

**CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

COURSE OUTLINE 2001

The faculty union is in the midst of contract negotiations and there is a possibility of work interruption that may affect this course. Updates on this situation will be provided throughout the course.

RS 356: Contemporary Religious Thought: Death and Dying

Sierra Hall 384

Mondays, 7:00 to 9:45 p.m., Ticket No. 74521

Instructor: Amir Hussain

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Office Hours: Mondays, 9:00 to 11:30 a.m., and 6:15 to 6:45 p.m.

Course Description:

“The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion”.

—from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The Epic of Gilgamesh, perhaps the oldest surviving story in Western literature, speaks to us about certain understandings of death and mourning. This course is a cross-cultural look at death and dying in several different religious traditions. In the first half of the course, we will specifically examine the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Primal traditions. In the second half of the course, we will examine how these different traditions interact and affect the lives and deaths of women, children and men. This course will be of interest to students who find the death rituals of “others” profoundly awkward, as well as the student who can make no sense of her or his own received rituals of mourning.

Goals for students enrolled in this course are 1) to develop the ability to think both empathetically and critically about conflicting religious claims; 2) to gain knowledge of the history and culture of several major religious traditions; and 3) to understand how various religious traditions understand death and dying. This course satisfies the C-3 category of General Education requirements, and is classified as “writing intensive”.

Required Texts:

Colin Murray Parkes, Pittu Laungani and Bill Young, editors, *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1998[1997]).

David Field, Jenny Hockey and Neil Small, editors, *Death, Gender and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Both texts are on reserve in the Reserve Book Room of the Oviatt Library.

Lecture outlines will be available from the instructor throughout the course.

Evaluation:

It is important for each student to know at the outset that this course requires daily reading, written assignments and a final examination. Moreover, regular class attendance and participation are required. Clear, grammatically correct composition and standard spelling are expected on all written assignments.

Information on the written assignments and the research paper (which will be on a topic of the student's choice, in consultation with the instructor) will be provided separately during the course. The final examination will be cumulative, and based on both books. The exam will be graded on a) familiarity with the readings and b) independent questioning and reflection elicited by the lectures and classroom discussions. Methodical reading, conscientious writing of the assignments, and participation in class discussion will prepare students for the exam.

Active class participation will positively affect the student's final grade. More than one unexcused absence during the semester will negatively affect the student's grade. The University's grading policy, including the plus/minus system, will be used. The University's cheating policy will be followed in this course.

Grades will be determined as follows:

- 30% Written assignments (6 assignments, worth 5% each)
- 30% A reflective research paper of not more than 15 pages, due November 26
- 30% A final examination on December 10
- 10% Class participation

Journal Writing and Written Assignments:

For this course, you will be asked to keep a learning journal. This journal is intended to 1) improve your writing fluency; 2) increase your recall and comprehension of the readings; and 3) help you to articulate the ideas that you develop during the course.

How you keep this journal is up to you. Many students prefer a spiral-bound notebook, others a looseleaf binder that they can divide into sections, and others an electronic journal. However you keep it, this journal is meant to be a personal record of your learning in this course. **As such, you are the only person that will ever read your journal.**

At times in the course, I will ask you to take out your journals and write in them. In addition to these opportunities to write in your journal during class time, you should write in your journal after you have done the reading for a particular section. You should write about 5 to 7 pages per week in your journal. Some topics you might address are:

- 1) What were the important points of this reading (or lecture, or class discussion)?
- 2) Do you agree or disagree with those points? Why?
- 3) What questions do you have about the reading (or lecture, or class discussion)?
- 4) How does the reading (or lecture, or class discussion) relate to your own experience, or to other outside reading/research that you have done?
- 5) How does the material in the *Death, Gender and Ethnicity* book relate to the information that is presented in the *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures* book?

For each religious tradition that we study, I will ask you to select from your journal the piece that you consider to be the most important to you, revise it, and submit it as a formal written assignment. This assignment should not be simply a summary of your notes, but your own reflection on what you have learned. Each assignment should be between two and three typed, double-spaced pages. These assignments will be graded on such things as spelling, punctuation, grammar, word precision and style, in addition to content. Journal assignments will be collected at the beginning of the classes indicated below. If you do not hand in the assignment when it is due, you may turn it in at a later time. **Do not turn the assignments in to the Departmental Office. They will not accept assignments.** Turn in late assignments to me personally, in my office.

