Psychology of Religion

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 different sources of information.

Required readings will be in a reading packet to be purchased from StudentPrint, Memorial Union. You will also locate some research articles yourself for presentation in class.

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%) completed by the end of the semester. Late assignments will be penalized. Unexcused late short assignments will be given a maximum of half credit. Late major assignments will be penalized 10%.

The term paper will be on a topic chosen by the student, but must be relevant to the course and must be approved by me. 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 for the whole class.

Course Procedures
The course will be a seminar type of class in which we discuss the readings and analyze their implications. I will give present brief overviews of each area that we cover to give the class a broader view than is provided by the readings alone, but I will not lecture. Occasionally each of you will be responsible for brief oral summaries of and commentaries on original research articles that are pertinent to the topic we are covering.
Course Content and Calendar

We will develop the 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. We will cover topics 1-5 in the order listed below. After that, the class will help decide the direction and emphasis.

1. What is religion?
   
   
   Optional: Ch 2: How is religion studied?
   

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

3. Prejudice and discrimination
   
   
   
   


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


**5. 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. Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Reproduction


8 Health, Well-being, Religious Identity, Religiousness and Religious Practices


9. Conversion


11. Religiousness, Mental Health and Coping

a) Viewpoints and some findings


b) Religious Coping


10. Psychotherapy & Religiousness


11. Religion and Moral Thinking


12. Mystical, Religious and Paranormal Experience or beliefs


### 13. Forgiveness


### Assignments

1. **Writing assignment #1** (in class). Write a definition of religion that would be useful in the psychological study of religion.

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. **Write a 50 word assignment** that includes a statement of the purpose of the measure of religiousness, and a summary of its strengths and weaknesses. In choosing strengths and weaknesses to include think about issues such as reliability, face validity, predictive validity, construct validity, and the assumptions about religiousness that are implicit in the measure.

4. **Oral presentation assignment #2**: Choose or find an original research article on prejudice and religion, compassion/helping and religion, or family violence, substance use, crime and religion. Working with a partner you will give a presentation of the article in class. The presentation should give us a good summary of the article, and a commentary on it. Make sure you relate the issues raised in the article to the key issues about prejudice, compassion/helping, or family violence/substance use/crime and religiousness that we identified in class. (We will have 3 presentations on each of the topics.). Your team’s presentation should be no longer than 15 minutes.

5. **(Graded Midterm) Writing assignment #3.** Choose one of the following options and write a 3 page essay that analyzes the issue. A) Batson argues that 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 and how they help us to understand religiousness. B) When, how and why can being religious lead to racial, ethnic, or outgroup prejudice? What are the key points of scientific dispute, and how could they be resolved with research? C) When, how and why is being religious related to aspects of personal conduct such as family violence, substance abuse, or crime? What are the key points of scientific dispute and how might they be resolved with research? 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 options below as potential topics for in-depth class discussion, as well as options generated by the class, 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 whether or not psychology is 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 so-called ‘cults’ 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 for freedom of religion conflict with public safety and well-being?

7. Writing assignment #4. (followup to oral presentation #3): A 50 word assignment that you did not present in class (but that other students did present).

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

9. Writing assignment #5. (followup to oral presentation #4). A 50 word assignment on a topic that you did not present 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 about 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 weeks of classes.