

PSYCH 231 -- Psychology of Religious Experience -- Fall 2015 -- W 2:30-5:20 P.M.

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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 16 Introduction to Course; Foundations I; **CHAPTER 1**
Sep 23 Foundations II; **CHAPTER 2**
Sep 30 Religious Development; **CHAPTER 4**
Oct 07 Religious Orientation; **CHAPTER 5**
Oct 14 **Test 1**; Intense Religious Experience I; **CHAPTER 10**
Oct 21 Intense Religious Experience II
Oct 28 Mysticism; **CHAPTER 11**
Nov 04 Conversion; **CHAPTER 8**
Nov 11 **Test 2**; Religious Groups; **CHAPTER 9**
Nov 18 Religion and Social Consequences; **CHAPTER 12**
Nov 25 Religion and Mental Health; Integrative Comments; **CHAPTER 13**
Dec 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. 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%. All tests are multiple choice and use computer cards, so be sure to bring a couple of pencils and an eraser on test days. Also, ***be prepared to present identification (your WAT card) during tests***. The tests are weighted in accordance with how much material they cover; they are not cumulative. Any material covered in class or in the assigned readings is testable, including material covered in class immediately after a test. Class will resume after a break following Test 1 and Test 2. Test marks will be posted on LEARN as soon as possible. In order to be fair to everyone, ***the mark received for a test stands*** – it will not be dropped or re-weighted. There is no final exam.

Extra Credit:

Up to 4% extra credit is available via SONA research participation. Detailed instructions appear in the "F14 SONA INSTRUCTIONS" handout available for download on LEARN. As an active researcher myself, I would ask that you PLEASE TAKE ANY RESEARCH PARTICIPATION SERIOUSLY – careless completion of a study's materials is a waste of everyone's time and seriously undercuts the research process.

UW Policy regarding Illness and Missed Tests:

UW Examination Regulations (www.registrar.uwaterloo.ca/exams/ExamRegs.pdf) state that: 1) A medical certificate presented in support of an official petition for relief from normal academic requirements must provide all of the information requested on the "University of Waterloo Verification of Illness" form or it will not be accepted. This form can be obtained from Health Services or at www.healthservices.uwaterloo.ca/Health_Services/verification.html. 2) If a student has a test/examination deferred due to acceptable medical evidence, he/she normally will write the test/examination at a mutually convenient time, to be determined by the course instructor. 3) The University acknowledges that, due to the pluralistic nature of the University community, some students may on religious grounds require alternative times to write tests and examinations. 4) Elective arrangements (such as travel plans) are not considered acceptable grounds for granting an alternative examination time.

Thus, 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. 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:

The AccessAbility Services (AS) Office, located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the AS Office at the beginning of each academic term. If you require an adapted learning or testing environment, please provide us with AS documentation *at the beginning of the term*.

For the Ethically Challenged:

I think cheating is lazy, disrespectful, and immoral, and I find it very sad that some people may try to get a course mark without having earned it honestly. I hope you're not one of them.

Academic Integrity:

In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo and its Federated University and Affiliated Colleges are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

Discipline:

A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under St. Jerome’s University Academic Discipline Policy and UW Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to [Policy 71 - Student Discipline](#).

Grievance:

A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. For students who decide to file a grievance, students should refer to [Policy 70 – Student Petitions and Grievances](#). In such a case, contact Dr. Scott Kline (scott.kline@uwaterloo.ca), Associate Dean of St. Jerome’s University.

Appeals:

A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 71 – Student Discipline or Policy 70 – Student Petitions and Grievances if a ground for an appeal can be established. In such a case, contact Dr. John Rempel (jrempel@uwaterloo.ca), Appeals Officer of St. Jerome’s University.

Academic Integrity website (Arts): http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html

Academic Integrity website (Math): <https://math.uwaterloo.ca/math/current-undergraduates/regulations-and-procedures/cheating-and-student-academic-discipline>

Academic Integrity Office (UW): <http://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/>

On Doing Your Best: There are some things you can do to put in the best performance possible in this class:

- 0) Make the decision to do your best! I have often wondered how much the class average would improve *if every student decided to work to his/her full potential*. Are you willing to make this commitment to yourself?
- 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 deal with a lot of specific phenomena, but some big themes will recur throughout the term. Look for them. Look also for connections between lecture and assigned readings. Think about what *this* theorist might say about *that* topic, etc. – even if we’ve never addressed this in class.
- 4) Test yourself! Don’t assume that certain concepts are “easy” or “common sense” – often, they are not. Can you explain an idea to someone, 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 can you explain how members of a set are similar or different?

These may sound difficult, especially if you have gotten by with plain old memorization in the past. Having said that, I strongly suspect that you WILL do better in this class if you put the above suggestions into practice. ***I have also prepared the "MC Survival Guide" (downloadable through LEARN) that offers you specific tips for preparing for my tests.*** Remember: I am happy to see you succeed, but YOU have to do the work!

Classroom Etiquette and Contacting Me:

Please TURN OFF cell phones, etc. when in class. Please do your "social media," surfing, gaming, etc. elsewhere. Thanks. 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. Use e-mail for small questions (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's open, you may drop in, but be sure to knock and ask if it's a good time to talk.

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