

**PSY 8905 – The Social Psychology of Religion**  
**Fall Semester – Mondays 2-4:45pm – Porter 254**

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Office Hours: By appointment

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This graduate-level course will focus on the social psychology of religious beliefs and practices. We will cover topics such as the psychological functions of religion (i.e., why people are religious and what religion can do for people); conceptions of “religion” and “God” across situations and cultural contexts; effects of religion on cognition, prosocial behavior, prejudice, and well-being; and stereotypes of religious believers and non-believers.

The course is discussion-based, although I may occasionally spend time at the beginning of class providing background information and/or clarifications. The format of each class session will be a mix of “traditional” (e.g., discussions based on the readings) and “non-traditional” (e.g., discussions of current events related to the course material, debates). Given the relevance of religion to important problems, policies, and controversies in our society, I strongly encourage you to contribute your knowledge of and perspectives on these issues to class; I will do so too.

**READINGS**

All readings (listed at the end of this syllabus) will be posted on the Blackboard website or distributed during class. There is no required textbook or course pack. You must complete the readings prior to the day we discuss them in class.

**COURSE POLICIES**

- All cell phones must be turned off in the classroom.
- Late assignments will be penalized one full grade for each day they are past due. For example, if you turn in an assignment of “A” quality one day late, you will receive a “B”; and if you submit a Blackboard response on which you received a “+” one day late, you will receive a “√+.” (The grading policy for Blackboard responses is explained in the Grading section below.)
- Academic misconduct in this class, including but not limited to plagiarism and knowingly providing or receiving help during examinations, will be penalized through the procedures set up by the university.
- Any student who suspects s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss the student’s specific needs and provide written documentation from the Office of Student Accessibility Services. If the student is not yet registered as a student with a disability, s/he should contact the Office of Student Accessibility Services.

## GRADING

Attendance and participation

33.3%

*You are expected to attend class regularly and actively participate in discussions. However, if you are unable to make it to a class session due to illness or emergency, please make sure you keep up with the readings, try to get notes from a classmate, and let me know if you have specific questions or concerns about the material. This component of your grade will include your facilitation of class discussions, if applicable. (We will discuss and decide on the possibility of students leading class discussions during our first meeting.)*

Blackboard responses

33.3%

*You are expected to post a 1-2 paragraph response to the readings on Blackboard, and to do this **10 times** throughout the semester. That is, there are 12 weeks of content, but you are only required to post on 10 of these weeks. Please post by 5pm the Sunday before each class. The format of these responses is open-ended, and you should go beyond simply summarizing the readings. For example, you may raise questions about theoretical assumptions, critique one or more studies, apply the readings to current events, or propose ideas for future research. However, you must **incorporate at least two of the readings** into your response. You will be graded on the following scale: +,  $\sqrt{+}$ ,  $\sqrt{\phantom{+}}$ ,  $\sqrt{-}$ , and -.*

Final Paper

33.3%

*For the final paper, you are expected to write either a literature review or design a study relevant to the course material. The paper need not be constrained by the readings (and should not because it will involve your own ideas!), but should be inspired by them. Ideally, you would write your paper on a topic that you plan to pursue (e.g., a research project or article with your academic advisor) after the course is over. The maximum length is 2500 words, or approximately ten double-spaced pages. A one-page proposal for the paper, describing your topic and how you plan to approach it, will be due on Blackboard on Monday, October 31 at 11:59pm. The paper itself will be due on Monday, December 5 at 12:20pm.*

### CLASS SCHEDULE (subject to change)

Monday, August 22	Introductions
Monday, August 29	Conceptualizing “religion”
Monday, September 5	<b>No class (Labor Day)</b>
Monday, September 12	Social identity functions of religion
Monday, September 19	Compensatory functions of religion
Monday, September 26	Conceptualizing “God”
Monday, October 3	<b>No class (Reading Day)</b>
Monday, October 10	Religion and science
Monday, October 17	Religion and cognition
Monday, October 24	Stereotypes of religious believers
Monday, October 31	Stereotypes of religious non-believers
Monday, November 7	Religion and prosocial behavior
Monday, November 14	Religion and prejudice
Monday, November 21	Religious fundamentalism
Monday, November 28	Religion and well-being

### READINGS

#### Conceptualizing “religion”

Emmons, R. A., & Paloutzian, R. F. (2003). The psychology of religion. *Annual review of psychology*, 54(1), 377-402.

Saroglou, V. (2011). Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(8), 1320-1340.

Cohen, A. B., & Hill, P. C. (2007). Religion as culture: Religious individualism and collectivism among American Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. *Journal of Personality*, 75(4), 709-742.

#### Social identity functions of religion

Ysseldyk, R., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2010). Religiosity as identity: Toward an understanding of religion from a social identity perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(1), 60-71.

Verkuyten, M., & Yildiz, A. A. (2007). National (dis) identification and ethnic and religious identity: A study among Turkish-Dutch Muslims. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33(10), 1448-1462.

