

# DePaul University

*Department of Religious Studies*

## Syllabus

**REL257 Death and Its Beyond: Experience, Myths and Rituals**

**Winter 1998**

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**General Description: Religious attitudes and practices responding to the phenomena of death and dying studied cross-culturally, conceptually and ethically. Bulletin, 1997-1999.**

**In this course we will examine some of the many and various ways that the human community responds to the reality of physical death. Being a Religious Studies course, our exploration will be of the religious interpretations of death and its beyond: what does death mean? In the course of our study we will see that a people's understanding of death is integrally bound together with its concept of human nature, cosmology, the nature of ultimacy, time, human responsibility and other religious concepts.**

**We will focus on three great religious tendencies and on contemporary scientific thought.**

**General Objectives Students who successfully take this course will 1) come to an understanding of the origins of human questions surrounding death and afterlife and their place in a culture's general worldview. 2) come to a critical understanding of several religious tradition's understanding of death and afterlife. 3) come to an empathetic understanding of one individual's beliefs around death and afterlife and its relationship to the lived experience of that individual. 4) come to an empathetic, critical understanding of issues related to the human concern with the end of the universe and the end of time, 5) develop their ability to work in cooperation with other students and their ability to express their thoughts both verbally and in written form.**

**Texts Cohn-Sherbrok & Lewis, *Beyond Death: Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Life and Death*. St. Martin Press, 1995. Obayashi, *Death and Afterlife*. Praeger, 1992. Articles on reserve in the Richardson Library.**

### Calendar

**The class meets every Monday from 5:45 to 9:00pm from January 5 to March 09. The final examination session is March 16 at 5:45pm.**

### Requirements

**Each student will be expected to 1) attend each class session, (missing one session may lower the final grade one full letter, missing two sessions will lower the final grade one full letter, missing three sessions**

will result in lowering of grade two full grades, missing four sessions will result in failure. Arriving later than 6:00 pm or leaving before the end of class may be interpreted as missing class.) The class session on January 5, 1998, is a class session. To miss on the 5th is considered a miss, even in the case of late registration, 2) read the readings in preparation for class, 3) demonstrate to the instructor that the course objectives were attained and the degree to which the objectives were achieved.

## **Grading**

All grades will be given in relationship to the accomplishment of course objectives. In their written and oral work, students must demonstrate that they have accomplished the general course objectives and the specific objectives of each class session. Papers, essays, examinations, brief memos and class participation are among the ways that accomplishment of objectives can be demonstrated.

Written work is given priority in grading.

The meaning of grades is given on page 417 of the 1995-1997 DePaul University Bulletin. D -- Poor accomplishment of the course objectives. C -- Satisfactory accomplishment of the objectives. This means that all the major concepts of the course are understood and the work is all done: readings read and understood, satisfactory class participation, prompt and full class attendance. C students can parrot every idea the professor or the authors have presented. This is a fine grade. B -- Very Good accomplishment of the objectives. A student is judged very good when they can put the thought of two or three authors or speakers into critical juxtaposition with each other. The student can manipulate ideas, relate ideas from one section of the course to another and point out the source of ideas. B students manifest verbally and in writing a bit of creativity with the course content, but a creativity that accurately presents content. A -- Excellent accomplishment of the course objectives. Excellence means that students not only understand the ideas and can work creatively with the ideas, but that they can critically evaluate the reasonableness of ideas. This critical evaluation is manifest in writing as well as in oral work.

It is the responsibility of the student to demonstrate that they have achieved the course objectives. Students can make that demonstration in several ways:

1) with a partner, interview a person regarding their experience of death and the dead. Present a thorough, written analysis of that conversation (see Appendix B), 2) write eight, weekly, one or two page reflective essay in preparation for the class session and pertaining to the readings (a total of eight essays), 3) on two occasions present five, one-page "What I have learned" essays. The two due dates are Feb. 9 and Mar. 16. These essays ought to show that you have accomplished the general objectives of the course and the specific objectives of the individual class sessions. Those specific objectives will be given at each class session, 4) demonstrate their knowledge on a written, take home mid-term and final examination, 5) write an in-depth research paper (THIS POSSIBILITY OUGHT TO BE PURSUED BY RELIGIOUS STUDIES MAJORS) 6) prepare a photo or artistic exhibition and commentary that presents your understanding of a cultures experiences, myths and rituals around death. 7) interview an undertaker, clergy person or other person who regular performs funeral rituals. (see Appendix C) 8) present a project to the professor that will demonstrate your accomplishment of one or more of the objectives.

Passing grades ("C" and "D") may take any two of the above options that demonstrate the accomplishment of the objectives. Those who wish a "B" must demonstrate more complete accomplishment of the objectives. Doing three of the above options showing broad knowledge and insight will merit a "B."

