

PSYCH 455 (F12) -- Honours Seminar: Social Psychology of Religion

W 9:00 A.M.- 11:50 P.M. STJ 3020

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Office Hours: T 11:00-12:00; W 6:00-6:45; by appointment

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Course Description: Our aim is to develop a broad-based understanding concerning the origins, development, and consequences of religion from a psychological perspective. We will try to make sense out of both the commonalities and diversity of expression across cultures and faith traditions. We will explore the significance of religion as a group phenomenon, as well as a private, individual experience, with a particular focus on religion's adaptive and maladaptive consequences in domains such as mental and physical health, and interpersonal and intergroup relations. Although a social psychological perspective will permeate our exploration, we will not be "purist" in our approach: Complementary perspectives, such as those offered by personality and social neuroscience, will be considered as well.

Course Purpose and Structure: This is an honours seminar, the most advanced type of course that you can take at the undergraduate psychology level. Thus, these skills are essential for a positive experience for all:

1) *independent thought & tolerance for ambiguity* -- I want to see that you can think critically about the information and ideas encountered. I want you to become increasingly comfortable with the fact that I'll be asking a lot of questions and offering relatively few answers. Although I may sometimes point you in a direction, I'm much more interested in your attempts to come to your own conclusions, and your justifications for doing so.

2) *verbal & written communication skills* -- I want you to be able to communicate the results of your independent, critical thought in spoken and written word. Essential to both is the ability to articulate your reasons for advancing a particular idea – be it a criticism, a conceptual model, a testable hypothesis, or whatever.

3) *collegiality and cooperation* -- For a seminar to be successful, all participants must be engaged in the process: That means giving serious attention to assigned readings in order to prepare comments, questions, and the like. It means showing up on time and making consistent contributions to in-class discussions. At the same time, it means allowing others that same opportunity. It means being respectful when differences of opinion arise – and always, *always*, ALWAYS examining your assumptions and trying your best to ensure that your position is rooted in research and/or rational argument.

Evaluative Tasks: Your degree of success in this seminar is based on your performance on the four tasks below.

Participation (20%): This is a seminar, not a lecture class. That means that you are expected to take an active role in it. Like it or not, that means talking in class. Reality check: How many of you plan to have careers that will NEVER involve speaking up in a group setting? Participation marks can be quite subjective, so here's a rough quantification of the standards I will be using:

- 0.0 -- absent (unexcused)
- 0.5 -- present, but essentially silent
- 1.0 -- talking, but contributions generally misguided, trivial, or insufficiently justified
- 1.5 -- talking, and contributions are "on the mark" as often as not
- 2.0 -- talking, and contributions are usually "on the mark" (or at least one real "Wowser").

I'll be using these guidelines starting week 3. A few additional tips: Only legitimate, documented absences -- illness, family emergency, or religious observance -- will be excused without penalty. In the case of excused absences, participation marks will be pro-rated accordingly. There are lots of ways to make "on the mark" contributions -- Criticisms, connections, observations, and even good questions are all potentially wonderful contributions. In order to function consistently at this level, you will need to complete the assigned readings in advance. That means making notes to yourself as you read – not the kind of notes you'd take if you were studying for a test, rather: "This reminds me of..." "Could this be related to...?" "What if the study did this...?" "Did anybody else not get this...?"

Although I certainly hope that it doesn't happen, please be aware that disrespectful communication -- in the form of personal attacks, unjustified criticism of another's ideas, or monopolization of discussion time (talking to hear oneself talk) -- will be penalized. Those on the shy side may have to make an extra effort to speak; those on the more verbally assertive side may have to make a special effort to be concise and to listen. Let us work together to create a learning environment in which all are willing to engage in these various efforts.

The "Burning Question"

Starting Week 1, you will be asked to pose and develop one "burning question" relevant to the psychology of religion – what question relating to religion/spirituality would you MOST like to try to answer from a psychological perspective? You'll need to find the "sweet spot" between a question that is too broad or vague to address within the context of this seminar and one that is too concrete and specific that it is already clearly "answered" in a very small literature. I and your fellow students will work with you to find this "sweet spot"; in the event that more than one student has an initially similar question, I will work with you together to ensure that you are ultimately addressing non-redundant aspects. The end goal is to become an expert in the area that your question addresses.

