

(Cognitive) Psychology of Religion

Institution: The University of Findlay (A Private Comprehensive University)

Last Taught: Spring 2004

Course Level: Religion 340-01/Psychology 310-02 (yr. 3 undergraduate seminar)

Hours of Instruction: 3 hrs/week over a 15 week semester

Student Enrollment: 30

Instructor:

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Course Description:

This cross-listed course explores the contemporary (not classical) psychology of religion, that is, the newly emerged **cognitive science of religion**. We explore the basic mental processes that underwrite ordinary religious thought and behavior across cultures and eras (rather than the experiences of the mentally ill [Freud] or the experiential elite [James]). We will try to answer questions like why does religion exist in all homo-sapiens cultures; is religion a product of cognition or culture (or both); why are there so many different versions of religion; how do mind-brain processes govern religious thought and behavior; what impact does religion have on human life, etc. The course is scientific in orientation and universal in scope.

Texts (in order of readings):

- 1) Evans, Dylan. 1999. *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology*. Totem Books.
- 2) Boyer, Pascal. 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- 3) Slone, D. Jason. 2004. *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't*. New York: Oxford University Press

Grades:

Attendance, Participation, and Quizzes – 100 points

3 Exams – 100 points

1 Experimental project and report – 100 points

Total = 500 points

Basic Course Outline and Reading Schedule:

Week One (Read: Evans, 1-49)

M: What is the 'classical' psychology of religion and why aren't we doing it?

W-F: Intro to evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology

Week Two (Read: Evans, pp. 50-150)

M-F: Behavioral 'Modules': What are they and why do we have them?

Week Three (Read: Evans, pp. 150-169)

M-W: Critical Analyses of Evolutionary Psychology

Friday: Exam #1

Week Four (Read: Boyer, Chapters 1-2)

M-F: What is religion and where did it come from?

Week Five (Read: Boyer, Chapter 3)

M-F: What kind of person would believe in God?

Week Six (Read: Boyer, Chapters 4-5)

M-F: What are gods like and why do they matter?

Week Seven (Read: Boyer, Chapters 6)

M-F: Why is religion concerned with death?

Week Eight (Read: Boyer, Chapter 7)

M-F: Why do people do rituals (and think that they work)?

Week Nine (Read: Boyer, Chapter 8)

M-F: Why do religions have versions of the Golden Rule but people still kill each other?

Week Ten (Read: Boyer, Chapter 9)

M-W: Is religion really about "belief"?

Friday: Exam #2

Week Eleven (Read: Slone, Chapters 1-4)

M-F: Theological Incorrectness: A product of culture or cognition?

Week Twelve (Read: Slone, Chapters 5-6)

M-F: Theological Incorrectness: Case Studies from Christianity and Buddhism

Week Thirteen (Read: Slone, Chapters 7-8)

M-W: Why religion is about luck, and what that means for society.

F: Exam #3

Week Fourteen

Class Presentations

Week Fifteen

Class Presentations

### Pedagogical Reflections:

This is an interdisciplinary course, offered as “Topics in Religious Studies” and “Issues in Behavioral Studies,” in the newly emerged cognitive science of religion. The aim is to combine the theories and methods of cognitive science with the cross-cultural and historical data from comparative religion to understand why and how ‘religion’ is a natural feature of human behavior. In this sense it is a significant departure from previous psychology of religion courses, which tended to cover “classical” theorists like Freud, Jung, James, etc.

The material that animated students the most was from *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology*. Students were quickly able to grasp the operative theories of evolutionary psychology, that certain behaviors—and the mental mechanisms that cause them—are likely adaptations which is why those behaviors recur in all cultures (e.g., preferences for fats and sugars, mate selection strategies, tit-for-tat reciprocity, kin preferences/nepotism, etc.). However, students were troubled by the fact that these behaviors might be “hard wired” and that religion is a by-product of ordinary evolved mental mechanisms. In short, they grasped the idea conceptually but resisted its existential implications.

What also worked well was the course assignment to perform experimental research. Though I had to guide the non-psychology (i.e., religious studies) majors through experimental design and evaluation, nearly all enthusiastically engaged the assignment once started. It helped a great deal that I allowed them to pursue topics of their choice (with HS-IRB approval) and offered suggestions for how to improve the designs. From my perspective, by conducting experiments students were exposed to the value of testing hypotheses and refining theories and the benefits and limitations of doing the scientific study of religious behavior.

The two biggest challenges of the course were (1) that many students didn’t have strong background in the technical material on cognitive science (to be fair, this is a fairly new discipline) and so I had to go very slowly through that (Boyer) material, and (2) that the students often inferred that cognitive science was a form of “greedy reductionism” (i.e., a mind is not just necessary for religion but also sufficient). Thus, I found myself in class often doing the philosophy of science on the hoof. In the future, I will likely add readings in the philosophy of social science to prime students for thinking about the differences between empirical claims and metaphysical speculations.

Overall, however, the course was a great success—especially if measured by student fascination in the subject. And, I should add that the course accomplished both the deconstruction of students’ familiar thoughts about religion and the reconstruction of a new framework for making sense of religious thought and behavior across cultures and eras. The latter should “stick” with them in other religious studies courses (including, possibly, graduate school).