

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier
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Laurier hosts symposium on psychology of religion and prejudice

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WATERLOO – A leading expert on authoritarian personalities will deliver the keynote address at a conference on the psychology of religion and prejudice, entitled The Psychology of Religion, Atheism and Prejudice.

Bob Altemeyer will deliver a lecture entitled The Psychology of Atheism at 2:30 p.m. on October 15 in room N1001 of the science building at Wilfrid Laurier University. Altemeyer will review the psychological underpinnings of a small but increasingly powerful North American group – active atheists.

“Atheists in North America are small in number but carry a big stick,” says Altemeyer. “Using the courts, active atheists have eliminated prayer in public schools in the United States and most of Canada. They are currently attempting to have references to God stricken from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance and have the phrase ‘In God We Trust’ removed from American currency.”

His talk will attempt to answer such questions as: Who are the active atheists? What led them to atheism? How do they compare with very religious people when it comes to dogmatism, zealotry and religious prejudice? He will present data from a Canadian sample of middle-aged adults that included atheists, agnostics, inactive believers and regular church goers. He will also report the results of a study of active American atheists that he conducted with Bruce Hunsberger, a Laurier professor who passed away last October.

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A professor of psychology at the University of Manitoba, Altemeyer was a graduate advisor to Hunsberger. The two conducted joint research projects on the psychology of religion and prejudice, and co-authored a book entitled *Amazing Conversions: Why Some Turn to Faith and Others Abandon Religion*. Altemeyer is a recipient of the American Association for the Advancement of Science Prize for Behavioral Science Research.

The symposium will include morning presentations from three other academics who shared Hunsberger's areas of interest, two of whom (Scott Veenvliet and Lynne Jackson) are his former students. Scott Veenvliet, of the University of Western Ontario, will discuss *The Role of Attitude Function in the Relationship Between Conservative Religiosity and Negative Attitudes Toward Gay Marriage*. Chris Burris, from St. Jerome's University, will present *Having a Blessed Day: The Social Identity Function of Religious Language*. Lynne Jackson, of King's University College at the University of Western Ontario, will explain *Religion as a Meaning System: Implications for Intergroup Relations*.

Mike Pratt, chair of Laurier's psychology department, hopes to establish this symposium as an annual, memorial lecture celebrating Hunsberger's research and work in the social psychology of religion and prejudice. Hunsberger passed away last October after a long battle with leukemia.

A member of the psychology department since 1974, Hunsberger served as chair on two occasions. He was a widely respected scholar of the psychology of religion and received a prestigious award from the American Psychological Association for his empirical research on the socialization of religion in adolescence and young adulthood. Hunsberger's other research interests included the psychology of prejudice and discrimination and the transition to adulthood and university.