

Haram, Harmless, Confirming Islam? Teaching and Learning about New Religious Movements at a Moroccan University

Stefano Bigliardi, Jalal Benyougil, Maha Berrami, Kacem Chawqi,
and Aya Touile

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco

S.Bigliardi@au.ma

Abstract

This article crystallizes and scrutinizes the experience of an undergraduate, general-education class on New Religious Movements imparted at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, a Moroccan, English speaking Liberal-Arts university. The study was conducted by a team including the course instructor and four students who, in addition to taking the course, engaged in analytical observation of the class with a focus on their peers' reactions and participation.

Keywords

Pedagogy of New Religious Movements; New Religious Movements and Islam; Morocco; Scientology; Raelian Movement; Satanism; Falun Gong; Santo Daime; Santa Muerte.

Introduction: A Course on New Religious Movements (NRMs) at AUI

AUI - Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, founded in 1993 by Royal Daheer (Decree) and opened in January 1995, is a Liberal Arts, English-speaking university in Morocco, with its campus located in the village of Ifrane in the Atlas region.¹ The University is organized around three Schools, each one with its own Dean, staff, and faculty: the School of Business Administration (SBA); the School of Science and Engineering (SSE); and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS).² The Schools are complemented by a Language Center that mainly offers courses for newcomers who need to improve their English skills. In accordance with the Liberal Arts model, SHSS, in addition to offering its own degrees (e.g., in International Relations and in Human Resources), offers general-education (gen-ed) courses that are required of all students regardless of the degree they are seeking.

In Fall 2023, Dr Stefano Bigliardi, Associate Professor of Philosophy, imparted, under the general title of History of Ideas (a gen-ed course), two parallel sections of a course about the history and beliefs of New Religious Movements (the specific title being: "Starships, Shamans, Skeletons, and Satan:

¹ See <https://au.ma/>. All links were accessed on 10 March 2024.

² Between Fall 2022 and Fall 2024, upon Dean Asma Abbas's initiative, the School underwent significant restructuring which was symbolically sealed by the official adoption of a new name, in February 2024: the School of Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities (acronym: SSAH). At the time of the project, the School was being interchangeably called with the old name and a new, temporary one: School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (SaHSS).

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Exploring New Religious Movements”). This was the second time he offered such a course; he had taught two parallel sections of History of Ideas focusing on NRMs in Fall 2022. Stefano was originally trained in philosophy, but he later took up the study of NRMs and specialized in it for over a decade, focusing on their respective conceptualisations of science and technology. Although having been trained to conduct mostly theoretical research, while studying NRMs Stefano developed a habit of integrating his “armchair analysis” of NRMs’ theology and history through fieldwork and interviews with leaders and followers. In a few cases, his interest in a specific NRM was prompted by coincidental exposure, in extra-academic life, to the activities and members of that very movement.

In 2023, one of the reasons for Stefano to teach a course on NRMs was the success enjoyed by its first iteration.³ In 2022, his decision to design and impart such a course had been prompted by different thoughts and factors that one year later he still regarded as well-founded and relevant. In the first place, he felt that drawing on one of his specialties, as well as on his most recent research, would make for an especially lively and interesting course for students. Additionally, while the environment of AUI makes for interreligious/intercultural contact and exchange,⁴ and while SHSS does offer courses in comparative religion, NRMs had never been extensively taught at the university. Previous single lectures for the AUI community on, respectively, Scientology, Santo Daime, and Santa Muerte had elicited curiosity and engagement on behalf of the audience. A course covering very diverse NRMs would also be an opportunity to study, to some extent, different contemporary countries, societies, and cultures including aspects of their respective history, tradition, and sociopolitical dynamics. Students would probably have some pre-knowledge of NRMs, which are usually conceptualized in terms of bizarre and/or “evil” “cults” or “sects” by popular media including Netflix series, YouTube videos, and films. Sensational, stigmatized, and oversimplified popular perceptions of NRMs, on the one hand, would prompt the students’ initial interest in the course. Eventually, as the course advanced, those very preconceptions would make for an interesting object for “Socratic” deconstruction in class. In sum, Stefano was convinced that NRMs made for an ideal subject for a gen-ed course.

The present article crystallizes and scrutinizes the teaching and learning experience of the 2023 courses. It offers not only a detailed overview of the contents covered, but also an ethnography of the students’ reactions as well as an examination of their responses to two questionnaires regarding their perception of the class and of NRMs. The article is the result of a project involving a team composed of two students for each class (more details in the third section).

The Introductory Unit

The two courses began on 5 September 2023 and ended on 12 December. Each course met 27 times (due to Moroccan holidays), and each meeting lasted 80 minutes. Four meetings were used for in-class exams; the remaining ones, with the exception of the first day, were used to cover course content. For each unit, Stefano prepared a PowerPoint presentation including essential information, visuals, and links to relevant videos. The presentations and readings were made available to students through the university’s platform. The first day was dedicated to reading and commenting on the syllabus including

³ AUI prompts students to provide final course evaluations. The points to assess include: “The course material is relevant”; “The course objectives are clearly stated in the syllabus”; “The instructor demonstrates knowledge of the subject”; “The lessons are well-prepared”; “The student participation is encouraged”; “The tests and assignments used are appropriate for the course.” On this occasion, the overall average of the evaluations for each course was 4.40/5 and 4.55/5, respectively. The sections had, respectively, 27 and 30 students; and, respectively, 23 and 21 students participated in the evaluations.

⁴ In addition to employing non-Moroccan faculty AUI counts, among its students-led clubs, a very active Interfaith Alliance, and it regularly hosts students from the US, France, and Italy.

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the discussion of some basic notions about NRMs, and a brief illustration of the NRMs covered including some of their symbols.⁵

The first unit started off with an “ice-breaking” discussion of the pictures on the first slide of the presentation, showing photographs that depict different moments in the life of multiple NRMs: Reverend Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012) and his wife Hak Ja Han (b. 1943) officiating at a Unification Church blessing (mass wedding); a group picture of ISKCON members; (what seems to be) a Satanist ritual, with people clad in black capes standing around a pentacle; Raelian women engaging in a GoTopless Day (see Rael.org 2023) with a person clad in a green alien costume; and a spectacular 2020 Scientology celebration. The discussion touched on whether the students recognised any of the movements and/or what they could infer about their beliefs and activities from the pictures. One of the questions debated was whether, outside the context of a course on NRMs, the students would have perceived the situation, or the people displayed, as belonging to a religion or being engaged in a religious activity.

Prompted by the instructor, the students tried to come up with a definition of “New Religious Movement” following two distinct, but complementary, and equally “Socratic” methods. The first method was referred to by the instructor as “top-down” and it was articulated into two tasks. Initially, the students tried to enumerate criteria defining a belief system as a “religion.” Eventually, they tried to narrow down, within the set so identified, those religions that qualify as “new.” The first task proved fairly easy. The criteria (that the instructor wrote down on the board) included, for instance: belief in a God, belief in a Prophet, presence of rituals, sacred scriptures, existence of temples/specific places of worship, belief in supernatural beings, and belief in an afterlife. Such criteria were additionally tested by discussing how they would *not* apply to an institution like AUI that, despite some common traits (e.g., the existence of ceremonies, a meaning-making function, and others), students concluded, does not qualify as a religious movement. However, the second task in this method made the classes realize the intrinsic relativism of any temporal reference: all religions, they saw, are new at some point - and they eventually get old.

The second Socratic method was “bottom-up”: students came up with a few names and descriptions of NRMs they knew and tried to determine which common traits they displayed that could be said to define NRMs more in general. This method, due to the students’ very limited knowledge of NRMs, proved far less fruitful. The NRMs that the students were able to mention were mainly those already touched on in the course, and one or two more that a few students had heard about through films and documentaries, but of which they barely remembered the name.

The instructor explained that there exist innumerable NRMs but that only a few “make it” to the news, to popular culture, and to being the subject of extensive academic studies and publications. The next phase of the discussion concerned the terms “cult” and “sect” (that some students had used in the previous discussion). Students were warned that such terms, which were originally neutral, as a result of polemical or sensationalist usage on behalf of political agents and popular media currently project a negative aura onto NRMs, associating them with heinous behavior and events (violence, fraud, abuse, brutality, crime in general...). Such phenomena, however, neither qualify (new) (religious) movements *exclusively* nor *essentially*; that is, they can be experienced within other kinds of organization, and they do not define most NRMs.

This discussion was integrated by screening three video clips about, respectively: the Peoples Temple and the Jonestown massacre (1978) (Brut America 2020); Heaven’s Gate and its mass suicide (1997) (CNN 2011), and the Waco siege and massacre (1993) (Scripps News 2018). The class discussed whether each video seemed to represent the facts and their protagonists in a sufficiently detailed way

⁵ Syllabus available at: <https://rb.gy/wlsmap>

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and in an unbiased perspective, as well as the differences between the events presented: e.g., students remarked that the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, as much as an external observer may find it horrific and have doubts about its exact dynamics, appeared like a choice dictated by belief in a specific theology and religious path, while the Jonestown massacre seemed to have been abruptly imposed by a religious leader in response to an unplanned emergency. The instructor also evoked the historical importance of the Waco massacre with regard to the construction and diffusion of sound scholarly information about NRMs and their beliefs: the tragedy prompted the realization that, if US-American institutions had been better informed about the Branch Davidians' theology, negotiations could have been conducted in a more considerate way, avoiding a dramatic outcome. It should be emphasized that the clips in question familiarized the students with three cases that are very frequently touched on by the critics and detractors of NRMs; the purpose of screening them and conjuring up the three historic cases was to confront the "elephant in the room," i.e., the fact that a few NRMs are indeed notable for heinous or otherwise "disturbing" facts; but students were also prompted to avoid generalizations and to always engage in meticulous scrutiny of facts and sources.

