Psychology of Religion

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The person seeking teaching resources for the psychology of religion will encounter simultaneously no options and unlimited options. By and large, this sub-discipline has focused far more on research than on teaching per se. Among the various introductory or advanced level texts that are now available in the area, teachers will not, to the best of our knowledge, find any dedicated ancillary materials such as study guides or test banks. Likewise, there is little material published in professional journals about the teaching this topic; it has also been quite rare over the last several decades to find conference sessions devoted to discussing teaching strategies. The downside is, of course, that preparation can seem a daunting task for individuals wishing to initiate a new course. The upside is that one is not inadvertently constrained by someone else's impressions of what is important within the field and personal creativity can have more influence.

With these caveats in mind, it is our intent to offer a series of tips that have worked well in various undergraduate sessions taught over the last few decades. In addition to these necessarily static ideas, consultation of the Psychology of Religion web site (Nielsen, 2008) will provide a continually refreshed stream of up-to-the-minute information, including sample syllabi, field relevant announcements, films, books, journals, the Sommervogel Archive of psychology of religion publications, and a plethora of other materials to enhance courses. The American Psychological Association Division 36 (Psychology of Religion) website (*Psychology of Religion – APA Division 36*, 2010) also provides links to various email lists where one can solicit teaching related input from scholars around the globe. For a global perspective on the field, the International Association for the Psychology of Religion is another excellent resource (*International Association for the Psychology of Religion*, n.d.).

Original Exercises/Demonstrations

Embrace Transdiciplinarity

The formal and informal study of religion is much older than the field of psychology. Even a cursory reading of the history of psychology reveals that many concepts in this "new science" emerged as expansions or reactions to theological formulations; this is not surprising when one realizes how many of the early psychologists were either from clergy families and/or attended seminary prior to identifying themselves with psychology. Without sacrificing any emphasis on the scientific method as the bedrock of the discipline, it would be interesting to trace backward the current areas of concern to their earliest appearances. By doing so, the students "inadvertently" learn about the history of science. As two other examples, a course might take a thematic turn and investigate how the psychological experience of faith is related to architecture, or how the inherent reductionism of neuroscience does or does not provide useful information concerning the psychological aspects of believing.

Capitalize on the Negative

What is missing in the psychology of religion? Well-grounded theoretical work. Much of what passes for theory is at best a loose collection of ideas. Looking at psychology department requirements across the United States reveals that only a very few institutions include an explicit course on theory in their curriculum. Pointing out that well-structured theory is largely absent within this realm provides a natural segue to teaching about what theory is and is not and equipping students with tools to think creatively on this topic. This theme of thinking about theory can be fruitfully carried across the semester by having the students collaboratively assemble concept maps (Coffey et al., 2003; Novak & Cañas, 2006). Novak and Cañas (2006) include a link to download free software that can be used to develop a graphic concept map. There is a learning curve that, although slight, may be prohibitively steep for some classes.

An alternative, admittedly less scientific approach, is to select a single theory (or suspected theory) and have students compose short papers outlining that topic. Then, the instructor can assemble all the papers into a single file and paste that text into a "word cloud" generating tool (e.g., Feinberg, 2009) to create a graphic representation based on word frequency. The image resulting can be used to generate discussion about the convergence of ideas

concerning the theory under investigation. As an example, the word cloud derived from this chapter appears in Figure 1. The emphasized words in this chapter are clearly students, psychology, religion, teaching, theory, and course.
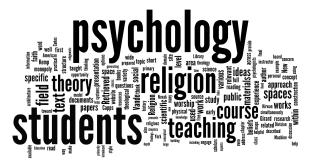

Figure 1. Word Cloud of this Chapter

Be Original

A large number of this area's foundational works were composed in an era that is now in the public domain. As a result, a course can be structured so that students have an opportunity to read a wide variety of primary source materials, often at little or no cost. As survey text books continue to rise in cost, it is nice to have this fiscal alternative, but even more important, students who engage primary documents get to learn how to come to their own conclusions about the nature of these classic efforts. A wide variety of seminal works are located on the *Classics in the History of Psychology* website (Green, n.d.). These are not sorted with respect to the psychology of religion, but many of the early works are clearly applicable. Other less well-known websites provide full text options for hard-to-find early journals in the field such as the *American Journal of Religious Psychology and Education* (*Open Library*, 2010) or even complete books. For instance a search using the terms *psychology* and *religion* returned over 400 full text hits, with modest redundancy (*Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free Books, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine*, 2010). Using these and other public domain works, it is possible for instructors to assemble a paperless, free reading list that will expose students to the foundations of the field.

The Media and the Message

American culture holds dear the paradox of having high rates of individual endorsement of religious beliefs while simultaneously declaring it improper to discuss those beliefs in public. Perhaps as a result of that social restriction on public expressions of faith, the media, especially film, and more recently television and print have had a lot to say on the behalf of believers and non-believers alike.

Taking advantage of the ever increasingly easy access to video is a natural way to introduce topics. Nielsen (2008) provides a helpful listing of relevant media on the Psychology of Religion website.

Talk it Out

The authors of the most relevant texts in the area have either spent their entire careers or significant portions thereof at primarily undergraduate institutions. They understand teaching and interact well with students. If they and you both have decent internet connections and even very inexpensive webcams, it is very feasible to set up live video conference calls using free services (e.g., Skype, ustream.tv, etc.). During one semester when psychology of religion scholars visited as guest lecturers, students were required to submit a minimum of five substantive questions in advance. The result was that the speakers could address pertinent questions in their own style and the students were engaged waiting for their specific inquiry to be addressed. In addition, the value of generating questions ahead of time was demonstrated by the fact that students came prepared with "follow up" questions to press for greater understanding. Both presenters and students came away with very positive evaluations of the experience.

Go Deep

One way to approach the teaching task is to structure a course in the psychology of religion around the presentation of different foundational theories within branches of psychology (e.g., behaviorism, cognition, social) or to go more deeply into a specific branch (e.g., the social psychology of religion). The benefit is that this reinforces ways of thinking taught in other core psychology courses and demonstrates how those frameworks help to make sense of faith systems. The cost is that it is very hard to bring the ideas down to a concrete level because "religion" (or "spirituality") tends toward the abstract.

Go Wide

An alternative is to choose a specific topic, for instance, how psychology helps us understand the role of physical worship spaces. Grounding the discussion in explicitly psychological principles makes sure students remember they are in a psychology class as opposed to religious studies. Then it is possible to begin to draw in a variety of works from other disciplines that help to inform and expand the psychological ideas. As these disparate sources are drawn together, students acquire the knowledge necessary to think critically about the psychological components of belief systems and how

that psychology is enhanced (or not) by a plethora of other factors.

An Example Course Structure

The following course example expands on the article by Capps (1980) by modeling a fourth approach that is gaining in popularity: mixed methods. Here, the scholar embraces both quantitative and qualitative data, balancing their pros and cons. Following Capps' model, the belief system linked to this style can be described as stable and exploratory; the individual has a firm set of personal beliefs, but is welcoming to other systems without either discounting or advocating them. The example offered is in this mold.

This course was designed with several key components: short reflection papers, essay exams, site visits, and a physical model construction. The reflection papers were based on a wide swath of reading materials. Students systematically engaged grouped chapters from Hood, Hill, & Spilka (2009) spread across the first few weeks to open their eyes to the breadth and depth (or lack thereof) of the various core areas of investigation within the field. Students simultaneously were assigned selected chapters from Jaccard & Jacoby (2010) setting the stage for students to, if not generate theory, at least recognize possibilities for theorizing and sense its presence or absence.

The next text introduced was Grudin (2010) because it is a very "friendly read" and helped balance the intensity of the other two texts. This resource served as an excellent discussion starter and a natural bridge to standard aspects of perceptual psychology. To stay at an easier level of reading, the Kirwan (2005) book steered the discussion toward theoretical notions at the same time that the students were completing the Hood et al. (2009) book. This experience well-arms students with information about research findings within the field; therefore they are able to think about how the presented results can be explained by a particular theory. For example, Girard's notion of mimicry was presented as having the potential to unify and drive forward the psychology of religion.

Blesser & Salter (2006) brought the class back to a very practical level by directing attention toward the fact that different faith traditions inhabit worship spaces that are often quite dissimilar. The discussions centered on how the divergent spaces are experienced psychologically.

Continuing in the vein of reflecting on how spaces foster various psychological reactions, Rowland & Howe (Eds.; 2008) made clear how the selection of building locations, materials, and architectural principles can work harmoniously or in opposition to each other. The selections from this ancient text provided both a sense of the rich history of shaping people's psychological spaces for worship and for leisure as well as concretizing these elements in an unambiguous fashion.

Burger & Salazar (2008) took students into a cultural time and place with which they were largely unfamiliar. This text provided students with an opportunity to explore how these ancient people constructed a sacred space and to make observations about how that space would control and direct the psychological experiences in very distinct ways.

The readings concluded with Girard, Antonello, Rocha, & Kirwan (2007) exposing students to primary-source documents dealing, once again, with theoretical notions. This final work added another layer of sophistication with which to evaluate the topic at hand.

Over the first three-quarters of the semester, students encountered the texts in the intentional order described above, experiencing a movement back and forth between theory and practice. Along the way, some texts were distinctly challenging to stretch their capacity for reading and synthesizing. Other works, more popular in nature, allowed them to catch their intellectual breath. Students were required to write two-page reflection papers on each reading, with the goal of integrating the materials.

This series of writing prepared them to encounter and evaluate actual worship spaces with regard to their psychological influences. Field trips to local worship spaces, next, moved the discussions to an applied orientation. A center where Buddhist, Native American, and other similar traditions gathered in a primarily outdoor area was juxtaposed with a Roman Catholic Basilica and outdoor grotto. These locations were further distinguished from an Islamic mosque, the Unity Temple (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright), and a Baha'i temple. To add to the mix, one traditional Episcopalian Cathedral, an early 1900's semicircular (United) Methodist building, and a Salvation Army soup kitchen/worship center were compared with a very contemporary Episcopalian structure. During each of these visits, students were encouraged to gather their own experiential data by asking questions such as: How did the space feel when simply standing quietly? What perceptual cues suggested the theological focus of the congregation? How did sound play off the structure? What was the role of light? Did the space feel open or closed, elevated or grounded?

Together, the readings and the site visits prepared the students for their final project: building a scale model that used theory and practical applications to create a specific psychological experience within a worship space. Here, the students

had the opportunity to work alone or in groups. The outcome was both a physical structure and a public presentation describing the reasoning behind the choices of design and materials.

With multiple short papers, three essay tests, a final essay exam, field trips, the physical construction of a scale model, and a public presentation, the course addressed a wide swath of learning objectives from developing writing skills to cultivating synthetic and generative thinking. This approach is not for the faint of heart because it requires a large and sustained effort on the part of both student and instructor. The payoff, however, is best described in student comments which centered on this theme: "I never realized the complexity of how spaces, whether ornate or plain, influenced psychological experiences. Whether in the specific context of expressing faith or in any secular situation, I can't help but think about the messages the design enhances and subdues. My way of seeing and experiencing has undergone a radical change."

Annotated Bibliography

For ease of reference, the following annotated bibliography is broken into three sections. The first presents a short list of the articles generated by using the search terms *teaching, psychology,* and *religion* across social science, humanities, and medical databases. These articles contain few practical examples for classroom application, however, they do highlight some of the perennial issues that surround teaching this sort of class.

The second section contains the references mentioned in points 1-7 of the Original Examples/Demonstrations. The final section offers annotations of the texts used in the sample course.

Teaching Related Articles
Research models. Capps outlines three broad ways that scholars in the psychology of religion orient themselves to conducting their research. Some favor a compare/contrast emphasis on dichotomies; others highlight the landscape of options or perhaps embrace a more open-ended (qualitative) style of work. Capps notes that each of these preferences can be reflective of the instructor's personal attitude about the origins and values of religious beliefs. Recognizing and taming these biases is a substantial challenge that must be addressed because it influences the manner in which the teaching will be conducted, the types of examples used, and so forth.
- Capps, D. (1980). Research models and pedagogical paradigms in psychology of religion. *Review of Religious Research, 21*, 218-227.

Professing belief. This article addresses, in brief form, the question of professing Christianity (or any specific belief) as a part of teaching the scientific study of psychology. The author calls on her own experience as an instructor who professes Christianity and indicates that addressing in the classroom the psychological interpretations that her beliefs shape, helps to illustrate to students how all scientists have beliefs that shape their interpretations, and how acknowledging this shaping can improve the personal understanding of the students and improve the quality of the future scholarship of these potential researchers.
- Gavin, E. (1982) Professing psychology and Christianity in a denominational college. *Teaching of Psychology, 9*, 228-229.

Religion from a traditional psychological perspective. Hester and Paloutzian focus on teaching the psychology of religion from traditional psychological subdisciplines (i.e., developmental, personality, social, and clinical), this chapter briefly addresses the resources available for addressing scientific aspects of the course. Religious experience is featured in several texts, and Hester and Paloutzian note the resources available to instructors who wish to address this in depth. The chapter concludes with suggested assignments and assessments, including some that require self-reflection, group assignments in which students examine the function of religion in diverse groups, and assignments in which students design – or actually implement – an empirical study relevant to the course.
- Hester, M. P., & Paloutzian, R. F. (2006). Teaching the psychology of religion: Teaching for today's world. In W. Buskist & S. F. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of the teaching of psychology.* (pp. 207-213). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Teaching Non-Social Science Majors. Petrovich explores issues related to teaching a social science (psychological content) class to humanities students (primarily students of theology) who have no prior experience with psychology or with the scientific approach. The author suggests two specific reasons why a broad approach to psychology, including exposure to scientific research methods, should be offered to theology students. First, a grasp of scientific methods helps students understand and apply psychological findings. Second, awareness in this area contributes to the science-religion dialogue.
- Petrovich, O. (2010) Perceptions of relevance and conceptual challenges of studying psychology among theology students. *Discourse, 3*, 92-113.

Courses related to psychology of religion. Although somewhat dated, this study reports on what courses related to psychology/religion are taught where, and by whom, using what books. The author indicates concern that the "'religionists' have a monopoly on all the courses" (p.18), and even those taught by psychologists are probably taught by those biased toward religion, despite the recognized breadth of perspective attested to by the compiled booklist. The author suggests that without significant changes the described monopoly will provide only a "religious psychology of religion" (p. 18).

- Vande Kemp, H. (1976) Teaching psychology/religion in the seventies: Monopoly or cooperation? *Teaching of Psychology, 3*, 15-19.

The proper place for religion. In a rebuttal of Wagner and Struzynski (1979), Vande Kemp reiterates her initial findings and concerns, clarifying what might demonstrate full cooperation between the disciplines. Cited among her concerns are a proper place for religion, the willingness of "'religionists' to appropriate the work of psychologists" (p. 143) and the "inadequacy of theological anthropologies to deal with psychological questions" (p. 143). The concern of a subordinate disciplinary identity comes to the fore, but for Vande Kempe, despite the monopoly held by the so called religionists for the teaching of psychology/religion courses, the theologians are the ones whose disciplinary identity appears to be subordinate. Vande Kemp sees the need for the psychologist to be able to address and engage classical theological systems, but finds this currently unattainable, as a consequence of the autonomy and monopoly she describes.

- Vande Kemp, H. (1979) On seeing yourself through another's eyes: Response to Wagner and Struzynski. *Teaching of Psychology, 6*, 143-145.

Interdisciplinary courses. Responding to the Vande Kemp (1976) article, these authors (one a psychologist and one a theologian) agree with Vande Kemp's evidence of monopoly, and her concern to address it, sustain optimism that truly interdisciplinary courses can be achieved, with psychology and theology remaining "fully and compatibly autonomous" (p. 140). They cite their own five year endeavor to create such a course as evidence for their position.

- Wagner, C. & Struzynski, A. (1979) On the autonomy of psychology in psychology/religion courses: An optimistic view. *Teaching of Psychology, 6*, 140-143.

The use of the word cult. The author articulates concerns about use of the word "cult" in the teaching of psychology; specifically, negative connotations, and misuse of the term based on the perceptions of the user. Woody explores conflicting definitions, identifies the impacts on students, and makes recommendations for teachers, scholars, and practitioners based on more extensive evaluation and objective terminology.

- Woody, W. D. (2009) Use of *cult* in the teaching of psychology of religion and spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 1*, 218-32.

Texts Cited in the Practical Examples

❖ Coffey, J. W., Carnot, M. J., Feltovich, P. J., Feltovich, J., Hoffman, R. R., Cañas, A. J., Novak, J. D. (2003). *A Summary of Literature Pertaining to the Use of Concept Mapping Techniques and Technologies for Education and Performance Support.* (Technical Report submitted to the Chief of Naval Education and Training, Pensacola, FL). Retrieved from Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition website: www.ihmc.us/users/acanas/Publications/Concept MapLitReview/IHMC%20Literature%20Review %20on%20Concept%20Mapping.pdf
Readers will find this a helpful description both of the idea of concept mapping and also how the technique can be of specific benefit within educational settings.

❖ Feinberg, J. (2009). *Wordle – Beautiful Word Clouds*. Retrieved from www.wordle.net
A simple cut/paste of a document into a target window will generate a graphic representation of word frequencies, with the size of the font reflecting the frequency of the words. Users can alter the horizontal/vertical orientations, choose from a variety of fonts, manipulate colors, and save their work. This artistic presentation of linguistic data naturally captures student's attention and fosters spontaneous discussions of the actual content at a level more accessible to some classes than the full conceptual maps.

❖ Green, C. D. (n.d.) *Classics in the History of Psychology*. Retrieved from http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/index.htm An archive of public *domain works relevant to the field o*f psychology, this resource includes many very early documents that demonstrate the links

between the rise of psychology as a science and its origins in theological constructs.

❖ *International Association for the Psychology of Religion* (n.d.). Retrieved from http://psychology-of-religion.com/
Representing the oldest established group of scholars interested in the topic, this site provides information concerning relevant conferences and offers the opportunity for teachers to solicit examples that move beyond the perspective of the United States.

❖ *Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free Books, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine* (2010). Retrieved from www.archive.org
A free source of various documents, this site contains a variety of classic works in the psychology of religion that are frequently written about, but less frequently read in their entirety.

❖ Nielsen, M. E. (2008). *Nielsen's Psychology of Religion Pages.* Retrieved from www.psychwww.com/psyrelig/
Nielsen's effort is one of the first to consolidate materials related to this area of study. The pages range from resources for teachers (e.g., texts, films, syllabi, etc.) to blogs, and job openings in the field.

❖ Novak, J. D., & Cañas, A. J. (2006). *The theory underlying concept maps and how to construct them.* (Technical Report IHMC CmapTools 2006-01, Rev 2008-01). Retrieved from Florida Institute for Human and Machine Cognition website:
http://cmap.ihmc.us/publications/researchpapers/theorycmaps/theoryunderlyingconceptmaps.htm
This work presents a thorough introduction to the idea of conceptual maps at a level most appropriate for the teaching professional. The ideas are exceptionally helpful in generating thinking about how to encourage more advanced students to actively engage in the process of theory identification and construction.

❖ *Open Library* (2010). *Journal of Religious Psychology.* Retrieved from http://openlibrary.org/books/OL7047342M/Journal_of_Religious_Psychology.
This site is another excellent source of full text, psychology of religion relevant documents that are in the public domain.

❖ *Psychology of Religion – APA Division 36* (16 November 2010). Retrieved from www.division36.org
The flagship organization of the discipline, the Division 36 website's main contribution to teaching is its hosting of listservs that connect people who are active in the field. The site also is helpful for teachers interested in attending conferences to learn more about the discipline.

Texts Cited in the Example Course

❖ Blesser, B. & Salter, L. (2006). *Spaces speak, are you listening? Experiencing aural architecture.* Cambridge: MIT.
Ranging from psychoacoustics to philosophy, the authors engage readers with a transdisciplinary *tour de force* of how physical spaces can influence people who enter them, whether intentionally or unwittingly.

❖ Burger, R. L. & Salazar, L. C. (2008). *Machu Picchu: Unveiling the mystery of the Incas.* New Haven: Yale.
The text first presents theories concerning the use of Machu Picchu and details about its construction. The second major section catalogues artifacts from the location.

❖ Girard, R., Antonello, P., Rocha, J. C. C., & Kirwan, M. (2007). *Evolution and conversion: Dialogues on the origins of culture.* New York: Continuum International Publishing.
In this collection of papers, readers are introduced to primary writings of Girard. The basic themes of his theory are introduced, but readers need to be sufficiently savvy to extract them from across the various documents.

❖ Grudin, R. (2010). *Design and truth.* New Haven: Yale.
With a very readable style, Grudin introduces the notion that spaces convey messages. Religious spaces are mentioned with enough frequency for the instructor to be able to make the connection directly back to a course on the psychology of religion.

❖ Hood, R. J., Jr., Hill, P. C., & Spilka, B. (2009). *The psychology of religion: An empirical approach.* New York: Guilford.
This edition continues the updating of one of the inaugural texts to circumscribe the field. The volume is indispensible both as an overview of research already completed and as a source of ideas for developing new lines of inquiry. Although not a simple read for undergraduates due to its rapid fire presentation, students frequently comment in subsequent semesters that they greatly appreciate having a copy for ongoing reference. Instructors need to be prepared to remind students to read with the intent of observing the arc of the field if this text is used in a survey course. If used as a solo text, instructors may elect to focus on a few select chapters to help students appreciate the depth of information available.

❖ Jaccard, J. & Jacoby, J. (2010). *Theory construction and model-building skills: A practical guide for social scientists.* New York: Guilford.
Covering both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this material is an accessible introduction for students who have heard *about* theory, but have not engaged it beyond a superficial level. The presentation gives students the tools to critically evaluate existing ideas and begin to think creatively on their own.

❖ Kirwan, M. (2005). *Discovering Girard.* London: Cowley
The author uses this short text to make explicit the core ideas of Girard. There are plenty of opportunities for psychologists of religion to reflect on how these notions of group formation, struggle, and continuation are applicable to contexts of faith communities.

❖ Rowland, I. D. & Howe, T. N. (Eds.) (2008). *Vitruvius: Ten books on architecture.* New York: Cambridge.
This classic text emphasizes the concept of architecture as a "liberal art" that necessarily draws knowledge from all fields of study. Readers have the opportunity to see, for instance, how decisions about the mathematics of proportions of entryways have links to history, philosophy, and psychology.