

Death and the Afterlife in World Religions (RELI 2732 B/V)¹

Instructor: Chris Jensen
Classroom: Southam Hall B
Class Times: Mon. 8:35AM–11:35AM

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Office Location: 2A54 Paterson Hall
Office Hours: M 13:00-14:00 (or by appointment)

Overview

In spite of the kaleidoscopic range of human cultures and all of the ways that these cultures have transformed over time, it remains the case that the fundamental units in this system – the inheritors, transmitters and creators of culture – are biological beings. We need to eat and excrete, we need shelter, we are driven to mate, and, after a certain measure of time, we die. Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the variety seen in human cultural systems is focused on the ways that these biological processes can be understood, disciplined, ritualized, and, if possible, controlled. In this course, we will be considering the variety of ways that the world's religions have tussled with the unavoidable, existentially distressing fact of death.

Intellectually, the problem of death has consistently spawned a host of related questions: “Why do people die?”, “Is it possible to know when I’m going to die?”, “What happens to people after death?”, “Can I do anything to save myself?”, “Can anyone save me?”, and many more. In this course, we will explore the responses to such questions proposed by the devotees of the world's religious traditions, considering, as one example, the issue of cosmology (i.e., theory about the nature and structure of the world) as it relates to death, noting the breadth of possibilities proposed across religious cultures: reunion with loved ones in a blissful afterlife; posthumous punishment; salvation by deities; notions of karmic recompense and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth; and even the possibility of achieving immortality. When confronted with the reality of death, however, a grieving person often cannot find solace in these sorts of overt doctrinal teachings alone. For this reason, we will also consider various other means, such as stories, visual art, and rituals, that are employed in the religious traditions under consideration to provide emotional solace and social reintegration to grieving individuals. In general, our approach to this complex material will focus on the problem of death as it is expressed in three key dimensions of religion:³ 1) religious teachings (doctrines and philosophy); 2) ritual and mortuary practice; and 3) narratives.

RELI 2732 as an Online Course

All information for viewing this course online and for distance students can be found at <http://www2.carleton.ca/cuol/>. Back-up viewing options for section B include the kiosks in the CUOL student centre (D299 Loeb), the pay-per-lecture rental system, or the video-on-demand service.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, you will develop the conceptual vocabulary necessary to describe the basic perspectives on death and the afterlife of the various traditions that we have explored in class, as well as the processes of historical development that link them. In addition, because we will be using a portion of our class time each week to discuss primary sources (religious narratives, sacred texts, and videos of religious practices), you will also gain valuable experience parsing unfamiliar religious data,

1 I would like to thank Dr. Angela Sumegi for sharing her RELI 2732 syllabus with me and for inspiring me to think more deeply about various issues relating to the instruction of this course.

2 As per Carleton University policy, all communication between students and professors should be conducted via our Carleton email accounts.

3 Note: this framework is borrowed from Ninian Smart's *Seven Dimensions of Religion*.

and thus learn to highlight relevant vocabulary, stylistic features, and cosmological / soteriological assumptions, as well as hints about target audience(s) and potentially contentious issues. In order to further hone this form of reading, which I hope will serve as a useful tool throughout your academic career, you will also be using it as part of both the midterm and final exams. Finally, your reflection papers will give you the opportunity to practice your academic writing and to engage with course concepts in a focused, self-directed fashion.

Textbook

- Angela Sumegi, *Understanding Death: An Introduction to Ideas of Self and the Afterlife in World Religions*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).
- All other readings will be posted to the course website or ARES.

Assessments

Reflection Papers	10% + 15% = 25%
Midterm Exam	35%
Final Exam	40%

Reflection Papers (10% + 15%) – Due: February 11th and March 18th

Over the course of the semester, you will write two 750-word (~2.5 page) reflection papers, which will encourage you to engage with key course themes and concepts. Reflection paper questions and detailed assignment guidelines will be posted to cuLearn and discussed in class three weeks prior to the assignment due dates.

Midterm Exam (35%) – Saturday, March 2nd from 4pm – 6pm.

The scantron-gradeable midterm exam will consist of multiple choice and true/false questions related to material covered in the first half of the course (Jan. 7th to Feb. 11th). Students will be responsible for material covered in the course text, assigned readings, and the class lectures, as well as posted on the course website. Exams will not be returned but may be reviewed with the professor or the assigned TA during office hours. Exam results will be posted on cuLearn.

Final Exam (40%) – Date TBA

The final exam will follow the same format as the midterm, save that it will be based on material from the second half of the course.

Course Policies

1. ALL e-mail correspondence must first be directed to the TA assigned to you. Please consult cuLearn after the first class for your assigned TA's contact information.
 - a) **EXCEPTION:** Students who require academic accommodations should feel free to discuss these matters (either in person or via email) with the instructor. Please be sure to contact the Paul Menton Centre to complete the required forms at least two weeks before the exam.
2. Before contacting your TA with a course inquiry (relating to either the subject matter or course policies), you should first consult the *Questions* forum on our course's cuLearn page. All questions related to course content and assignments, and the instructor's responses, will be posted (anonymously) to this forum, allowing for it to serve as a resource for all enrolled students.
3. There are no grade-raising exams or assignments for this course. If you miss the midterm due to illness or family crisis or emergency, you may write a make-up with a letter signed by your doctor or minister or counsellor stating the reason for missing the exam. Please contact your TA

as soon as possible if you have missed the exam.

4. There will be no make-up exams scheduled for the finals. If you miss the final exam, you are required to apply for a deferral from the University.
5. Late Submission Policy (reflection papers): Every student has SEVEN grace days available to them, which they can use to extend the due date of either reflection paper. You do NOT need to consult with your TA prior to making use of this extension. Grace days can be split between assignments (e.g., handing in paper #1 four days late and paper #2 three days late). As long as your assignments are submitted within this grace period, you will be granted full marks (no late penalty). Once your seven grace days are exhausted, your paper(s) will not longer be accepted.
6. You must write **both** exams and **at least one reflection paper** in order to be assigned a grade for the course. **If you do not complete these three minimum requirements, you will be assessed a grade of “F” for the course.**

Course Timetable and Readings

Note: the most up-to-date version of the schedule will always be posted on cuLearn.

In the case of a discrepancy, the version on cuLearn will be taken as authoritative.

Week	Topics, Readings and In-Class Activities	Readings and Assessments
<i>Week 1</i> Jan. 7 th	Course Overview and Policies Investigating Religious Perspectives on Death and the Afterlife	
<i>Week 2</i> Jan. 14 th	Death in Indigenous Religions	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 1 + 2) Selection from <i>Near-Death Experience in Indigenous Religions</i> (ARES)
<i>Week 3</i> Jan. 21 st	Death in the Ancient World: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 3) “The After-Life In Ancient Greece” (web source)
<i>Week 4</i> Jan. 28 th	Jewish Perspectives	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 4) Selections from <i>An Introduction to Judaism</i> (de Lange) (ARES)
<i>Week 5</i> Feb. 4 th	Christian Perspectives	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 5) “The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity” (web source)
<i>Week 6</i> Feb. 11 th	Muslim Perspectives	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 6) “The Search for Muslim Near-Death Experiences” (cuLearn) REFLECTION PAPER #1 DUE
No Classes Feb. 18 th – Winter Study Break Feb. 18th: LAST DAY TO SUBMIT REFLECTION PAPER #1 FOR CREDIT⁴		
<i>Week 7</i> Feb. 25 th	Hindu Perspectives	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 7) “Death Beyond Death: The Ochre Robe” (ARES)
Midterm Exam: Saturday, March 2nd at 4pm. Midterm covers material from the first half of the course (Jan. 7 th to Feb. 11 th).		

⁴ This assumes that the student has employed their full seven “grace days” on the first assignment (as outlined in **Course Policies #5**).

<i>Week 8</i> Mar. 4 th	Buddhist Perspectives – Early Buddhism and Theravada	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 8) “The Great Discourse on the Total Unbinding” (cuLearn)
<i>Week 9</i> Mar. 11 th	Buddhist Perspectives – Mahayana	Selection from <i>Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction</i> (cuLearn) “Amida, The Pure Land, and the Response of Old Buddhism to the New” (ARES)
<i>Week 10</i> Mar. 18 th	Buddhist Perspectives – Vajrayana	Selection from <i>Encyclopedia of Buddhism</i> (ARES) “Enshrining a Relic” (ARES) “Returning from Hell” (ARES) REFLECTION PAPER #2 DUE
<i>Week 11</i> Mar. 25 th	Death in Chinese Religions (Popular Religion, Daoism, Confucianism)	<i>Textbook</i> (CH. 9) Selection from <i>The Taoist Experience</i> (“Ascension”) (ARES) REFLECTION PAPER #2: LAST DAY TO SUBMIT FOR CREDIT⁵
<i>Week 12</i> Apr. 1 st	Death in 21 st Century Canada	Selection from <i>Dying and Death in Canada</i>
<i>Week 13</i> Apr. 8 th	Course conclusion and exam review	

5 This assumes that the student has employed their full seven “grace days” on the second assignment (as outlined in **Course Policies #5**).



University Regulations for All Humanities Courses

Copies of Written Work Submitted

Always retain for yourself a copy of all essays, term papers, written assignments or take-home tests submitted in your courses.

Academic Integrity at Carleton

Plagiarism is presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas, or work of others as one's own. Plagiarism includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to: books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, art works, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, and material on the internet. More information can be found [here](#).

Academic Accommodation Policy

Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request the processes are as follows:

Pregnancy obligation: write to the instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details see the [Student Guide](#)

Religious obligation: write to the instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details see the [Student Guide](#)

Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: The Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at

613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send me your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with me to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. Please consult the [PMC website](#) for the deadline to request accommodations for the formally-scheduled exam (if applicable).

Grading System at Carleton University

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor, subject to the approval of the faculty Dean. Standing in courses will be shown by alphabetical grades. The system of grades used, with corresponding grade points and the percentage conversion is below. Grade points indicated are for courses with 1.0 credit value. Where the course credit is greater or less than one credit, the grade points are adjusted proportionately.

[Grading System](#)

Course Sharing Websites and Copyright

Classroom teaching and learning activities, including lectures, discussions, presentations, etc., by both instructors and students, are copy protected and remain the intellectual property of their respective author(s). All course materials, including PowerPoint presentations, outlines, and other materials, are also protected by copyright and remain the intellectual property of their respective author(s).

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Statement on Class Conduct

The Carleton University Human Rights Policies and Procedures affirm that all members of the University community share a responsibility to:

- promote equity and fairness,
- respect and value diversity,
- prevent discrimination and harassment, and preserve the freedom of its members to carry out responsibly their scholarly work without threat of interference.

Deferred Term Work

In some situations, students are unable to complete term work because of illness or other circumstances beyond their control, which forces them to delay submission of the work.

Students who claim illness, injury or other extraordinary circumstances beyond their control as a reason for missed term work are held responsible for immediately informing the instructor concerned and for making alternate arrangements with the instructor and **in all cases this must occur no later than three (3.0) working days after the term work was due.**

The alternate arrangement must be made before the last day of classes in the term as published in the academic schedule. Normally, any deferred term work will be completed by the last day of term. More information is available [in the calendar](#).

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The application for a [deferral](#) must:

1. be made in writing or online to the Registrar's Office no later than **three working days** after the original final examination or the due date of the take-home examination; and,
2. be fully supported by appropriate documentation and, in cases of illness, by a medical certificate dated no later than one working day after the examination, or by appropriate documents in other cases. Medical documents must specify the date of the onset of the illness, the (expected) date of recovery, and the extent to which the student was/is incapacitated during the time of the examination. The University's preferred medical form can be found at the Registrar's Office [forms and fees page](#).

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Withdrawal From Courses

Withdrawn. No academic credit, no impact on the CGPA. WDN is a permanent notation that appears on the official transcript for students who withdraw after the full fee adjustment date in each term (noted in the Academic Year section of the Calendar each term). Students may withdraw on or before the last day of classes.

Important dates can be found [here](#):

Financial vs. Academic Withdrawal

Make sure that you are aware of the separate deadlines for Financial and Academic withdrawal!

Making registration decisions in Carleton Central involves making a financial and academic commitment for the courses you choose, regardless of attendance. If you do not attend – you must withdraw in Carleton Central within the published deadlines to cancel your registration. [More information](#)

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Student Resources on Campus

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