Psychology 404  
Psychology of Religion  
Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:00-12:20 (Section 101) SWING 307  
Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:00-3:20 (Section 102) GEOG 212  
Course Website at canvas.ubc.ca

Instructor:  
Dr. Ara Norenzayan  
Office: 4354 CIRS Building  
Email: ara@psych.ubc.ca  
www.psych.ubc.ca/~ara  
Tel: 604-827-5134  
Office hours: Mondays 1:00-2:30 or by appointment

Teaching Assistants:  
Section 101  
Brent Stewart  
Office: Kenny 1604  
Office hour: Tuesdays 3:30-4:30  
Email: brent.stewart@psych.ubc.ca

Section 102  
William Jettinghoff  
Office: Kenny 2206  
Office hour: Wednesdays 4:00-5:00  
Email: will.jettinghoff@psych.ubc.ca

Course Description & Objectives

This advanced seminar introduces students to the psychological study of religion, current debates, and controversies. Culturally variable as well as universal aspects of religion will be considered in light of various scientific explanations of religion. Topics include belief in supernatural agents, ritual, sacrifice, sacred values, 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 moral psychology, cooperation and conflict, power, environmental and other values, and intergroup relations. We will also explore explanations for secularization trends in the world and within societies. Although this is a psychology seminar, perspectives from anthropology, sociology, history, archeology, religious studies, and evolutionary biology will also be covered. By the end of the course you will (1) have an understanding of the known psychological foundations of religious thought and behavior, (2) gain knowledge about how religious belief and experience (and their absence) in turn shape human psychology, and (3) cultivate critical thinking regarding debates surrounding the role of religion 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. Original articles and chapters from a variety of sources are assigned. These readings are accompanied with guiding questions. 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**: (30%) *(date: Thur. Oct. 11 in class)*
- **Cumulative take-home final exam**: (40%) *(Questions on Thur. Nov 29; due: Thur. Dec 6, 11:59 PM)*
- **Reading Assignments**: (5%)
- **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 one week 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 that you 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.

**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, and when possible, the instructor will strive to take into account the interests of the students with regards to course readings. To this end, students are to submit a short (i.e., 100-200 word) paragraph with thoughts or questions about the assigned readings, up to 5 total for the course (you can pick any 5 of the 10 weeks with assigned readings, 3 must be before the midterm and 2 after). These should *not* be summaries of the readings, but rather reflections on the readings, their interpretations, and how they might relate to other material. These reading assignments are due Monday afternoon by 5pm. You will receive 1 point for each assignment you submit, up to 5 points total.

**Oral Presentation**

Every student will do an in-class presentation 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 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 class, 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 and section). 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.

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](http://www.library.ubc.ca). (Not sure which index to use? Click HELP on the library homepage at 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](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: Introduction to the Course

PART 1. Foundations of religions

Week 2: Religious diversity and the cultural landscape

   James (1902/1982)
   Lester (2002)
   Norenzayan (2016)

Week 3: Mind-body dualism, teleology, & magical thinking

   Bloom (December, 2005)
   Keleman (2004)
   Nemeroft & Rozin (2000)

Week 4: Existential insecurity

   Freud (1930/2002)
   Gray & Wegner (2010)

Week 5: The cultural evolution of Big Gods and large-scale cooperation

   Wade (2015)
   Purzycki et al (2016)

Week 6: Rituals and extravagant displays

   Norenzayan (2013; *Big Gods* Chapter 6)
   Sosis & Alcorta (2003)
   Midterm Exam (Oct 11 in class)

PART 2. Religions in everyday life

Week 7: Self-regulation, meaning in life, and happiness

   Oishi & Diener (2013)
   Laurin & Kay (2016)

Week 8: Moral psychology

   Graham & Haidt (2010)
   Cohen & Rozin (2001)

Week 9: Conflict, power, prejudice

   Atran & Ginges (2012)
   Gervais et al (2017)
Watts et al (2016)

**Week 10: Religion and the Natural Environment**
- White (1967)
- Bentzen (2018)

**Week 11: Secularization**
- Norris & Inglehart (2004, Chapter 1)
- Zuckerman (2008, Chapters 5 & 6)

**Week 12: Oral presentations**

**Week 13: Oral presentations**
- Wrap-up and discussion
- Take-home exam questions announced
List of Readings