Eventually, the instructor actively provided the students with a list of notable characteristics of NRMs, being careful to specify that such traits are neither necessary nor sufficient to identify NRMs: e.g., branching off from an old religion or receiving a new revelation; having less affiliates in comparison with old religions, and so on. This was followed by a discussion of the different sources NRMs are known through: e.g., leaders' writings; NRM-run websites; "counter-cult" groups; the media, and so on. Integrating this discussion, the instructor introduced, once again in Socratic fashion, the "parable" of the blindfolded men who encounter an elephant and, based on the part they touch, deem the animal to be a different kind of object.⁶ He suggested that, out of metaphor, NRMs are experienced, known, and judged differently by different actors: leaders, rank-and-file members, ex-members, members' relatives, and so on. Scholars, while avoiding factually incorrect information and striving to get a picture as complete as possible, should also fully acknowledge, and distinguish, all such diverse perceptions.

There followed a discussion of the pedagogic usefulness of learning about NRMs based on two citations, from world-class NRMs scholars: Professor John A. Saliba⁷ and Professor David G. Bromley (both are reported in the last section). Finally, students were encouraged to organize the rich information imparted in the class through an analytical model for NRMs; this was an elaboration on a model originally used by Professor M. A. Davidsen at Leiden University, which was both recalled on the slides used in class and provided to the students through a Word document shared via the course portal.

The Project Begins

After the first unit the course instructor released a "mini-call" via e-mail to both sections, prompting interested students with adequate credentials, skills, and motivation to engage in a research project largely based on an auto-ethnography (see Appendix 1). Four students promptly responded, and, after verifying their respective credentials with AUI colleagues, the instructor summoned them for an in-person meeting.⁸

⁶ At the time of writing, Stefano Bigliardi cannot recall where and when he first came across this pedagogic narrative; however, he used the illustration available here: <https://rb.gy/hrgtix>.

⁷ As the instructor only realized while writing this article, in the presentation he wrongly attributed the passage by Saliba to another prominent academic figure: Professor J. Gordon Melton.

⁸ One student who couldn't show up was eventually briefed by one of the other participants.

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The meeting included: a general introduction to how scholarly articles are written and produced; explanation and discussion of respective duties and responsibilities; designing a questionnaire aimed at gathering data about course demographics, students' pre-knowledge about, and attitude towards, NRMs (excluding those discussed in the first unit). The project participants, two for each course section, were instructed to sit in the last row, and, in addition to ordinary participation and note-taking, to record how their peers would respond, not only verbally, but also through body-language (as well as informal reactions shared among students without involving the teacher), to the topics and visuals they were exposed to in class.

The instructor opened, for each project member, a shared Google-drive document containing instructions for note-taking (usually, the project participants would rather take their notes on paper and populate the file later). The instructions prompted them to “focus on questions like: What catches the students' attention? What aspects of the NRMs are they most critical of? Which ones do they appreciate? Which ones do they have a hard time understanding? and Is there any pattern in their comments/reactions/contributions to the discussion?” (see full text in Appendix 2). The participants were encouraged to observe confidentiality about the project's specifics so as not to influence their peers' behavior.⁹ After the initial meeting, contact was held informally with single members before and after class, as well as on WhatsApp (in an *ad hoc* group as well as over one-on-one chats).

First Survey

The anonymous survey was administered on 21 September during class time. One reason for administering it relatively late in the course is that the instructor wanted to discuss and design it with the team members. Another reason is that, as per AUI rules, students have the right to add and drop courses after the start of the semester (and the administration often decides to extend the deadline for various reasons). It was important to conduct the questionnaire among students who would stay in the course (more on this in the section about the final survey). It must be remarked, however, that out of 50 students enrolled in the two sections, only 44 took the survey.¹⁰

The students' average age was 19.25 years. 13 students self-identified as male, 30 as female, and one as non-binary. 38 students had attended high school in the Moroccan system; three in the French system; and three in the US-American system. 23 were majoring in the School of Science and Engineering; 18 in the School of Business Administration; and three in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. The average semester was 4.¹¹

Prompted to indicate their religion, 39 indicated Muslim/Islam. Those who did not indicate Islam wrote “agnosticism” or “agnostic” (two students), “agnosticism/atheism” (one), and “none” (two).

Students were requested to rate their *knowledge* of their own religion; on a scale from 1 (min) to 10 (max). The average was 7.04. Students were also prompted to rate, according to the same scale, the *commitment* to their religion. The average was 6.7.

Students were asked which other religions they were familiar with (except for NRMs) and through which sources? 33 students indicated Christianity and 24 Judaism; but also Buddhism (12) and

⁹ It should be specified that one of the students who originally joined the team, a few weeks into the course, stepped down from it; the instructor promptly contacted another student whose participation and performance in the course had proven outstanding, and who agreed to join the project. The notes taken by the student who stepped down were not used to produce the article.

¹⁰ Two students were absent on that day; however, a link to the survey was sent via email. Interestingly, no one informed the instructor that they were unable to take the survey.

¹¹ Average based on relevant answers (5 students responded “Fall 2023”). In order to take History of Ideas, prerequisite courses are Fundamental Academic Skills (FAS) 1220 and English 1301.

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Hinduism (seven). Other religions including paganism, shintoism, sikhism and taoism were mentioned more rarely or only once. The students' sources were the school system (six) (especially considering that Christianity and Judaism are the two "religions of the Book" with Islam), but mostly films and documentaries (15), and social media (three). Multiple students (six) also wrote they knew about other religions through personal acquaintance with members of such religions.

Asked whether they had prior knowledge about NRMs, most students (27) answered in the negative. However, among those who answered in the affirmative, 10 referred to Satanism and 5 to Scientology.

26 students responded that they expected no challenges from the course in terms of pedagogy; of those who did expect challenges, indicated note taking, the amount of information, and the exams. One student was "still figuring out." One student answered that they anticipated the challenge of looking at the NRMs without bias; and another one stated that their only challenge had been watching "those disturbing documentaries."

The final question was whether students expected any challenges to their religious beliefs. One student answered "No, I already do not believe." The vast majority (36) answered in the negative. In this regard it should be specified that project members, upon examining the responses, had the feeling that some students may not have read the question in specific reference to the course content, considering answers like the following:¹² "The challenge I face is the laziness to pray." One answer that is difficult to interpret is "yes, especially from Christian and Muslims." Here are some significant answers: "Yes, I think maybe satanism might challenge my belief as they tend to worship the devil (from what I know) and we worship a god. So im sure there will be some challenges to my religious belief." "No because Im interested in other NRM to know how they think with an explanation behind their actions but I don't think that it will have an influence over my own beliefs." "No. I know I am not as devoted to my religion as much as my parents or grandparents are, but I will never give up on it. My religious beliefs won't be challenged because I know what I believe in." "I love to broaden my knowledge of beliefs that differ from mine. It allows me to question my own and thus optimize my way of thinking. Thus, I wouldn't call it a challenge but more of an opportunity, which is the reason why I took this class." "No I don't think so, I'm open to learn about new religious movements and I respect every aspect of each one of them. But I know what I believe in." "I may come across a different kind or set of beliefs and conduct, but it will not change by current religious beliefs as it's in touch with my values." "I do expect challenges to my beliefs and I would love to hear them so that I can get start thinking more thoroughly about my religion." "No I do not expect any challenges to my religious beliefs because I am firm regarding my beliefs and have a strong faith." "No, I am firm about my religion nothing would make me doubt about it."

Intermezzo: Islam in the Moroccan School System

In order to contextualize and appreciate the results of the present project, one must keep in mind the role of Islam in Moroccan society and education, which I briefly reconstruct here based on the personal experience of the team members. Public schools include Islamic education (التربية الإسلامية, *At-tarbiyah Al-Islamiyyah*) classes at all levels (primary, middle, and high school), that impart knowledge about *surat* (chapters) of the Qur'an (to be learnt by heart) as well as about Sunna (prophetic tradition, conveyed by texts known as *ahadith*). The goal, however, is not to simply instill erudition and practical

¹² Some answers have been abbreviated to avoid redundancy; however, the students' responses are not edited, since their quality is also relevant to document.

instructions (about, for instance, praying and fasting), but to provide students with guidance, in line with the idea that Islam that is not just a system of beliefs but of ethical rules.

One team member recalls an Islamic education teacher in high school stating that girls who do not wear a *hijab* go to hell and that people who do not pray aren't really Muslim, which the team member interprets as the teacher's specific bias interfering with the subject.

Judaism and Christianity are mentioned as the two other "religions of the Book." Other religions or Islamic currents and sects are hardly mentioned (Morocco adheres to Sunni Islam). One team member recalls: "most teachers didn't even bother studying or discussing other religious movements." Islam is presented as the only true and right religion, not only on behalf of Islamic education teachers, but other ones (e.g., science teachers pointing out how amazing the creation is).

Team members remember that Judaism and Christianity were represented as respectable but without providing students with historical notions; in other words, they would be referred to in comparative fashion, but without there being in the curriculum specific units dedicated to them. Religious diversity was more evoked as the object of respect than extensively explored in full detail. One team member had the feeling that, together with the suggestion to respect such religions, teachers were also encouraging students *not* to explore such religions. Notions about Judaism and Christianity, therefore, come to students from alternative, possibly informal, and un-coordinated sources such as papers, articles, and YouTube videos.

Scientology: Teaching and Response

The unit about Scientology started off with a discussion of different online pictures of Scientology buildings and gatherings, as well as of Scientology's 2014 Super Bowl commercial (Scientology 2014). There followed an examination of official Scientology web pages illustrating Dianetics (Church of Scientology International 2024a¹³ and Church of Scientology International 2024b), the meaning of the term "Scientology" (Church of Scientology International 2024c), the start of Scientology (Church of Scientology International 2024d), and the life and achievements of L. R. Hubbard (1911-1986) (Church of Scientology of Los Angeles 2024).

These materials were complemented by the instructor's introduction¹⁴ to the following topics: Dianetics and the role of the E-Meter; Dianetics's transition (and relation) to Scientology, including an explanation of Dianetics's/Scientology's special vocabulary and symbols; the recognition of Scientology as tax exempt in the US in 1993; Hubbard's period at sea (1967-1975); Scientology and other religions; Hubbard's last years and the succession; Scientology's growth and spread; Scientology's VIPs, and its front groups. The discussion of the E-Meter included the instructor's narrative of how he experienced the "pinch test" (cf. Bigliardi 2016). Scientology's conceptualisation of other religions was conducted while reading an official webpage about Jesus, Mohammad, the Buddha, and other religious leaders (Church of Scientology International 1995-2024); drawing on his research (Bigliardi 2015), the instructor discussed in detail how the Prophet Muhammad was

¹³ The instructor provided the pages in the form of a PDF file (composed of pages downloaded in 2022). The links provided in the References are to the pages as they are available at the time of writing this article (in 2022, the one about L. Ron Hubbard was provided by the Church of Scientology International). The pages of the Church of Scientology International are listed in the order in which they were offered to the students (except for the 1995-2024 one).

¹⁴ While the adverb will not be repeated in order not to clutter the text, the reader should keep in mind that each and every introduction to/discussion of a specific "package" of information always happened *Socratically*, with the instructor prompting students to share pre-knowledge, first guesses, assessments; and to find analogies with other religions (including NRMs), and so on.

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represented in the Scientology magazine *Advance!* (The photograph representing Hubbard's own creative rendition of Qur'anic revelation to the Prophet - including the "Prophet's" face - was shown right after class [on the classroom computer and not on the screen] to students who expressed a specific interest). The discussion of Hubbard's succession included screening the footage of David Miscavige (b. 1960) announcing the founder's demise (Public Interest 2013).

Pictures of Scientology's headquarters and conventions elicited witty comments along the lines of the buildings resembling casinos in Las Vegas. Generally, the students perceived Scientology's buildings and events (as well as the Super Bowl advertisement) as conveying an aura of modernity, success, inclusiveness (due to the different ethnicities displayed), and patriotism (in regard to the US-American flags). They felt that Scientology, while promising radical changes and improvements in one's life, does so while also reassuring prospective members that they would still be in a familiar environment. Both the Super Bowl advertisement and the Scientology web pages about Dianetics and the basics of Scientology, however, were also seen as somewhat vague and allusive, and this was interpreted as a marketing strategy: promising teachings and results that one can only have full access to after signing up for Scientology and paying for its services. Upon seeing the cross on a Scientology building, students immediately identified it as a symbol of Christianity; however, prompted to observe more attentively, they noticed the four diagonal arms which they were unable to interpret while understanding that they constituted a difference from the Christian cross. While reading the Church's official description of Dianetics including Hubbard's original language, the instructor tried to make students realize that it had been written a considerable time ago by alluding to its non-gender neutral language; however, no student seemed to perceive this feature, or to explain it while guessing the text's age. Generally, in order to understand Scientology, students tended to compare it to old religions. They expressed scepticism as to whether it could be described as a genuine faith. In fact, rather than being interested in knowing more about the religion, some students seemed eager to find out "weird" facts about Scientology.

Initially, students showed very little to no knowledge of Scientology, and after covering the unit, there remained a general impression that Scientology is vague, unclear, and superficial at best, or a "smart business" at worst. The perception that Scientology is somewhat vague seemed to be strengthened by the exposure to Scientology's concept of God as "Eighth Dynamic." The idea that, according to Scientology, all humans are thetans (immortal and powerful beings) and therefore, in a sense, gods, elicited irritation. Another question that was raised by the students was whether Hubbard actually believed in what he was narrating, describing, and prescribing. Some aspects of Scientology, such as the usage of the E-Meter, elicited mockery; the students, however, showed interest in the instructor's narrative about his own experience with the E-Meter.

While watching the video of Miscavige's announcement of Hubbard's demise, some students looked smirked, others were confused, and yet other students were neutral. Generally, the appeal of Scientology was explained by the students in reference to the hope and psychological comfort it may provide people with, in particular when a prospective follower feels they need to heal of some kind of trauma; but students hypothesized that the prospects of self-realization within Scientology (i.e., ascending in its ranks and acquiring a prestigious position) may exert attraction, too, as well as the dream of interacting with world-class VIPs such as Tom Cruise and John Travolta. Another reason for Scientology's fascination, they hypothesized, could be that being inside Scientology may inspire in someone the belief that, being privy to knowledge that non-members have no access to, they are superior to others.

Students were also utterly critical of the fees required of Scientologists. They remarked (and criticized) that Scientology keeps its members "hooked on" with the promise of ever-increasing

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knowledge and improvements that are, however, proportional to one's financial commitment. When the instructor, playing "devil's advocate," pointed out that all religions inevitably have a strong material side and need to sustain themselves, at least one student remarked that, differently from other religions, the spiritual improvement promised by Scientology seems conditional on the amount of one's payments.

A segment of this unit that sparked particular interest was the story of Hubbard and the Scientologists' stay in Morocco. The students were very sceptical as to Hubbard's actual chances of having Scientology institutionalized in their country; they were also fairly familiar with the power dynamics and historical events of Hassan II's (1929-1999) rule (from 1961 onwards) that can explain why Hubbard's attempts ultimately failed. The students also regarded Hubbard's discussion of the great spiritual leaders of the past as opportunistic, and the representation of the Prophet's appearance in the *Advance!* magazine as a sign that Hubbard was not appropriately educated in things Islamic. When the instructor offered to interested students to look at Hubbard's "Prophet's" picture after class, no one found this inappropriate, and at least one student who used to strongly self-identify as Muslim was eager to see the photograph.

Prompted to come up with questions they would pose to a Scientologist, some students suggested asking about their actual attainment of "superhuman" powers; other ones suggested investigating the Scientologists' background prior to joining the movement, their expectations, and the reasons for the comfort experienced within Scientology.

Over the course of this unit a tendency emerged, that was confirmed in the remainder of the classes: not everyone was reactive to the topic; one could clearly notice detachment on behalf of some students. While some were very committed to understanding and sharing their opinions, others just seemed very disconnected from the class.

Raelian Movement: Teaching and Response

The unit about the Raelian movement was started through a reflection on, respectively, a picture representing a GoTopless Day, another one of Rael (Claude Vorilhon, b. 1946) as a mature man, and the Raelian's symbol including a swastika; also as a way to introduce the movement, the students were exposed to an initial sequence in Yoav Shamir's documentary *The Prophet and the Space Aliens* showing Rael's interaction with his Japanese followers (Shamir 2020). Students were prompted to reflect, in particular, on Rael's demeanour, attire, and interaction with the followers, as well as on the followers' response to him.

Eventually, the instructor introduced and discussed the following topics: Rael's first and second revelation; Rael's mission; Raelian ideas in matters of society, science, and technology; the Clonaid affair (2000-2001); the Clitoraid initiative (mid-2000s); Raelian symbols, initiatives, and diffusion. The first revelation was discussed on the basis of Rael's own narrative in *The Book that Says the Truth* (Vorilhon 1974, cit. in Chryssides and Wilkins 2006: 52-55). Clonaid was discussed by comparing a 2003 comedic skit parodying Rael and Clonaid company's director Dr Brigitte Boisselier (b. 1956) (Saturday Night Live 2013) and the actual Dr Boisselier speaking about Clonaid in Shamir's documentary. The Clitoraid affair was discussed after watching the sections of Shamir's documentary that introduce the Burkinabe village Elohika and Rael's relation with Burkinabe Raelians, as well as the Grand Imam of Bobo-Dioulasso justifying female genital mutilation (illegal in Burkina Faso), a Burkinabe woman (a Raelian bishop) sharing her experience with clitoris restoration, and a Raelian promotional video for the "Clitbox" fundraising initiative, to help the victims of female genital mutilation. (It is worth mentioning that the segments of the advertisement screened included strongly implied sexual intercourse, and a kiss between male interracial homosexual partners; and strongly

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implied female masturbation). The way in which the Movement conceptualizes science was discussed in the light of the statements made by Raelian Dr Phylis Hetie in Shamir's documentary, who emphasized how she is indebted to Rael for having empowered her, and that she ultimately does not care if his revelation is an imposture.

Upon being exposed to the picture of Rael dressed in white, and wearing a skullcap and a long beard, some students identified him as a Muslim, further assuming (in reference to his skin colour) that he may be a convert. They also noticed that the Raelian symbol resembles both a known symbol of Judaism (the Shield of David, popularly known as the Star of David) and the swastika; they associated the latter with Nazism, yet some students showed awareness that such a symbol also belongs to ancient Asian religions. While commenting on the photograph of a GoTopless initiative (that was explained to them by the instructor) some students positively conjured up feminist notions; however, the way in which they could possibly relate to Raelian beliefs remained untackled. Commenting on Rael's interaction with his followers in Japan some students commented that he looks "cringy," but others found him "a nice person." Prompted by the instructor, the students remarked that Rael's friendly and "physical" interaction with his fans and followers (in the context of an occasion that looks like a "get together") may come across as unusual, but even as appealing, to some Asian people, considering the social norms of their culture of origin, which prescribe distance and detachment. Rael's unassuming behaviour and his accessibility were (favourably) compared to Hubbard's behaviour. The song sung by Rael was perceived as musically basic and, content-wise, trivial or even "silly."¹⁵ Similarly, Rael's words about the importance of silence were perceived as carrying "cheap wisdom."

Rael's pages narrating his first encounter with the Elohim were deemed dull; students perceived them as resembling a children's story or a cheap science fiction tale. Rael was seen as someone who packs his text with details in the hopes of making it more credible, and who writes "for the word count." Students also felt that extraterrestrial Yahveh's explanation of why Vorilhon was chosen to become the Elohim's ambassador reads like a justification aimed at pre-empting and defusing the reader's doubts. Some students were also surprised at the thought that a religious revelation could be delivered in French, which they deemed ultimately unsuitable for such a task. Some students seemed surprised to hear that Rael did not have a formal education. Prompted by the instructor, the students reflected on Rael's professional background and skills that could be useful to him also in his capacity as religious leader; as a journalist, he may have developed effective communication skills, specifically aimed at the general public; as a musical performer, he knows how to handle and fascinate an audience; as a race car driver, he is used to quick and individual decision-making, including in risky situations. However, students also hypothesized that he may have sought success as a religious leader as a compensation for his lacking or declining fame as an artist and sportsman.

