

Professor Rebecca Moore
REL S 395 New Religions
San Diego State University

NEW RELIGIONS ASSIGNMENTS

I. Participation

By definition this means coming to class prepared and willing to discuss readings and topics. This will be measured through in-class projects and attendance, and not through monopolizing class discussions.

II. 4–5 page analytical paper. Due Feb 19

Take two of the readings in the Lorne Dawson volume (or some of the additional readings posted on Blackboard) and compare and contrast the arguments presented in them. You could analyze the articles about who joins NRMs and why; the brainwashing debate; arguments about conversion processes; types of New Religions; historical cases of New Religions and NRMs today; and so on. Within the page limit outlined I'd like you to discuss the arguments presented and to assess them as well: which argument do you find more persuasive?

The following list is a suggested outline. You do not have to slavishly follow this—and in fact I wish you would be creative—but you should include the following elements in your paper:

1. Introduction: What is the subject and what will you be arguing?
2. Observation: What is the subject or topic of each text?
3. Identification: What is each author's argument? What are their main points?
4. Analysis: What is the evidence they provide in support of their arguments?
5. Evaluation: Which argument is stronger? Explain why.
6. Conclusion: What have we learned? What remains to be studied?

III. 2–3 page "Finding Aid" for Special Collections. Due Mar 19

What is (or are) Special Collections? The Special Collections and University Archive of the SDSU Library house unusual, one-of-a-kind items. The University Archive contains materials directly relevant to SDSU, such as faculty notes and memorabilia, minutes and notes from department and university meetings, and other items relating to the history of SDSU.

Special Collections, in contrast, houses rare, fine, unique, and valuable books, periodicals, manuscripts, and documents which require preservation, security and care in handling. It also holds other valuable historical items such as photographs, prints, postcards, memorabilia, scrapbooks, and oral histories (<http://library.sdsu.edu/scua>).

This is a long way of saying that Special Collections has some very cool stuff. We will be visiting Special Collections in March (date TBA) with a guided tour led by Robert Ray, head of the department.

As a follow up to this tour, you are assigned the following tasks:

1. Identify an item, any item, relating to New Thought or New Age which you would like to study further.
2. Examine the physical item closely: what condition is it in? old? falling apart? in relatively good condition for something that is 50 or 100 years old?
3. Examine the contents closely: publication information, author, text, illustrations, number of chapters, chapter titles, etc.



4. Read the item closely: what is the subject matter of the item? what is the author's approach to the subject (instructional? informational? advocacy? criticism?).
5. Identify other items through the SDSU Library catalog that seem similar in subject, style, topic, or are written by the same author.
6. Put all of this information in a 2–3 page descriptive paper that might help someone else who is considering doing research on New Thought or New Age in Special Collections.

In other words, this assignment asks you to evaluate an object (probably a book, magazine, newspaper, or pamphlet) in terms of its physical condition, its actual content, and its historical and literary context. While it is unlikely (though not impossible!) that you will become a university archivist, you can transfer the skills you learn in this assignment to a number of real world situations: evaluation of products, manuals, services, contracts, and so on. In addition, you may find that you would like to do a research paper using materials located in Special Collections, for either this course or another one.

Important note: hours for Special Collections are M–F 10:00 to 4:00 p.m.

IV. 2–3 page fieldnotes for site visit. Due April 16

The second unit of the course focuses on New Age and New Thought religions. To help us understand these religions more deeply than simply reading about them, students in the course will visit a worship service and observe closely what goes on: demographics, topics covered in worship, general ambience, etc. After your site visit you will complete a simple form that presents your observations.

Grading criteria include completeness of form, extent of fieldnote observations, accuracy and care in the write-up, and an attitude and spirit of adventure. This project will enable students to integrate insights and theories learned in class into actual field research. Your form will include the name of anyone who accompanied you as a "buddy." This document, called Fieldnotes, is on Blackboard under "Assignments."

You may earn 5 points extra credit if you accompany a classmate as a "buddy" to their site (which is different from your own).

V. 4–5 page analysis of media coverage of a "classic cult." Due May 7

Rather than writing a traditional research paper about a particular new religion, you are asked to write a short analysis of how the news media cover(ed) a particular new religion. There is a large body of scholarly literature about how the news media cover new religions; and there is a wealth of news coverage of these groups. To list just a few examples:

- Raid on Fundamentalist Mormon Church (2008)
- Raid on Island Pond commune in 1984 (The Twelve Tribes); ongoing raids in Germany (2012)
- "Muslim" "extremists"
- Raelian announcement of cloning a human being (2003)
- Scientology and Tom Cruise (or pick whichever celebrity you like)
- Scientology and psychiatry
- Failed landing of Space Brothers for Unarians in El Cajon (2001)
- Murder-suicide of members of Children of God (now The Family International) (2005)
- Branch Davidians at Waco (1993)
- The Satanism Scare (pick a single instance, e.g., Judas Priest trial, 1990)
- Peoples Temple and Jonestown (1978)

Aimee Semple MacPherson's disappearance in 1926
San Diego Theosophical Society in early 20th century
Disclosure of fakery in Spiritualism, Theosophy, other new or old-new religions
Tony Alamo Christian Ministries (Alamo convicted of rape in 2009)
James Arthur Ray and the sweat lodge deaths in 2009
Death of Rev. Sun Myung Moon of Unification Church (2012)
and many more!

Your paper will incorporate the theories concerning new religions—especially media coverage of new religions—that we learn about in class, as well as secondary literature you identify in your research. The paper will analyze media coverage of a specific incident or a specific group. You could pick an incident, such as a raid, to see how the group is described and characterized, and to see whose voices are privileged in the discussion; or you could pick a particular group and examine media coverage over time, e.g., the Moonies (formerly Unification Church, now the World Family Federation). You will study the media coverage and present your interpretation of that coverage. In other words, you are writing history. Given the fact that you have only 4–5 pages, stay narrowly focused on a time period or an event.

V. Three essay exams

Test # 1 is scheduled for Feb 24. You will be given two sets of questions, with three questions in each set. You will be asked to write on one question from the first set, and one question from the second. 20 points

Test # 2 is scheduled for Mar 26 and follows the same format. 40 points

Test # 3 is scheduled for May 12, 1:00-3:00 p.m., and follows the same format. 60 points