

**Psychology 404**  
**Psychology of Religion**  
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:30-4:50pm  
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**

The instructor 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

Readings are available on the course website online (UBC connect). 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 (20%) (date: February 7, 2017)
- Cumulative take-home final exam (40%) (Due date: April 13)
- Oral Presentation (15%)
- Reading assignments (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, you must 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 content discussed in class. 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.

## Reading assignments

This is a seminar class. That means it follows a discussion format rather than a lecture format, and works best when every student participates. To help facilitate participation,

the instructor will strive to focus each session on the interests of the students. To this end, each week, students are encouraged to submit a short (i.e., 100-250 word) paragraph with thoughts or questions about the assigned readings. You can use bullet points if you prefer. **Check course website for due dates of these reading assignments; typically these will be Mondays by midnight.** Eleven weeks have assigned readings; you will receive 1 point for each paragraph you submit; if you submit 8 paragraphs or more you will receive up to 4 additional points based on the quality of your submissions.

## **Class Participation**

Class participation will be based on attendance and taking active part in class discussions and activities. Doing the reading assignments will help you come to class prepared with comments and questions, and will therefore help you get a good class participation grade.

## **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 Distribution 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 (Jan 3 & 5): Religion in Context**

Lester (2002)  
Saroglou (2011)

### **PART I: WHY RELIGION EXISTS & PERSISTS**

### **Week 2 (Jan 10 & 12): Magical Thinking and other Cognitive Byproduct Theories**

Kelemen (2004)  
Gray & Wegner (2010)

### **Week 3 (Jan 17 & 19): Cultural evolution; NO CLASS JAN 19**

Norenzayan et al. (2016)

### **Week 4 (Jan 24 & 26): Cultural evolution + Prosocial behavior**

Randolph-Seng & Nielson (2007)  
Shariff & Norenzayan (2007)  
Shariff et al. (2016)

### **Week 5 (Jan 31 & Feb 2): Intrapsychic needs**

Laurin & Kay (2017)  
Pargament et al. (1990)  
Vail, Rothschild, Weise, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg (2010)

### **Week 6 (Feb 7 & 9): Midterm Exam (Feb 7) + Religious Diversity**

Cohen & Rozin (2001)

## **PART II: RELIGION AND SOCIETY**

### **Week 7 (Feb 14 & 16): Conflict, Violence, & Prejudice**

Atran & Ginges (2012)  
Hall, Matz, & Wood (2010)

### **Week 8 (Feb 28 & March 2): Solidarity and Moral Psychology**

Gervais (2014) [PloS ONE]  
Gervais (2014) [JEP-general]  
Haidt & Joseph (2004)

### **Week 9 (March 7 & 9): Atheism and Secularization**

Norenzayan & Gervais (2013)  
Norris & Inglehart (2004, Chapter 1)

## **PART III: RELIGION IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

### **Week 10 (March 14 & 16): Religion and Self-Regulation**

McCullough & Willoughby (2009)  
Laurin & Kay (2016)

### **Week 11 (March 21 & 23): Religion and Relationships**

Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver (2010)  
Laurin, Schumann, & Holmes (2014)  
Sedikides & Gebauer (2010)

### **Week 12 (March 28 & 30): Oral presentations**

### **Week 13 (April 4 & 6): Oral presentations Wrap-up and Discussion**