

Psych 410/510: Psychology of Religion

Syllabus Spring 2011

Instructor Information:

Instructor: Robert C. Gordon, Ph.D.
Lectures: 9 a.m. M W F 250 Clinical Services Bldg.
Office Hours: Monday 10:30-11:30 Tuesday 12-1
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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*

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. Attendance will also be a factor in your final grade.

Schedule of Lectures

Week I (Mar 28 – Apr 1)

General Introduction and Religious Autobiography

Pragmatism and Religion

Institutional Religion vs Individual Religious Experience

Reading: James, *Varieties*, (pp. 1-95).

Week II (Apr 4 – Apr 8)

The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness

The Sick Soul

The Divided Self, and the Process of Unification

Reading: James, *Varieties*, (pp. 96 –192).

Week III (Apr 11 – Apr 15)

Conversion

Saintliness

Mysticism

Reading: James, *Varieties*, (pp. 193 – 318).

Week IV (Apr 18 – Apr 22)

Sacrifice, Confession, and Prayer

William James and the Future of Religion

Sigmund Freud and the Origins of Religion

Reading: James, *Varieties*, (pp.339 – 390).

Week V (Apr 25 – Apr 29)

Freud and the Future of an Illusion

Dark Night of Behaviorism

Mid-Term Examination (Friday April 30)

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

Week VI (May 2 – May 6)

Carl Jung and the Search for Soul

Abraham Maslow and Peak Experience

Empiricism and the Psychology of Religion

Reading: Research Bibliographies on the Effects of Religious Belief and Spiritual Practice.

Week VII (May 9 – May 13)

Social Influence Theory and Correlational Studies in the Psychology of Religion

Religion and Health

Behavioral Studies in the Psychology of Religion

The Neurophysiology of Mysticism

Reading: Research Bibliographies on the Effects of Religious Belief and Spiritual Practice.

Week VIII (May 16 – May 20)

Fundamentalism and Authoritarianism

The Psychology of the True Believer

Understanding Religiously Inspired Violence

Reading: Research Bibliographies on the Effects of Religious Belief and Spiritual Practice.

Week IX (May 23 – May 27)

Deuteronomy and the Traditions of Abraham

Christianity and Religious Conquest

Jihad and the Expansion of Islam

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

Week X (May 30 – Jun 3)

No class Monday May 30 (Memorial Day)

The Apocalypse and Religious Violence

General Characteristics of Holy War

The Clash of Civilizations and Future Religious Possibilities

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

Finals Week (Jun 6– Jun 10)

Final Examination: Monday June 6 @ 10:15 a.m.