After watching, in Shamir's documentary, Rael's interaction with Burkinabe people, students expressed the feeling that his praise of African religions was shallow and opportunistic; additionally, they found that Burkinabe people appreciative of Rael were somewhat inconsistent in praising a "white man's message" for encouraging them to be free and embrace their religion and identity. Students were intrigued about the relationship between Dr Boisselier and Rael, asking if they were a couple. Prompted by the instructor, they remarked that both the "Rael" of the satirical skit and the real Dr Boisselier in Shamir's documentary seemed to admit that the actual success obtained by Clonaid consisted of the visibility it bestowed on the Movement. However, students also remarked that the caricature of Dr Boisselier was far from the real Dr Boisselier interviewed in the documentary, and ultimately unfair. They did not seem to agree with the instructor's suggestion that Dr Boisselier's attire may be carefully thought out to convey both an aura of intellectualism (the glasses with thick, round frames) and

¹⁵ Two team members possess advanced musical knowledge and skills.

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sensuality (the low-necked dress). Some students manifested discomfort while watching the Clitbox advertisement. Generally, students (in particular, female ones) seemed fairly well-informed about, and strongly critical of, female genital mutilation, although they were unable to say whether such a practice ever existed or still exists in Morocco, and why. Students suggested that Rael may care more about female pleasure than about female rights. They regarded the Movement as very much life-oriented, and as including an array of ideals and causes typical of the “liberal” West that one can also find in other non-religious movements. Some students seemed appreciative of the emphasis on sexual enjoyment taught by the Movement.

The discussion of the Raelian symbol sparked a little debate on whether religions do/should adjust to the times, and whether Islam, in particular, should do so, or already does. Questions and criticisms about the movement suggested by the students included: Why did the Elohim create humanity? Why did previous prophets have different messages? What do Raelians actually worship, and do they do so at specific places? and Is cloning really a way to attain individual immortality? The Raelian Movement was also compared with Scientology, finding the latter more structured and richer in members than the former; but it was stated that the Raelian message was not ultimately more convincing than Scientology’s. Another difference between Scientology and the Raelian Movement that students were able to identify (upon being prompted by the instructor) is that the former claims to have its own science and technology (Dianetics, the E-Meter) while the latter glorifies science and technology as they are.

The discussions inspired by the topics in this unit confirmed that most of the students try to explain their opinions or observations about a NRM by comparing it to other religions (most of the time Islam). Finally, students were also wondering whether there were Raelians in Morocco.

Bambini di Satana: Teaching and Response

The unit about Bambini di Satana was started by prompting students to share their knowledge of Satanism and to compare the figure of Satan in Christianity (information was provided through a presentation slide) and Islam (based on the students’ own knowledge). Eventually, the instructor introduced: the typology of Satanism advanced by scholar Massimo Introvigne (Introvigne 2010) (including an explanation of this scholar’s background and approach);¹⁶ Bambini di Satana’s founder Marco Dimitri’s (1963-2021) most important biographical facts up to the foundation of the organization; the founding principles and statute of Bambini di Satana; their rituals and beliefs; Dimitri’s presence in, and relation with, Italian media in the early 1990s; his legal troubles, with a focus on the 1996 trial over accusations of child sex abuse (and other crimes) during satanic rites; the activism in defence of Dimitri and the trial’s outcome; Bambini di Satana’s second period and Dimitri’s death; and its coverage by the press. The discussion of Bambini di Satana’s beliefs included the analysis of a passage from Dimitri’s writings about the concept of “magic” (Dimitri undated); and while covering the trial, the instructor prompted the students to gather knowledge about the concept (and historical phenomenon) of Satanic panic, which they did by reading relevant passages from the related Wikipedia entry and the one about the book *Michelle Remembers* (Smith and Pazder 1980).

Multiple students seemed fairly-well informed about Satanism, although it eventually turned out that their perceptions were heavily influenced by pop culture including films and series. One student shared their experience with a Satanist classmate in high school, and another one recalled how they

¹⁶ In addition to the value of his scholarly contribution, the instructor deemed the example of Introvigne particularly useful in this class. Introvigne is a living example of how one can combine a strong religious background and a scholarly approach while studying NRMs in general and the controversial and sensitive topic of Satanism in particular.

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came across Satanists “chilling” in a park. Prompted to articulate the Islamic conception of Satan, students brought different views and interpretations and corrected or integrated each other’s contributions. While the instructor encouraged the class to conduct an objective comparison of religious beliefs, a few students frequently asserted their beliefs as the truth and the only reality.¹⁷

Students seemed shocked to hear that Marco Dimitri had engaged in prostitution as a youngster. They commented that his life seemingly crystallized in a teenager-like condition, and that there were contradictions in his ideas; however, at least one student commented that Bambini di Satana seemed like a “nice” group. One interpretation offered for the creation of the movement was that perhaps Dimitri needed to make friends. Some students thought that Satanism may be regarded as “cool” by some people. Satanism in general, and Dimitri’s version in particular, was also perceived as a way of rebelling against society. Students were also surprised to hear that the founding principles of Bambini di Satana included the rejection of violence and that the organization set out to fully abide by Italian laws, including the suspension of the applications by prospective members below the age of 18. A little debate started on whether Dimitri’s collecting money through the organization would lead to a breach of the law regarding nonprofit organizations. Upon hearing from the instructor that Dimitri looked like a shy person in his television appearances, one student remarked “He knows the Devil and is shy!” Dimitri’s reflections on magic were found to be quite convoluted and shallow. Overall, students concurred that Dimitri was attention-seeking (a statement that in fact, was made by Dimitri himself in an informal interview with the course instructor that the instructor mentioned in class). Commenting on Dimitri’s legal troubles, one student pointed out that whenever someone wants to destroy a celebrity, they accuse them of sexual harassment or paedophilia. Some aspects of Dimitri’s trial (for instance, the mention of lycanthropy)¹⁸ elicited laughter. Upon reading the goals of Bambini di Satana (in its second phase) students identified a strong parallel between them and the causes supported by the Raelian Movement.

Falun Gong: Teaching and Response

The unit about Falun Gong started with a brief inspection of the movement’s symbols reproduced on the first slide of the presentation, that include multiple swastikas as well as the yin/yang. The instructor prompted the students to recall general knowledge about contemporary China including its constitution and the way in which the government handles religion. While exploring Falun Gong the instructor illustrated, and elaborated on: the 1999 Zhongnanhai demonstration; the 2001 Tiananmen Square incident (including still unclarified questions about the event); the historical emergence of Qi Gong, the “Qi Gong Fever,” and the birth of Falun Gong; the different versions of the biography of Li Hongzhi (b. 1951/52), Falun Gong’s founder; Falun Gong’s belief and practices; religion in contemporary China; the reasons why Falun Gong qualifies as a religion while significantly differing in several respects from

¹⁷ It is worth quoting here from the log kept by a team member: “I met a student from the other section who mentioned that they found ... certain concepts to be perplexing and irrational because it is all lies and that the only real truth is Islam. It seemed they didn’t get the main purpose of studying this course - they are more focused on determining if these movements carry any truth. They appeared uninterested in exploring these ideas further.”

¹⁸ During Dimitri’s trial, one of the witnesses stated that they had received “lycanthropy” as a result of Dimitri’s kiss (the statement was, in all likelihood, meant as symbolic/metaphorical; and it was interpreted as such by the court, although it was also used by those who criticized the trial as one example of how the debate in court mostly revolved around nonsensical statements; see Bigliardi (2021).

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major ones; and the possible reasons for the movement's ban in China.¹⁹ A video was also shown of Master Li performing Falun Gong exercises.²⁰

While recalling prior knowledge regarding China, its political system, demographics, and the presence of Islam in the country, students proved fairly able to contribute to the discussion. Exposed to a picture of Master Li, students commented that he seemed like “a wise mysterious monk”; however, the idea that he would possess supernatural powers including walking through walls elicited laughter. When the instructor pointed out that Master Li prescribes modesty including not showing off one's superhuman abilities, two students commented “impostor.” Also, students remarked in this regard an analogy with Scientology and the abilities allegedly obtained by high-level Scientologists. Overall, the discussion was less lively than usual. This unit required the students to become familiar with events and notions they had hardly heard about before (not only the ones directly related to Falun Gong, but also Chinese history, the Chinese political system, and the way in which the Chinese government handles religion). This may have significantly reduced the space for discussion in comparison with other units.²¹

Santo Daime: Teaching and Response

The unit about Santo Daime and its Italian branch Stella Azzurra was introduced through a discussion of possible criteria to identify a substance as a “drug” and the ways in which a government could and should deal with “drugs” thus defined. Eventually, the instructor shared the personal narrative about how he crossed paths, in his childhood (in the 1990s), with Walter Menozzi (b. 1975), who in the early 2000s would emerge as an important Santo Daime leader in Europe after undergoing significant legal troubles due to the uncertain legal status of ayahuasca in Italy. The unit included the illustration of the historical origins of Santo Daime in the Amazon region; the chemical composition of ayahuasca; Menozzi's arrest and trial; Santo Daime ceremonies; the conceptualisation of science on behalf of *daimistas*. The class also watched and commented on a video of a Santo Daime ceremony (Stefan Babin 2014), and the instructor shared his own experience with participant observation in one of such “spiritual works.”

The discussion of what counts as a definition of “drug” was animated, with students advancing multiple contributions based on chemical, social, and legal criteria and expressing different viewpoints on how governments should handle “drugs.” The debate also covered the question whether alcohol should be considered a drug, the conditions under which it is commercialized in Morocco, and whether Moroccan people and institutions go about it with “double standards.” Hashish was discussed as well, along similar lines. Students' views about drugs ranged between negative ones and more “liberal” ones; and one student (and a project team member), self-identifying as a musician, said he appreciated the “inspirational” role played by substances when it came to the creativity of major modern musicians. Additionally, at least one student stated they were familiar with DMT/ayahuasca. Upon watching the video of a Santo Daime ritual, one student initially identified it with “a party.” Upon hearing about the role of ayahuasca in the movement, one student humorously commented that they would join the movement just for the pleasure of drinking ayahuasca.

¹⁹ The work of the late James R. Lewis is important here. See James R. Lewis, *Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and James R. Lewis and Huang Chao (eds), *Enlightened Martyrdom: The Hidden Side of Falun Gong* (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2019).