Your "burning question" will provide the context for the remainder of the evaluative tasks in this seminar:

Progress/Integration Reports (15%): You will be asked to submit three (5% each) progress/integration reports throughout the term. The idea is to ensure that you are pacing yourself and finding points of connection between the course and your specific interests, as articulated in your "burning question" as it takes shape. Each report is expected to be a minimum of two pages long, and should focus on how you are refining your question and sketching out tentative answers in light of assigned readings, class discussion, and your own individual research and reflection. Due dates will be tied to your presentation schedule (see below) as follows:

- Presentation Week 09: Reports due Weeks 3, 5, and 7 (if you drew a "1")
- Presentation Week 10: Reports due Weeks 4, 6, and 8 (if you drew a "2")
- Presentation Week 11: Reports due Weeks 5, 7, and 9 (if you drew a "3")
- Presentation Week 12: Reports due Weeks 6, 8, and 10 (if you drew a "4")

Presentation (25%): During class time in the month of November (Weeks 9-12), you will be asked to do an individual presentation; your week will be assigned by a draw. The goal will be to present your "burning question" to the class, followed by the answer(s) – based on the relevant research that you have located and integrated. You should also spend some time pointing out what gaps exist – be they theoretical or empirical – and how these might be addressed. You will each have a 30-minute slot – about 20 minutes of which should be presentation, and 10 minutes for questions. You are *strongly encouraged* to distribute a preview, readings, thought questions, weblinks, etc. sometime during the week before your presentation in order to give us some context and background. All students are expected to provide each presenter with constructive verbal and/or written feedback, suggestions, and questions dealing with the **content** of the presentation (not that they said "um" too much or that you didn't like how they accessorized) – ideally, this will help each presenter in the preparation of his or her written document (described next). To be very clear: This is expected to be a professional, scholarly presentation – not craft time, interpretive dance, etc. The goal should be to teach us what you've learned – not entertain us or kill time.

Final Paper (40%): Finally, you will be asked to submit a paper that is, essentially, a more detailed exposition of your burning question and its answer along the lines of what has been described above for the presentation. The paper should be in the range of 15-20 double-spaced pages, not including APA-style references. It will be **due in my office no later than NOON on December 5th** (there is no class that day). Late papers will be subject to 10% per day deductions unless acceptable documentation of emergency or illness is provided. Earlier submissions are welcomed.

A few follow-up words about marks: Marks are based on performance on the evaluative tasks specified above. Period. I am more than happy to consult with you at any stage of the course, but I will not do the work for you – and my expectations are high: I expect you to be motivated to do your *absolute best work* in here.

A word about academic integrity: As it pertains to this class, I am assuming that, at this advanced stage of your education, you know how to cite sources properly when referring to another's ideas, and how to use quotation marks

when using another's words. The formal statements about all of this stuff appear on the next page:

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: All students registered in courses at St. Jerome's University are expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their 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, www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm.

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. In such a case, contact the St. Jerome's University Grievance Officer. Read St. Jerome's University Handbook, Section 4, item 8, www.sju.ca/faculty_staff/SJU_handbook/grievance_policy.html.

Appeals: A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under St. Jerome's University Academic Discipline Policy or Grievance Policy if a ground for an appeal can be established. In such a case, contact the St. Jerome's University Appeals Officer. Read St. Jerome's University Handbook, Section 6.4, www.sju.ca/faculty/SJU_handbook/examinations_grades_standings_and_appeals.html.

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

Academic Integrity Office (UW): <http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/>

A word about special needs: Should you require an adapted learning environment due to a learning disability or something similar, you **MUST** provide me with documentation at the beginning of the term from Disabled Student Services in Needles Hall. I am happy to accommodate you, provided that you go through the appropriate channels.

A word about reference letters: It is entirely possible that some of you may seek me out for letters of reference following your completion of this seminar, as it is for many of you the most intimate setting you have encountered thus far. I am certainly open to this. You can make it easier for me – and better for yourself – by making sure that I know you, and by keeping a dossier of your work in this seminar for future reference. That does wonders for jogging my memory and giving me specific examples rather than vague generalities to present and discuss in a letter.

A word about contacting me outside of class: I am available for course-related dialogue outside of class. For questions requiring only brief responses, use e-mail. For those requiring longer responses, see me in person.

Rough schedule (topics are subject to change; assigned readings will be posted on Desire2Learn one week prior to the class in which they will be discussed):

Week 1 (12 Sep) – Introductions (You, me, and “the psychology of religion”)

Assigned reading for Week 2: Bering, J. M. (2006). The folk psychology of souls. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 29(5), 453–462. doi:10.1017/S0140525X06009101 PLUS the commentaries and responses that follow (to p. 493).

Week 2 (19 Sep) --

Week 3 (26 Sep) --

Week 4 (03 Oct) --

Week 5 (10 Oct) --

Week 6 (17 Oct) --

Week 7 (24 Oct) --

Week 8 (31 Oct) --

Week 9 (07 Nov) – presentations

Week 10 (14 Nov) – presentations

Week 11 (21 Nov) – presentations

Week 12 (28 Nov) – presentations

(05 Dec) – paper due