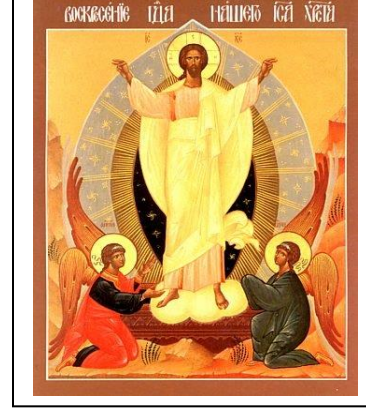
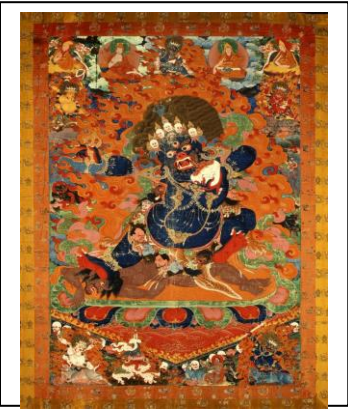




RE 230-001: DEATH AND IMMORTALITY

FALL 2009

Prof. Olga Solovieva
Tu Th 12:40-2:00 p.m., Ladd 206

Office hours: Tu 3-4 p.m., Th 2:00-3:00 p.m. and by appt
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Of all the world's wonders, which is the most wonderful? That no man, though he sees others dying all around him, believes that he himself will die (Mahabharata)

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom (Psalm 90:12)

*Do for this world as if you were to live a thousand years and for the next, if you were to die tomorrow
Die before dying
(The Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad)*

Course Description

This course will be a cross-cultural exploration of the religious interpretations of death and its beyond. Throughout the semester, we will take a look at several different perspectives on death and afterlife as articulated in doctrines, texts and ritual practices of selected religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Ancient Greek religion, Christianity, indigenous traditions of Mesoamerica, etc. In the course of this study we will see how these different perspectives are integrally related to the particular religious traditions' cosmologies, theological reflections, and their concepts of human nature and ethics.

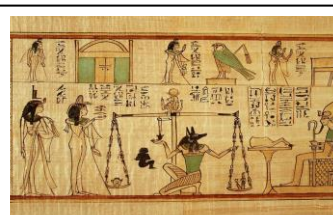
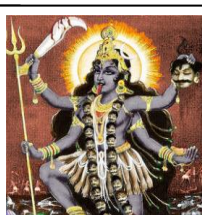
Objectives

Students who successfully complete this course will a) come to an understanding of how several major religious traditions view death and afterlife; b) acquire some basic contextual knowledge of the history, ideas and practices of these religious traditions; c) learn to approach other religions and cultures from a sympathetic and critical-analytical perspective; d) develop their ability to read and interpret primary sources and scholarly discussions, and to express their findings in both written and oral form.

Required Texts

Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions
Thich Nhat Hanh, No Death, No Fear.
Euripides, Alcestis (in Euripides I, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore)

Books are available for purchase at the Skidmore Bookstore; they are also placed on a 3-hour reserve at the library. Other readings will be available on-line and as a Course Reader (to get a copy please stop by Philosophy and Religion main office in Ladd Hall). In addition, there will be occasional handouts distributed in class; please note that it is your responsibility to obtain and keep the copies of all handouts throughout the semester.



Requirements

Class Participation	10 points
In-class tests	50 points
Online Reading Journal	25 points
Research project	15 points

Grading Scale

This course will be graded on the following scale (point values approximate, subject to adjustment at the instructor's discretion):

100-95 = A	75-72 = C
94-91 = A-	71-69 = C-
90-87 = B+	68-66 = D+
86-82 = B	65-62 = D
81-80 = B-	61-59 = D-
79-76 = C+	below = F

A: Active and in-depth involvement with the material as demonstrated in class discussions and written and oral assignments; outstanding quality of writing and ability to analyze and appreciate difficult concepts and ideas.

B: Above-average performance on written assignments and tests; demonstrates consistent and thoughtful engagement with the material.

C: Adequate performance on tests; consistent attendance and on-time completion of reading log entries.

Class participation

- (a) Your participation is vital to the success of our course, so please take this requirement seriously! Certain times in class each week will be reserved for discussion, usually centering around the close reading of the assigned texts and your responses to them. Please bring your copies of the assigned readings to class and be prepared to talk about them.
- (b) Your participation is assessed based on your presence and preparation, so that an active and well-prepared participation in class discussions will raise your participation grade (5 points/C+ by default), while no-shows or evident negligence in reading will lower it.
- (c) Attendance is required and will be recorded beginning the second week of the semester. Each student is allowed 2 unexcused absences; please plan your time accordingly. Each additional absence will lower your participation grade by 1 point, unless it is a documented emergency (acceptable documents include: a note from your doctor or health services for medical emergencies; a letter from appropriate departments, offices or faculty for athletic and academic events; a note from the Dean of Students office and/or parents in case of family emergencies).
- (d) Please note that consistent failure to attend classes (over 6 missed classes) will result in a failing grade and/or removal from the course, at instructor's discretion (and I'm deadly serious about it!)