²⁰ Available on *Dailymotion* in different versions; at the moment of writing, the instructor cannot recall which one was shown in class.

²¹ However, it should also be remarked that we have fewer sets of notes on this unit (in fact, only one project member was able to take them).

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The class appreciated the music used in the rituals, also feeling surprised at how *daimistas* can be synced and in rhythm in a “drunk” state. Some found it scary how the hymn was sung by Santo Daime practitioners while being in an inner state of transcendence, dizziness, or wispieness (which is how some described it). Upon hearing the story of Santo Daime’s founder Mestre Irineu (1892-1971), students questioned the overall consistency of a system of belief that holds together the New Testament, and the experience, facilitated by a hallucinogenic substance, by an Afro-Brazilian rubber worker like the founder. The students were interested in the instructor’s personal narrative of how he interacted, as a child, with the person who would become a major player in the diffusion of Santo Daime in Italy and in Europe; and how the instructor, upon first reading (in his early 20s) about such a person’s legal troubles in local sensationalist press, was quite judgmental but eventually changed his mind after studying the movement, interviewing the leader, and participating in a ritual. Students were likewise interested in the instructor’s experience with Santo Daime and ayahuasca (which, they specified, they would not try); and they reacted with laughter at the idea that vomiting and diarrhea possibly experienced in a Santo Daime ceremony could cleanse one of “negative energy.”

Santa Muerte: Teaching and Response

The unit about Santa Muerte was introduced through a discussion of the students’ knowledge of contemporary Mexico and videos of Santa Muerte rosary rituals in Tepito, the historic neighbourhood in Mexico City.²² The instructor shared the narrative of how he came to know about the popular devotion for Santa Muerte by noticing a mural-painting-turned-altar in his neighbourhood at the time he used to live in Cuajimalpa (Mexico City).

The unit included: a systematic exploration of the ways in which Santa Muerte is represented and the different areas of intervention in human affairs the devotees ascribe to her; an introduction to Santa Muerte-related rituals; the difference between the way in which Jesus Christ and his death are conceptualized in mainstream Christianity, and among Santa Muerte devotees; the kind of miracles Santa Muerte is prayed to and praised for; a digression about Mexican traditions and symbols that should not be confused with Santa Muerte while possibly overlapping with it (*Día de los muertos*, *Calavera Catrina*, and the Virgin of Guadalupe); the mystery about the historical origins of Santa Muerte (and the devotees’ claims in this regard); how (violent) death is depicted in popular Mexican media belonging to the *Nota roja* genre; the story of three notable shrines: Calle Alfarería and Santuario Nacional de la Santa Muerte in Tepito, and the Templo Internacional de la Santa Muerte in Tultitlán; the depiction of Santa Muerte in the media. The instructor also shared the narrative of his visits to, and participant observation in the ceremonies of, the three aforementioned shrines.

When students were prompted to recall their prior knowledge of contemporary Mexico, they seemed to have at least basic information about it, including that its predominant religion is Catholicism. Asked about the possible reasons why someone would pray to death, they hypothesized: to avoid death, to connect with the dead ones, to leave earth in peace. Upon watching a video of a Santa Muerte rosary in Tepito, students seemed unappreciative of Santa Muerte tattoos; and the sight of some devotees crawling towards the altar elicited laughter. Seeing that devotees bring their own effigies of Santa Muerte to the shrine, students assumed that such effigies represent the very devotees, or that they bring them “like Christians bring their crucifixes to church.” Students were fairly familiar with the Day of the Dead (it also had been recently celebrated on AUI campus by the Interfaith Alliance, a very active student club). One student remarked that Mexicans seem to celebrate someone’s death rather than

²² Although the PPT presentation included the links to two videos about Santa Muerte in Tepito, those watched on this occasion were randomly selected from *YouTube*.

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mourning it. The idea of a religion without a prophet elicited laughter, and students were also puzzled at the idea of devotees turning to Santa Muerte while leaving the Catholic church. Some also assumed that death could rather be seen as an “ally” of Jesus, helping him rise from the dead.²³ However, eventually, the students showed that they were perfectly able to grasp why death is regarded by Santa Muerte devotees as the epitome of justice. The students showed interest in the instructor’s experience of visiting different shrines and participating in their respective rituals.

While discussing the popularity of *nota roja* papers (that the instructor encouraged the students to google only if they felt they could cope with the sight of real-life gory images) students commented that it suggests a normalization of violent death that indicates the conditions of contemporary Mexico. They expressed shock at the images they found (including a decapitated man), and were in agreement as to the fact that this kind of press could not be produced and sold in Morocco: in addition to possibly infringing the law, it would elicit disgust and outrage among people.

While comparing the devotion for Santa Muerte with other NRMs explored in the course, students remarked, among other things, that it did not have a specific conceptualisation of science. This was explained in reference to the fact that its devotees turn to Santa Muerte for urgent and unsophisticated needs. One student suggested a comparison between Santa Muerte devotees in Tepito and the Quraysh tribe of the time of Qur’anic Revelation (7th century CE) - that came to (religious) prominence after embracing Islam.

The Exams and Other Aspects of the Course

Students’ knowledge was tested over four in-class written exams (or “assignments”), each one worth 25% of the final grade.²⁴ Each exam consisted of a battery of open-ended questions; students were prompted to discuss information about the NRMs covered, but also to reconstruct the in-class discussions mentioning different positions advanced about controversial issues, including their own ideas and assessments. Each question (or its sub-questions) was assigned a certain number of points. Exams usually took place during ordinary class time, immediately after the completion of two units, and the exact days (that depended on the pace of the in-class discussion as well on AUI/official Moroccan calendar) were announced around 7-10 days in advance via email.

The second, third, and fourth exam included the opportunity to obtain extra points by watching a documentary or a film beforehand and answering a question about it included in the assignment. Such a question would either touch on the students’ own evaluation of the facts the film narrated, or of the way in which the film depicted a movement. For the second exam, students interested in extra points were encouraged to watch Adam Fairholm’s documentary *Pope Michael* (Fairholm 2010). For the third one, students could watch Ahmed Boulane’s film *Les anges de Satan (The Satanic Angels)* (Boulane 2007). For the fourth exam, students had a choice between Ari Aster’s film *Midsommar* (Aster 2019) and Zal Batmanglij film *Sound of My Voice* (Batmanglij 2011); in this case, the instructor came up with two alternatives considering the graphic and sensitive elements of Aster’s movie.

The instructor picked films as material for extra-points work not only convinced that they would make for a more pleasant experience than an additional reading, but also in order to have students realize the importance that popular media have in shaping the general public’s perception of NRMs and related topics. Boulane’s film is particularly interesting in that it reconstructs the 2003 story of fourteen

²³ It is worth recalling here that, although Islam does recognise Christ as prophet and messenger, the Qur’an implies that he did not die on the cross and resurrected, but that he was miraculously lifted to heaven by God.

²⁴ SHSS faculty are encouraged to keep the percentage of each exam, test or assessment activity equal to, or below, 25% of the final overall grade.

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Moroccan hard rock musicians arrested, jailed, and tried over accusations including hosting people who attempted to shake the faith in Islam²⁵ and engaging in practices against morals, and who were depicted by the prosecution as Satanists. Such events represented a (late) ramification of globalized Satanic panic in Morocco, and presented significant similarities with the case of Dimitri and Bambini di Satana.

Finally, it is worth adding that, per AUI rules, attendance is mandatory and courses have an established “ceiling” for unexcused absences, the one for the courses in question being set at five since they met twice per week (AUI Academic Catalog 2023-2024, 90). In fact, such rules are variously interpreted and implemented by AUI faculty. While being aware of serious pedagogic objections to the official AUI approach, the instructor decided to largely embrace it, punctually and regularly taking attendance. He namely regards this as a useful way to filter out highly unmotivated students, who would otherwise produce poor work whose correction would drain time and energy from the pedagogy and attention offered to motivated students. Students were marked late if they entered after attendance was taken and within 10 minutes since the beginning of a class. The instructor established and implemented a rule according to which one point from the final overall grade would be deducted for each “tardiness” after the first three.

Course End and Final Survey

Of the 50 (21 and 29) students that enrolled and decided to remain in the course after the end of the “add and drop” period (that closes a few days after the beginning of the semester), a total of 7 (5 and 2, respectively) voluntarily dropped the course or were withdrawn for excessive absences. In the first section, all students passed the course: 6 with A+, 6 with A, one with B+, one with B, one with C, and one with C-. In the second section, one student did not pass the course despite remaining enrolled and not exceeding unexcused absences until the end; of the remaining ones, 11 passed with A+, two with A, six with A-, three with B+, one with B, two with B-, one with C+, and one with C- (for the numeric equivalents cf. AUI Academic Catalog 2023-2024, 97).

A final survey was administered on 7 December (the penultimate day of class for the courses and the last meeting on which actual content was imparted, the final meeting being dedicated to the fourth exam). 36 students took the survey (the link was sent via email). On this occasion, the team members (who discussed and designed the survey a few days before administering it) decided to re-check course demographics and to ask some questions, a few of which duplicated questions included in the first survey. 36 students took the survey.

This time, the students’ average age was 19.38 years. 10 self-identified as male, 25 as female, and 1 as non-binary. 24 studied, prior to AUI (high school) in the Moroccan system; 9 in the French system; and 3 in the US-American system. 18 students were majoring in the School of Science and Engineering; 15 in the School of Business Administration; and 3 in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. The average semester was 4.14.²⁶

Prompted to indicate their religion, 33 indicated Muslim/Islam. One gave “agnostic/atheist,” one “none,” and one “agnostic.” The average rate for their knowledge of their own religion was 7.25, and it was 7.1 for their commitment to their own religion.

Asked to elaborate on their initial perception of NRMs and the one they entertained at the end of the course most students (32) indicated some positive shift in their knowledge and attitude. They specifically observed being more open-minded towards NRMs, or having dropped prejudice about

²⁵ This is punished by imprisonment and by a fine according to article 220 of the Moroccan Penal Code.

