

REL 230: Religious Perspectives on Death and Dying

Instructor: W. Ezekiel Goggin

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Class Meetings: TANG SOMR W/F 10:10-11:30

Office hours: Thurs 1:30-4:30

Course Description

“Death,” 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “is not an event in life.” Despite this paradox (or perhaps because of it), human beings have spent centuries meditating on death and how the proper relation to one’s own mortality might facilitate a more meaningful existence. In this course, we will approach these issues as a vector of comparison in the study of religions. What, for instance, can the approaches to death within a tradition tell us about how they value life and the human body? How does a community’s approach to mortality serve to shape and renew their sense of identity, history, and fate? Are there better and worse ways to die? Can reflecting on death and its relation to life empower us to live better lives?

Objectives

In pursuit of these and other themes, students will achieve six major objectives:

1. Develop an appreciation of some basic metaphysical and ethical problems associated with our understanding (or lack thereof) of human mortality, and gain familiarity with a range of religious responses to these problems
2. Reflect on how the memorialization and care of the dead play a role in the formation of community, identity, and cultural memory
3. Examine the way religious narratives, representations, and rituals which concern themselves with mortality (e.g., accounts of the afterlife, the moral significance of death, mourning and mortuary practices) can shed light on religious perspectives on biological and social life (e.g., nature, the body, personal relationships)
4. Explore contemporary challenges in our approaches to death and dying (e.g., the Anthropocene, transhumanism)
5. Complete a research project on some form of “alternative” mourning, mortuary, and/or burial practice, including a comparison of these practices with a number of the religious perspectives we study in the course

Required Texts:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (Greenwood Press, 1992)

From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death, Caitlyn Doughty

Talking to the Dead, LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant (Duke University Press, 2014)

Epic of Gilgamesh, ed. and trans. by NK Sandars (Penguin Classics, 1972)

Sophocles: The Oedipus Cycle, trans. by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977)

Internet Afterlife: Virtual Salvation in the 21st Century, Kevin O’Neill (Praeger, 2016)

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene, Roy Scranton (City Lights, 2015)

NB: Other required texts will be distributed electronically and as handouts.

Assignments

3 reflection papers (150 points total)

Students will submit 3 reflection papers (500-1000 words) throughout the course of the term. Reflection papers should take up an issue or question raised by a reading or readings from the course. Students are advised to think of these reflections as preliminary explorations into themes that they would like to address in their term paper. The professor will provide detailed feedback on these reflections to help students refine their thinking and research topic.

Term paper (200 points)

Each student will complete a term paper based on independent research of an “alternative” funerary practices (i.e., mortuary, mourning, and commemoration). A successful paper will be a.) grammatically correct, b.) analytically sophisticated, b.) thorough and topical; additionally, successful papers will c.) compare the subject matter to materials covered in the course and d.) meet course standards for research. Requirements for the term paper will be enumerated and explained in more detail on the assignment handout and scoring rubric, and standards for research and citations will be explained during a meeting with the staff of Scribner Library (9/27). Research topics will be chosen by each student, but must be approved by the professor no later than the end of Week 8 (see “Course Schedule” below). This can be done by way of a formal prospectus (a short 500-1000 word description of the research project’s subject and aims) or through a brief, informal conversation or email with the professor.

Participation (150 points)

- 1.) Attendance: **All students are required to attend every class meeting**, and students who incur unexcused absences will receive zero participation points for the day, unless extenuating circumstances beyond the student’s control dictate otherwise.
- 2.) Punctuality: **Tardiness will be recorded by the instructor and habitual tardiness will result in a professor-student conference to understand the root of the problem.** Depending on the circumstances, this may result in a loss of points.
- 3.) Preparation: **Students are expected to prepare for each class by completing all the assignments for that day and bringing the relevant readings/materials with them to class meetings.** If you are not prepared for class you are not only doing yourself a disservice, but also your peers –lack of preparation precludes effective participation in class, thus diminishing our capacity to learn. We are all in this together!
- 4.) Participation: **Students should engage the material and join in class discussions of the reading assignments.** Students are expected to be respectful, charitable, and rigorous in their exposition of argument and in their reception of the arguments made by their peers. **Failure to respectfully and thoughtfully engage in discussion will result in a loss of participation points.** Cell phones and computers must be silenced or turned off and stowed away prior to class, and should remain so during the entirety of class time. Refrain from any texting, snapchatting, tweeting, and other forms of digitally broadcasting/consuming information during class time, please.

