

**Psychology 404**  
**Psychology of Religion**  
Tue and Thu 11:00-12:20 (Section 101) SWING 107  
Tue and Thu 2:00-3:20 (Section 103) MCDLD 214  
Course Website: [www.connect.ubc.ca](http://www.connect.ubc.ca)

Instructor:

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## Course Objectives

This advanced seminar introduces students to the scientific study of religion. We will focus on the psychological and cultural origins of religious behavior. Culturally variable as well as universal aspects of religion will be considered in light of various evolutionary explanations of religion. Topics include belief in supernatural agents, ritual, sacrifice, and existential concerns. Related phenomena such as animism, anthropomorphism, dualism, magical and teleological thinking will also be discussed. We will examine religion's role in morality, prosociality, sacred values, intergroup relations, intolerance, and violence. We will also explore explanations for secularization and atheism. Although this is a psychology seminar, perspectives and debates from anthropology, sociology, history, archeology, religious studies, and evolutionary biology will also be covered. By the end of the course you will (1) have a basic understanding of the known psychological bases of religious thought and behavior, (2) gain knowledge about how religious belief and experience in turn shape human psychology, and (3) cultivate critical thinking skills about ongoing debates and controversies regarding the role of religious beliefs and behaviors in societies around the world.

## Seminar Format

I will do occasional short lectures to put the readings in context or provide additional information. However, most of class time will consist of in-depth discussion and in-class debates and activities, as well as oral presentations by students followed by Q&A.

## Readings

There is no standard textbook for this course. The main reading is:

Norenzayan, A. *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

The book is available in the UBC bookstore or can be purchased online as standard book (either hardcover or paperback) or as an e-book. In addition, original articles and chapters from a variety of sources are assigned. These other readings will be available on the course website online. You are expected to have done the readings before coming to class. The reading load for this course is heavy; it is similar to a graduate-level seminar, so be sure to devote ample time on a regular basis to stay on top of the readings.

## **Course Evaluation**

Students' final course mark will be based on:

- Midterm exam (25%) (date: Tue. Oct. 13 in class)
- Cumulative take-home final exam (50%) (Due date: Thur. Dec 10, 5:00 PM)
- Oral Presentation (15%)
- Class participation (10%)

## **Examinations**

Both exams consist of essay questions. The Midterm Exam will be 1hr15min long, in class. The Final Exam will be cumulative (covering the entire course), and take-home. This means that you will receive the questions ten days prior to the due date, and you can consult class notes, readings, and do library research to prepare your answers. To do well on the midterm and final exams, it is expected to demonstrate a thorough and critical understanding of the theories and concepts, and a high level of critical and original thinking. Students are responsible for all readings assigned in the required readings and presented in class, as well as lectures. Make-up midterm exams are not allowed. The one exception is when valid documentation is provided regarding a genuine medical or family emergency. In those instances, the makeup exam is an oral examination in the presence of the instructor and the teaching assistant.

## **Oral Presentation**

Students will do in-class presentations on a particular religious group, movement, or tradition, either contemporary or historical, followed by Q&A. Pick a case that raises interesting questions for the psychology of religion. Use readings from the course, personal interviews, online and library research as material for your presentation. More detailed instructions will be provided in class for this assignment.

## **Class Participation**

Class participation credit will be based on attendance and taking active part in class discussions and activities. Be prepared with questions and comments before coming to class.

## **Classroom Participation Etiquette**

Classroom discussion is an important part of this course and your grade. Please share your ideas and opinions. You are welcome to ask questions before or after class, or during office hours.

Out of consideration for the instructor and other students, you are asked to refrain from conversation during lecture, and to turn cell phones (and other personal electronic devices) to silent during class. If you arrive to lecture late or must leave early, please do so quietly.

## **E-mail Etiquette**

Students are encouraged to use e-mail if you have an easy question that can be answered in three sentences or less. Individual tutoring cannot be done over e-mail. Neither the instructor nor TA is expected to respond during evenings, or on weekends/holidays. Be sure to include a meaningful subject line (including the course number). Always include your full name, and student number. Use standard spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Do not use text message spelling/lingo.

## **Psychology Department's Policy on Grade Distributions and Scaling**

In order to reduce grade inflation and maintain equity across multiple course sections, all psychology courses are required to comply with departmental norms regarding grade distributions. According to departmental norms, the mean grade in a 400-level class is 70 for a good class, 68 for an average class, and 66 for a weak class, with a standard deviation of 13. **Scaling** may be used in order to comply with these norms; grades may be scaled up or down as necessary by the professor or department.

