

SCAR 2QQ3: CULTS, CONSPIRACIES & CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Winter 2021 – Online

Draft Outline

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Office: Via Zoom

Email: Via Avenue

Office Hours: Wednesdays 1:00 – 2:00

Lecture: Made Available on Mondays

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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. The course will try to articulate and consider 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. 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 theology 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 a term that both describes the ways we may seek to alienate the foreign and domesticate the mysterious.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course students should be able to:

- Have a better grasp of how religion is understood and defended by its adherents;
- Develop their communication and thinking skills

Required Materials and Texts

- All materials will be posted on our Avenue to Learn website.

Class Format

Each week, (typically on Monday or Tuesday), I will be posting a video lecture covering the week’s material. It is your obligation and responsibility to view the lectures. Luckily, they are going to be a lot of fun. On Wednesdays at 1:00 PM, I will be offering a Zoom office hour for questions and discussion of said material.

Course Evaluation – Overview

1. First Assignment – 30% due February 12
2. Second Assignment – 35% due March 19
3. Third Assignment – 35% due April 24

Course Evaluation – Details

Assignment/test 1 (30%), due February 12

At least one week before the first assignment is due you will be provided with four questions. You are to write a short reflection essay on 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. No secondary materials are allowed.

Assignment/test 2 (35%), due March 19

Essay topics will be provided after the first assignment and will refer to material studied after the week of February 1st. 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 materials studied in this course. Secondary materials are accepted. The essay should be no more than five double spaced pages in 12 pt font.

Assignment 3 (35%), due April 24

This assignment is identical in structure to the first assignment.

Weekly Course Schedule and Required Readings

Week 1 January 11

Introduction to Class

Week 2 January 18

Lecture: The Difficult Path of the Religious Life

Week 3 January 25

Lecture: Who Named You?

Readings: Please watch *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (Durkin)

Week 4 February 1

Lecture: Freedom and Desperation

Readings: Please watch *The Village* (Shyamalin)

Notes: Questions for Assignment One Posted

Week 5 February 8

Lecture: The Family Cults

Readings: Posted on Avenue

Notes: Assignment One Due by Noon on February 12th)

Week 6 February 15

Reading Week

Week 7 February 22

Lecture: The “Out of this World” Cults

Readings: Posted on Avenue

Week 8 March 1

Lecture: Return to Scripture (and Write Some New Ones)

Readings: Posted on Avenue

Week 9 March 8

Lecture: The Church of Satan

Readings: Posted on Avenue

Notes: Assignment Two Questions Posted

Week 10 March 15

Lecture: Scientology

Readings: Please watch *Going Clear* (Gibney)

Notes: Second Assignment Due By Noon on March 19th

Week 11 March 22

Lecture: The Peoples Temple: Cult, Crisis, or Conviction?

Readings: Please watch *Life & Death of Peoples Temple* (Nelson)

Week 12 March 29

Lecture: Who Tells Us What A Cult Is?

Readings: Please watch *Waco: Rules of Engagement* (Gazecki)

Week 13 April 5

Lecture: What is a Cult Again?

Readings: Please watch *Jesus Camp* (Ewing and Grady)

Week 14 April 12

Lecture: Conspiratorial Thinking and the Future of Cults

Readings: Please read posted lecture on Avenue.

Notes: Assignment Three Question Will Be Posted

Assignment Three will be due on April 24th.

Course Policies

Submission of Assignments

All course work will be submitted on Avenue to Learn.

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

To be discussed in class.

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 Statement

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](https://secretariat.mcmaster.ca/university-policies-procedures-guidelines/), located at <https://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.

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.

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.