**"A" means an exceptionally fine job in accomplishing course objectives. It will take an exceptionally fine job on four of the above projects or a very fine job on five of the above projects to earn an "A."**

**Grades in a course such as this inevitably entail an element of subjective evaluation on the part of the professor. Students who are not willing to trust the professionalism, objectivity, experience and fairness of the professor in the grading process should discuss their concerns with the professor.**

**Plagiarism This is the unforgivable sin of academia. Plagiarism will be dealt with in accord with the policy set out in the DePaul University Student Handbook, pp. 58ff.**

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## **Appendix A**

**Class 1, Jan. 05 -- Introduction; Experiences and Questions around Death and Afterlife; Related Issues: Cosmology and Anthropology, the Ultimate Meaning of Morality. Readings: None**

**Class 2, Jan. 12 -- What is Death?; The Inter-relatedness of Death, Thought and Actions at Death Readings: How We Die, Chs. 1 & 12 (On reserve) BD, Part II, pp. 117-206 DA&S, Ch. 1, 4 & 5 (On reserve)**

**Class 3, Jan. 19 --Death and Afterlife: A Smorgasbord of Ideas Guest -- Dr. James Foody, U of Chicago Medical School Readings: BD, Introduction, pp. 1-9 D&A, Chs. 1, 2 & 3**

**Class 4, Jan. 26 -- Aztec Experiences, Myths and Rituals Guest -- Dr. Kay Read Readings: TBA**

**Class 5, Feb. 02 -- The End of the World and the Death of Individuals: Christian Perspectives Readings: BD, Chs. 1-4 D&A, Chs. 6 & 8 DA&S, Ch. 26 (On reserve) LDWR, Ch. 2 (On reserve)**

**Class 6, Feb. 09 -- The End of the World (as we know it) and American Society; More on the Christians Readings: D&A, Chs. 5 & 7 DA&S, Ch. 12 (On reserve)**

**Class 7, Feb. 16 -- The End of the World and the Death of Individuals: Buddhist Perspectives Readings: BD, Ch. 6 D&A, Ch. 11 DA&S, Ch. 17 (On reserve)**

**Class 8, Feb. 23 -- More on the Buddhists Readings: D&A, Ch. 12 DA&S, Ch. 10 (On reserve)**

**Class 9, Mar. 02 -- More on the End of the World in Popular Media; Some Student Work(?) Readings: TBA**

**Class 10, Mar. 09 -- The Psychological Experience of the Living Readings: BD, Chs. 7 & 8 VD, Ch. 1 (on reserve) Appendix B**

**The paper is in three parts. Part I -- Find a person who claims an experience similar to those discussed in this course. This could be a person with a near-death experience, an out-of-body experience, an appearance of the dead to the person in either a dream or in the waking state, a person who has communicated with the dead through one of the regular media -- seance, cards, boards, etc., or one who has experienced the presence of the dead. Interview the person and then report the interview.**

**As you interview your person there are a number of questions you might want to ask. 1) Get all the fact about the claimed experience. Who? What? When? Where? What time? What emotional conditions? Is this the first such experience or is this part of one's life history? Any special preparations for the**

event? With whom did you talk about the event after it happened? Have you added details to the story after the event? 2) Facts about the persons background. Raised in a tradition? What did that tradition teach about such experiences? What did family teach about experiences? Does the person experiment with alcohol? Drugs? Sorcery? Divination? Witchcraft? The Occult? 3) What has happened after the event in relation to the event? Has the dead person made a repeat visit? Have you left your body again? How are you different?

**Part II -- Analyze the cosmology and anthropology of the person interviewed. In light of what they said and with all the things you now know, what are the person=s assumptions about life, living and death, the relationship of the living to the dead, the nature of death, the structure of the cosmos and the place of the dead in the cosmos.**

**In light of the various religious traditions you have examined this quarter, how is your subject like many other people? How different?**

**Part III -- What sense do you make of the claim? Is the person=s claim objectively truthful? Why do you say what you do? With what degree of certitude do you say that the other person has properly interpreted his/her experience or has he/she misinterpreted?**

**The paper is graded on its thoroughness.**

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## **Appendix C**

**The paper is in three parts:**

**Find a person who regularly performs funeral rituals and interview him/her. AS you prepare your interview, think of many questions to ask: what are the elements of the ritual you perform? What does the ritual do to the dead person? To the living persons who attend? To the person who performs the ritual? What is the belief expressed in the ritual?**

**What is death? How should death be properly understood? What is the relationship between death and life? Is there a "beyond" to death? What is it like? How do artist and poets of the traditions conceive of afterlife or beyond life?**

**Has the person interviewed had "different" experiences with the dead? With a person they have buried? Has the person interviewed ever heard of extraordinary experiences with the dead?**

**Use you imagination and knowledge to prepare the interview.**

**Part I of the paper presents the results of the interview.**

**In Part II of the paper, compares and contrasts the ideas of the person interviewed with the theoretical material garnered form the class. In what specific ways is the person interviewed very much like people we have met in class and in the readings.**

**Part III is your own creative moment. What did you learn? What ideas of your own are challenged? Affirmed? What questions do you till have? What experiences of your are affirmed? What new questions do you have? How are you a better, richer, wiser, more intelligent, more humane person because of this interview?**

**The paper is graded on its thoroughness.**