This course examines religions and religious phenomena from the point of view of empirical psychology. This is a Level III (Advanced) Psychology course that assumes some sophisticated background in either psychology or religious studies.

**Course goals:**

1. To learn about some of the ways in which religious beliefs and practices influence psychological functioning, and the ways in which psychological functioning influences religious beliefs and practices.
2. To improve your written communication skills. This is a writing-intensive course. One focus of the writing assignments will be on constructing arguments.
3. To improve your oral communication skills.
4. To improve your library and electronic research skills as a citizen-scholar; to learn to distinguish among and critically evaluate the quality of different sources of information.

**Required readings** will be online in the Learn@UW course website. You might also be assigned to locate some research articles yourself for presentation in class and you will find all materials for your term paper.

**Grading**

Class attendance and participation is required. Course grades will be based on completing the short written assignments and oral presentations (40%), a midterm paper (20%) and on a term paper (40%). Unexcused late assignments will be penalized. Unexcused late short assignments will be given a maximum of half credit. Unexcused late major assignments will be penalized 10%.

The term paper will be on a topic chosen by the student, but must: a) be relevant to the course and on a topic approved by me, and b) make use of original publications of scientific literature. An oral term paper presentation is required. The term paper presentations will allow the whole class to share the new knowledge created through the term paper assignment. The term paper presentations are usually very interesting.

**Course Procedures**

The course will be a seminar type of class in which we discuss the readings and analyze their implications. I will present brief overviews of each area that we cover to give the class a broader view than is provided by the readings alone. Occasionally each of you will be responsible for brief oral summaries of and commentaries on original research articles.
Course Content
We will probably cover topics 1-5 in the order listed below. After that, we will have a class meeting to decide the remainder of the topics. We will not read everything on this syllabus. The list of articles on the syllabus provide an excellent resource for ideas for term papers and personal explorations.

Course themes
1) Approach. I approach the course from the perspective of psychology as a science. We will not have time to read depth psychology approaches to religiousness such as Jung, Freud, Fromm, or Maslow. The term papers must be based on social science research.

2) Role of assumptions and values of the researcher. The study of religions, religious beliefs, and spirituality are topics that are easily influenced by the assumptions and values of a scholar. Because I am interested in how values and assumptions interface with aspects of the conduct of scientific research, this is a fascinating part of the course for me. I believe it is essential that students learn to think about the assumptions that are embedded in any research.

3) Are religions and religious beliefs good or bad for people, or both? This question hovers implicitly behind much of the research on psychology of religion, and takes many forms. Even if we tried to avoid the question, it would come up.

4) How valid are measures of religiousness? In many of your courses you have simply been told “Questionnaire X measures personality trait X”. It isn’t that simple. This course will illustrate how psychological measurements are embedded in theory, and how research controversies often center on the way concepts are measured.

5) How general are the findings? Because many of us have strong ideas and opinions about religious beliefs or spirituality, it is easy for us to ask whether results generalize across a variety of religious groups or belief systems. Because religions are embedded in cultures, the question of generalizing across cultural and ethnic groups also comes readily to mind. Because much of the research uses majority ethnic and religious groups in the US and North America, we won’t always be able to answer this question, but the nature of the material does lead us to think seriously about ethnic and cultural differences.

Reading List

1. What is religion?

http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/studyguides/religion.html

2. How do social scientists measure religiousness – a grab-bag of examples


3. Prejudice and discrimination


**Anti-gay prejudice**


**4. Compassion, Helping and Prosocial Behavior.**


5. Abuse, Family violence and religiousness

6. Religiously motivated violence and terrorism


(I have a couple of videos for this topic that we might view in class)

7. Gender roles, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Reproduction

a. Sexuality


b. Reproduction, contraception and population


c. Gender and gender attitudes


9. Conversion


11. Religiousness, Mental Health and Coping

a) Viewpoints and some findings


b) Religious Coping


c) Depression and other diagnoses


10. Psychotherapy & Religiousness


11. Religion and Moral Thinking


12. Religious Experience

a) Mystical, Religious and Paranormal Experience or beliefs


b) Entheogens


c) Neuroscience of religious practices and experience


Davidson, R.J. et al. (2003). Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation *Psychosomatic Medicine, 65*, 564-570.

13. Forgiveness and vengence


Greer, T. et al. (2005). We are a religious people; we are a vengeful people. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 44*, 45-57.


### 14. Is religiousness or spirituality heritable?


### Assignments

1. **Writing assignment #1** (in class). Write a brief answer to the question, “What is religion?” We will use this as a springboard for discussion.

2. **Oral presentation assignment #1.** Select a psychological measure of religiousness. Prepare a 10 minute class presentation that includes a handout of the verbatim questionnaire items with the scoring key and the journal reference. In your presentation briefly address some of the following issues: a) summarize the purpose and uses of the questionnaire (why was this questionnaire developed, with what religious groups can it be used, etc.), b) what assumptions about religion or religiousness seem to be behind the measure, c) does the questionnaire measure functional or substantive aspects of religion, or both, d) what is the face validity of the questionnaire (do the items seem to measure what they are intended to measure). Also, comment on something about the research paper describing the measure of the religiousness that you did not understand completely. This assignment will be done with a partner.

3. **Writing assignment #2**. Measurement of religiousness. Choose a measure of religiousness. It can be the same or different from what you presented in class. **Write a 50-word sentence** that states the purpose of the measure of religiousness, summarizes its strengths and weaknesses, and relates the strengths and weaknesses to issues such as reliability, face validity, predictive validity, construct validity, and the assumptions about religiousness that are implicit in the measure. Strategy tip: begin
by writing something longer, then cut down what you have written while maintaining the substance.

