COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This course offers a thematic introduction to the history of New Religious Movements (NRM) from the mid-19th century to the present day. Often labeled as “cults” by the state and established religious institutions, new religions offer modern believers alternative spiritual and ideological solutions to age-old problems. In this class, students will be introduced to the teachings and practices of prominent NRMs in North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, from wide-spread movements such as Scientology, Mormonism, and the Unification Church to lesser known groups such as the Church of the Almighty God, Neo-Paganism, and Raëlism. We will explore the emergence of the anti-cult campaign in the second half of the 20th century, the relationship between apocalyptic sects such as the Peoples Temple and the Branch Davidians and political and social protest, and the role of Asian religions such as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation in the development of New Age religiosity. In addition, we will learn how new religious movements such as Wicca and the Children of God helped reshape gender roles and changed mainstream views about sexuality, and how developments in mass media and popular culture contributed to the creation of new groups such as the Star Wars inspired Temple of the Jedi Order (Jediism), the Church of the Latter-Day Dude (Dudeism), as well as UFO religions such as Heaven’s Gate. Throughout the semester, students will be exposed to a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, from academic articles and scholarly essays to documentaries, feature films, and TV shows. No previous knowledge in Religious Studies is required.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:
Class Attendance and Participation: 30%
Three Response Papers: 30% (10% each)
Final Project: 40%

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:
Class attendance is part of the learning process. Every student will be permitted to miss up to one lecture without their grade being adversely affected. Missing additional lecture times will lower grades. If you will miss an assignment due to a legitimate absence (such as serious illnesses, religious holidays, or University-sanctioned events), you must notify me in advance of the class you will be missing. In addition, class attendance means participation. This is a discussion-based class, so you must come prepared, after having completed all assigned readings, and be ready to discuss them in class.
RESPONSE PAPERS
Throughout the summer term, students will be asked to watch three documentary films: The Source Family, Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple, and The Immortalists. All films will be available to stream through the library website. The weekend before we discuss them in class, students will be given a set of guiding questions that will help them analyze the film against the backdrop of the weekly readings. Each essay will be 1000 words. The deadlines are clearly marked on the syllabus. As these are short assignments, there will be no extensions.

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PAPER:
For this paper, students will conduct their own independent research on a New Religious Movement not covered in the weekly readings and present it in class during our final meeting (10-15 minute). A list of potential NRMs will be provided, but students may also choose another one with the instructor’s approval. A written version of their report (2500-words) will be submitted electronically by noon, Sunday, July 7th, to oritavor@sas.upenn.edu.

READINGS:
The required textbooks for this course are:

- Additional weekly readings on Canvas.

You are welcome to purchase the textbooks if you want, but it is not required. PDF copies of both can be found in the “Files” folder on our Canvas website.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNED READINGS

Week One: New Frontiers, New Beginnings
5/28 – Course Introduction + The Second Great Awakening
5/30 – Mormonism + Scientology

Readings:

Week Two: Hippies, Gurus, and Alternative Families
6/4 – Transcendental Meditation + Hare Krishna
6/6 – Children of God + Source Family
Readings:
*The Source Family* (dir. Jodi Wille and Maria Demopoulos, 2012)

**Week Three: “Cults,” Violence, and the Media**
6/11 – Unification Church + Brainwashing
6/13 – Peoples Temple + Branch Davidians

Readings:
*Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*, 78-98, 120-140.

**Week Four: Mystics and Provocateurs**
6/18 – NRM in China and Japan
6/20 – Theosophy + Spiritualism + Channeling

Readings:

**Week Five: Witches, Aliens, and Cyborgs**
6/25 – Neo-Paganism + Satanism
6/27 – Transhumanism + UFO religions

Readings:
*The Immortalists* (dir. David Alvarado and Jason Sussberg, 2014)

**Week Six: Jedi Knights and Spaghetti Monsters**
7/2 – New Age and Invented Religions

Readings: