

CULTS & SECTS

IS RELIGION DANGEROUS?

Fall 2020 • #NUcults • PHIL4390



*THE PANDEMIC IS
STILL HAPPENING*

Nothing about this semester will be normal. Sorry. Let's try to be patient with ourselves and one another.

*THIS IS A
HARD CLASS*

PHIL4390 is a senior seminar. We are going to read. A lot. Of hard stuff. This hard stuff is important. Not sorry.

*JUST KEEP
SWIMMING*

I'm not expecting you to do your best work in the midst of a global crisis.
No one is failing this class.

ABOUT THIS CLASS

"Cult" is a word that gets used a lot, but what exactly IS a cult? Most often, cult describes beliefs we don't like or that make us uncomfortable, practices we think are stupid or exploitative, and groups we worry are dangerous. But is religion dangerous? Or do we use religion in dangerous ways? This class considers some ways "cult" gets used (by popular media, law enforcement, journalists, and even scholars) to criticize, discourage, and punish minoritized groups who do religion *too* differently – especially when those groups use religion to challenge white supremacy in what is now the United States.



WHAT WE'RE READING

You will need:

- Butler, *Parable of the Sower*
- Butler, *Parable of the Talents*
- Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*
- Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming*

Everything else is on Canvas.

CHALLENGING MEDIA

Butler's work is AMAZING, but it's often violent and painful to read. That's true for many of the sources we'll tackle this semester.

Please take care of yourself while we work with this material and let me know if you need an alternate assignment or a break.

OCTAVIA E.
BUTLER



CLASS FORMAT

COVID19 + immunocompromised professor = we're doing this thing **remotely and asynchronously**. At the time of this writing, I do not intend to have the class meet via Zoom or any other kind of video conference. If the group is strongly in favor of doing so, we can revisit this option.

Each unit requires you to review the assigned materials in advance of

our discussions (so you should complete readings, podcasts, etc. *by* the date on the syllabus). Several topics include feature films or documentary screenings. I'll be initiating each discussion on our **Medium** page during our scheduled meeting time. You can join the conversation there, AMA on twitter, or check in privately via chat on Canvas. Review the **opt-in grading** instructions for more information.

"AND HAVE BROUGHT HUMANITY TO THE EDGE OF OBLIVION: BECAUSE THEY THINK THEY ARE WHITE."

JAMES BALDWIN, "ON WHITENESS AND OTHER LIES"





CLASS EXPECTATIONS

OR, WHAT TO EXPECT
WHEN YOU'RE STILL
EXPECTED TO LEARN
THINGS IN THE MIDDLE
OF A GLOBAL CRISIS

Let's be honest: **none of us know what this semester will look like.** I'll do my best to provide clear, timely information as we continue to navigate this unprecedented historical moment. In return, I ask that you try to be as patient as you can with yourself, your fellow classmates, and with me, with the understanding that we're all doing our best at a time when getting *anything* done often feels overwhelming if not impossible.

That said: this is a senior seminar, and I've chosen our materials accordingly. You should have some familiarity with humanities scholarship, if not the discipline of religious studies. If you're *not* familiar with humanities research, these materials will be especially challenging. I strongly encourage you to check out the guidelines on how to read research articles and listen to academic podcasts.

Treat every person in this class and every concept you encounter with scholarly respect. As scholars of religion, we don't evaluate the truth or validity of any religious tradition. We examine the evidence we have to position that tradition's practices, beliefs, teachings, and products in the broader context of religion(s) and culture(s).



TECHNOLOGY

I am really trying to keep us off Zoom, y'all, for both professional and ethical reasons. We *will* be listening to podcasts; we're also using Medium (a writing forum) for discussions, Twitter for our AMA (ask me anything) sessions, YouTube/Vimeo for streaming video, and the quiz & chat functions on Canvas.

Nothing we're doing requires you to be a computer whiz, but if you start feeling lost or overwhelmed, please ask me for help. If you don't have access to high-speed internet and need alternate assignments, let me know and we'll work something out.

PARTICIPATION

In "normal" semesters, I have a whole chart about how to earn participation credit. This semester? **Let's all just do the best we can.** Any engagement beyond what is explicitly required = awesome. I hope you'll want to talk about the material we'll be covering beyond what's explicitly required, but I won't penalize you for being short on the ability to even right now.

If you're having trouble keeping up, please let me know as soon as you can. **You do not have to have a registered disability to request accommodations** – but I won't know you need help or more time unless you tell me so. You don't have to tell me *why* you're having a hard time, but getting in touch means I can come up with a plan to get you what you need.

