

# **Psych 410/510: Psychology of Religion**

## **Syllabus Spring 2006**

### **Instructor Information:**

Instructor: Robert C. Gordon, Ph.D.

Lectures: 9 a.m. M W F 302 Gerlinger Hall

Office Hours: Monday 11-12 Tuesday 12-1 Thursday 1-2 348 Straub Hall

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### **Course Description**

Religion is one of the most powerful forces animating the world today. This course will explore the psychology behind this propulsive power. The course will not only introduce students to classic figures in the field such as William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow, it will also explore why individuals become so strongly wedded to their religious beliefs, and the ways in which religious institutions channel human activity. Finally, it will examine the rise of religiously inspired terrorism, and its implications for the future.

The course will approach psychology of religion from three different but complementary perspectives -- phenomenological, empirical and sociological. The first part of the course will study psychology of religion from a phenomenological perspective. This approach will help us understand just what we mean by religious experience considered psychologically. Our phenomenological exploration will depend heavily on William James' classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It has been said that all of Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato. It can equally as well be said that all of the psychology of religion is a footnote to William James because he explores most of the salient issues that have become important to the field. Students will also have the opportunity to study James' Pragmatism. He is well known for his pragmatic assessment of religion, holding that if religious beliefs and practices produce positive practical effects, then that fact is grounds for considering religious beliefs to be true. Students will learn how significantly James' pragmatic approach has influenced empirical studies in the psychology of religion.

The second phase of the course will study the empirical approach to psychology of religion. It will center on the question: How do we measure religious experience and its effects? It will explore methodological and ethical issues unique to the psychology of religion, explicating how it is that we can scientifically measure religious attitudes, thoughts, behaviors and experiences. It will present psychological research concerning

religion and human development, mystical experience, conversion, new religious movements, mental/physical health, and personality and religion.

The final phase of the course will explore psychology of religion from a sociological perspective. It will center on the question: What are the social effects of individual religious psychologies? This section of the course will be concerned with studying how individual religious belief translates into group action AND how the religious ideology of the group shapes the religious psychology of the individual. It will briefly survey the history of the religions of Abraham – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and the socio-political effects of their ideology of religious conquest.

Finally, insights from the phenomenological, empirical and social approaches to the psychology of religion will inform an examination of the roots and rise of religious terrorism.

### **Required Textbooks:**

Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Raymond Paloutzian, *Invitation to the Psychology of Religion*

### **Grading:**

Grades will be based on a mid-term examination (1/3 of your grade), a final examination (1/3 of your grade), and a 5-8 page research paper (1/3 of your grade). Details of the requirements for the research paper will be presented in class.

## **Schedule of Lectures**

### **Week I (April 3 – Apr 7)**

General Introduction and Religious Autobiography

Pragmatism and Religion

Institutional Religion vs Individual Religious Experience

The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness

**Reading:** James, *Varieties*, (pp. 17-113).

### **Week II (Apr 10 – Apr 14)**

The Sick Soul

The Divided Self, and the Process of Unification

Conversion

**Reading:** James, *Varieties*, (pp. 114 –210).

### **Week III (Apr 17 – Apr 21)**

Saintliness

Mysticism

Sacrifice, Confession, and Prayer

**Reading:** James, *Varieties*, (pp. 211 – 260; 299 – 336).

**Week IV (Apr 24 – Apr 28)**

William James and the Future of Religion  
Sigmund Freud and the Origins of Religion  
Freud and the Future of an Illusion

**Reading:** James, *Varieties*, (pp.357 – 408).

**Week V (May 1 – May 5)**

Carl Jung and the Search for Soul  
Abraham Maslow and Peak Experience  
Mid-Term Examination (Friday May 5).

**Reading: (No Assignment – review James for mid-term)**

**Week VI (May 8 – May 12)**

Empiricism and the Psychology of Religion  
Historical and Theoretical Developments  
Social Influence Theory

**Reading:** Paloutzian, *Invitation*, (pp. 1 – 80).

**Week VII (May 15 – May 19)**

Religious Orientation, Attitudes, and Behavior  
Religion and Health  
The Neurophysiology of Mysticism

**Reading:** Paloutzian, *Invitation*, (pp. 81 – 174).

**Week VIII (May 22 – May 26)**

Deuteronomy and the Traditions of Abraham  
Christianity and Religious Conquest  
Jihad and the Expansion of Islam

**Reading:** Paloutzian, *Invitation*, (pp. 175 – 270).

**Week IX (May 29 – Apr 2)**

Memorial Day (No Class)  
The Psychology of the True Believer  
Faith and Mass Movements

**Reading:** Hoffer, *True Believer*, (pp. 1 – 53).

**Week X (June 5 – June 9)**

Religion and Political Action  
Contemporary Culture and Religious Violence  
Religion and Cultural Coexistence

**Reading:** Hoffer, *True Believer*, (pp. 54 – 168).

**Finals Week (June 12 – June 16)**

Final Examination: Thursday June 15 @ 10:15 a.m.