

**CAUTION!!!** We are about to engage in an in-depth exploration of one of the topics (along with politics) that, in North American society, is not to be discussed in polite company: religion. Moreover, we are about to examine religion, not as “insiders” (followers), but as critical “outsiders” (psychologically informed observers). It is unrealistic to think that you or I have not formed some opinions, if not deeply held convictions, about the various forms of religion that we will encounter. It is therefore absolutely essential that we all strive to maintain an atmosphere of respect and tolerance for differing viewpoints.

**PSYCH 231 -- Psychology of Religious Experience -- W '08 Wed 7:00-9:50 P.M.**

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**Office Hours:** M 2:30-3:20; M W 6:00-6:45; by appointment  
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**What the Course Is Intended to Be:** The “official” course description is: “Approaches of traditional psychological theories toward phenomena of religious experience, mysticism, and prayer are examined. The psychological process of creating and naming ‘gods’ is considered as well as comparisons among altered states of consciousness including some forms of prayer.”

We will indeed be exploring some of these issues. In order to do so in a meaningful way, however, we must be mindful of their context. First, we must explore what we mean when we say “religious” and “experience” (and “psychology of,” for that matter). We need to address such core questions as “How do you know, psychologically speaking, when “religious” is an appropriate label?” and “Can any ‘experience’ be religious?” and “How can psychology say anything meaningful about religion? Can (or should) it say anything at all?”

My intent is to offer you an overview, based on psychological research, of the origins, development, and consequences of religion. In addition to exploring intense mystical or conversion experiences, for example, we will examine the “day-to-day” relationship between religion and social-psychological variables such as adjustment, prejudice, and prosocial behavior. I would suggest to you that the day-to-day stuff is inescapably the context in which the more intense stuff must be considered.

**What the Course Is Not Intended to Be:** This is NOT a “how to” course. If you were expecting instruction in meditation or past life regression, or tips on how to improve your prayer life, you are in the wrong place. Some psychologists of religion take this approach -- indeed, they assume that firsthand experience is the ONLY means of understanding religion -- but I will not. Rather, because my expertise is that of a social-psychological researcher, I will encourage you to adopt the role of observer rather than participant for the purposes of this course, regardless of your religious tradition (or lack thereof).

This is NOT a theology or apologetics course. I will NOT seek to prove or disprove the truth claims of any particular religious tradition. My goal is to get you to think about religion psychologically, to ask psychological questions about religion to which theory and research can be applied in pursuit of answers. As you will see, this is not necessarily an easily attainable goal (indeed, some would argue that it is not even a desirable one, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves...).

**Required text:** Spilka, B., Hood, R. W., Jr., Hunsberger, B., & Gorsuch, R. (2003). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford. [assigned readings appear in CAPS below]

Jan 09 Introduction to Course; Foundations I; **CHAPTER 1**  
Jan 16 Foundations II; **CHAPTER 2**  
Jan 23 Religious Development; **CHAPTER 4**  
Jan 30 Religious Orientation; **CHAPTER 5**  
Feb 06 **Test 1**; Intense Religious Experience I; **CHAPTER 9**  
Feb 13 Intense Religious Experience II  
Feb 20 **WINTER BREAK -- NO CLASS**  
Feb 27 Mysticism; **CHAPTER 10**  
Mar 05 Conversion; **CHAPTER 11**  
Mar 12 **Test 2**; Religious Groups; **CHAPTER 12**  
Mar 19 Religion and Social Consequences; **CHAPTER 14**  
Mar 26 Religion and Mental Health; Integrative Comments; **CHAPTER 16**  
Apr 02 **Test 3**

*How to Approach the Text:* The text is encyclopedic, with lots of words and no pictures. You are responsible for all assigned chapters, but at a level of detail that is reasonable. Skimming or just reading a chapter’s Overview is insufficient, but memorizing percentages, etc. is a waste of time. Instead, aim to extract the main points from each headed section.

**Tests and Marking:** TEST 1 = 40%; TEST 2 = 35%; TEST 3 = 25%. Tests are based on lecture AND text, and are not cumulative. There is no final exam. The format is multiple choice with computer cards, so bring a couple of pencils and an eraser on test days. Marks will be posted on the large bulletin board outside of my office (STJ 2016) as soon as they are available (I will announce this in class). The mark received for a test stands -- it will not be dropped, reweighted, etc.