It is 100% okay to be struggling to retain new information or keep up with schoolwork right now. Again: we are living through a crisis (several, honestly) and that stress affects our moods, our energy, and our cognition. **I will never judge you for needing more time or an alternate assignment, but I can't help you if you don't tell me you need help.**

YOU ARE WELCOME HERE

I am committed to making our campus and classroom (including its online analogs) a supportive learning environment for people of all races, genders, ethnicities, abilities, classes, ages, sexualities, and statuses of documentation.



KNOW YOUR IX

Despite recent efforts to the contrary, gender- and sex-based harassment is still a Civil Rights offense and survivors are still entitled to confidential support. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you're entitled to help. [Here are Northeastern's resources.](#)



PLEASE DON'T CHEAT

Cheating is the only way to fail this class. Just: please don't. Complete the [plagiarism tutorial](#) by 15 September so I know that you know what plagiarism is. Check out the resources on Canvas for more info. [Short version: do your own work & cite everything!](#)



OPT-IN GRADING

YOU DECIDE HOW
MUCH YOU CAN
HANDLE & HOW MUCH
YOU HAVE TO GIVE

There's a lot of evidence to suggest that grading isn't (and maybe can't be) 100% objective, and that often grades reflect unconscious instructor biases. This is class hopes to challenge & disrupt white supremacy. So let's try something different, shall we?

Opt-in grading = you decide what kind of and how much energy you can devote to this course. Given current crises, here's the plan.

Option F: failure is not an option.

Option D: turn in literally any work this semester/pandemic. Congrats, you've got yourself a D. It's not fancy, but you pass the class.

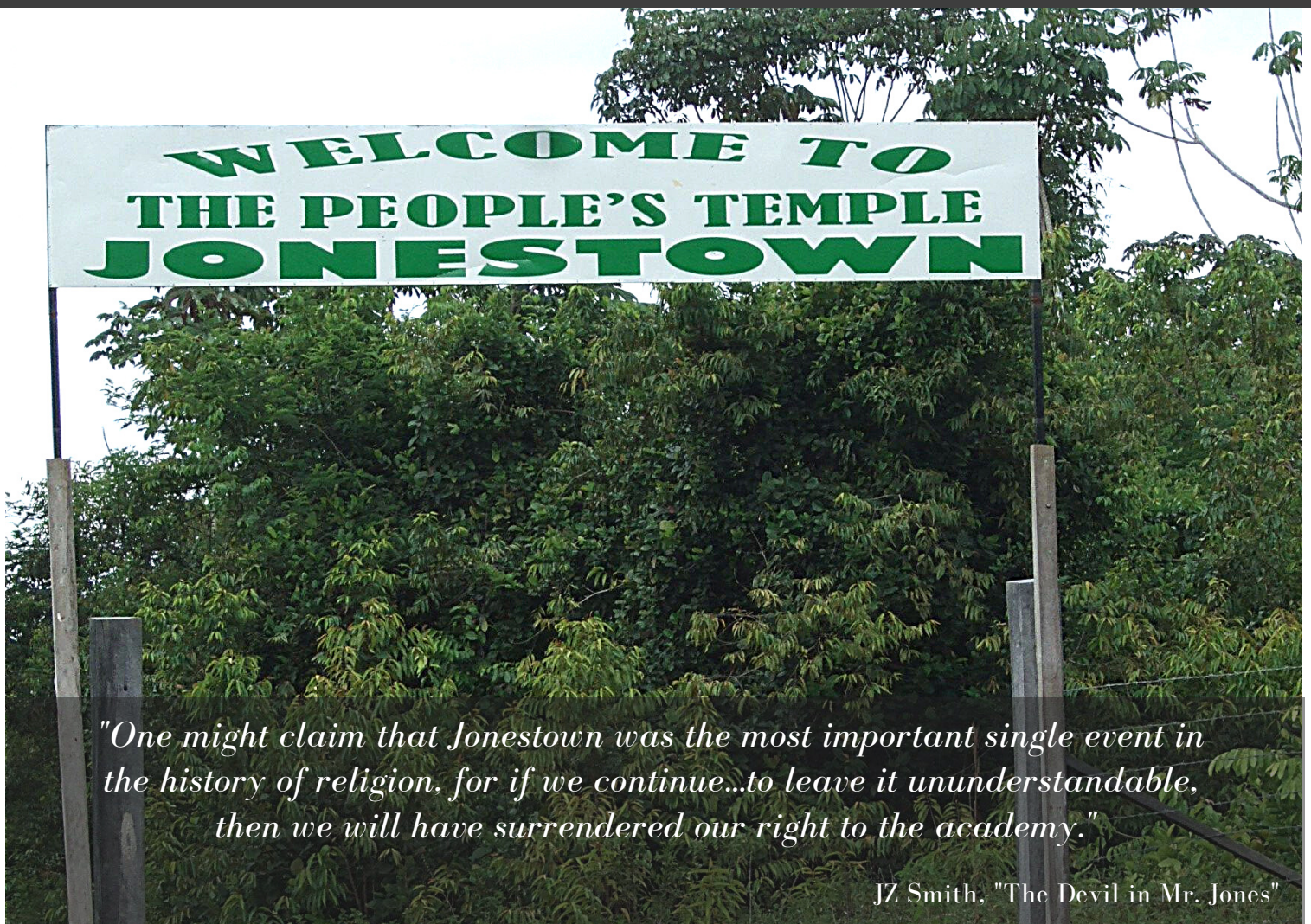
Option C: turn in at least 75% of your reading notes (15/20). Bam! That's a C.

Option B: turn in at least 85% of your reading notes (17/20) + at least one film analysis + participate in most class discussions (minimum 20/25; via Twitter, Medium, or Canvas chat). Mazel tov on your B.

Option A: 95% (19/20) of your reading notes + two film analyses + participate in 90% of class discussions (23/25). You earn an A, also several naps. Just kidding, everybody deserves naps.

Tell stories
Filled with
Facts.

Make People
Touch and
Taste and
KNOW.
Make People
FEEL
FEEL!
Feel!



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

JZ Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones"

ASSIGNMENTS: READING NOTES

THE ONE NON-OPTIONAL
PIECE OF YOUR OPT-IN
GRADE OPTIONS

Ultimately, this class has two central goals: to help you think more carefully and critically about what religion is and what people do with it; and to help you become a more careful and critical thinker and reader/consumer of media, period. This assignment is designed to help you meet both goals.

Before each discussion, you'll complete your reading notes assignments on Canvas through the "quizzes" function. For each **bolded reading** on the syllabus, identify the argument (1 sentence), the evidence used to support the argument (3-5 sentences), and the significance of the argument (3-5 sentences). Basically, what does the author want you to think, what are they using as proof to trying to convince you, and why does it matter? (This, by the way, is something you should ask of every single thing you read.) Cite all references to assigned sources and consult the assignment sheet for more instructions. **You must closely follow instructions to receive credit for completing this and all assignments.**

CLASS DISCUSSIONS

SHARE YOUR
THOUGHTS,
QUESTIONS, AND
CONCERNS WITH
ME AND YOUR
CLASSMATES

My "lectures" this semester will be on our Medium page. (Any copyrighted material I reference will be on Canvas.) I'll post breakdowns of the materials, related links & resources, and ask you to reflect on what you read/ listened to/watched. Discussion prompts will be on Medium; you have options about how & where you want to respond:

- highlight a section of the Medium post and ask a question or offer a comment on the page
- highlight a section and tweet it at me with your comment/question
- Ask Me Anything (AMA) about the day's topic on Twitter (@mpgPhD #NUcults)
- respond privately via Canvas chat