Here is a link on the 50-word assignment:
http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/page.jsp?id=143&c_type=category&c_id=14

4. Oral presentation assignment #2: Using an original research article, you will work with a partner on a team presentation of the article in class. The presentation should give us a) a good summary of the article, and b) an insightful commentary on it. (We will have 3 presentations on each of the topics.). Your team’s presentation should be no longer than 15 minutes.

5. Writing assignment #3: For this assignment you will use a research article presented by someone other than yourself. Write a 2-3 page summary and critique that states the purpose of the research, summarizes the major findings, tells the reader the major limitations of or logical flaws in the conclusions, and how the limitations could be addressed.

5. (Graded Midterm) Writing assignment #5. Choose one of the following options and write a 5 page essay that analyzes the issue. A) Batson argues that conventionally religious people help others not really for the sake of doing the right thing, but for other reasons such as priding oneself in being good, following religious rules of conduct, etc. An alternative point of view is that because one function of religions is to promote prosocial actions, then the motivation of the actor doesn’t matter, but the action does. Evaluate these viewpoints in the light of research findings and discuss how the two viewpoints help us to understand psychological aspects of religiousness. B) When, how and why can being religious lead to racial, ethnic, outgroup or other forms of prejudice? What are the key points of scientific dispute, and how could they be resolved with research? C) (option to be determined as we progress through the material) D) Propose your own essay topic for the midterm (in order to carry out this option, you must discuss your essay topic with me and receive my approval at least one week before the due date of the assignment).

6. Oral presentation assignment #3: We will discuss the remaining topics on the syllabus, and decide which to carry out. Some of the options may require readings that are not in the reading packet. A) Hold a structured debate on a whether or not psychology as a field is biased against religions. B) Is there such a thing as “good” and “bad” religion? Can psychological research help us decide what religions or religious practices are good for people, and what religions and religious practices might be bad for people? C) Do either so-called ‘cults’ or radical fundamentalist sects use untoward or coercive practices in recruiting members? To what extent can members of any religious group be considered to have lost their ability to make rational decisions because of either the social influence of the religious group or the nature of religious belief? D) When does the right to freedom of religion or belief conflict with public safety and well-being?

7. Writing assignment #5. (followup to oral presentation #3): A 50 word assignment on an article that you did not present in class (but that other students did present). Details of assignment to be given in class.

8. Oral presentation assignment #4. (Will depend on topics selected by the class.)

9. Writing assignment #6. (followup to oral presentation #4). A 50 word assignment on a topic that you did not present in class. Details of assignment to be given in class.
Term Paper Assignments

Because the term paper is a major part of your grade, I have designed a series of assignments to help you develop and refine your term paper progressively.

Term Paper Assignment #1. Submit your topic. Write at least a sentence or two about a topic on which you would like to write your paper. Some students have several ideas and are undecided about which one to pursue. It is fine to give a few different ideas. I will give you feedback that might help you find some direction.

Term Paper Assignment #2. Submit a paragraph on your term paper topic, and a bibliography of at least a few references. The paragraph should include a thesis statement describing the main theme of your paper. Of course, as you develop the paper it is possible that the thesis will evolve. Also, write a reflective paragraph that explains to me what barriers you have encountered in working on your topic, and how you feel about your progress. Where are you stuck or confused?

Term Paper Assignment #3. Submit a 2-3 page section of your term paper and a bibliography with more than you had for Assignment #2. The section can be: a) the introduction, describing the thesis and laying out the background for the rest of your paper, b) a summary and critique of an empirical research paper that will be incorporated in your term paper, c) a one page abstract or summary of your entire paper, plus an outline of the paper and an annotated bibliography (a bibliography with a bout two sentences summarizing each item in the list). As #2, write a reflective paragraph that tells me where you are encountering problems. At this point, I hope you are dealing with different problems such as how to discuss conflicting research findings, or how to best organize your paper to establish a logical progression of the ideas.

Term Paper Assignment #4. Draft and peer feedback. You will turn in a draft of your entire paper. Each student will provide feedback to another student on the term paper draft. I will give you further information on the peer feedback exercise later. My classes in the past have found it very helpful.

Final Paper Due: The final term paper is due on the scheduled date of the final exam in the Timetable. Term paper presentations will occur during the last 2 1/2 to 3 weeks of classes.

Approximate calendar: We will develop the exact course calendar as we proceed. This will allow us to spend more or less time on different topics depending on the interests of the class. Due dates will be announced in class and on the Learn@UW website.

Week 1-2 (Jan 19): What is religion? How and how well do psychological research projects measure aspects of religiousness?
Week 2-3 (Jan 26): Prejudice and religiousness
Week 4-5 (Feb 9): Compassion/helping/prosocial behavior and religiousness
  Feb 11: Guest lecture on (probably on spirituality)
Week 6-7 (Feb 23): Abuse, Violence and Terrorism   (Writing Assignment #3 due)
Week 8 (Mar 9) “Cults”, “New” Religions and coercion ? (Midterm draft due; peer feedback on draft)
Week 9 (Mar 16) Neuroscience or religion and religious practices? (Term paper assignment #1 due)
Week 10 (Mar 23) Entheogens? (Term paper assignment #2 due)

Spring break

Week 11 (Apr 6) Topic TBD by class
Week 12 (Apr 13) Topic TBD by class (Term paper assignment #3 due)
Week 13-15 (Apr 20-Mar 4): Term paper presentations, including one day for term paper draft peer feedback.

Last day of classes: F Mar 7
Term paper is due on the scheduled date of the final exam