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## **Psychology Department's Position on Academic Misconduct**

Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct are very serious concerns of the University, and the Department of Psychology has taken steps to alleviate them. In the first place, the Department has implemented software that can reliably detect cheating on multiple-choice exams by analyzing the patterns of students' responses. In addition, the Department subscribes to *TurnItIn*--a service designed to detect and deter plagiarism. All materials (term papers, lab reports, etc.) that students submit for grading will be scanned and compared to over 5 billion pages of content located on the Internet or in TurnItIn's own proprietary databases. The results of these comparisons are compiled into customized "Originality Reports" containing several, sensitive measures of plagiarism; instructors receive copies of these reports for every student in their class.

In all cases of suspected academic misconduct, the parties involved will be pursued to the fullest extent dictated by the guidelines of the University. Strong evidence of cheating or plagiarism may result in a zero credit for the work in question. According to the University Act (section 61), the President of UBC has the right to impose harsher penalties including (but not limited to) a failing grade for the course, suspension from the University, cancellation of scholarships, or a notation added to a student's transcript.

All graded work in this course, unless otherwise specified, is to be original work done independently by individuals. **Do** use any of the indexes and databases listed under Indexes and Databases, Subject Resources, OneSearch or Metasearch on the Library's website at <http://www.library.ubc.ca>. (Not sure which index to use? Click HELP on the library homepage at [www.library.ubc.ca](http://www.library.ubc.ca) or try Subject Resources.)

If you have any questions as to whether or not what you are doing is even a borderline case of academic misconduct, please consult your instructor. For details on pertinent University policies and procedures, please see Chapter 5 in the UBC Calendar (<http://students.ubc.ca/calendar>).

## Required Readings and Schedule

Note: The reading list may change somewhat as we go along. If so, updates will be posted on the course web site, so check before you do the readings.

### **Week 1: Religion in Context**

*Big Gods* Chapter 1  
Lester (2002)

### **Week 2: The Evolutionary Landscape**

*Big Gods* Chapter 2  
Bloom (December, 2005)

### **Week 3: Prosocial Behavior**

*Big Gods* Chapter 3

### **Week 4: Trust and distrust**

*Big Gods* Chapter 4  
*Big Gods* Chapter 5

### **Week 5: Magical Thinking**

Nemeroff & Rozin (2000)  
Keleman (2004)

### **Week 6: Midterm Exam (Oct 13 in class)**

Fischer et al (2013) and lecture by Adam (on Oct 15)

### **Week 7: Rituals and Extravagant Displays**

*Big Gods* Chapter 6  
Xygalatas et al (2013)

### **Week 8: Historical and Cultural Diversity**

*Big Gods* Chapter 7  
Norenzayan (2016)  
Cohen & Rozin (2001)

### **Week 9: Social solidarity and moral psychology**

*Big Gods* Chapter 8  
Haidt & Joseph (2004)

**Week 10: Conflict, Violence, Prejudice**

*Big Gods* Chapter 9  
Atran & Ginges (2012)

**Week 11: Secularization**

*Big Gods* Chapter 10  
Norris & Inglehart (2004, Chapter 1).

**Week 12: Oral presentations**

**Week 13: Oral presentations**  
**Wrap-up and Discussion**

## Readings

1. Lester, T. (February, 2002). Oh, Gods! *The Atlantic Monthly*, 37-45.
2. Bloom, P. (December, 2005). Is God an accident? *The Atlantic Monthly*, 105-112.
3. Nemeroff, C. & Rozin, P. (2000). The making of the magical mind. In K. Rosengren, C. Johnson, & P. Harris (Eds.). *Imagining the Impossible: Magical, Scientific, and Religious Thinking in Children* (pp. 1-34). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Keleman, D. (2004). Are children intuitive theists? Reasoning about purpose and design in nature. *Psychological Science*, 15, 295-301.
5. Xygalatas, D., Mitkidis, P., Fischer, R., Reddish, P., Skewes, J., Geertz, A. W., Roepstorff, A. & Bulbulia, J. (2013). Extreme Rituals Promote Prosociality. *Psychological Science*, 24, 1602-1605.
6. Haidt, J., & Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. *Daedalus*, pp. 55-66, Special issue on human nature.
7. Fischer et al (2013). How do rituals affect cooperation? An experimental field study comparing nine ritual types. *Human Nature*, 24, 115-125.
8. Norenzayan, A. (2016). Theodiversity. *Annual Review of Psychology*.
9. Cohen, A., & Rozin, P. (2001). Religion and the morality of mentality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 697-710.
10. Atran, S., & Ginges (2012). Religious and sacred imperatives in human conflict. *Science*, 336: 855-857.
11. Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2004). The secularization debate. In *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*, pp. 3-32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.