Sasaki, J. Y., & Kim, H. S. (2011). At the intersection of culture and religion: a cultural analysis of religion's implications for secondary control and social affiliation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2), 401.

#### Compensatory functions of religion

Aydin, N., Fischer, P., & Frey, D. (2010). Turning to God in the face of ostracism: Effects of social exclusion on religiousness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Jonas, E., & Fischer, P. (2006). Terror management and religion: evidence that intrinsic religiousness mitigates worldview defense following mortality salience. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 91(3), 553.

Kay, A. C., Gaucher, D., Napier, J. L., Callan, M. J., & Laurin, K. (2008). God and the government: testing a compensatory control mechanism for the support of external systems. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 95(1), 18.

#### Conceptualizing “God”

Gebauer, J. E., & Maio, G. R. (2012). The need to belong can motivate belief in God. *Journal of personality*, 80(2), 465-501.

Gray, K., & Wegner, D. M. (2010). Blaming God for our pain: Human suffering and the divine mind. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(1), 7-16.

Kirkpatrick, L. A. (1998). God as a substitute attachment figure: A longitudinal study of adult attachment style and religious change in college students. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 24(9), 961-973.

#### Religion and science

Preston, J., & Epley, N. (2009). Science and God: An automatic opposition between ultimate explanations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(1), 238-241.

Rutjens, B. T., & Heine, S. J. (2016). The Immoral Landscape? Scientists Are Associated with Violations of Morality. *PloS one*, 11(4), e0152798.

Scheitle, C. P., & Ecklund, E. H. (2015). The influence of science popularizers on the public's view of religion and science: An experimental assessment. *Public Understanding of Science*, 0963662515588432.

#### Religion and cognition

Zuckerman, M., Silberman, J., & Hall, J. A. (2013). The relation between intelligence and religiosity a meta-analysis and some proposed explanations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 1088868313497266.

Gervais, W. M., & Norenzayan, A. (2012). Analytic thinking promotes religious disbelief. *Science*, 336(6080), 493-496.

Shenhav, A., Rand, D. G., & Greene, J. D. (2012). Divine intuition: cognitive style influences belief in God. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 141(3), 423.

#### Stereotypes of religious believers

Simpson, A., & Rios, K. (2016). How do US Christians and Atheists Stereotype one another's Moral Values? *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 26(4).

Toosi, N. R., & Ambady, N. (2011). Ratings of essentialism for eight religious identities. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 21(1), 17-29.

Rios, K., Cheng, Z. H., Totton, R. R., & Shariff, A. F. (2015). Negative Stereotypes Cause Christians to Underperform in and Disidentify With Science. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1948550615598378.

#### Stereotypes of religious non-believers

Gervais, W. M., Shariff, A. F., & Norenzayan, A. (2011). Do you believe in atheists? Distrust is central to anti-atheist prejudice. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 101(6), 1189.

- Cook, C. L., Cottrell, C. A., & Webster, G. D. (2015). No good without God: Antiatheist prejudice as a function of threats to morals and values. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(3), 217.
- Doane, M. J., & Elliott, M. (2015). Perceptions of discrimination among atheists: Consequences for atheist identification, psychological and physical well-being. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 7(2), 130.

#### Religion and prosocial behavior

- Shariff, A. F., Willard, A. K., Andersen, T., & Norenzayan, A. (2015). Religious priming a meta-analysis with a focus on prosociality. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 1088868314568811.
- Everett, J. A., Haque, O. S., & Rand, D. G. (2016). How Good Is the Samaritan, and Why? An Experimental Investigation of the Extent and Nature of Religious Prosociality Using Economic Games. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 7(3), 248-255.
- Decety, J., Cowell, J. M., Lee, K., Mahasneh, R., Malcolm-Smith, S., Selcuk, B., & Zhou, X. (2015). The negative association between religiousness and children's altruism across the world. *Current Biology*, 25(22), 2951-2955.

#### Religion and prejudice

- Johnson, M. K., Rowatt, W. C., & LaBouff, J. (2010). Priming Christian religious concepts increases racial prejudice. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1(2), 119-126.
- Whitley Jr, B. E. (2009). Religiosity and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men: A meta-analysis. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 19(1), 21-38.
- Wesselmann, E. D., & Graziano, W. G. (2010). Sinful and/or possessed? Religious beliefs and mental illness stigma. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 29(4), 402-437.

#### Religious fundamentalism

- Altemeyer, B., & Hunsberger, B. (2004). Research: A revised religious fundamentalism scale: The short and sweet of it. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 14(1), 47-54.
- Brandt, M. J., & Reyna, C. (2010). The role of prejudice and the need for closure in religious fundamentalism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.
- Ginges, J., Hansen, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2009). Religion and support for suicide attacks. *Psychological science*, 20(2), 224-230.

#### Religion and well-being

- Diener, E., Tay, L., & Myers, D. G. (2011). The religion paradox: If religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 101(6), 1278.
- Ritter, R. S., Preston, J. L., & Hernandez, I. (2013). Happy tweets: Christians are happier, more socially connected, and less analytical than atheists on Twitter. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1948550613492345.