In-Class Tests

- (a) Two in-class tests will be administered in the course of the semester, on the dates specified in the Schedule of Readings.
- (b) Tests are non-cumulative; they will be designed to cover material presented both in readings and in class (lectures, discussions and videos), so it is to your advantage to familiarize

yourself with all the material covered in appropriate section of the course. Study guides will be posted on-line at least 72 hours before the tests; when time allows, there will be brief in-class review sessions conducted before each test, or else we will do it on-line, using Blackboard discussion feature. You are encouraged to prepare for the tests by reviewing the terms and concepts identified in these guides, and by reflecting on the questions presented. Please note that no make-up tests will be given except for legitimate reasons and with prior arrangement.

On-line Reading Journal

- (a) You must submit Reading Journal entries via Blackboard system on the dates noted on the syllabus. There are 13 possible reading log entries; you must do 10 of them; otherwise, you will lose credit for the entire assignment (this means that if you complete only 9 of the entries, you will get no credit for this assignment). Journal entries must be 1-2 pages in length (typed, double-spaced, standard font).
- (b) Each Reading Journal entry must deal with the topics and readings specified in the appropriate sections of the Schedule of Readings. These writing assignments are designed to help you identify the most important themes and key concepts introduced in the readings, and to engage with specific issues and subjects. Some questions you might address are: What are the central concepts introduced in the reading? What are some of the important issues raised by the author(s)? What questions do you have about the reading? How does the material presented in the reading relate to your own experience, and/or to other readings and research you might have done in a related area?
- (c) Completed entries will be graded on the following basis: 1 = does not meet expectations; 2 = meets expectations. You will receive the full credit (25 points) for the Reading Journal assignment as long as you get "2" or above on 9 out of 10 entries; if your completed Reading Journal contains more than 1 unsatisfactory entry, the overall grade for this assignment will be reduced by 5 points for each such entry. Those students who consistently submit outstanding entries will be awarded extra points on this assignment, at the instructor's discretion.
- (d) Journal entries must be submitted on the due-dates; no late entries will be accepted for any reason other than documented medical or other emergency. Please organize your time accordingly.
- (e) All entries must be submitted via Blackboard system; paper or e-mail submissions will not be accepted except by prior arrangement for special circumstances, and are submitted at the student's risk for all delivery failures.

Independent Research Project

- (a) The independent project is worth 15 points. With the instructor's prior approval, you will select and research a topic relevant to the broadly defined area of our course. Possible topics for the project may focus on:
 - Understanding of death and afterlife in a particular religious tradition that we have not covered or just touched upon in passing in this course (ex: African and aboriginal religions; Confucianism; ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia; etc.)
 - Death-related ritual practices in specific religious traditions and cultural contexts. For example, you can explore and compare the funerary rites and customs within the same religious tradition, as developed within different historical and cultural contexts (e.g., funerary practices in early and medieval Christianity and/or contemporary Christianity; Buddhist death rituals in South-Eastern Asia as compared to Tibetan Buddhism or Buddhist groups in North America, etc.), or you can do a research on death rituals characteristic of specific cultures or social milieus (ex: death rites in Native American cultures; funerary customs in contemporary U.S.; etc.)

- Perspectives on religious views of death and afterlife from within particular disciplinary approaches (e.g., psychological approaches to death; sociological significance of death-related beliefs and ritual practices; etc.)
- Understanding and images of death and afterlife in art, literature, music, film and other cultural media, ancient and contemporary.

Obviously, these are just a few suggestions; you are welcome to search for a topic that would be of special interest to you personally, and/or relevant to your specific major and field of study.

- (b) Results of your research will be presented in a 6-7 page final paper, due Tue., Dec. 15th (by 5 p.m.)
- (c) You will also be asked to prepare a 5-10 minute oral presentation, to report on your findings to the rest of the class, during one of the class sessions reserved for these purposes (see the Schedule of Readings).
- (c) Detailed guidelines for the independent project will be available on Blackboard.

Notes and Policies:

Disability:

Skidmore College is committed to providing students with disabilities full and meaningful access to all college programs and activities and strives to offer individualized accommodations necessary for students to realize an equal opportunity to succeed. To arrange for special accommodations, you will need to contact the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities in Student Academic Services (Starbucks Center, tel. 518.580.8150, http://cms.skidmore.edu/academic_services/accessibility/index.cfm). You should also talk to the instructor as early in the semester as possible.