Make-up tests will be permitted ONLY in the event of *documented illness, emergency, or religious observance*, in accordance with UW regulations. They will NOT be granted because you forgot, overslept, were in a bad mood, have a holiday planned, didn't come to class or read the course outline, etc. Unless it is *absolutely impossible*, I should be notified of the situation BEFORE the scheduled time of the test, not after. A make-up exam should be written as quickly as possible upon your return to classes (ideally, that same day), with the obvious provision of access to missed material (see Class Attendance below). If you request an exception in extreme or unusual circumstances, *you need to be prepared to explain why making an exception for you would be fair to the other students in the class.*

**Class Attendance:** Whether or not you choose to attend class is entirely up to you, but you are responsible for all material covered. Should you miss class, for whatever reason, it is your responsibility to find a classmate who would be willing to provide you with the notes you missed. If your absence is *legitimate*, then I am happy to answer questions about the missed material once you have consulted with a fellow student. To make the most of consultation time outside of class, come prepared with specific questions regarding whatever material you may be having trouble with, and be prepared to discuss what you know (or think you know) about a topic -- that can speed up and simplify the clarification process tremendously.

**Special Needs:** Students with documented or suspected disabilities (i.e., physical, learning, or sensory disabilities or chronic medical conditions) are encouraged to contact the Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD) to determine eligibility for their services. OPD is located in NH 1132 and can be contacted at 519-888-4567, ext. 35082, TDD/TTY 888-4044. If you require an adapted learning/testing environment, provide me with OPD documentation *at the beginning of the term.*

**Cheating:** *I think cheating is lazy, disrespectful, and immoral, and I find it very sad that some people may try to get a course mark, or even a university degree, without having earned it honestly. I really hope that you're not one of those people.* "All students registered in courses at the University of Waterloo and its Federated University and Affiliated Colleges are expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for their actions. Students who are unsure whether an action constitutes an offense, or who need help in learning how to avoid offenses (e.g., plagiarism, cheating), or about rules for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, TA, academic advisor, the appropriate St. Jerome's departmental Chair, or ultimately the Appeals Officer (currently the Associate Dean) for St. Jerome's University. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy #71, *Student Academic Discipline*, [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm). Students who believe that they have been wrongfully or unjustly penalized have the right to grieve in accord with Policy #70, *Student Grievance*, [www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm](http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm)."

**On Doing Your Best:** As an alternative to cheating ;), how can you do well? 1) Come to class! Be alert, ask questions – either in class or later. Do more than mindlessly write down whatever appears on an overhead: *Think* about the material – try to come up with your own examples and illustrations by applying the material to people you know, media happenings, etc. 2) Do the readings! Ideally, read them at least once before the relevant week's lecture, and at least once after that lecture. Don't mindlessly run a highlighter over the words: *Think* about the material – write down questions, observations, possible examples, etc. as you read. 3) Look for connections! We will be dealing with a lot of specific phenomena in this class, but there will be some big themes that will keep recurring throughout the term. Look for them. Look also for connections between lecture and assigned readings. 4) Test yourself! Don't simply assume that certain concepts are "easy" or "common sense" – often, they are not. Can you explain an idea to someone else, without reciting your notes, in a way that that person will understand? If given a blank page, could you reproduce the structure of ideas I use to organize my lectures? Can you create a structure of ideas that accurately summarizes a reading's main points? Can you recognize sets of information in lectures or readings that might make good multiple choice options, and explain how members of a set are similar or different?

**Classroom Etiquette and Contacting Me:** Please TURN OFF cell phones, etc. when in class. When addressing me in person, by phone, or by e-mail, please call me "Dr. Burris." I welcome your questions and comments in class, but keep on topic, and don't insist that you be heard on every possible occasion or interrupt others who are speaking. For questions outside of class, use scheduled office hours whenever possible. When office hours (or before/after class) are not convenient, use e-mail for small questions (be sure to include your name, your UWID#, and the class), or make an appointment for bigger questions. When my door is open, you may also drop in, but be sure to knock and ask if it is a good time to talk.

*Good luck in this class -- I hope it is a good experience.*