

## CM 542 and COUN 542 THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Three(3) Credit Hours  
 Lonnie D. Yoder, Instructor  
 Spring Semester 2007

Texts: Spilka, Bernard; Ralph W. Hood, Jr.; Bruce Hunsberger; and Richard L. Gorsuch. The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach-Third Edition. New York: Guilford Press, 2003.

<http://www.psychwww.com/psyrelig/>

### I. Course Description

This seminar style course entails an exploration of religious/spiritual/faith experience from the perspective of psychological realities and insights. Both classical and contemporary material in the field of the psychology of religion will be utilized in this exploration. Students will have an opportunity to reflect on their own religious/faith/spiritual experience as well as that of others. The course will function primarily in seminar style with each student actively participating in and at times leading class sessions.

### II. Objectives

By the end of the semester, the student will be able to:

- A. To identify key events in the history of the psychology of religion. (3.b.3.5)
- B. To apply Biblical and spiritual realities to psychological and religious issues. (3.a.5)
- C. To explore religious/spiritual/faith realities and experiences from a functional psychological perspective. (4.a.b.c)
- D. To identify and draw from the rich variety of religious/spiritual/faith experience. (5.b.1.2.3)
- E. To analyze basic religious/spiritual/faith realities such as conversion, mysticism, prayer, etc. from a psychological perspective. (5.b.1.2.3)
- F. To relate the field of psychology of religion to one's own religious/spiritual/faith experiences and to learn from that of others. (1.e.f.g)
- G. To examine religious/spiritual/faith experiences from the perspective of culture.

### III. Course Requirements

#### A. Reading/Response Journal

Students will be responsible for reading the material in the Spilka text before each weekend session as follows: January 26-27: Chapters 1-5; February 23-24: Chapters 6-11; and March 23-24: Chapters 12-17.

For each weekend that the class meets, five or six chapters are assigned to be read by class time. At each weekend gathering, each student will submit two reading responses related to chapters of the student's choice assigned for that weekend. Each reading response (for a given chapter) shall include:

- 1) at least one or two full paragraph summarizing your understanding of the content of the chapter
- 2) at least one or two full paragraphs summarizing your critical response to the content of the chapter
- 3) at least two written discussion questions which you would like to ask when the class discusses the chapter during class time

The intended length of each reading response for a given chapter is approximately one single-spaced time written page or 400-500 words. In addition to the above standards, the EMU Writing Standards (Graduate Version) will be used to evaluate this assignment. Two reading responses are due January 26, two are due February 23, and two are due March 23. Journals submitted late will be docked at least one letter grade.

### **B. Personal Story**

Each student will write and present a story of his/her own spiritual/religious/faith experience to the class. The written story (1-3 pages in length-typed, double-spaced) with several accompanying comments of application based on class readings and/or other research will be submitted to the instructor at the time of the presentation of the story to the class. Many of the stories will relate to a given topic in the textbook. For example, when dealing with a spiritual/religious experience in childhood, you may choose to tell a story from your childhood and then reflect on its significance from the perspective of the psychology of religion (see Spilka, Ch. 4). A good distribution of stories across the various topics for the semester is encouraged. Grading of the stories will be based on: identification of a clear focus for the story (an inviting title for the story will help in this regard), a detailed telling of the story with significant attention to contextual issues, application of class readings and/or research to the story, and sound composition. Stories will be presented in class (20-30 minutes per story) based on a sign-up sheet for the second and third weekends of the class.

### **C. Individual Interview**

Each student will conduct one in-depth individual interview of another person related to that person's religious/spiritual/faith journey. The interview will be semi-structured in nature using questions from the following list. Feel free to adapt the questions to your own way of speaking and to add/delete certain questions according to the context/person you are interviewing.

An Opening Statement You May Want to Use--"The intent of this interview is for you to share your journey with religion/spirituality/faith and for me to hopefully better

understand that journey. I have used three words—religion/spirituality/faith—to speak about this journey. By religion, I refer to the more organized dimensions of one’s faith, e.g. church. Spirituality refers to the more personal and experiential dimensions of your faith. Faith refers to core beliefs, primary meanings in life, and those things to which you attribute ultimate value. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