Late paper policy:

I am aware that this is not your only course, that you have commitments and lives outside the classroom, and that unforeseen events can throw a wrench in even one's best laid plans. With that in mind, every paper deadline has a 24-hour "grace" period after during which you may turn in your paper with no penalty. After that, I will deduct 1/3 of a grade for each day that paper is not turned in. For instance, a B+ would become a B, a B- would become a C+, etc., for each 24 hour interval before the paper is turned in beyond the grace period.

Grading Policy

Grades for the course will follow the point scale and breakdown below:

Point Scale

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| 500-491 = +A | 409-400 = +C |
| 490-465 = A | 399-350 = C |
| 464-455 = -A | 349-330 = -C |
| 454-445 = +B | 329-300 = D |
| 444-420 = B | 299 & below = F |
| 419-410 = -B | |

NB: Grades are an assessment of the students' efforts and abilities. Only exceptionally sophisticated work will receive an 'A,' Good work will receive a 'B.' Satisfactory work warrants a 'C'.

Unsatisfactory work will receive a 'D.' Work which does not meet the basic course requirements will receive an 'F.' I have clearly laid out the points scale so that you may easily keep track of your progress through the course. While I stand by the marks I assign, you are welcome to discuss any grade with me (e.g., why you received it, what you could have done differently), though be please be advised that chances are slim that your mark will change, unless I have made a glaring error in assessment (in which case please bring it to my attention!).

In addition to being informative, this course is intended to be challenging. Students are encouraged to approach the instructor with any questions, problems, difficulties that they may face with respect to course materials. I promise to make myself available to discuss any issues you may have and to help you get the most you can from the course!

Plagiarism

No plagiarism of any kind is acceptable in this class (or any other, for that matter). **Any occurrence of plagiarism will result in an automatic grade of zero for the assignment and immediate referral to the University administration, who may recommend disciplinary action.** Students should consult the Academic Integrity Handbook for a full explanation of College expectations and policy.

https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/AcademicIntegrityHandbook_Web.pdf

Any material, from any source, must be cited according to standard citation procedures. This includes books, magazines, periodicals, newspapers, television, internet, lectures and even personal conversations. *Papers may be submitted to Turnitin.com.* If you are unsure of how to properly cite materials, check out: <https://www.library.ucsb.edu/help/citing-sources>

Writing Center and Academic Support

The development of clear, communicative, and effective writing skills is essential to a liberal arts education. Students who may be struggling with any phase of the writing process (drafting, research, editing, etc.) are strongly encouraged to avail themselves of the academic support resources provided by the college's Writing Center. The Writing Center also offers specialized support for English language learners and academic coaching and counseling services to help students develop skills necessary for academic success (e.g., time-management, organization skills, etc.). Consultations are available by appointment through the Writing Center's website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/writingcenter/>

Accessibility

Skidmore is committed to an inclusive, equitable, and accessible learning community. Students who require special accommodations should contact Meg Hegener (mhegener@skidmore.edu) at the Office of Student Access Services at the beginning of the term in order to facilitate their full participation in course activities and full access to course materials.

Further information can be found at the Office of Student Access Services' website:

<https://www.skidmore.edu/accessibility/>

Title IX Statement

Skidmore's Title IX statement as approved by the Student Government Association and endorsed by the Curriculum Committee is as follows: "Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available."

Course Schedule

Week 1

9/4: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Introduction to Death and the Afterlife

9/6: The Paradox of Death and its Existential Stakes

Required Reading:

“Death and its Concept” – Jeff Mason

(<https://www.philosophersmag.com/opinion/17-death-and-its-concept>)

“Letter to Meneceus” –Epicurus

(<https://users.manchester.edu/Facstaff/SSNaragon/Online/texts/316/Epicurus,%20LetterMenoceus.pdf>)

“At a Graveside” –Søren Kierkegaard (Selections, PDF)

Week 2

9/11: History at the Limits of the Historical: Changing Attitudes Toward Death

Required Reading:

Western Attitudes Toward Death –Phillipe Ariès

Chapter 1 “Tamed Death”

Chapter 2 “Thy Death”

https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Ari%C3%A9s_Philippe_Western_Attitudes_Toward_Death_1976.pdf

9/13:

Assignment Due:

Reflection Paper 1

Required Reading:

Western Attitudes Toward Death –Phillipe Ariès

Chapter 3 “Thy Death”

Chapter 4 “Forbidden Death”

https://monoskop.org/images/0/0e/Ari%C3%A9s_Philippe_Western_Attitudes_Toward_Death_1976.pdf