²⁶ In order to take History of Ideas, students are required to have taken the courses FAS 1220 (Introduction to Critical Thinking) and ENG 1301 (English Composition).

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NRMs being violent, approaching NRMs more scholarly, not relying on media or taking media critically when it comes to NRMs-related information.²⁷ Some comments were mixed/negative as well. Here is a selection of significant comments: “I thought that NRMs would be better than the major world religions and that maybe they’d be more logical but sadly they’re just like the major world religions, nothing’s special about them.” “For me hearing about NRMs automatically meant sects or cults, and I still believe that some of them are, like Falun Gong. However, I’m more open, now, to learn about NRMs and their beliefs, and hear about their stories.” “Before this class, my view of NRMs was excluded on strange, satanic or a bunch of mentally ill people making cults to fulfill their ego needs by being leaders of something even if it was nonsense and a bunch of ‘stupid’ people following them. Though, after this class I still think kinda of the same thing but I got to see that some of them have a purpose, people might feel happier being a part of something and some of them actually make sense a little bit and just because they are different we shouldn’t judge.” “No, my view is still the same, at the beginning it looked weird and it’s still looking weird to me.” “This class has opened my eyes on various aspects of a religion and it’s movements, that could be both interesting yet also something to be aware of it’s dangers.” “I can safely say that I no longer view NRMs as they are portrayed by the media, sure some of them do have bad traits but I don’t think I could generalize about all NRMs. I also feel like if an NRM were to arise I would want to see all sides of the story and not just what is shown by the media.”²⁸

Except for one student, who simply answered “yes” without offering further reflections, students unanimously stated that the class did not influence their religious beliefs or that, if it had any impact at all on their beliefs, it was in the form of a confirmation. Here is a selection of relevant comments: “To be honest I believe that it got me closer to my own religion because I can see how my religion is the only true religion and how other religions can be nonsense.” “No. It enhanced it. Comparing my religion to others only proves how other religions are wrong and irrational, I believe.” “This course made me realize that being Muslim is a blessing in itself, and it doesn’t compare to being part of any other religion.” “No, it made realize how my religious beliefs are well structured in my mind and how they accompany me on a daily basis.” “I think it made me more connected in my belief in a way and appreciate my belief. That is because I saw different religions and saw the difference between them. We were exposed to many unusual religious beliefs that made me really appreciate the beliefs we have in islam.” “Well, I think positively the more we study these NRMs the more crazy I get and absurd it gets and the more my attraction to my religion increases.” “I got more attached to my religion and beliefs.” “It didn’t influence my religious beliefs they’re still the same. It may be made them even stronger because I find that some of the NRMs are difficult or even impossible to believe in from my pint of view.” “To be honest I believe that it got me closer to my own religion because I can see how my religion is the only true religion and how other religions can be nonsense.” “It did not actually but maybe it only did show me how islam is the right religion comparing our beliefs to other religions.” “All NRMs we saw in class felt really unrealistic and not at all convincing. Which just strengthened my believe in my own religion.”

Most students (30) neatly answered in the affirmative to the question whether they would recommend this class for Moroccan students. Some students, however, did voice concerns or gave mixed answers: “Yes, but not in the public sector. I am sure it will get some critics from the public.”²⁹ “It depends which kind of moroccans. I mean by that if the moroccan student is willing to take the

²⁷ These ideas are often combined in the same answer.

²⁸ One comment is ambiguous: “yes, before this class i almost had no knowledge regarding the NRMs, and i didnt think that NRMS might mostly contain some form of violance...y”

²⁹ In fact, AUI is a public university but it requires tuition fees (that are mitigated by a system of scholarships). However, the very fact that students are required to pay tuition fees, and the costs of accommodation, living far from one’s city of origin and family, and transportation, *de facto* render it similar to a private university.

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course and is open to new ideas and others' beliefs. Well yes he should take this course. But if the student is close minded, I don't advise him to take the course." "I wouldn't necessarily suggest it to Moroccan students who studied in a firm Moroccan system or public schools because they have Islamic classes and introducing certain of the NRMs to them would seem crazy to them such as the raelian movement and etc. They may also see it as the professor may be trying to change their beliefs and etc." "I wouldn't do so because moroccans can be a bit not open-minded and see this as a treath for their own beliefs so this course wouldn't suit anybody especially not moroccans." One student simply answered "No." Another student wrote: "I would suggest this class for anyone confusing religion with new religious movements."

Asked about the NRM they "liked" the most (the quotes indicating that the concept of "liking" could be broadly interpreted) most students indicated Scientology (14), followed by the Raelian movement (7), Santa Muerte (6), Santo Daime (5), Bambini di Satana/Satanism (3), and Falun Gong (1). One student liked all NRMs, another one didn't like any.

The motivations behind the students' appreciation of Scientology were varied, for example: "Scientology is one of the most NRMs that I liked because I had a few facts about and I have read about it too." "The NRM that i 'liked' the most was probably Scientology because it was really interesting to learn about this 'popular religion that you can buy yourself into' and i have heard a lot about it on social media so it's great to have a deep understanding of it now beliefs, history..." "Scientology. That NRM looks very fancy, it includes many celebrities but it is also very hard to join since you need to be rich rich." "The NRM I liked the most was Scientology. I find it to be the more elaborate and credible for me." "Scientology because it was the less weird and the more accurate to me. The other NRMs were kind of disturbing and seemed unbelievable to me." "Scientology seemed concrete." "The NRMs I likely found interesting were scientology because it had an interesting way of selling itself as a religion, especially it's use of a technology capable of getting sensitive information of it's users." These are some of the reasons given for the appreciation of Santo Daime: "Santo Daime. Cool music, and weird how can drugs, substance used for parties, be used for meditation and religious purposes." "Santo daime/Stella azura, this NRM is very calm and as religion it's a good one." "Santo daime. I found that this NRM is the least disturbing of them all and it is the calmest." "Santo Daime, only because they don't really have an origin and they're overall are not doing something to hurt themselves or anyone else."

Asked about the movements that they "disliked" the most, 9 students indicated the Raelian Movement, followed by Falun Gong, and Scientology (each one with 8), Bambini di Satana (4), and Santa Muerte (3). One student disliked "all of them" and another one wrote "I can't say that I disliked any NRM because they're all just looking for peace and new ideas to have some faith in this life."

As to the reasons given for disliking the movements, here is a selection. Regarding the Raelians: "I just found it really idiotic and fake." "It's the most out of them that doesn't make any sense." "Raelism, I find it hard to believe in their ideology and the way rael talks to his followers in Burkina Faso is honestly disturbing, they need another French person to help them from their misery." "I still can't understand why or how can people believe in I find it absurd and kind of childish. Its foundations are not strong or deep and difficult to find credible." "It feels that Rarl lied the biggest lie of his life and everyone is believing him and is praising him as if he did something amazing." "I don't really know why but I find it so inappropriate they only thing about having sex and rael's meeting with the aliens looks so unreal, I don't know." Falun Gong: "just doesn't make sense, too much politics going on, I don't know those millions of people actually believe in FG or just as a political stand." "I disliked falun gong because while the other leaders of the NRMs seemed to stick to their beliefs the ex-leader of falun gong just abandoned the movement and moved to the US after gathering what is said to be a large sum

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of money, and people still can't see that he scammed them." "Falun Gong, personally i felt like it didn't really stand out compared to the other NRMs we studied and it was a bit boring cause we didn't really learn new concepts the beliefs are affiliated with a mix of different beliefs and concepts we know such as karma and the yin and yang." "Too much politics." "Falun Gong. That NRM just doesn't make sense to me, how come some practices are considered religious and a religion in general." "Falun Gong is the one i disliked because it involved a lot of political content which is not really my thing." "The Falun Gong NRM was the NRM that I didn't like as much as the others. Simply because it was too complicated in the sense of it not being a religious movement and etc at first." Scientology: "because it was more like an organisation to collect money rather than a religion." "I disliked scientology mainly because it felt like every other NRM was genuine. As in they believed what they were saying and had nothing to gain unlike scientology where there is a clear monetary gain for those at the top." "My least Favorite NRM would be Scientology as it seems too lucrative and esoteric to those enough to join." "I hated Scientology. Because it's a religion for rich people. And the leader used to abuse his power. Plus it was the most boring one." "Scientology, this religion made me think that they were just exploiting people to join them and just to take their money." Bambini di Satana: "Out of the 7 NRMs studied, my least Favorite was Bambini di Satana because I didn't really like the satanic aspect of it." Santa Muerte: "La Santa muerte, because I found it bit unlogical and doesn't really have a background story." "La santa muerte, i find it a bit dumb to give gifts to a statue waiting for it to make your wishes come true and to serve your needs." "The NRM I disliked the most was La Santa muerte because I found its concept very casual and doesn't have great concepts to be a 'religious' movement."

Students were also asked which NRM was for them the most difficult one to understand. 16 students indicated Falun Gong, 5 Santo Daime, 4 Bambini di Satana, 3 Santa Muerte, and 1 Scientology. Other students stated that they had no difficulties understanding any NRMs, or left the question unanswered. In some cases, the students explicitly stated that the difficulties experienced were related to their having missed classes. In some cases, the reasons given for finding a NRM hard to understand are similar to those given for disliking an NRM.

Here is a selection of the reasons given for finding Falun Gong difficult: "to be honest I still don't understand why it counts as a NRM, it doesn't feel like one at all, it feels just like a cold political war or something." "This NRM had a lot of details and events and were hard to remember, also the words and the vocabulary were complicated." "I've had a hard time understanding Falun Gong due to the fact it contained many events as opposed to other NRMs whos history was kind of boring, but after studying it for a bit it wasn't so difficult." "Fallun gong. How they changed from qi gong to fallun gong was giving me a hard time to understand." "Too much politics." "At first it did not make sense to me, specially when talking about the transition from Qi gong to Falun gong." "Falun gong because there was a lot of details that we had to memorize." "It was hard to understand the history behind it and the relation with previous protesting." "Scholars don't have many information about it, it has many mysteries or things that people don't know about." "Falun Gong I feel like this NRM was complicated and not very clear." "Falun gong, because it had a lot of informations regarding china's history." "The whole NRM is weird and not clear." "I don't see it as a religion at all. The Falun gong movements for me just looks like a different version of Tai chi. I don't see the reason why this has become a religion at all."

