

**DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS**  
**RELIGION 215-I**  
**FALL 2009**  
**TTh, 3:00-4:15 PM, MARTING HALL ROOM 103**

Instructor: Ellen Posman  
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Office Hours: Monday, Tuesday and Thursday 4:30-5:30, or by appt.  
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**Course Description:**

What happens when we die? Though there are no definitive answers to this question, we will examine the beliefs about death and the afterlife from a variety of religious and cultural perspectives. By reading studies about near death experiences, we will critically assess the types of evidence and theories about the afterlife. By exploring the world's religions, we will reach a deeper understanding of views about death and how those views shape our views about life. By learning about funerary practices around the world, we will theorize about the psychological and social functions of mourning practices and think deeply about the relationship between belief and practice. Finally, we will turn to some challenging ethical issues about life and death decisions and discuss them in the context of the views of world religions, philosophical positions, and our own experiences.

**Course Goals and Objectives:**

As a core course in the humanities that counts for international credit, this course supports the mission of Baldwin-Wallace College as well as the overall goals of the college core. Baldwin-Wallace College is committed to a "rigorous academic program that is characterized by excellence in teaching and learning within a challenging, supportive environment that enhances students' intellectual and spiritual growth." To this end, this course has the following objectives:

- 1) Increase the breadth of student knowledge by providing basic familiarity with the major religions of the world.
- 2) Encourage students toward personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth by considering positions about death in relation to their own views.
- 3) Challenge students to read anthropological sources and think deeply about the relationship between belief and practice.
- 4) Develop oral presentation skills, research skills, teamwork skills, and ethical sensitivity by doing a group presentation on a life-and-death issue.
- 5) Establish critical thinking and writing skills by composing essays that analyze ideas and practices regarding life after death.
- 6) \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) \_\_\_\_\_

Baldwin-Wallace College also "assists students in their preparation to become contributing, compassionate members of an increasingly global society." To that end, the course has the following objectives:

- 1) Learn to appreciate the international aspects of cultural diversity.
- 2) Consider deeply some of the challenging ethical issues that face us today.
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_

**How You Can Help Achieve These Goals:**

- 1) Come to class
- 2) Come to class prepared (do **all** the reading!)
- 3) Come to class ready to participate, preferably with questions
- 4) Participate thoughtfully
- 5) Come to office hours
- 6) Write rough drafts
- 7) Ask questions (about the material, about the assignments, about anything!)
- 8) Turn in assignments on time
- 9) Read the newspaper

**How I Will Help You Achieve These Goals:**

- 1) I will come to class prepared.
- 2) I will assign manageable but challenging readings.
- 3) I will explain the material using diverse methods.
- 4) I will be available to answer questions or help you find answers.
- 5) I will look over drafts.
- 6) I will return graded assignments promptly with thorough explanations of grades.
- 7) I will stimulate your curiosity by displaying my own passion for the material.
- 8) I will stay current on the issues by reading the newspaper.

**Required Texts:**

- Chidester, David. *Patterns of Transcendence*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002.
- Lunsford, Andrea A. and Marcia Muth, *The St. Martin's Pocket Guide to Research and Documentation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.
- Moody, Raymond A. Jr., M.D. *Life After Life*. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.
- Parkes, Colin Murray, Pittu Laungani, and Bill Young eds. *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Pojman, Louis P. *Life and Death*. Cincinnati: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2000.

**Course Requirements:**

- 30% Three 4-6 Page Essays:** Topics will be handed out at least one week prior to the due date. The 1<sup>st</sup> essay will count for 5%, the 2<sup>nd</sup> for 10%, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> for 15%
- 10% Midterm Examination:** In-Class Midterm on **Thursday, Oct. 15th**
- 20% Final Project:** Each student will take part in a group presentation on an issue focusing on life and death.
- 30% Final Examination:** In-Class Final on **Wednesday, Dec. 9th at 1:30 PM**
- 10% Class Participation:** Students are expected to complete the readings as assigned, contribute meaningfully to classroom discussions, participate eagerly in review sessions, and attend one teacher-student individual conference.