FILM ANALYSES

WATCH SAD STUFF
AND EXPLAIN WHY
IT MATTERS TO
THE STUDY OF
RELIGION

It turns out there aren't a lot of uplifting documentaries about attempts to chill religious difference and free exercise? So we'll be watching two very depressing documentaries in class: *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* and *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. We'll live-tweet the films and you'll have the opportunity to analyze either or both in conversation with other assigned sources. Check out the assignment sheet for the rubric and more explicit instructions.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Date	Topic	Assignment
11 September	What's religion? What's a cult?	Post introduction to class KI101 E102, "Who Gets Left out of Religion?" KI101 E110, "Cults" Baldwin, from "Letter from a Region in My Mind"
15 September	What does race have to do with religion & cults?	KI101 E202, "Intersectionality" Lorde, "Open Letter to Mary Daly" Bayoumi, "Racing Religion" Giovanni, "Ego Tripping" Shange, from <i>For Colored Girls</i>
18 September	Race and religion (1)	Oluo, intro & Ch 1-5 Chan Malik, "Race" Gerbner, "Race"
22 September	Race and religion (2)	Oluo, Ch 6, 10, 12, 15-17 Rana, "Race"
25 September	<i>Parable of the Sower</i> (1)	Jemisin, "Three Reads" Butler 1993, Ch 1-12
29 September	<i>Parable of the Sower</i> (2)	Butler 1993, Ch 13-25
RADICAL RELIGIOUS INNOVATION & RESISTANCE		
2 October	Religion as rebellion	Screening: <i>Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property</i> Turner, Confessions (excerpts) Gerbner, "Conversion and Race in Colonial Slavery" Stutman, "Nat Turner's Divine Violence"
6 October	Religion as revelation	Jackson, from Gifts of Power Hull, "Uses of Power" Bassard, "Rituals of Desire" "African American Shakers"
9 October	Religion as "barbary"	Mueller, "Prologue" Mueller, "Race on the Page, Race on the Body" Marr, "Turkey Is in our Midst" Mueller, "Is Mormonism Still Racist?"
13 October	Religion as white supremacy	Weisenfeld, "Framing the Nation" Baker, "Birth of the Klan's Nation" Newton, "Scared Sheetless" <i>Birth of a Nation</i> (1915, clips) <i>A Mormon Maid</i> (1917, clips) <i>BlackKKlansman</i> (clips)
16 October	Religion as nativism	1924 Immigration Act 1965 Immigration Act Baker, "The Klan's Nationalism" Baker, "White Skin Will Not Redeem a Black Heart" Baker, "Guardians of Privilege" Minhaj, "We Cannot Stay Silent about George Floyd"
20 October	Religion as women's work	Hurston, "Mother Catherine" Kaplan-Levenson, "Mother Catherine Seals" Guillory, from <i>Spiritual & Social Transformation</i> RSP, "African American Spiritual Churches"

RELIGIO-RACIAL IDENTITY

Date	Topic	Assignment
23 October	<i>Black Gods of the Metropolis</i> (1)	Savage, "Forward" Fauset, "Introduction" Fauset, "Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North"
27 October	<i>Black Gods of the Metropolis</i> (2)	Fauset, "The Negro and His Religion" Fauset, "Why the Cults Attract" Hardy, "No Mystery God" Greene Hayes, "Black Gods Among Us"
30 October	New World A-Coming (1)	Weisenfeld, intro & conclusion Claude & Weisenfeld, " Formation of R-R Identity " (AAS21 podcast)
3 November	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (2)	Weisenfeld, "Narratives" (Part 1, pp 23 – 88)
6 November	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (3)	Weisenfeld, "Selfhood" (Part 2, pp 89 – 166)
10 November	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (4)	Weisenfeld, "Community" (Part 3, pp 167 – 278)
13 November	<i>New World A-Coming</i> (5)	Conversation with Dr. Weisenfeld (podcast) Weisenfeld, "The House We Live In"

RELIGION AND WHAT COMES AFTER IT

17 November	Surveilling religion	Johnson, "Red Squads and Black Radicals" Gin Lum and Martin, "The Rise of Internal Security" Evanzz, "The FBI and the Nation of Islam"
20 November	Religion as revolution	Screening: Life and Death of Peoples Temple Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones" Milk, " In Defense of Jim Jones " Peoples Temple Songbook
24 November	Revolutionary suicide as religion	Kempton, "Revolutionary Suicide" Newton, "The Way of Liberation" Q042 Transcript, FBI Transcription Hutchinson, "Why Did So Many Black Women Die?" Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion"
27 November	No class: Thanksgiving	
1 December	Defining religion	Move timeline Evans, "Introduction" Evans, "Policing Religion" Evans, "Building a Cult" Evans, "Conclusion" Demby, " Still Trying to Make Sense "
4 December	<i>Parable of the Talents</i> (1)	Butler 1998, prologue – Ch 11 Aguirre, "Octavia Butler's Prescient Vision"
8 December	<i>Parable of the Talents</i> (2)	Butler 1998, Ch 12 - epilogue



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MEDIUM.COM/CULTS-SECTS



DR. MEGAN GOODWIN
*IS NOT ON CAMPUS
THIS SEMESTER*

PHIL4390 NU ATTRIBUTES

- Engaging Difference and Diversity (DD)
- Interpreting Culture (IC)
- Capstone Experience (CE)
- Writing Intensive (WI)

But you can email her at me.goodwin@northeastern.edu or find her on twitter [@mpgPhD](https://twitter.com/mpgPhD)

Office hours via Canvas chat
TR 1:35-3:15 pm

