

**DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE**  
**(Lower level undergraduate)**  
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**NOTE:** This is an outline of a much more resource-heavy course accessed on a Moodle site. This only touches the surface of the materials available to students enrolled in this course, and it does not contain full bibliographical and other information that is available to students on the site. The full syllabus includes all administrative and other details (e.g. location, office hours).

### **Course Description and Goals**

This course is an historical survey of beliefs and rituals relating to death and the possibility of an afterlife. We will use religious, philosophical, and literary texts as well as art and architecture to explore funeral and burial customs; ideas regarding the separation of the soul from the body; images of heaven and hell; visionary journeys to the other world; quests for immortality; beliefs in near-death experiences; and traditions of memorializing the dead. The focus here will be on traditionally religious and philosophical perspectives on death but we will also delve into death as encountered in popular culture, including art and literature.

What this course is NOT: This course is not about the stages of death, dying, and bereavement. It is not Bible study or therapy. It covers some cross-cultural material but focuses mainly on traditions that have more closely influenced mainstream American deathways.

The overall goals of this course are to encourage self-reflection alongside the ability to synthesize ideas and information; to explore some of the range of meanings and practices people have historically associated with death and dying; to develop the ability to think both empathically and critically about competing religious claims; and to demonstrate that the ways we understand death in America today have deep roots in western cultural assumptions and traditions.

The readings and assignments in this class are designed to improve and foster your discipline and focus in working through primary texts; your ability to make connections and comparisons across time and cultures; your facility in engaging in constructive, civil discourse; and your interest in learning more on your own.

## Assignments

**Writing:** You will be responsible for submitting and revising three of four possible short no more than 500 word papers. Details about these papers can be found under the "Papers" section at the top of the Moodle site.

**Discussions:** The size of this class could make meaningful in-class discussions difficult, but our undergraduate teaching assistants can guide discussion and allow for discussion of readings and issues. I welcome questions as I present the day's material, but we will also set aside time many days for small group discussions with TA leadership. You are expected to participate in a substantive way each of these discussions. "Substantive" participation means adding something more than "I agree with Fred" or "I thought the reading was stupid." Teaching assistants will report on your discussion participation directly to Dr. Robinson.

**Clickers:** We will be using clickers in this class for attendance and in-class feedback. Please be sure to have a clicker by the second day of class.

**Exams:** You will take three exams, each of which will be in the form of a mock student paper that you, in the role of teacher, are expected to critique and grade. The content will come from the required reading materials and from lectures. These exams including the one held during final exam time will NOT be cumulative; that is, they each focus on the previous third of the semester's work. The TA will hold review sessions prior to each exam if requested.

**Final Project:** We will form working groups during the first weeks of class. Groups will be expected to produce a board game for others to play at the end of the semester. There are many different types of games, and some of the most interesting are centered on some sort of knowledge base. You have the knowledge base before you in the readings for this course; in order to create a game, you will need to do some thinking about for instance concepts, people, social dynamics found in the texts and the potential form, content, goal s , etc., of the game. You will need to write out rules and be able to justify those rules. These games should be "old school" that is, tangible: not video games and targeted toward others in this class, who will play the game at the end of the semester. [More guidelines provided on the Moodle site.] Guidelines for Board Game Project

It is entirely up to each group whether you decide to emphasize breadth or depth of material covered in your game. That is, you can cover a broad range of information from across the course breadth or you can focus on a more defined set of principles depth . Effort and creativity will also be rewarded i.e., higher marks will be given to groups who start their game from scratch and come up with a novel idea . Presentation is also important: you will be judged on neatness, quality of design, and visual impact in addition to more substantive matters.

## Grade Calculation

Papers/Writing: 15% 5% each  
Discussion: 15%  
Clickers: 10%  
Exams: 45% 15% each  
Final Project: 15%

## Required Texts

Christopher Jay Johnson and Marsha McGee, *How Different Religions View Death and Afterlife*, second edition. Charles Press, 1999

Obayashi, Hiroshi, ed., *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*. Praeger, 1992 .

