

Professor dispels negative cult stereotypes

■ Marion Goldman's class educates students about a variety of nontraditional religions

By Mandy Toomey
Oregon Daily Emerald

For most, the term 'cult' brings up images of brainwashing, mass suicide and isolation from one's family.

But one sociology professor is using the testimonies of former cult members, as well as exercises asking her students to make contact with cults, to break these stereotypes of nontraditional religions. Sociology Professor Marion Goldman offers the "Cults and Religious Movements" class to give students a well-rounded view of cults so they are aware of their potential dangers, but also so they understand that cults are not necessarily harmful.

This term, Goldman will bring several speakers to her class, including a man who witnessed the 900-person Jonestown mass suicide in 1978, a feminist neo-pagan, and Anna Flowers from The Brethren, a nomadic cult that spent some time in Eugene.

"Speakers allow students to see the way [orthodox religious] theories might not capture what's going on in cults," Goldman said.

She is also encouraging students to make contact with a particular cult over the Internet and join its chat room or answer cult questionnaires to show them how cults try to recruit people.

She said that most people do not

realize how close cults are to the campus.

"There is always someone recruiting, especially in freshman dorms and international students," Goldman said.

Goldman started the first day of the class with a clip from an episode of "The Simpsons" in which the family gets recruited into a cult and brainwashed. Goldman uses the stereotypes presented in this episode to show the misconceptions about nontraditional religions.

"Some cults can give needed support and are positive experiences," she said.

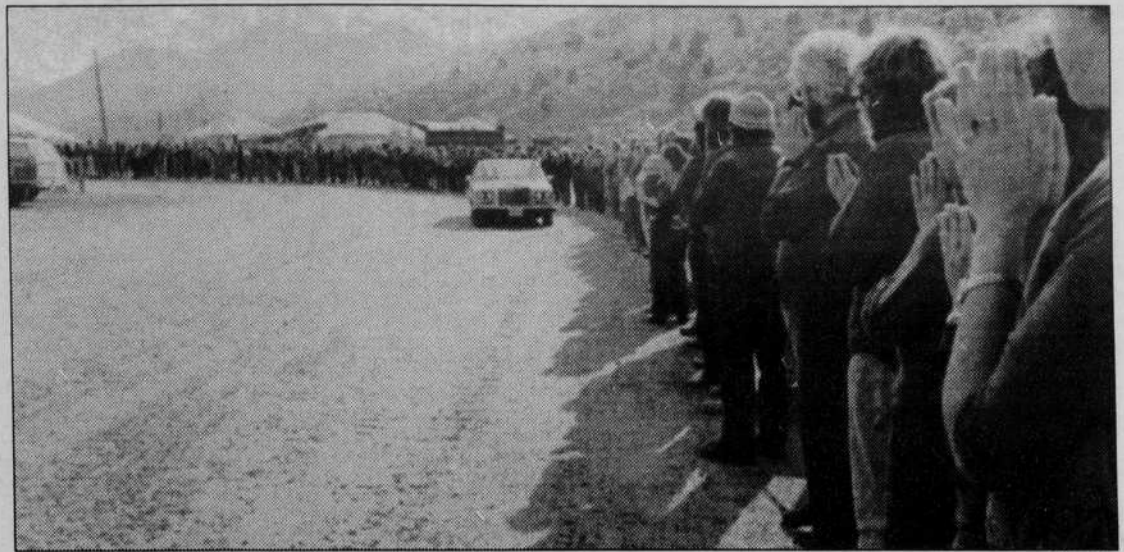
She added that when Christianity and the Mormon faith began, they were considered cults, but are now mainstream religions.

"Once people start thinking of Christianity as a cult, it doesn't seem so negative anymore," Goldman said.

History major Melissa Unger, who is also the ASUO executive legislative associate, said the class has given her a new perspective on cults.

"The class made me aware that I had a negative connotation of cults, and now I know that cults aren't necessarily a bad thing," Unger said. "She's dealing with a touchy subject and does a good job of respecting both sides of the story."

Even though Goldman works hard to dispel the negative stereotypes surrounding cults, she also acknowledges that some cults prey off their members and may induce them to harm themselves and others.



In 1984, 'Sannyasins' gather at Jesus Grove daily, waiting for Rajneesh's Rolls Royce to pass by, hoping to catch a glimpse of their master. Students taking 'Cults and Religious Movements' study cults and get a more positive views of non-mainstream religions.

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The class studies religious movements by analyzing their central beliefs, how they recruit new members and their success in society.

Goldman has a wealth of background knowledge to enhance her class. She recently wrote a book about the Rajneesh, a cult that lived in Eastern Oregon in the 1980s. In researching her book, she stayed in the community while its members were living in Oregon, although never more than two nights in a row.

Cult classes are common at many research universities, Goldman said, and the topic offers a hotbed of research material.

"It is important to be on top of

new research, and to keep the class aware of new discoveries," Goldman said.

Research into cult dynamics can be used to teach people about everyday relationships, Goldman said.

"We can look at how cults work to understand why people join particular friendship networks," she said.

Although Goldman has been teaching the class at the University for 10 years, she is continually modifying her material to keep up with changing student attitudes.

"Students are less fazed by new religions. They really want to know the facts," Goldman said. "UO stu-

dents today are more sophisticated and they aren't taking simple answers."

Goldman's research adds a valuable insight to the class, said Natalie Henes, a sophomore sociology major.

"She has a lot of energy for the subject," she said.

In addition to appreciating Goldman's enthusiasm, Henes also said the class gave her a deeper understanding of different faiths.

"This class has made me more aware of other religions," said Henes, "I didn't realize how many new religious movements there are."

Committee searches for solutions to voting problems

SEATTLE — A committee created in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election is examining ways to fix the nation's voting system.

But the 21-member National Commission on Election Standards and Reform doesn't want to tie election reform to campaign finance reform.

"We believe election reform is a

cornerstone to maintaining integrity and public confidence of the American people and, therefore, demands thorough and separate consideration," reads a resolution adopted unanimously.

Democratic Senate leaders have proposed legislation that includes both.

The committee will take the reso-

lution to its board of directors, which meets in early March, spokesman Tom Goodman said.

The commission, which met for the second time Wednesday in Seattle, is a product of the National Association of Counties and the National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks. Its next meeting is March 2

in Washington, D.C.

Changes to the election system — from conducting elections entirely by mail to declaring Election Day a national holiday — were raised at the meeting, although no decisions were made, Goodman said.

"We are going to hear some of the strangest things you've ever heard in your life as solutions to some prob-

lems which are presumed but which were never problems in the first place," said Doug Lewis, executive director of Houston-based The Election Center, a nonpartisan association of state and local election administrators.

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