“The Challenges of Defining Death” *The Economist*, 2018

<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/05/03/the-challenges-of-defining-death>

Week 3

9/18: Death and Eternal Life in Ancient Mesopotamia

Required Reading:

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Suggested Reading:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 2 “The Fate of Mankind: Death and Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamia”

9/20: Mortality and Afterlives in Greek Literature

Required Reading:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 4 “Death and Afterlife in Greek Tragedy and Plato”

Antigone –Sophocles, transl. by Fitts and Fitzgerald

Week 4

9/25: The Social and Legal Significance of Death in Ancient Greece

Required Reading:

Antigone –Sophocles, trans. by Fitts and Fitzgerald

“But a Lump of Earth? The Legal Status of the Corpse” –Ngairé Naffine in *Courting Death: The Legal Constitution of Mortality* ed. Desmond Manderson (PDF)

9/27: Introduction to Library Resources and Research Methods (Johanna MacKay, Scribner Library)

Week 5

10/2: Divine Justice Deferred: Exile, Martyrdom, and the Changing Face of Death in Ancient Israel

Required Reading:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 5 “From Witchcraft to Justice: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament”

Ecclesiastes, 9 (NIV)

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+9&version=NIV>)

Daniel, 1, 3, 10-12 (NIV)

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Daniel+1&version=NIV>)

10/4: Resurrection, and the World to Come: Death and Post-Biblical Eschatology

Required Reading:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 7 “Bound Up in the Bond of Life: Death and Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition”

Week 6

10/9: No class, Yom Kippur

10/11: Riffing on Eschatological Judaism: Resurrection and the Second Coming

Required Readings:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 6 “Death and Afterlife in The New Testament”

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 8 “Death and Eternal Life in Christianity”

Week 7

10/16: *Mors Mortis*: The Death of Death in Paul’s Theology

Required Readings:

Romans (Chapter 1-16)

(https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=Romans&qv_version=NIV)

I Corinthians (Chapter 1-16)

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians+16&version=NIV>)

10/18: Death, Dreaming, and Resurrection in Islam

Required Readings:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 9 “Your Sight Today is Piercing: The Muslim Understanding of Death and Afterlife”

Selected Poems of Jelal al-Din Rumi (PDF)

In-Class Video:

Janazah in Kentwood Michigan (2 minutes)

Week 8

(Research Paper Topic Proposal Due)

10/23: The Greatest Teacher: Desire and Death in Buddhist Thought and Ritual

Required Readings:

Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions –Hiroshi Obayashi

Chapter 11: “Death as Threat, Death as Achievement: Buddhist Perspectives with Particular Reference to the Theravada Tradition”

Chapter 12: “The Tibetan Tantric View of Death and Afterlife”

In-Class Video: *Vultures of Tibet* (20 min)

10/25 **Study Day, No Class**

Week 9

10/30: **Discussion Day**
Assignment Due:
Reflection Paper 2

11/1: Talking to the Dead
Required Readings:

Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women –LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant
Introduction
Chapter 1

Week 10

11/6:

Required Readings:

Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women –LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant
Chapters 2-3

11/8:

Required Readings:

Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory Among Gullah/Geechee Women –LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant
Chapters 4-5

Week 11

11/13: ...to Find The Good Death

Required Readings:

From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death, Caitlyn Doughty
Introduction
Indonesia

11/15:

Required Readings:

From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death, Caitlyn Doughty
Mexico

Week 12

11/20: Learning to Die as a Species

Required Readings:

Learning to Die in the Anthropocene –Roy Scranton
Introduction
Chapters 1, 4, 5, & Coda

11/22:

Assignment Due:

Reflection Paper 3

Required Readings:

Internet Afterlife: Virtual Salvation in the 21st Century –Kevin O’Neill
Chapters 1-3

Week 13

11/27: no class (thanksgiving break)

11/29: no class (thanksgiving break)

Week 14

12/4: Crossing-Over: Transhumanism and Mortality

Required Readings:

Internet Afterlife: Virtual Salvation in the 21st Century –Kevin O’Neill
Chapters 5-7

12/6:

Required Readings

Internet Afterlife: Virtual Salvation in the 21st Century –Kevin O’Neill
Chapter 10

Week 15

12/11: Course Review

12/12-15: Study Days

Finals Week

12/16:

Mandatory Paper Conference Sessions

9:00am-12:00pm (To be scheduled in advance)

*****12/16-12/19: Term Paper Due*****