The next question concerned the NRM that the students found easiest to understand. 13 students indicated Bambini di Satana. 10 students gave the Raelian movement. 8 students indicated Scientology. 3 indicated Santa Muerte, 1 Santo Daime and 1 Falun Gong. According to one student, all movements were easy to understand.

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This is a selection of the reasons given for finding Bambini di Satana easy: “the events and what happened are straightforward.” “We were already exposed to Satanism and knew some facts about it and the class just made it clearer and easier to understand.” “Because they were less religiously eventful than the other NRMs. The NRMs consisted of more scandalous than anything else.” “Because we’ve all heard about it at least one or twice in our life so it felt like we are just getting more information and in depth knowledge about it.” “Because there wasn’t really something to understand for me it looked like a club where people shared the same tastes and that is it.” Here is a reason given in the same answer both for Bambini di Satana and the Raelian Movement: “I guess because we are used to seeing something alike in movies so it was easy to understand.”

Students were asked if they envisaged applying what they had learned in their future studies and/or professional life - and how. Only in five cases the answer was neatly negative; and reasons for answering in the negative were different, including: “I don’t think I’ll ever apply what I learned in the future, since I try to avoid religion as much as I can.” “I don’t think that I’ll use this course for my future studies/personal life because I didn’t feel like it’s the type of studies I think I’ll be enjoying.” “I don’t think I’ll be applying it in either because I have strong faith in my religion and it’s not in my field of studies.” In a few other cases, students answered that they did not envisage any application but they felt they had acquired knowledge. The majority answered in the positive, suggesting increased tolerance, increased critical thinking (especially towards media), and curiosity. Here is a significant selection: “Yes, critical thinking, analysing texts or media publications, and as an engineering student, it is important to be objective, so as in understanding one’s belief.” “I will have an open mind regarding NRMs and I would love to keep learning about them.” “I would take time to understand things better and know where they come from before judging them.” “Being more understanding of people, not acting on assumptions, and seeking further information before settling on a final judgement.” “I am a person who is very fond of traveling and maybe one day i’ll meet someone that is apart of such NRM’s and that could lead me to connecting to people in a different level. additionally, maybe one day i will hear about an NRM in the news and i will know not to take the news to be fully true and use other sources to truly understand the nRM.” “I envision myself educating others about NRMs because now that i’ve understood and learnt about them i’d hate to hear others having a wrong idea about them.” “i will not beleive what the media say about other religion before doing research and having knowledge.” “I believe how the course affected me is very special. In the future, if I ever want to study something related to humanities and history. I will consider digging deeper in NRMS.” “I can apply it if I meet an NRM devotee. I could understand how they think and respect their beliefs.” “This course has perhaps influenced me to approach things in a more investigative and analytical way.” “I would like to meet people from these new religious movements and understands them more and be more open to them.” “Just being more open minded and tolerant about other’s beliefs.” “As i mentioned before, this course is a good mental exercises to look within and apply the same critical way of studying NRMs and their beliefs, to our own beliefs, whether spiritual and religious or not.” “I believe that in the future if I met someone who belongs to any of these religious movements I would have some knowledge about it.” “I think what I have learned in this class has turned to a personal interest and it will always be.” “now i learned about many different NRM’s so if at some point i met a person coming from one of them i’ll have an idea about his religion and i won’t do any weird expressions when hearing about it from him and now i’m very open to new religions.” “I learned from this course that every single person has reasons for which they believe in what they believe in, and for them it is the ultimate truth so as long as they are not harmful they should be believed in.” “To always ask questions and see why people are doing some weird practices.”

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Finally, students were encouraged to come up with additional reflections or suggestions regarding similar courses in the future. Here is a selection: “Maybe adding an NRM from the arab world would be very interesting because we would see how people could apply arab culture and belief and create an NRM.” “Is it possible to count pagan religion such as Celtics or hellenism as part of the NMR, cause I saw alot of people in the Internet that are following this religions.” “I watched a movie once (The wave, 1981)³⁰ where highschool students studying totalitarianism movements were appalled by how anyone could join such movements. Yet, the teacher experimented on them by subtly pushing totalitarian beliefs on to them and everyone submitted to these without realizing it. I think that perfectly shows that although History of Ideas students understand the course material, they might not apply it still. Fun Suggestion: maybe experiment on student’s thinking?” “Any additional NRM to be learned will be better.” “Maybe it would be nice to have some in real-life interactions with people involved with these movements³¹ or maybe trips to places where students would be exposed to other religions because special moroccan students at least most do not have this chance often to at all.” “Change the name of the course from History of Ideas to New Religion Movements because the current name is not really relevant to the course, I thought at first we’ll study some great ideas from philosophers and scientists and intellectuals from the past that would open our eyes on diffèrents ways of thinking.” “Maybe try other interesting and more famous religions.”³²

Team Members’ Reflections on the Class, the Project, and their Challenges

Overall, the team members found the course entertaining and interactive, feeling more like a discussion than a class merely conveying information to swallow; they feel that the interactive approach is good, and that it facilitates understanding on behalf of students. Most students did actively engage in class, although the early time (for the 8:30 AM class) was definitely a challenge, and some topics did elicit more interest than others (drugs, alcohol, Satanism). For one team member the course was a way to fulfill an educational aspiration - that of learning about a completely new subject; and the course was also a good exercise in seeing things from other people’s perspective. The same team member did remark that other students seemed bored, though. Boredom was interpreted by the team as a reaction to specific topics, or units, perceived by the students as (comparatively) uninteresting, rather than to the subject of NRMs in general, or to the teaching style. One pattern noticed in the discussions we had in class is that students tried to relate every subject to Islam, usually by way of comparison.

The four team members, who had never participated in a similar project, unanimously remarked that they found note-taking challenging, having to interpret and preserve in writing other students’ reactions and ideas, while at the same time catching up with new course content and participating actively. However, at least one team member did not find it difficult to single out fellow students’ reactions that would be relevant to note for the project. Another challenge was to keep the commitment and deliver on time, especially during finals and over the winter break (one team member in particular had to move abroad for an exchange semester and was busy with the related paperwork). They found, however, that observing the class was enjoyable and that the project in fact helped them understand course content because of the extra attention it required (revising the notes automatically entailed revising the information covered in class). At least one team member found that this kind of observation

³⁰ This is in fact the publication year of the novel by Todd Strasser on which is based the 2008 film by Dennis Gansel with the same title.

³¹ One of the 2022 sections had an on-line conversation with *daimista* leader Walter Menozzi.

³² 11 and 19 students participated, respectively, in the final evaluations (see previous footnote); and in both classes the average evaluation was 4.9/5.

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was not as easy as anticipated; but also, that the research conveyed the feeling that the study of NRMs is a vast, virtually inexhaustible field, to which one can actively contribute. Another team member found that the project prompted the realization that the course was not only about understanding religious beliefs but also other people's viewpoints.

Sometimes team members would feel insecure about the quality and quantity of their respective notes, wondering whether they would suffice. In this regard, however, they appreciated that the team leader was regularly checking their notes, providing them with feedback, and positively encouraging them not to give up. The team members found it easy when the project leader set up questions to guide their reflections, and to be answered orally via voice notes, so that he would draft the article by transcribing such voice notes and adjusting them. Additionally, they appreciated that he would keep encouraging them to take notes, and provide them with timely feedback. For future projects, they would like to have more face to face meetings to keep participants committed and avoid miscommunication.

Instructor's/Project Leader's Reflections on the Class, the Project, and their Challenges

Teaching an AUI gen-ed course, and one about NRMs in particular, presents an instructor with multiple, intertwined challenges. To begin with, for students, the general heading "History of Ideas" is opaque at best, not corresponding with any subject they are familiar with since high school. There exist, of course, web pages in which students share "reviews" of teachers and courses, but the discussion usually focuses on grades and "easiness" rather than on course content. Sometimes, "History of Ideas" is either confused with "history" courses, creating false expectations, being history associated with an exciting subject by some students, or boring by others.³³ Other times, due to the fact that the same instructor is also in charge of teaching Philosophical Thought, the course is associated with philosophy; and, as I systematically hear in my interaction with students at the beginning of a course in Philosophical Thought, for most students who studied within the Moroccan system philosophy comes with a bad reputation; it is a tedious subject that requires blind memorisation of abstruse concepts in order to obtain a high score in the "Baccalauréat." Yet other times students expect some psychological subject, or the history of great inventions.

Some challenges are generally related to how students perceive their experience at AUI and the role and relevance of gen-ed courses in the humanities, imparted according to Liberal Arts principles. In all likelihood most prospective students are initially attracted by the "American" experience: on-campus life far from home and family, international faculty,³⁴ English as a language of instruction,³⁵ international connections,³⁶ a diverse and (generally) accepting community; to this one should add national prestige and the promising high rate of employment after completing their studies.³⁷ It is, however, reasonable to assume (based on admittedly anecdotal but wide and persistent evidence in the

³³ It is customary for Stefano to illustrate this difficulty and dispel the confusion over the nature of History of Ideas on the first and/or the second day of class, when the syllabus is read and discussed. However, on a couple of occasions including in one of the courses discussed in this essay, he learned students were disappointed via a written comment suggesting that "History of Ideas" is not an appropriate name.

³⁴ Approximately 50% of faculty members are international as per data advertised over AUI's official web page (<https://aui.ma/aui-experience>).

³⁵ While other Moroccan universities do offer some programs in English, AUI has only courses in English (with the exception of Moroccan Economy, Moroccan Accounting and Taxation, and, of course, French).

³⁶ At the moment of writing, AUI can count on active exchange programs with about 90 institutions, and is a member of ISEP (International Student Exchange Program) (Office of Internationalization and Partnerships, February 22 2024, personal communication).

³⁷ In 2023, out of 491 students who graduated (all schools, all programs), approximately 69.67% received a job offer (data from AUI Employability and Entrepreneurship Office, February 2024).