The penalty for late assignments will be one letter grade per day late (with the “day” ending at 6:00 p.m.). All assignments are due on Mondays, and can earn a maximum grade of A. If an assignment is turned in on Tuesday, it can earn a maximum grade of B+ . If it is turned in on Wednesday, it can earn a maximum grade of C+ , and if turned in on Thursday, a maximum grade of D+ . The first assignment will be graded, but the grade will not be recorded. This first assignment will give you feedback on my grading system (see grading standards below).

Schedule of Topics and Dates for Handing in Written Assignments:

- Aug. 27: Introductory meeting: What are we doing in this course and why? Methodological and other issues in this course. The roles of women, children and men. READING: Field, Introduction, Chapter 1; Parkes, Chapters 1 and 2.
- Sept. 3: No class due to Labour Day.
- Sept. 10: **First assignment due: What object, film, song, piece of music, art or writing helps you to understand death?** “There’s a bit of magic in everything / and then some loss to even things out”: Death and dying in America. READING: Field, Chapter 9.
- Sept. 17: “Our bodies are known to end, / but the embodied self is enduring, / indestructible, and immeasurable”: Hinduism. READING: Parkes, Chapter 4.
- Sept. 24: **Assignment on Hinduism due.** “Everything that arises also passes away, so strive for what has not arisen”: Buddhism. READING: Parkes, Chapter 5.
- Oct. 1: **Assignment on Buddhism due.** “Glorified and sanctified be G–d’s great name”: Judaism. READING: Parkes, Chapter 6.
- Oct. 8: **Assignment on Judaism due.** “He is not here; he is risen”: Christianity. READING: Parkes, Chapter 7; Field, Chapters 7 and 10.
- Oct. 15: **Assignment on Christianity due.** “Indeed it is We, We who give life and We who give death and unto Us is the returning”: Islam. READING: Parkes, Chapter 8; Field, Chapter 10.
- Oct. 22: **Assignment on Islam due.** “It is a good day to die”: Primal Traditions. READING: Parkes, Chapter 3.
- Oct. 29: **Assignment on Primal Traditions due.** “Son in irons and husband clay / Pray. Pray”: Women. READING: Field, Chapters 5 and 6.
- Nov. 5: “I shall not murder / The mankind of her going with a grave truth / Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath / With any further / Elegy of innocence and youth”: Children. READING: Field, Chapters 2 and 3; Parkes, Chapter 10.
- Nov. 12: “And I will honor my father with these words I write down / And as long as I remember him he’ll always be around”: Men. READING: Field, Chapter 4.

- Nov. 19: “In my dream the pipes were playin’ / In my dream I lost a friend”.
Intersections: Death and dying in multi-cultural, multi-religious America.
- Nov. 26: **Research Paper due.** Intersections continued. “I hope my going brings ‘em peace”: The death penalty in America.
- Dec. 3: Overview and review. READING: Field, Chapter 11; Parkes, Chapters 11, 12 and 13.
- Dec. 10: **Final Exam** (8:00 to 10:00 p.m.). Final exam is cumulative, based on everything covered in the course.

Responsibilities and Respect:

In this course, as in this life, we all have responsibilities toward each other. I have found that my most successful classes are those in which we respect each other, and understand our mutual responsibilities. With that in mind, I offer my understanding of these responsibilities with the following assumptions. We will discuss them in the first week of class, and I hope that you will consult them throughout the course. Tina Pippin has articulated the following “manifesto” with her students, and it is with her words that I would like to begin:

we have the responsibility for sharing in and contributing to the learning process; we have the right to voice an opinion that is based on a self-chosen value system; we have the right to dissent or differ from the professor and from others in class; we have the right to personal dignity not to be infringed by the conduct of the professor; we have the responsibility for evaluating and suggesting positive directions for the class at informal evaluations throughout the course and at the end of the formal evaluation in order to make the learning process more efficient and valuable; we have a right to a curriculum that is inclusive of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Assumptions I Make About You

1. You have made a conscious, informed choice to be a member of this class. This means that you have read the syllabus, and know the workload required. Be aware that on average, you should spend 3 hours on your own (reading, studying, making notes, working on assignments, etc.) for every hour that you are in class.
2. You will give the basic respect that is due to me and the other students in this class.
3. You will observe basic classroom decorum. In this class that means (but is not limited to!) the following: 1) You will turn off (or set to “silent” mode) watch alarms, pagers, and cellular

phones. 2) If you come in late, leave early, or need to leave during the class, you will do so with a minimum of disruption. To do this, open the door slowly, and close it slowly behind you. Don't make a lot of noise packing or unpacking your things. If you are coming in late, it's a good idea to take off your coat and open your book bag/knapsack in the hallway. 3) You may eat or drink in the class, providing that you don't disrupt the class (no "noisy" foods, and please clean up after yourself). 4) You won't start to put away your things until the class is over. 5) You will not interrupt when someone else is speaking.

