

**PSYCH 231 -- Psychology of Religious Experience -- Fall 2010 -- M 7:00-9:50 P.M.**

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**Office Hours:** M W 2:30-3:30; 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:** Hood, R. W., Jr., Hill, P. C. Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach (4th ed.)*. New York: Guilford. [assigned readings appear in CAPS below]

Sep 13 Introduction to Course; Foundations I; **CHAPTER 1**  
Sep 20 Foundations II; **CHAPTER 2**  
Sep 27 Religious Development; **CHAPTER 4**  
Oct 04 Religious Orientation; **CHAPTER 5**  
**Oct 11 Thanksgiving Monday – NO CLASS**  
Oct 18 **Test 1;** Intense Religious Experience I; **CHAPTER 10**  
Oct 25 Intense Religious Experience II  
Nov 01 Mysticism; **CHAPTER 11**  
Nov 08 Conversion; **CHAPTER 8**  
Nov 15 **Test 2;** Religious Groups; **CHAPTER 9**  
Nov 22 Religion and Social Consequences; **CHAPTER 12**  
Nov 29 Religion and Mental Health; Integrative Comments; **CHAPTER 13**  
Dec 06 **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. I will periodically make study questions for the chapters available to assist you.

**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. Also bring ID – ideally, you WATCard. Marks will be posted on ACE as soon as they are available. The mark received for a test stands – it will not be dropped, re-weighted, etc. because you weren’t feeling well, had a lot on your mind, etc., nor will “extra” assignments be given to students who are dissatisfied with their grades. *My goal is to be fair to*

**everyone. PLEASE UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT THIS POLICY, AND ADJUST YOUR EXPECTATIONS ACCORDINGLY.**

You are entitled to test rescheduling for *legitimate* medical, compassionate, or religious grounds. Alternate test dates/times will not be granted because you forgot, overslept, were in a bad mood, had a plane to catch, didn't come to class or read the course outline, had a bird poop on your head, etc.

Whenever possible, please inform me PRIOR to the scheduled test to arrange an alternate writing time. A make-up test should be written as quickly as possible upon your return to classes, with the obvious provision of access to missed material (see Class Attendance below). When arriving to write a make-up test, please have the appropriate documentation in hand to support a medical, compassionate, or religious claim, in accordance with UW regulations. Make-up exams may differ in format from the original.

**Class Attendance:** *This is not a web-based or distance education course.* Thus, although whether or not you choose to attend class is entirely up to you, 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 will be 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)."

**How to Do Your Best:** 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. Texting, chatting, surfing, facebooking, tweeting, squawking, etc. annoy me and distract other students, so please do them elsewhere. When addressing me in person, by phone, or by e-mail, please call me "Dr. Burris." I welcome on-topic questions and comments, but don't insist that you be heard on every possible occasion or interrupt others who are speaking. For questions outside of class, use office hours whenever possible. When these (or before/after class) are not convenient, use e-mail for small questions (be sure to include your name, your UWID#, and the class, and allow at least 24 hours for a response), 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.*