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# Religion Expert to Explore Women on High

## UNH Sidore Lecture Planned April 20

By [\*Tracy Manforte\*](#)  
*UNH News Bureau*

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DURHAM, N.H. -- An April 20 lecture by Catherine Wessinger, an expert in new religions and women's leadership in so-called "cults," marks the final presentation of the 1999-2000 Saul O Sidore Memorial Lecture Series at the University of New Hampshire.

Wessinger, of Loyola University in New Orleans, will discuss "Charisma and Credentials: Women's Religious Leadership in America." Her talk, free and open to the public, begins at 12:40 p.m., in Theatre II of the Memorial Union Building.

Wessinger is the author of the forthcoming "How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate." She is the editor of "Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases" (1999) and "Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream" (1993). Wessinger also contributed the forward to Mary McCormick Maaga's "Hearing the Voices of Jonestown" (1998).

Wessinger's work has been targeted by critics who condemn her objectivity as apologetic. For example, she depicts Jonestown as a blend of radical socialist separatism from the capitalist, racist American mainstream, and blind commitment to Jim Jones, who saw his vocation as the work of Christ saving a poisoned world. Wessinger's attention to historical detail and her interpretation of such emotionally charged events as the Jonestown mass suicide have alarmed cult-watchers who read her cultural analysis as complicit and therefore controversial.

In her Sidore lecture, Wessinger will focus on female religious leaders, in particular, the role of charisma in

the vocations and reputations of these women who historically were able to gain respect in their religious communities only by presenting evidence of direct communication with the sacred.

Since the 19th century, women in America increasingly have gained access to academic and institutional credentials in ministry. She intends to highlight this progression, as well as the importance of charisma in supporting women's religious leadership.

The Sidore Lecture Series was established in 1965 in memory of Saul O Sidore, of Manchester. The purpose of the series is to offer programs that raise critical and sometimes controversial issues facing society. The series is sponsored by the Sidore Foundation, the UNH Center for Humanities and the UNH Foundation.

*April 7, 2000*

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