Spiegel, Maura and Richard Tristman, eds, *The Grim Reader: Writings on Death, Dying, and Living On*. Anchor, 1997

Dave Egleman, *Sum: Forty Tales From the Afterlives*. Vintage, 2009.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

### Topic 1: Introduction to the Course

Readings: Wed. :  
Donald Barthelme, "The School"  
Take Confidential Class Survey

### Topic 2: What Do We Know About Death and Dying?

Day 1 : TED Talk: Peter Saul, "Let's Talk about Dying"

Day 2 : Orientation to resources on Moodle

TED talk: Candy Chang, "Before I Die I Want to..."  
This American Life: "The Business of Death" Audio

### Topic 3: Death and Afterlife in Various Religious Traditions

Day 1 : General overview

Johnson and McGee, Questions and Answers, pp. 266-300

Day 2 : Buddhism

Johnson and McGee, pp. 47-63  
Obayashi, pp. 157-67

Day 3 : Hinduism

Johnson and McGee, pp. 132-144  
Obayashi, pp. 143-156

Day 4 : Chinese Religions  
Obayashi, pp. 181-92

#### **Topic 4: Death in the Ancient World**

Day 1 : Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt

Obayashi, pp. 19-33 and 35-48  
The Epic of Gilgamesh: Enkidu's Dream  
Egyptian "Negative Confession"  
Egyptian Land of Silence and Darkness

Day 2 : Zoroastrianism

Johnson and McGee, pp. 246-63  
Crossing the Cinvat Bridge

#### **First Writing Assignment DUE**

Day 3 : Ancient Greece and Rome

Obayashi, pp. 49-64  
Emily Vermeule, "A Very Active Dead" *The Grim Reader*  
"The Death of Socrates"  
Plato, *The Myth of Er* excerpt

#### **Topic 5: Death in Abrahamic Traditions**

Day 1 : Judaism

Obayashi, pp. 67-82 Old Testament and 97-108 note prayers of mourning  
Johnson and McGee, pp. 145-59  
Passages from the Hebrew Bible  
Passages from the Hebrew Bible: Ecclesiastes 8  
Philip Roth, "Patrimony," *The Grim Reader*

Day 2 : Early Christianity

Obayashi, pp. 83-96  
Salvation and Damnation linked to Deeds Matthew 7:13-23  
Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans

Day 3 : Christianities

Obayashi, pp. 109-23  
Johnson and McGee, pp. 31-46 and pp. 193-204  
Giovanni Boccaccio, "The Plague in Florence" *Grim Reader*  
Carlos M. N. Eire, "From Madrid to Purgatory" *Grim Reader*

Day 4 : Islam

Obayashi, pp. 125-39  
Johnson and McGee, pp. 132-144

## Second Writing Assignment DUE in Moodle

### FIRST EXAM

#### Topic 6: Death in the New World

Day 1 : Colonial and Victorian traditions

Rudolf Schafer, "Photographing the Dead" *Grim Reader*  
Burial Customs in American History

Day 2 : GAME WORKSHOP

Day 3 : Erwin Panofsky, "The Dangerous Dead" *Grim Reader*

#### Topic 7: After Death or Afterlife

Day 1 : Immortality

Radiolab: After Life  
Decoding the Mystery of Near-Death Experiences

TED talk: Mark Roth on Suspended Animation  
TED talk: Aubrey de Grey on Ending Aging

### Third Writing Assignment DUE

Day 1: Afterlives

Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"  
David Eagleman, *Sum*

Day 2: Afterlives

Dante's Inferno, Canto III  
Interview with the director of "Hell House" documentary

Day 4 : GAMES WORKSHOP

### SECOND EXAM

#### Topic 8: Contemporary Death

Day 1 : American Attitudes to Death and Dying

"Chronicle of Death We Can't Accept" New York Times op-ed  
Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking*  
Jessica Mitford, "The American Way of Death" *Grim Reader*  
Philippe Aries, "The Modern Cemetery" *Grim Reader*  
Paul Auster, "Portrait of an Invisible Man" *Grim Reader*

Day 2 : Visit from Charlotte Hospice and Palliative Care

Anne Munley, "The Hospice Alternative" *Grim Reader*  
Timothy Quill, "The Burdens of Aggressive Medical Treatment" *Grim Reader*  
Ronald Dworkin, "Life's Dominion" *Grim Reader*

Day 3 : Suicide

"Suicide is Neither Rational nor Irrational"

#### Topic 9: Death in the Arts

Read and listen to sources posted on Moodle

## **Topic 10: Death and Humor**

The Temperature of Hell: A Colloquium  
Monty Python, "The Dead Parot" *Grim Reader*  
Jack Handey, "My First Day in Hell"  
Day of the Dead or Halloween? From *The New Yorker*  
Funny obituary

### **THIRD EXAM**

**GAMES DUE and ready to be played IN FINAL EXAM PERIOD**

**Many extra guides and resources are available on Moodle.**