

**IDH3931 – Neurotheology
Spring 2017**

Section Number: 046H
Credits: 3
Meeting Time: W 10-E1
Meeting Location: 239 Little

INSTRUCTOR:

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Office: L1-116 McKnight Brain Institute (MBI)
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Course Overview:

Are religious and spiritual experiences brain-based? If they are, what are the implications for understanding brain circuitry? If they are not, what are the implications for our understanding of who we are? Our course - Neurotheology - will investigate the neural correlates of religious and spiritual experiences and the implications of such relationships. Through our discussions and readings, we hope to develop a more complete understanding about our identity, what it means to be fully human, and our relationship to that which is sacred.

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- 1) Discuss what spirituality means and what are the qualities of a spiritual person.
- 2) Consider the varieties of spiritual/religious experiences that contribute to being “fully human”.
- 3) Describe the general brain localization of higher cortical functions.
- 4) Explore Near-Death Experiences (NDE), as one type of reported transcendent experience, and potential explanations of the NDE.
- 5) Consider whether the brain generates our mind/ consciousness. If not, what might be an alternative explanation?
- 6) Assess whether there is a genetic basis of our spirituality.
- 7) Discuss whether our brains are hardwired for spirituality – are there brain circuits or neurotransmitter systems that promote spiritual experiences?
- 8) Understand how and why psychedelics (entheogens) are used as sacraments and what brain mechanisms might be involved.
- 9) Describe why epilepsy is called a sacred disease and how this relates to the reported workings of the “God-machine”.
- 10) Describe compassion, a feature of all wisdom traditions, and discuss whether there is a biological basis. Are there animals which display compassionate behaviors?
- 11) Discuss the varieties of meditation techniques and explore what we know about the associated physiological mechanisms.
- 12) Understand how we can image brain functions associated with meditation or prayer.
- 13) Consider the role of the mind in the grand scheme of life. What are the positive, and negative, qualities of the mind? Are there techniques to help us quiet the mind?
- 14) Discuss the “journey beyond yourself”, its significance, and how this might be accomplished.
- 15) Discuss different “emotional styles” and their brain basis. Describe mechanisms of plasticity of the central nervous system, in particular as it relates to emotional styles.
- 16) Describe the scientific study of meditation – both objective and subjective studies.
- 17) Comprehend the expansion of our personal belief systems to incorporate a holistic view of the entire human being.

Requirements, Assessment, and Grades:

I - Attendance, Participation, and Internet Research Project: 20%;

- 1) You are expected to complete assigned readings prior to each class.
- 2) Attendance will be taken each class. You may miss 1 class or 2 halves; more than that you will lose points. Please plan your Wednesday evenings accordingly.
- 3) The course is a semester-long, student-centered conversation, facilitated by the Course Director, about the “gray” areas of life. We hope to facilitate a “collective self-discovery” during this course through our group discussions. As such, participation from each student is critical.
- 4) Starting in the fourth week and continuing for the remainder of the course, we will have three five-minute student presentations based on internet research. Each student will present a unique website and discuss a new aspect of a topic that has been covered in class.

II - There will be 5 4-page papers, each worth 16% (80% total). The papers are based on an integration of your reflections, understanding, and insights of our readings and classroom discussions.

UF Class Attendance Policies:

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>

Students with Disabilities:

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

UF Grading Policies:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>.

Course Evaluation:

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/evals/Default.aspx>

Class Culture:

- 1) This is a paperless course. All discussion materials, other than the books, will be sent to the students as a PDF. The reflection papers will be emailed to the Course Director as a WORD document (.doc or .docx only).
- 2) Out of respect for each student’s contributions to our discussions, we will give everyone our full attention. It is hoped that the students will learn as much (or more!) from each other as they do from the Course Director.
- 3) Please do not check your cell phones, email, or websites during class time. There will be a break in the middle of each class session.
- 4) Out of respect for the Course Director, please arrive to class on time.
- 5) All points of view are respected. We hope that we all come to class with an open mind and leave with an open heart.

Required Reading List:

Mario Beauregard – The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Case for the Existence of the Soul

Marc Ian Barasch – The Compassionate Life: Walking the Path of Kindness (formerly called: Field Notes on the Compassionate Life)

Michael Singer - Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself

Richard J. Davidson and Sharon Begley – The Emotional Life of your Brain

In addition, selected readings (PDFs) will be emailed for some of the classes.

Course Schedule:

Jan 4 – Introduction to the class, to the faculty; to the students; to the overall issues

Jan 11 – WIE article – “Is God All in Your Head?”

Jan 18 – “Unready to Wear”; Readings on Near-death experiences (NDEs)

Paper 1 – Topic TBA

Due via email by 4PM on Wed, Jan 25

Jan 25 – The Spiritual Brain

Feb 1 – The Spiritual Brain

Feb 8 – The Spiritual Brain

Paper 2 – Topic TBA

Due via email by 4PM on Wed, Feb 15

Feb 15 – The Compassionate Life

Feb 22 – The Compassionate Life

Mar 1 – The Compassionate Life

Mar 8 – **Spring Break**

Paper 3 – Topic TBA

Due via email by 4PM on Wed, Mar 15

Mar 15 – Untethered Soul

Mar 22 – Untethered Soul

Mar 29 – Untethered Soul

Paper 4 – Topic TBA

Due via email by 4PM on Wed, Apr 8

Apr 5 – The Emotional Life of the Brain; Science of Meditation

Apr 12 – The Emotional Life of the Brain

Apr 19 - The Emotional Life of the Brain

Paper 5 – Topic TBA

Due via email by 4PM on Wed, April 29