

**The Nature of Religious Experience**  
**Dr. Michael Sudduth**  
**Course Syllabus**

San Francisco State University, Fall 2013  
Philosophy 525-01 (14013)/Religion 300-01 (14186)  
MWF 10:10-11:00am, HSS 259  
[iLearn Resources Link](#)

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**Course Description**

*Basic Course Description*

This course involves an exploration of fundamental questions about religious or spiritual experience. Some of these questions concern the characteristics of religious experience and the beliefs they engender. What is religious experience like? Are there different kinds of religious experience? What is the content of the beliefs associated with or produced by religious experience? Another set of questions concerns the cognitive mechanisms or processes involved in religious experience and the production of religious beliefs, as well as their relation of the former to the broader range of human experiences and cognitive functioning. Finally, there are questions concerning the epistemic assessment of religious experience. Does having a religious experience make it reasonable or rational to hold religious belief? Do the facts of religious experience constitute evidence for the truth of religious beliefs?

Since a paradigmatic form of religious experience is the alleged experience of God—a supreme personal being—the above questions may be rephrased in terms of the experience of God. However, it is widely acknowledged that religious experiences are not limited to experiences of God, at least where “God” is understood as a supreme personal being. Some people claim to experience God but do not regard their experience as an experience of a personal being. Other people claim to have experiences that strongly resemble what other people call “experiences of God,” but they do not self-describe their experience as an experience of God. To the extent that such persons describe their experiences, they speak instead of the experience of the absolute, the transcendent, ultimate reality, the Self, or nature. Hence, in exploring the nature of religious experience we will be exploring the nature of a broad range of experiences that include but are not restricted to what are commonly called “experiences of God.” Our critical exploration will canvass such experiences in both the eastern and western religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions.

*Expanded Course Description*

The course is divided into three units covering the phenomenology, psychology, and epistemology of religious experience.

1. *August 26–September 18.* We will explore the **phenomenology** of religious experience through primary and secondary sources of the eastern and western religious traditions, e.g., Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The “phenomenology” of religious experience refers to the subjective features of religious experiences, that is, what these experiences are like from the viewpoint of the persons having the experiences. So we will explore how “God” or “the transcendent” experienced in eastern and western religious traditions. Course readings will emphasize “mystical” experiences, broadly speaking, experiences in which subjects experience intimacy, oneness, unity, or even identity with the

Supreme or Absolute reality. But since the range of experiences to be explored is diverse, we will ultimately consider classification schemes for religious and spiritual experiences.

2. *September 20–November 8.* The second unit of the course will be primarily devoted to exploring **psychological models** of religious experience, roughly stated, accounts of the cognitive mechanisms or processes involved in religious experience. We begin with William James's seminal text *the Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). We will then consider the contributions of Rudolph Otto, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung to twentieth-century understandings of the psychology of religion and religious experience. Readings will not only discuss the essential features, content, structure, and possible causes of religious experiences, but how modern thinkers have related religious phenomena to the larger context of the human psyche and human psychological development. Of particular importance to twentieth-century models of religion is the central role afforded to the unconscious in explaining the origin, nature, and psychological dynamics of religious experience, so there will be considerable examination of the structure of the psyche and its division into conscious and unconscious strata.

3. *November 11–December 16.* We will consider some questions in the **epistemology** of religious experience, roughly, questions concerning whether religious experience justifies or makes it reasonable to believe in God (or some transcendent reality). We will consider whether a person could be justified or reasonable in believing in God (or some other transcendental reality) on the basis of having a religious experience. We will also consider the closely related question as to whether the facts or descriptions of religious experience (discussed in units 1 and 2 of the course) constitute evidence for the existence of God (or some transcendent reality). This will require a critical examination of the case for and against religious experience as a ground for justified beliefs about God. Authors in this section of the course will include contemporary philosophers of religion William Alston, William Rowe, William Wainwright, Richard Swinburne, and Caroline Franks Davis.

### *Course Objectives*

The main objective of the course is to illuminate the nature of religious experience. I propose to accomplish this by addressing three closely related fundamental questions:

- (i) What are the basic phenomenological features of religious experience? (Unit 1 Objective)
- (ii) What are three important features of modern psychological models of religious experience? (Unit 2 Objective)
- (iii) Do religious experiences justify belief in God or some transcendent reality? (Unit 3 Objective)

### **Method of Instruction**

The primary method of instruction in this class is lecture. However, I believe that student participation is of great value to the learning process. To that end I want to encourage students to ask questions and make observations during class. Some class sessions will be discussion oriented rather than lecture format. At times I will make use of power point presentations. These power point presentations will be posted on the course page at [michaelsudduth.com](http://michaelsudduth.com), along with class handouts and study questions. At times you will be asked to bring handouts to class in connection with the lectures.

### **Course Texts, Assignments, and Grading**

#### *Required Course Texts*

- William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Modern Library, 1994). [ISBN 0-679-64011-8]
- Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (Yale University Press, 1938, 1960). [ISBN: 978-030000137-2]
- Andrew Harvey (ed.), *The Essential Mystics: The Soul's Journey into Truth* (Harper San Francisco, 1996). [ISBN: 0-06-251379-6]

### *Important Notes on Texts for Course*

† The campus bookstore is unable to provide copies of Harvey's *Essential Mystics*, but the text is widely available through used book vendors. Do a search on [bookfinder.com](http://bookfinder.com) to locate a copy of the book. As of August 22, 2013, [bookfinder.com](http://bookfinder.com) has over 200 listings for the text.

† There will also be several online readings. These will be made available on the course page at [michaelsudduth.com](http://michaelsudduth.com)

### *Assignments and Grading*

- 25%: mid-term exam (objective; T/F and multiple choice)
- 25%: final exam (objective; T/F and multiple choice)
- 20%: 5 two-page response essays (graded CR/NC)
- 30%: term paper (6 pages in length), tentatively due on Monday, November 1 (online submission)

Papers will be submitted online through a Turnitin link on the iLearn page for the course. Details on paper assignments will be given at a later time.

### *Late Papers and Missed Final Exam*

Papers: It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the paper is submitted before the deadline specified in the course assignment. By rule, **no late papers will be accepted**. However, if—due to extraordinary circumstances—students wish to have consideration for turning in a paper late, they must submit their request in writing to me by email no later than 24 hours before or after the paper due date. Requests should include an explanation of the circumstances that prevented the submission of the paper. All authorized late papers are still subject to grade reduction.

Exams. By rule, **a missed exam cannot be taken at a later date**. Students who miss the mid-term exam must contact me 24 hours before or after the exam if they wish to petition for an opportunity to make up the exam. Students should not presume that make-ups will be authorized. Students who miss the final exam will be given a zero for the assignment and issued a final grade based on total accumulated points. Although students are not entitled to take the final exam at a later date, should an emergency prevent them from taking the final exam they may *request* by email an incomplete (within 24 hours before or after of the exam), but only if they have completed 75% of the work in the class with a passing grade. Please note that the university schedules final exams. If you have a complaint about the date, please contact university administration.

### *Grade Scale*

All assignments have a point value, and there are 500 points possible in the class. Letter grades on papers are converted into a point value for the purposes of calculating final grades. I use the following grade scale for individual assignments and for calculating final grades.

<b>Grade Scale</b>	<b>Final Grade Point Scale</b>	<b>Assignment Point Values</b>
93–100% = A	465–500 = A	*Mid-term = 125 points
90–92% = A-	450–464 = A-	*Final exam = 125 points
		Term Paper = 150 points
		Short Response Essays = 100 points
87–89% = B+	435–449 = B+	
83–86% = B	415–434 = B	
80–82% = B-	400–414 = B-	
77–79% = C+	385–399 = C+	
73–76% = C	365–384 = C	
70–72% = C-	350–364 = C-	
67–69% = D+	335–349 = D+	
63–66% = D	315–334 = D	
60–62% = D-	300–314 = D-	
0–59% = F	0–299 = F	

\*Exams are worth 125 points each. Since there are 50 questions on each exam, each question is worth 2.5 points. Mid-term and final exams combine for a total of 250 points (50% of the final grade). Paper grades are converted into point values for the purpose of calculating final grades on a point scale.