- 1) What was your experience of religion/spirituality/faith in your **childhood**? Do any specific memories (positive, negative, other) stand out?
- 2) What was the nature of your religious/spiritual experience in **adolescence and young adulthood**? How was it like/different from your experience as a child?
- 3) If the interviewee is an adult, how have you experienced your religion/spirituality/faith in your **adult years**? Have there been important events/experiences which have impacted your journey? If so, what were these events/experiences and what was their impact?
- 4) Has your experience of **death** or your thoughts about death influenced your religion/spirituality/faith? If so, how and why?
- 5) Are there one or two religious/spiritual/faith **experiences** which stand out in your mind? If so, what is it/are they?
- 6) Have you ever had a **mystical experience (“deeply spiritual experience”)**? If so, describe it.
- 7) Have you ever had a **conversion experience**? If so, describe it.
- 8) Has your religious/spiritual/faith journey been influenced in significant ways by **group experiences or membership in a given church or faith community**? If so, describe the impact of the group/church/faith community on your own journey.
- 9) What impact, if any, does your religion/spirituality/faith have on your **moral beliefs and behaviors**?
- 10) Does your religion/spirituality/faith help you **cope** with life? If so, how?
- 11) Have you experienced any connection or relationship between your religion/spirituality/faith and your **mental well-being**? If so, how would you describe that connection.
- 12) What else, if anything, would you like to say about your religious/spiritual/faith journey that you have not been able to say in response to the other questions?

In addition to the above questions, be sure to gather the following demographic information on the individual:

- name
- age
- marital status
- educational level
- occupation
- current religious affiliation
- past religious affiliations
- places of residence (now and in the past)

Based on the interview a summary and analysis of the individual's religious/spiritual journey will be written. The summary and analysis should be 4-8 pages (typed-double-spaced) in length. Each student will have 20-30 minutes to share his/her interview story, summary and analysis with the entire class based on a sign-up sheet for the second and third weekends. Grading of this assignment will be based on: a thorough interview of the individual, a clear and concise summary of the interview with appropriate analysis drawing on learnings from the textbook, and the EMU Writing Standards (Graduate Version).

#### **D. Group Project**

Teams of three/four students will plan, implement, and report on their study of one religious faith community (written summary report-10-15 pages double spaced). The project can be developed in a number of ways, but should include at least one visit to a worship service of the community, a study of the physical plant of the community, interview(s) with key leaders of the community, participant observation exercises as appropriate, some attention to the larger religious faith context of the community and other activities the team deems important in order to understand the community. Studying Congregations: A New Handbook (Nancy T. Ammerman, et al., Abingdon Press, 1998) can serve as one resource to help structure the group project. The group project will be evaluated on its organization, creativity, thoroughness/content, and insight. The written report will be evaluated using the EMU Writing Standards (Graduate Version). Each team will have one hour to report to the class on the final weekend (March 23-24). 1/4 of the grade for the group project will be based on the class presentation and 3/4 of the grade will be based on the written report. Teams will be composed during the first weekend of the course (January 26-27).

#### **E. Class Attendance/Participation**

Students are expected to attend all class sessions unless there are legitimate reasons for their absence. Such reasons should be communicated to the instructor as soon as possible. Where a student's final course grade is on the borderline between two grades, class attendance and participation will become a significant factor. Materials submitted late are also subject to a grade reduction.

**F. Academic Integrity**

All students are expected to practice academic integrity in this course. See the on-line Graduate Catalog (p. 71) for particular details regarding the EMU policy on academic integrity. Students found cheating or engaging in plagiarism will fail the particular assignment in question and, depending on the severity of the incident, may receive a failing grade for the course.

**G. Disability Statement**

If you have received services in the past related to a learning disability or attention deficit disorder and/or feel you may have such a problem in this course, please make an appointment to speak with me during my office hours or with the Coordinator of Student Disability Support Services in the Academic Support Center, Roselawn Ground Floor, 432-4233.

**III. Grading**

- A. Reading/Response Journal-25%
- B. Personal Story-10%
- C. Individual Interview-30%
- D. Group Project-25%
- D. Class Attendance/Participation-10%

**IV. Course Schedule** (subject to change)

The class will meet January 26-27, February 23-24, and March 23-24 from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. using the following schedule as a guideline:

8-9:15 a.m.	Session 1
9:15-9:30 a.m.	Break
9:30-10:45 a.m.	Session 2
10:45-11 a.m.	Break
11 a.m.-12 noon	Session 3
12 noon-1:15 p.m.	Lunch
1:15-2:30 p.m.	Session 4
2:30-2:45 p.m.	Break
2:45-4 p.m.	Session 5

## V. Selected Bibliography (\* indicates the book is in the EMU library)

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