January	What's (American) religion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moore, from <i>Religious Outsiders</i></li> <li>• Albanese, "Elephant in the Dark"</li> <li>• Ginsburg, "America"</li> </ul>
T 24 January RN	Making a Majority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• US Constitution, Article VI, Paragraph 3</li> <li>• First Amendment</li> <li>• Washington, "Letter to the Jews of New York"</li> <li>• Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "What's Wrong with Tolerance?"</li> </ul>
R 26 January RN	Making a Minority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sullivan, "The Impossibility of Religious Freedom"</li> <li>• Reynolds v. US (1878) + Oyez report</li> <li>• Gordon, "Faith and the Contested Constitution"</li> </ul>
T 31 January	WORKSHOP: Primary Sources + Media Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readings TBA</li> </ul>
R 2 February	Religion and the State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Atwood, <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i></li> </ul>
<b>1920s– 1960s</b>		
T 7 February RN	Pre-war Indigenous Religions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wenger, "We Are Guaranteed Freedom"</li> <li>• Zitkala-Sa, "Why I Am a Pagan"</li> </ul>
R 9 February RN	Mainline Religion and the Cold War	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Mainline Religion and the Cold War" (HG)</li> <li>• Stone, "But It's Not Just Joe McCarthy"</li> <li>• Day, "Our Brothers, the Communists" (HG)</li> <li>• Church League, "Manual for Survival" (HG)</li> <li>• Rosenbergs, "Final Letter"</li> </ul>
T 14 February RN	American Judaism after the Holocaust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Herberg, from <i>Protestant Catholic Jew</i> (HG)</li> <li>• Corrigan and Neal, "Anti-semitism"</li> <li>• Imhoff, "Hoover's Judeo-Christians"</li> <li>• Heschel, "Telegram to JFK"</li> </ul>
R 16 February RN	Japanese/American Religions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kochiyama, "Then Came the War"</li> <li>• Blankenship, from <i>The Japanese American Incarceration</i></li> <li>• "Directive for the Disestablishment of State Shinto"</li> <li>• Lange, Internment Camp Photos</li> </ul>
T 21 February	Immigration + Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harvey and Goff, "New Immigrant Communities"</li> <li>• Immigration Acts of 1924 and 1965</li> <li>• Vanzetti, "Speech to the Court"</li> <li>• Yogi, "Transcendental Meditation" (HG)</li> </ul>
R 23 February	Exam 1	
<b>1960s– 1980</b>		
T 28 February	Race and Religious Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Religion and the Civil Rights Movement" (HG)</li> <li>• Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in My Mind"</li> <li>• X, from <i>Autobiography</i> (HG)</li> <li>• MLK, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (HG)</li> </ul>



# SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

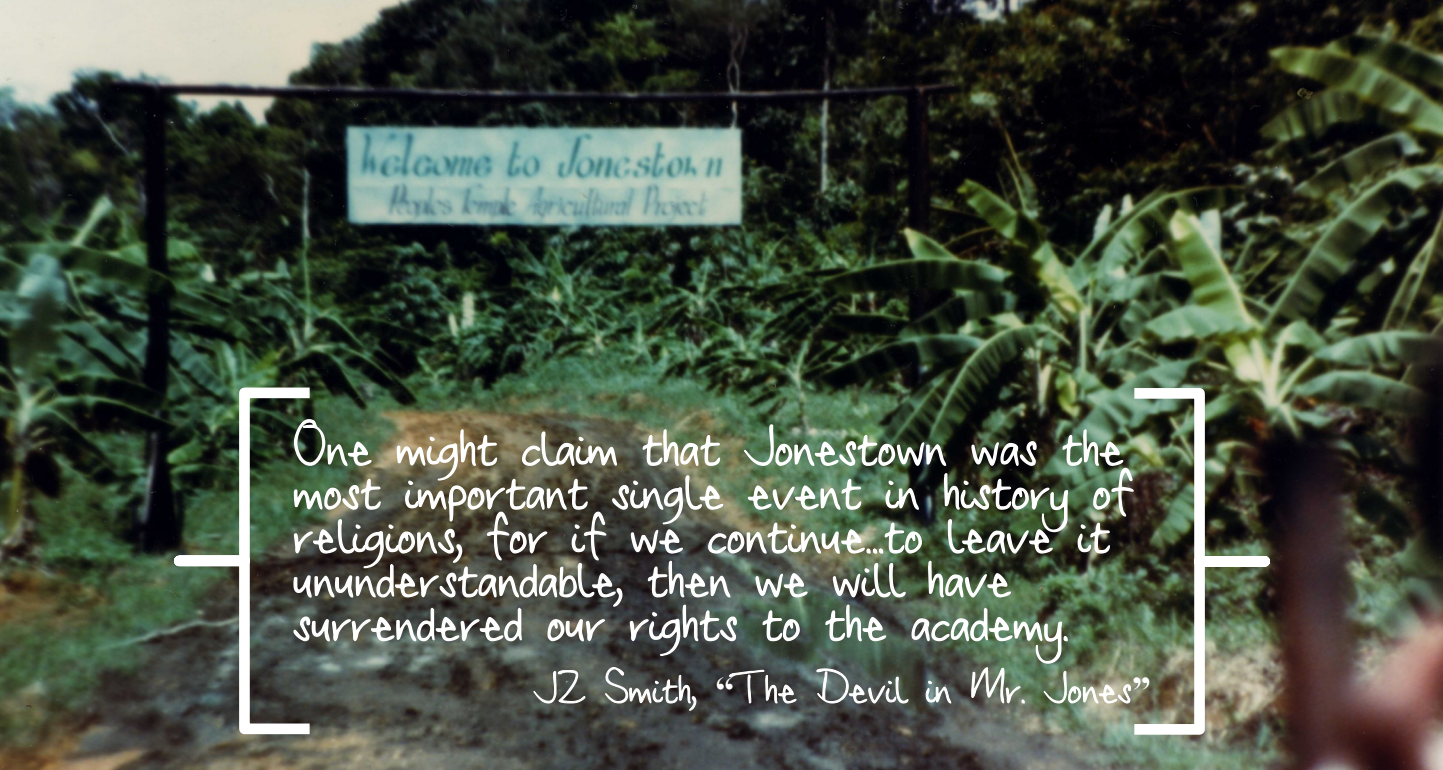
DATE	TOPIC	ASSIGNMENT
R 2 March RN	Reimagining the Divine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cone, "God is Black"; "The White Church &amp; Black Power" (HG)</li> <li>Shange, from <i>For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide</i></li> <li>Giovanni, "Ego Tripping"</li> <li>Deloria, "God is Red" (HG)</li> </ul>
T 7 March RN	Gender and Religious Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Religion and Gender" (HG)</li> <li>Plaskow, "The Right Question is Theological" (HG)</li> <li>Daly, from <i>Church and the Second Sex</i></li> <li>Lorde, "Open Letter to Mary Daly"</li> </ul>
R 9 March RN	All of Them Witches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Starhawk, "Witchcraft and Women's Culture" (HG)</li> <li>Budapest, "How This Book Was Born"</li> <li>Eds. Castelli and Rodman, "Woman as Witch"</li> <li>WITCH manifesto</li> </ul>
T 14 March	<b>spring break</b>	
R 16 March		
T 21 March RN	Radical Religious Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Popular Religion" (HG)</li> <li>Hubbard, "Two Rules for Happy Living" (HG)</li> <li>Bornstein, from <i>A Queer and Pleasant Danger</i></li> </ul>
R 23 March RN	Brainwashing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Barker, from <i>Making of a Moonie</i></li> <li>Palmer, "Lovers and Leaders in the Rajneesh Movement"</li> <li>ISKCON, "Philosophy"</li> <li><i>LA Times</i> articles re: Orange County ISKCON case</li> </ul>
T 28 March RN	Social Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chavez, "The Mexican American and the Church" (HG)</li> <li>Milk, "In Defense of Jim Jones"</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Screening:</b> <i>Jonestown, Life and Death of Peoples Temple</i></p>
R 30 March RN	Revolutionary Suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead"</li> <li>Hutchinson, "Why Did So Many Black Women Die?" "</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Screening:</b> <i>Jonestown, Life and Death of Peoples Temple</i></p>
T 4 April	Discussion / Catch-up / Review	
R 6 April	Midterm 2	
<b>1980s–2010s</b>		
T 11 April RN	Free Exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment Division of Oregon v. Smith (1990)</li> <li>Sullivan, "The World That Smith Made"</li> <li>RFRA (1993)</li> <li>Peppard on #NoDAPL, Theology, and Water Justice</li> </ul>
R 13 April RN	Contemporary Islam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hammer, "(Muslim) Women's Bodies, Islamophobia, &amp; US Politics"</li> <li>Mustafa, "My Body Is My Own Business"</li> <li>Hagri, "Or You Could Ask Us"</li> </ul>
T 18 April RN	Sexual Difference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bennion, "Many Faces of Polygamy"</li> <li>Gibson, "However Satisfied a Man Might Be"</li> <li>Wessinger, "Culting"</li> </ul>

# SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

DATE	TOPIC	ASSIGNMENT
R 20 April RN	Apocalypse Again	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gallagher, "Negotiating Waco"</li><li>• Gladwell, "Sacred and Profane: How Not to Negotiate with Believers"</li><li>• 911 calls from Mt. Carmel</li></ul>
T 25 April	Covington, <i>Salvation on Sand Mountain</i>	
R 27 April	Conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Orsi, "Snakes Alive! Religious Studies between Heaven and Earth"</li></ul>
T 2 May	Final project presentations	

## [ section info ]

Instructor: Prof. Megan Goodwin  
Email: [mpgoodwi@syr.edu](mailto:mpgoodwi@syr.edu)  
Office: Hall of Languages 513  
Office hours: TR 2:30–3:30 pm or by appointment  
Class meets: TR 12:30–1:50pm



Welcome to Jonestown  
Peoples Temple Agricultural Project

One might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in history of religions, for if we continue...to leave it understandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy.

JZ Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones"