Request for Curriculum Council Action

JAN 13 2000

TO: Mona Gardner, Associate Dean
CC: Irv Epstein, General Education Director

DATE SUBMITTED: January 12, 2000
(Please submit 15 copies of your proposal)

FROM: (Name) Carole Myscofski (Department) Religion

1. Proposed Action (Please check all that apply):

	Title	Number	Units
[X] New Course	Cults in America	310	1 0
[ ] Existing Course for which General Education credit is sought:			
[ ] Deletion			
[ ] Change title from			
to			
[ ] Change number from			
to			
[ ] Other			

2. Are you requesting General Education unit and/or flag credit? ____ Yes X No (If No, skip to #4.)

3a. Please check the category, if any, for which you are requesting General Education unit credit:

[ ] Analysis of Values [ ]Formal Reasoning [ ]The Natural Sciences
[ ] The Arts [ ]Intellectual Traditions [ ]Issues
[X] Contemporary Social Institutions [ ]Literature [ ]Laboratory
[ ] Cultural and Historical Change [ ]Modern and Classical Languages [ ]Physical Education

3b. Please check the flag(s), if any, you are seeking:

[ ] Writing Intensive [ ]Global Diversity [X]U.S. Diversity

4. Please insert here the proposed catalog course description. Course descriptions should be limited to no more than 50 words, not counting (a) title; (b) prerequisite; (c) General Education category; and (d) when offered.

Over>

see attached

5. Please list any prerequisites: _____

6. When will this course first be offered? Fall 2000

7. Please indicate how often course is offered. *Check only the item that best describes this course.*

[ ]Offered each semester
[ ]Offered each Fall Term
[ ]Offered each spring
[ ]Offered each May Term
[ ]Offered each semester and May Term
[ ]Offered occasionally
[X]Offered in alternate years
[ ]Offered in alternate years, Fall Term
[ ]Offered in alternate years, Spring
[ ]Offered in alternate years, May Term
[ ]Offered annually
[ ]Offered every third semester
[ ]Offered as needed
[ ]Offered on request
[ ]Offered by arrangement

8. Is/are any other department(s) affected in any way by this request (e.g., course is cross-listed, team-taught, etc.)?
[X] No. [ ] Yes. In what way?

_____

_____
Signature of the Head(s) of the Affected Department(s) or School(s)

9. **WRITTEN RATIONALES:** If this proposal presents a new course (whether for General Education credit or not), an existing course for which General Education credit is now being sought, a May Term course, or a new major, minor or concentration, please attach a written rationale, following the guidelines found in the *Curriculum Development Handbook.*

10. The Curriculum Council assumes that the faculty members of your department have seen and approved of this request. Please sign below if this assumption is correct:

Carole Myrick
_____
Signature of Faculty Member Primarily Responsible for This Proposal

Carole Myrick
_____
Signature of the Head of the Department or School

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Religion 310 CULTS IN AMERICA

A critical investigation of so-called "cults," New Religious Movements, sects, and alternative spirituality formed over the past 150 years in the United States. Includes study of a wide range of phenomena, from millenarian groups to the New Age, and their purpose and place in contemporary society. Fulfills general education credit in Contemporary Social Institutions category and U. S. diversity flag. Offered in alternate years.

RATIONALE

1. This new course is an expansion of our curriculum at the 300-level, where we have deleted (and not replaced) several redundant courses over the past 2 years. This course has been offered, in several different forms, as a 'Special Topics' course in the department four times since its creation—first taught by Carole Myscofski as "New Religions," now in May Term as "The End of the World." The topic is within Carole's research expertise and is a perennial favorite among students. This will offer a more regular opportunity to investigate New Religious Movements using scholarly perspectives.

2. Carole Myscofski will teach it, adding it to her regular roster of courses; there is thus sufficient staffing.

3. No course will be deleted, but the special topics courses related to this topic will not be repeated.

4. Because "cults" are a popular subject in religious studies, it was decided to offer this at the 300-level in order to include the advanced interpretations and perspectives that would allow serious and scholarly consideration of the topic. This will also provide another advanced course for Religion majors (suitable also for majors in the related fields of History and Sociology), that incorporates both a complex and controversial subject matter and the critical tools for analysis.

5. 1.0 units only.

6. Library and other resources are sufficient for the course, but more advanced texts, videos and CD-ROM products will be requested to enhance research for the course.

GENERAL EDUCATION CREDIT REQUEST: Contemporary Social Institutions

Course submitted for approval: **RELIGION 310: CULTS IN AMERICA**

Criteria met:

1. Courses examine the evolution of one or more contemporary social institutions . . . and analyze the current structure and functions . . . and its relationship with other institutions.

This course investigates the evolution, over the past 150 years in the United States, of those social institutions called "cults." Despite the title of the course, we will cut through the inflammatory rhetoric about New Religious Movements (NRMs) to take a look at the small, dynamic, and often controversial religious groups that are changing the face of religion in America. Included in the category of NRMs are a wide range of phenomena: new versions of ancient religions, millenarian Christian denominations, imported religions of Asia, and elusive New Age spirituality. In this class, we will consider the structure and function of novel religions in America, the patterns of new religious phenomena, how the new trends fit into the broader field of American religion, and how we may come to define religion itself when the 'new' meets the old. At the same time, we will—as seems increasingly necessary—consider the connections between religion and government in the U.S. and the role of governmental observation and even control of the growth of "cults" of all sorts in contemporary society.

2. Courses engage students in discovering underlying values . . . embodied in the structure and functioning of the institution[s].

In this course, our purpose will be not only to learn about the history, teachings and appeal of the new trends in religions and of each group but also to consider how each fits into the broader category of American religion. Thus the course objectives are twofold. First, we will examine the doctrinal, ritual, and sociological aspects of each NRM, addressing directly the issues that might puzzle us most about these new religions: why might one join a "cult"? what about its beliefs, practices, leadership, and community structures seems appealing to members? what new and old values do they espouse? Through these inquiries, we will explore the underlying values of the groups themselves—including their obvious novelty—and the concept of religion, stretching its definitional rubric to include the "new religions." Second, we will consider the role of religion in American life, from the viewpoints of contemporary scholars and of the religious members themselves. This course will introduce a critical perspective on the mainstream or media views of novel religious ideas and groups, weighing their position as part of alternative lives or philosophies. As part of this second objective, we will expand our vision to include the underlying values of American society, the expectations of the dominant religious institutions, and their representation in public media and law.

3. Students participate in assignments and activities that require them to consider . . .how . . . attitudes, convictions, and actions are influenced by the institution[s] studied.

Since the upsurge of new religions in the U.S. during the 1970s, one of the important factors in studying NRMs is the impact of such religious groups and their particular beliefs on the daily lives of individual members and their social communities. Undeniably, many NRMs demand near-total

commitments of their members, drawing them away from mainstream society, religions, and family contacts. It has been further argued that religious life in America has also been transformed into a sort of "religious marketplace," in which believers—like amateur chefs—select separate, appealing, but not necessarily coherent parts of religions and stir them together into a new stew of beliefs. Some of the new concoctions remain individualized paths for religious seekers, while others shift gradually into still newer NRMs. In this course, then, we will study the range of influence of novel religious activity, considering how members of NRMs see the world around them differently and act accordingly. We will also consider the influence of newer alternative religions on mainstream religions and on local and national political issues in the 1980s and 1990s, following such topics as the growth of popular, large-scale, non-denomination Christian services, the presence or absence of cult members in public life, and the role of the FBI in responding to potentially violent cults.

4. Courses provide opportunities for students to observe the actual functioning of the institution[s] studied and/or to interact with . . . participants in the ongoing activities of the institution[s] through . . . appropriate means.

Because of the potentially volatile nature of some New Religious Movements (witness, for example, the Heaven's Gate movement), the opportunities for students to observe the actual functioning of these religious institutions directly will be limited. There are nonetheless a wide variety of appropriate means for pursuing further understanding of the day-to-day activities of cults and the lives of their members. We will, then, take advantage of newly-emerging personal statements from former cult members, new videos on NRMs in the U.S. and carefully delimited Internet searches for the active sites of contemporary groups.

*In addition, courses proposed for credit at the 300- . . . level also require a significant research component and require students to frame questions of public policy and to grapple with answers to those questions.

As indicated above, one of the central issues in the study of new religious movements is their proper place in the religious realm in contemporary America, and the role of the local or federal government in monitoring and even controlling cult formation. As part of their required research into a specific cult, students will be asked to investigate the place of legal limitations for cultic behavior and to consider the appropriate role—given constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and separation of religion and state—of the government in regulation of personal and social activities.

Request for 'Encountering U.S. Diversity' flag

Course: RELIGION 310: CULTS IN AMERICA

Flag criteria:
1. Courses consider one group, its alternative value system and experience, and its encounters with dominant ideas and institutions, **or** examine interactions between and among diverse groups.

Insofar as 'cults' or New Religious Movements in America may be considered a single group, this course will be focusing on what may be the definitive alternative value system among American religions. As this course begins, we will consider how NRMs, as a whole, express alternative values and engage those seeking an alternative lifestyle; indeed, many who chose membership in NRMs report that they have found the dominant religious institutions somehow lacking—in modern perspective, energy, or flexibility. We will maintain that perspective on NRMs through the course, as we investigate individual groups, and will include specific study of the critical encounters between members of NRMs and representatives of another dominant institution—the federal government. Part of our work will also be to examine the relationships among religions in America, and more specifically among these alternative religions. Not surprisingly, there are shared beliefs and histories among the older NRMs and shared lineages in more recent groups—as well as substantial disagreement over the adequacy of rivals to attain religious truth, enlightenment, human perfection, or whatever goal is claimed by individual movements. At the same time, as this class will emphasize, the category of 'New Religious Movement' allows us to compare the social structures among its exemplars, and discover their minor but critical differences in leadership and community coherence.

2. Courses examine process of accommodation, resistance, and appropriation.

The history of New Religious Movements in America, particularly in the past 5 years, has been primarily one of resistance to the dominant culture and the social norms shaped by Christian religious and related secular ideas. This is most graphically represented by the heterogeneous beliefs and practices of many smaller cults and the isolation of members within them, and may be understood to present NRMs as true alternatives to the mainstream religions which their members deem false or simply outmoded. Members may feel their difference from the mainstream in two contradictory but related ways: they may pride themselves on being participants in <u>the</u> uniquely true religion, while experiencing and even expecting rejection and derision from nonmembers.

Across the period under study in this class, however, we will also attend to the pattern of accommodation to the dominant culture and the appropriation of mainstream religious and folk beliefs and practices. For example, nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century NRMs, as they sought to achieve a sort of acceptability for middle-class members, gradually integrated spiritualism or Asian esotericism with the use of churchlike buildings and Protestant ritual structures. And NRMs may be said to have captured an American sense of adventure and individualism, offering an eclectic range of beliefs and practices, and drawing symbols from sources as diverse as Christian theology, media depictions of UFOs, and American lore of the Wild West.

3. Courses include some material that develops students' ability to consider the consequences of advantage and disadvantage in their own lives.

Through our readings about the histories of New Religious Movements and particularly in our explorations, through readings, videos, and NRM Websites, of members' roles and lives, students will be encouraged to consider the implications of membership in these alluring but controversial religious groups. We will pay close attention to the problems of membership, but also to the benefits of participation in a small, close-knit, and supportive religious community. At the same time, we will locate these NRMs within the American religious landscape, noting their strong similarities to other accepted religious traditions. In this way, the course will encourage students to "acknowledge and appreciate"* the religious diversity of their contemporary society and the distinct advantages of the right to religious freedom.

*from the U. S. Diversity Flag Goals, Number 3.