**Course Policies:**

- Late Policy:** Papers go down one-third of a grade (e.g. B to B-) per day late and are late as of the beginning of class on that day or at the exact time of an electronic deadline.
- Participation Policy:** Participation grades are based on a combination of attendance, active, thoughtful participation, and reading quizzes at the beginning of class.
- Paper Grading Policy:** A is Excellent; B is Good; C is Fair; D is barely satisfactory; F is unsatisfactory. Further guidelines will be handed out at a later date.
- Disabled Student Policy:** Any student with a documented disability (e.g. physical, learning, psychological, vision, hearing, etc.) who needs to arrange accommodations must contact both the instructor and Disability Services **at the beginning** of the term. For a complete explanation of B-W's disabilities policy, see <http://www.bw.edu/stulife/judicial/policies/disability/index.html>

**Plagiarism Policy:** A Plagiarized paper will receive an automatic zero, and if the plagiarism is flagrant, it will be reported to student affairs, which may result in automatically failing the class. See the full BW academic honesty policy at <http://www.bw.edu/resources/dean/policies/>

### **Course Schedule:**

#### **WEEK ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Tues. August 25: Introduction to course, materials, syllabus, themes of the course

Thurs. August 27: Evidence from Near Death Experiences

\*Readings: Moody, Introduction, Chaps. 1-2

#### **WEEK TWO: IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?**

Tues. Sept. 1: Cross-Cultural Issues

\*Readings: Moody, Chaps. 3-4, Parkes, pp.3-9

Thurs. Sept. 3: Is There Life After Death??? Discussion and Debate

\*Readings: Moody, Chaps. 5-6

#### **WEEK THREE: HINDUISM**

Tues. Sept. 8: Hindu Beliefs about Death and the Afterlife

\*Readings: Chidester, pp.76-88

Thurs. Sept. 10: Case Study of a Hindu Death

\*Readings: Parkes, pp.52-72

#### **WEEK FOUR: BUDDHISM**

Tues. Sept. 15: Buddhist Beliefs about Death and the Afterlife

\*Readings: Chidester, pp.88-98

Thurs. Sept. 17: Catch-Up and Discussion

\*\*\*PAPER #1 DUE!!!

#### **WEEK FIVE: TIBETAN BUDDHISM**

Tues. Sept. 22: Tibetan Buddhism in Particular

\*Readings: Chidester, pp.122-143

Thurs. Sept. 24: Case Study of a Tibetan Buddhist Death

\*Readings: Parkes, pp.73-97

#### **WEEK SIX: CHINESE AND JAPANESE RELIGIONS**

Tues. Sept. 29: Chinese Attitudes Towards Death

\*Readings: Chidester, pp.98-107

Thurs. Oct. 1: Japanese Attitudes Towards Death

\*Readings: Chidester, pp.107-117

#### **WEEK SEVEN: INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS**

Tues. Oct. 6: Indigenous Attitudes Towards Death: Australia, Africa, and America

\*Chidester, pp.41-72

Thurs. Oct. 8: Another Perspective on Death in Indigenous Societies

\*Parkes, pp.27-51

#### **WEEK EIGHT: HALFWAY THERE!!!**

Tues. Oct. 13: In-Class Review

\*\*\*PAPER #2 DUE!!!

Thurs. Oct. 15: MIDTERM EXAM!!!!

#### **WEEK NINE: JUDAISM AND ITS ANTECEDENTS**

Tues. Oct. 20: Death in the Ancient West and in Judaism

\*Readings: Chidester, pp.145-169

Thurs. Oct. 22: Case Study of a Jewish Death  
 \*Readings: Parkes, pp. 98-130

#### WEEK TEN: CHRISTIANITY

Tues. Oct. 27: Christian Beliefs About Death and the Afterlife  
 \*Readings: Chidester, pp. 169-178

Thurs. Oct. 29: Some Differences Between Christian Denominations and Case Studies  
 \*Readings: Parkes, pp.131-146

#### WEEK ELEVEN: ISLAM

Tues. Nov. 3: Muslim Views of Death and the Afterlife  
 \*Readings: Chidester, pp.178-188

Thurs. Nov. 5: Muslim Funerary Practices  
 \*Readings: Parkes, pp. 147-165

#### WEEK TWELVE: THE MODERN WEST

Tues. Nov. 10: Catch-Up and Discussion/Group Work  
 \*Readings: Reading for your group (TBA)

Thurs. Nov. 12: Issues of Secularization  
 \*Readings: Parkes, pp.166-187

#### WEEK THIRTEEN: ETHICAL ISSUES

Tues. Nov. 17: Death and Ethical Issues  
 \*Readings: Pojman, pp.36-73

Thurs. Nov. 19: Group Work  
 \*\*\*NO READING TODAY! PAPER #3 DUE!!!

#### WEEK FOURTEEN: GROUP PRESENTATIONS

Tues. Nov. 24: Topics 1&2  
 \*Readings: Pojman, TBA

Thurs. Nov. 26: NO CLASS TODAY!!! HAPPY THANKSGIVING!!!

#### WEEK FIFTEEN: GROUP PRESENTATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Tues. Dec. 1: Topics 3&4  
 \*Readings: Pojman, TBA

Thurs. Dec. 7: Topic 5 and Conclusion/Review  
 \*Readings: Pojman, TBA

**FINAL EXAM: WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9TH 1:30-3:30 PM**