Academic Integrity:

I will expect all students enrolled in this course to adhere to standards of academic integrity outlined in Skidmore's Honor Code (http://cms.skidmore.edu/student_handbook/honor-code.cfm) and avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty (such as plagiarism) will be referred to the Dean of Studies and may incur such penalties as a failing grade on a part or the whole of course requirements or removal from the course, at instructor's discretion.

Course Outline and Schedule of Readings*

*Any changes will be announced in class, via e-mail and/or on Blackboard

All readings must be completed prior to the class period for which they are assigned; please don't forget to bring your books and/or course reader to class. Reading designations: "t" = read from/to the first full paragraph at the top of the page; "m" = the middle of the page; "b" = the last full paragraph at the bottom of page; no designation at all means you should read the entire page

I. Introduction to the Course and the Studies of Religion and Death: Sep 10-17

Reading: Obayashi, *Death and Afterlife*, ix-xii(b) (hereafter "DA")

Lewis, "Beyond the Crematorium" (handout)

Lecture Notes on the "patterns of transcendence" (Blackboard)

Berger, "Death and Afterlife: New Approaches to an Old Question" (CR)

Lorimer, "The Near-Death Experience: A Glimpse of Heaven and Hell?" (CR)

Ellison, "Human Survival of Death: Evidence and Prospects" (CR)

Video: *What Dreams May Come*

Reading Journal due Sep 17

II. Death and Afterlife in Hinduism

A. Death and Afterlife in Hindu Scriptures and Mythology: Sep 22-24

Reading: DA, 143-54

Zimmer, "The Fabric of Life" (CR)

Bhagavad-Gita, selections (CR)

Reading Journal due Sep 22

B. Responses to Mortality in Hindu Folk Traditions and Ritual: Sep 29

Reading: Ann G. Gold, *Fruitful Journeys*, selections (CR)

Reading Journal due Sep 29

III. Buddhist Perspectives on Death and Beyond

A. Theravada and Zen Buddhism: Oct 1-6

Reading: DA, 157-66

Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear* (read at least to p. 55 by Oct 1, finish by Oct 6)

Reading Journal due Oct 1

B. The Tibetan Tantric View of Death and Transcendence: Oct 8-13

Reading: DA, 169-80 (read up to 173b for Oct 8)

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, selections (CR) (read by Oct 13)

Video: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

Reading Journal due Oct 13

TEST # 1: Oct 15

IV. Death in Ancient Greek and Near Eastern Religions

A. Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia: Oct 20

Reading: DA, 19-30, 35-46

Reading Journal due Oct 20

B. Death in Greek Myth, Ritual and Literary and Philosophical Traditions: Oct 22-27

Reading: DA, 49-63

Euripides, *Alcestis*

Plato, *Dialogues*, selections (CR)

Reading Journal due Oct 22

V. Death, Resurrection and Eternal Life in Christianity

A. New Testament and Early Theological Perspectives: Oct 29

Reading: DA, 83-95, 109-114(m)

The Gospel of Luke 23-24 (CR)

Origen of Alexandria, selections (CR)

The Book of Revelation 4-22 (glance through—it's not that long, and it's fun!
use any edition of the New Testament you have available, or read on-line

http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book_id=73&chapter=4&version=8)

Reading Journal due Oct 29

B. Martyrs: "The Special Dead": Nov 3

Reading: *Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicity* (CR)

Reading Journal due Nov 3

C. Heaven, Hell and Salvation: Later Developments: Nov 5

Reading: DA, 114(m)-122

Dante, *The Divine Comedy* ("Inferno," Canto IV, V, VI; "Purgatorio," Canto X, XI, XII, "Paradiso," Canto XXXII, XXXIII; use any edition/ translation that you have available, or read the assigned selections on-line at

http://www.divinecomedy.org/divine_comedy.html (select "Mandelbaum" under "Edition")

Reading Journal due: Nov 5

[Please note: no class Nov 10, I will be at the American Academy of Religion meeting]

INDEPENDENT PROJECT PROPOSALS DUE: Nov 12

VI. The Muslim Understanding of Death and Its Transcendence: Nov 12

Reading: DA, 125-38

Selected suras from the Qur'an (CR)

Reading Journal due Nov 12

VII. Death and Regeneration in Mesoamerican Cosmovision: Nov 17-19

Reading: Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, selections (CR)

Popol Vuh, selections (read by Nov 19) (CR)

Video: *Popol Vuh*

Reading Journal due Nov 17

TEST # 2: Nov 24

VII. Independent Project Presentations: Dec 1-10

FINAL PAPER is due Tue., Dec. 15 by 5 p.m. (please submit via Blackboard or turn in in person at Ladd 215)