4. You will do all of the required reading. This means that you will often have to read something more than once in order to fully understand it (remember the 3:1 ratio in the first assumption). You will attend class regularly and on time.

5. You will be responsible for all of the material that we cover in class. If you miss a class, you will contact another student to find out what you missed.

6. If you have a question, any question, you will ask it. You may ask during class, during my office hours, by telephone, or email.

7. You will turn in your assignments on time. If you are unsure of the requirements for an assignment, or when it is due, you will ask me.

8. You will improve your writing skills throughout this class. You will ask me for help, and also contact the Writing Skills Center at 677-2033 if you need to.

9. You will share your personality, knowledge, skills and special expertise with the rest of us throughout this semester.

Assumptions You Can Make About Me

1. I will give you the respect that I ask you to give me and the other members of this class.

2. I will begin and end the class on time. I will try to follow the schedule of lectures/lecture outlines as closely as possible.

3. I will be available to help you, but you must let me know that you need help. I will be available during my scheduled office hours (and can often schedule appointments at other times), and will return phone calls and emails promptly. Please contact me when you first have a problem. If you wait until it is too late, then it is too late!

4. If you do not turn in an assignment, I will not ask you for it. I will assume that you are content with a grade of zero for that assignment.

5. I will grade fairly and responsibly, returning your assignments to you in a timely manner. I do not grade on a curve, and will grade each assignment on its own merit. Through the “grading standards” outline, I will let you know how I grade. I am willing to explain my grade to you, but if you request a grade change, you must be willing to explain to me (using the same outline) why you deserve another grade.

6. I will follow and enforce the university policy on academic dishonesty, particularly with regards to cheating and plagiarism.

7. I will be receptive to and encourage constructive comments about my teaching (as an example, “you’re ugly and your mother dresses you funny” is NOT a constructive comment...).

8. I will do my best to help you, but I cannot learn the material for you.

Grading Standards:

I use the plus/minus system, so be aware that these ranges themselves contain a range of work.

“A” Work	Outstanding	Strong evidence of original thinking; good organization, capacity to analyse and synthesize; superior grasp of subject matter with sound critical evaluations; evidence of extensive knowledge base.
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For written assignments: 1) Responds fully to the assignment; 2) Expresses its purpose clearly and persuasively; 3) Is directed toward and meets the needs of a defined audience; 4) Begins and ends effectively; 5) Provides adequate supporting arguments, evidence, examples and details; 6) Is well-organized and unified; 7) Uses appropriate, direct and inclusive language; 8) Correctly acknowledges and documents sources; 9) Is free from errors in grammar, punctuation, word choice, spelling and format; and 10) Maintains a level of excellence throughout, and shows originality and creativity in realizing 1) through 7).

“B” Work Very Good Evidence of grasp of subject matter, some evidence of critical capacity and analytic ability; reasonable understanding of relevant issues; evidence of familiarity with the literature.

For written assignments: Realizes 1) through 9) well, but not fully and completely. Demonstrates overall ability but shows little apparent originality or creativity.

“C” Work Average Student who is profiting from his/her university experience; understanding of the subject matter; ability to develop solutions to simple problems in the material.

For written assignments: Realizes 1) through 9) adequately and demonstrates overall competence. Contains a few minor errors or flaws. A “C” assignment may show great creativity and originality, but those qualities don’t make up for poor or careless writing. A “C” assignment usually looks and reads like a penultimate draft.

“D” Work Barely Passing Some evidence of familiarity with subject matter and some evidence that critical and analytic skills have been developed.

For written assignments: Fails to realize elements of 1) through 9). Contains several serious errors or flaws, or many minor ones. A “D” assignment often looks and reads like a first draft.

“F” Work Failure Evidence of familiarity with only some subject matter; presence of some critical and analytic skills.

or Little evidence of even superficial understanding of subject matter; weakness in critical and analytic skills; with limited or irrelevant use of literature.

For written assignments: Fails to realize several elements of 1) through 9). Contains many serious errors or flaws, and many minor ones as well. An assignment that violates the university’s policy on academic dishonesty (e.g. cheating or plagiarism) will at minimum receive a failing grade.