### Course Teaching Assistant

Graduate philosophy student Justin Kitchen ([kitchen@mail.sfsu.edu](mailto:kitchen@mail.sfsu.edu)) is the teaching assistant (TA) for this course. Justin is a former student who has expertise in philosophy of religion. He will be responsible for grading your papers and keeping track of your grade in the class. On occasion he will give class lectures or lead class discussion. Feel free to contact Justin if you have questions about a grade assigned for your work. Students should also feel free to discuss their work and grades with me. Grades will be posted on iLearn.

### **Guidelines for Success in the Class**

- (1) Attend class regularly. While I do not grade on attendance, habitual absences and/or tardiness will adversely affect your performance in the class. Students are responsible for knowing what assignments have been given or collected. Contact me by email if you have questions about this.
- (2) Respect the classroom as a learning environment. Do not speak or otherwise distract when the professor or students are speaking. This includes the disruptive use of cell phones, iPods, and other electronic devices.
- (3) I wish to make this course as accessible as possible to students with disabilities or medical conditions that may affect any aspect of course assignments or participation. Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email [dprc@sfsu.edu](mailto:dprc@sfsu.edu).
- (4) Academic dishonesty on any assignment will result in a “zero” for the assignment. An academic dishonesty report will be submitted to the Dean for possible further academic action. Any student who is caught plagiarizing is subject to having other written work submitted in the course re-evaluated for

plagiarism. Plagiarism is likely to be detected since all response papers must be submitted through Turnitin, a plagiarism detector database. For more information, see <http://turnitin.com/>.

*Plagiarism occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgement, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism in the College of Humanities will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action. (Quotation taken from "College of Humanities Plagiarism Resources," [www.sfsu.edu/~collhum/plagiarism.html](http://www.sfsu.edu/~collhum/plagiarism.html))*

- (5) It is crucial that you complete the reading assignments or view any other course materials in a timely manner. Some reading assignments will be lengthy, and many will be challenging in content. It is important that you keep up with the readings. Be prepared to discuss the readings when you come to class.
- (6) Lecture notes, power point presentations, videos, assignment information, and study questions will be posted on my professional website [michaelsudduth.com](http://michaelsudduth.com). The VIP Lounge in the main menu is the section of my website that is designed exclusively for my students. Go to the VIP Lounge main menu option and scroll down to PHIL 525/RELS 300: Nature of Religious Experience. A user password is required. The password is wjames. While class materials will be posted on my professional site, all grades will be posted on the iLearn page for this class and papers will also be submitted on iLearn.
- (7) Carefully follow instructions for all written work in class. Specific directions for class essay assignments will be made available at a later time.
- (8) Use [msudduthsfsu@gmail.com](mailto:msudduthsfsu@gmail.com) for all correspondence. Subject line of emails should read: Religious Experience FA 13. Always include your full name in correspondence. To contact Justin Kitchen, the course TA, use the following email: [kitchen@mail.sfsu.edu](mailto:kitchen@mail.sfsu.edu). Please allow 24 hours for return correspondence.

### Proposed Schedule of Readings

This is a *proposed* schedule of readings. The schedule of readings is subject to change and may be adjusted as the semester moves forward. For adjustments to this calendar, course materials, and complete daily assignments, see course page at [michaelsudduth.com](http://michaelsudduth.com).

#### Week 1: Orientation

August 26 (M): Orientation

August 28 (W): *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (hereafter, *MWR*), chapter 2

August 30 (F): NO CLASS – Department Meetings

#### Week 2: Mysticism in the Indian Traditions

September 2 (M): NO CLASS – Labor Day

September 4 (W): *MWR*, ch. 4 (pp. 30–42), *Essential Mystics*, pp 35–42

September 6 (F): *MWR*, ch. 9 (pp. 89–110), *Essential Mystics*, pp. 43–66

#### Week 3: Mysticism in Buddhism and Judaism

September 9 (M): Indian Mysticism and Philosophy concluded

September 11 (W): Buddhism, *MWR*, ch. 6 (pp. 54–65); *Essential Mystics*, ch. 4 (pp. 67–85)

September 13 (F): Judaism, *MWR*, ch. 10 (pp. 111–120); *Essential Mystics*, ch. 5 (pp. 87–109)

#### **Week 4: Mysticism in the Western Religious Traditions**

September 16 (M): Islam, *MWR*, ch. 11 (pp. 121–140); *Essential Mystics*, ch. 7 (pp. 137–167)

September 18 (W): Christianity, *MWR*, ch. 12 (pp. 141–162); *Essential Mystics*, ch. 8 (pp. 169– 216)

September 20 (F): William James, *Varieties*, Lecture II (Circumscription of the Topic, pp. 31– 60)

#### **Week 5: William James—The Nature of Religion**

September 23 (M): Discussion Day

September 25 (W): James, *Varieties*, Lecture III (The Reality of the Unseen, pp. 61–89)

September 27 (F): James, *Varieties*, Lecture IV and V (Religion of Healthy-Mindedness, 90–123)

#### **Week 6: William James—Types of Religious Disposition**

September 30 (M): James, *Varieties*, Lecture VI and VII (The Sick Soul, pp. 144–84)

October 2 (W): James, Lecture VIII (The Divided Self, pp. 185–209)

October 4 (F): James, Lecture IX (Conversion, pp. 210–239)

#### **Week 7: William James—Conversion and Mysticism**

October 7 (M): James, Lecture X (Conversion, pp. 240–46, 254–67, 271–73, 282–84)

October 9 (W): James, Lectures XVI and XVII (Mysticism, pp. 413–38, 442–47, 453–60)

October 11 (F): James, Lecture XVII (Mysticism, pp. 460–68)

#### **Week 8: William James—Philosophical Reflections (and Mid-Term)**

October 14 (M): James, Lecture XVIII (Philosophy, pp. 469–89, 495–98)

October 16 (W): James, Lecture XX (Conclusions, pp. 551–564)

October 18 (F): Mid-Term Exam (Scantron 882 form and #2 pencil needed)

#### **Week 9: Rudolph Otto on Religious Experience**

October 21 (M): Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, chapters 2–4

October 23 (W): Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, chapters 4–5

October 25 (F): Lecture on Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung

#### **Week 10: Carl Jung on Religion**

October 28 (M): Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, chapter 1 (pp. 1–39)

October 30 (W): Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, chapter 2 (pp. 40–62)

November 1 (F): Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, chapter 2 (pp. 63–77)

\*Mid-Term Paper Due Nov. 1

#### **Week 11: Carl Jung on Religion**

November 4 (M): Discussion Day

November 6 (W): Eugene Bianchi, “Jungian Psychology and Religious Experience” [Online]

November 8 (F): Bianchi article continued

#### **Week 12: The Epistemology of Religious Experience**

November 11 (M): NO CLASS – Veterans Day

November 13 (W): Ann Belford Ulanov, “Jung and Religion: The Opposing Self” [Online]

November 15 (F): William Wainwright, “Mysticism and Sense Perception” [Online]

#### **Week 13: The Epistemology of Religious Experience**

November 18 (M): William Alston, “Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief” [Online]

November 20 (W): Evan Fales, “Do Mystics See God?” [Online]  
November 22 (F): Alston, “Reply to Fales,” and Fales, “Reply to Alston” [Online]

#### **Week 14: Thanksgiving Break**

November 25 (M): NO CLASS  
November 27 (W): NO CLASS  
November 29 (F): NO CLASS

#### **Week 15: The Epistemology of Religious Experience**

December 2 (M): C.D. Broad, “The Argument from Religious Experience”  
December 4 (W): William Rowe, “Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity” [Online]  
December 6 (F): Concluding discussion on Rowe

#### **Week 16: The Epistemology of Religious Experience**

December 9 (M): Caroline Franks Davis, “Conflicting Claims Challenge” [Online]  
December 11 (W): Caroline Franks Davis, “Conflicting Claims Challenge” [Online]  
December 13 (F): Caroline Franks Davis, “Towards a Cumulative Case” [Online]

#### **Finals Week: December 17–20**

December 16 (M): Course Summary and Review for Final Exam – Last Day of Class

FINAL EXAM DATE\*: Wednesday, December 18 at 8:00am–10:30am

\*The final exam will only be given on the date and at the time scheduled by the university.

#### **Recommended Books for Further Reading**

For students interested in doing further advanced reading on religious experience, I would recommend the following books:

- Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Development of Humankind’s Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Bracken Books, 1995 [1911]).
- R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969 [1957]).
- John Smith, *Experience and God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).
- Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978)
- William Wainwright. *Mysticism* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1981).
- Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- Robert K. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- Jerome I. Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- Jerome I. Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
- Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).