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form of exchanges with students) that most students enroll without fully grasping the nature and importance of student-centered education including “Socratic” pedagogy, participative learning, and the like, since they have no correspondence in the Moroccan school system.³⁸ Also, AUI, over the past years, did not always seem efficient and effective, in its introductory courses,³⁹ in conveying to the students the essence of the Liberal Arts model so that certain misunderstandings and a lack of appreciation for AUI’s distinctive pedagogy, for some students, even extended into advanced semesters. Gen-ed courses may be perceived as unimportant, or as “GPA-boosters,” or in any case as “breathing space” from a generally busy and/or demanding schedule. In sum, a course that actually and fully implements the pedagogy that AUI upholds in its mission sometimes elicits confusion among students and even disappointment and negative judgements. For instance, teachers who prompt students to express their views and try to set up in-class discussions, or encourage students to discover and share knowledge on their own, can be seen as “killing time” as opposed to ones who deliver informational lectures.

There also exist other challenges, in which generational and cultural factors overlap: a general lack of interest in reading and writing (the latter often being replaced by resorting to AI). Additionally, English proficiency is not homogeneous across classes (as also shown by the linguistic quality of the comments reported above). Finally, the best-intentioned teachers also struggle with occasional technical disruptions, large classes,⁴⁰ and the lack of efficient systems and procedures allowing them to penalize plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty.⁴¹

Course-specific challenges include the difficulty of imparting knowledge about NRMs while making it clear that the teaching offered is neither aimed at proselytizing nor at ridiculing the beliefs and practices explored. The idea that NRM doctrines and rituals are important because they are important to certain sectors of society is a subtle and therefore challenging one to convey. Likewise challenging is to encourage occasional (as opposed to systematic) comparison with Islamic beliefs and doctrines and of avoiding that the discussion shifts towards an evaluation (from a Muslim angle) of a given NRM theology’s *veracity*.

In the introductory unit, the class was exposed to the following citations about the pedagogic worth of learning about NRMs:

The aim of teaching a course on NRMs should not be solely to give students information about current religious affairs, but also to help them reflect on and understand complex phenomena that in some way or other could have an impact on their lives. NRMs may be a sign of vibrancy of religion in the 21st century and, even though most of these groups may not survive or might remain marginal groups, they are having an impact on both society and traditional groups. They are also symptomatic of some of the problems inherent in all belief systems. NRMs not only encourage people to reflect on their belief systems. They also urge them to develop ways of coping with pluralism in an age of globalism and of discerning some of the major cultural and religious trends in Western culture (Saliba 2007: 59-60).

³⁸ One should add that they aren’t in fact constantly and consistently implemented by *all* AUI faculty.

³⁹ All students need to take the First Year Experience Seminar I and First Year Experience Seminar II.

⁴⁰ Sometimes the number of students per class exceeds 30.

⁴¹ Different policies have been proposed and implemented over the years, both at university and single schools level. At the time of writing, SSAH is working on a policy for academic honesty whose initial draft also considers AI-based dishonesty.

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What teaching about NRMs offers is an opportunity to make the study of religion come alive in a way that is particularly relevant. In the process, students can learn to question their own preconceptions, understand how minority groups and traditions meet resistance from established interests, witness how groups with ostensibly noble purposes fail and betray their own goals, becoming more discerning in assessing diverse sources of information, increase their capacity for critical thinking, and gain at least a preliminary sense of how to enter and appreciate an unfamiliar social and cultural milieu. For all these reasons, the study of NRMs can make a significant contribution to the ultimate goal of teaching, furthering liberal education (Bromley 2007: 26)

Based on the survey results, I am inclined to think that multiple goals suggested by Saliba and Bromley were met in Fall 2023. In particular, students did express acceptance of religious pluralism based on a deeper comprehension of the “human side” of NRMs; and they took a critical stance towards popular media depictions of NRMs. To be sure, I also suspect that most students started off as open-minded towards other religions, and critical towards popular sources of information, but they “channeled” such dispositions into the study of NRMs specifically. At the same time, I cannot fail to record that multiple students dropped the course; and this phenomenon is worth of consideration, too. Similar attrition rates observed over the years in courses that do not focus on NRMs⁴² suggest that the factors at play in such a decision were not necessarily or exclusively related to specific course content. However, one project member heard on one occasion from a classmate, who eventually dropped the class, that they felt they were doing something *haram* (Islamically forbidden). This, along with other episodes witnessed in class, suggests that there *was* a certain uneasiness associated with the topic, in addition to other challenges (class time, commitment required, and so on). Also, it is important to remark that, in their responses, students expressed acceptance while retaining an “exceptionalist” outlook about Islam. They may well perceive NRMs as ultimately tolerable but at the same time as irrational and flawed; NRMs beliefs are interpreted, comparatively, as confirming the superiority of Islamic faith. In other words, Islamic values and concepts were often invoked to draw comparisons resulting in a negative assessment of a given NRM or one of its aspects (e.g., Raelians have scriptures in French; Rael modified his message over time; Santa Muerte has no prophet; and so on). I am not sure this is what Saliba had in mind when he wrote that studying NRMs “encourage[s] people to reflect on their belief systems.”

I am also somewhat taken aback by the remark according to which there was “too much politics” in Falun Gong. This may be interpreted as an expression of lack of interest towards the multiple historical and social facts, far from the Moroccan experience, that need to be recalled in order to understand this specific movement. Alternatively, students may be characterized by a general lack of interest towards “politics” or even entertain the perception that religious beliefs and power dynamics belong to fully independent spheres. In sum, one of the goals suggested by Bromley may not have been met, at least in the specific unit: “understand how minority groups and traditions meet resistance from established interests.” Finally, I cannot fail to see that even students expressing acceptance and increased critical thinking still do so while not using accurate/scholarly language. All such aspects may be further investigated and unpacked in similar projects based on finer surveys.

In regard to research projects involving undergraduate students, the challenges are likewise multiple and intertwined. One must reckon, to begin with, with the students’ almost total (if surely understandable) lack of familiarity with research methods, as well as with other academic practices

⁴² Respective course content and final evaluations are summarized in a section of the instructor’s CV, available at: <https://aui.academia.edu/StefanoBigliardi/CurriculumVitae>.

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including the submission of an article to an academic journal and the subsequent, lengthy editorial process. It is also difficult to convey (and implement) the idea that a project is *teamwork* in the fullest sense of the expression. Students do not always grasp (not initially, at least) that they are not “reporting” to the project leader like they would to a “boss” in a profit-oriented, standard corporate environment. As a project leader I see myself as *sharing* my expertise and knowledge, and providing the team with *support* due to my experience; however, responsibility within the team is equally shared in the interest of superior goals including the construction of scholarly knowledge, personal growth and satisfaction, and the prestige bestowed on the School and university in case of success. Based on this and other similar projects I can confidently state that, while I articulate, and elaborate on, such ideas and principles at the beginning of the work, and while they meet with the students’ agreement on such an occasion, their actual appreciation and implementation when research is underway is a different matter: I often have to recall guiding ideals, correct, encourage and reassure team members, and steer the project back into the right methodology. Additionally, it often happens that, despite my early warnings, team members find out, while the project is already well underway, that they are busier than they optimistically assumed at the outset, so that they have to revise their priorities and end up delivering with significant delay. Likewise in spite of early warnings, team members often “discover” that actual research is lengthier, more repetitive, or more tedious than expected. As a result, *timeliness* turns out very challenging, too. It is my understanding that, in this specific project, team members blamed the lack of in-person meetings for a fading of their sense of focus and commitment: however, I must specify on previous projects I faced exactly the same issues while meeting frequently and in person.

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Appendix 1

Dear all,

I am looking for max four (4) **students** (ideally, 2 from the 8:30 section and 2 from the 10:00 section) who would like to work on a **research project/academic article** together.

First come first served.

Please note that this project does not entail any course-related benefits or monetary compensation. It's all about the pleasure of working together, gaining experience in conducting ethnographic research and writing an academic article, and (possibly) publishing it in a good-quality scholarly journal - with our names. If we get it published, we may also present it (online, in person) at some academic event.

Research subject: teaching and learning about NRMs at AUI. (I will disclose more to those who express interest).

Required commitment: this whole semester and part of the next one (one-two months). One online meeting every two weeks (approx.). Taking some extra notes in class. Approx. 1-2 hours per week for the first three weeks. Approx. 1-3 hours per week after the winter break (depending on your writing skills).

Requisites:

1. You are punctual and well-organized.
2. You are an excellent student (ideally you should refer me to a colleague who can vouch for you).
3. You are able to work in a (small) team.
4. You have excellent English (spoken, written).
5. You enjoy writing. (**No** prior experience in a similar project needed, though).
6. You are observant and meticulous.
7. You are curious.
8. You are particularly interested in our course and anticipate you will do extremely well in it.

Send me an e-mail if you want to express interest 😊

Ciao,

Stefano B.

(Sent on September 7, 2023; SaHSS Dean was included)

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Appendix 2

Hello ethnographers,

Here's a list of instructions for taking notes.

- 1) I shared a document on Drive with each one of you. Please check it right away and ask me for access permission (if needed). The document is for your notes. Of course you can take them elsewhere then paste them.
- 2) You should make it a habit to take notes during class or right after class when memory is still fresh.
- 3) Please start each new set of notes with a title like: "Tuesday September 19 – Scientology"
- 4) Don't mind grammar and spelling too much; these are just notes.
- 5) From now on you should sit where you can observe the whole class.
- 6) Please do not exchange info (about the notes) with the other classmate-observer! We need independent observations.
- 7) There is no word limit. I'd say min. maybe half a page per lesson but in principle it's your call. The notes should be rich but not excessive (we have a whole course ahead).
- 8) Please focus on questions *like: what catches the students' attention? What aspects of the NRMs are they most critical of? Which one do they appreciate? Which ones do they have a hard time understanding? Any pattern in their comments/reactions/contributions to the discussion?*
- 9) Everything you write down must have been observed/heard (not: guessed) by you. It's not about your gut feelings or guesswork but about your observations.
- 10) Please observe but also participate in the class!
- 11) In two or three weeks we shall meet again and discuss how this activity is going/possibly come up with new/improved guidelines for the notes.

Thank you,

Stefano

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