REL 264: Death, Dying and the Afterlife
Spring 2012

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Classroom: Butte 201
Office hours: Tuesdays 1-3,
Meeting Times: MWF 2:00-2:50 p.m.
Wednesdays 3-5 and by appointment
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Course Objectives

What do religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism believe happens when we die? Do we go to heaven? Are we reincarnated? What do these religions teach about preparing for death? Why do we die? How should the fact of human mortality affect the way we live? Is there a good way to die? What do these traditions teach about proper memorials for the dead? How do funeral customs reflect fundamental religious assumptions?

This course will answer these questions and more. We will examine how religious values and religious cultures shape the experiences of death, grieving, and expectations about mortality and immortality, focusing especially on the ways the experience of death poses an existential crisis of meaning. We will examine several theodicies, that is, religious explanations about why human beings suffer and die. We will also look at the ways cultural changes have affected the way we die, and explore ethical issues related to the medicalization of death and the funeral industry.

This is an approved GE course, part of both the Diversity Studies Pathway and the Global Development Studies Pathway. In this class, students will learn how religious and cultural values from India, Tibet, China, Japan, Mexico, the United States, Israel and the Muslim world shape beliefs and practices about death, the afterlife, and the overall meaning of life. Students will be able to identify and compare the funeral traditions and deathways of different religious and cultural traditions around the world, and explain how these practices are shaped by religious beliefs. Students will also examine a variety of secular and religious debates over end-of-life issues such as euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

This class meets several GE SLOs, specifically:

1. Global Engagement: Students will demonstrate an understanding of the basic tenets of several major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism—as well as exploring similarities and differences in their perspectives on death, the afterlife, the meaning of life.

2. Diversity: Students will analyze diversity within and among religious traditions, examining, for example, “official” v. “popular” attitudes toward the memorialization of death in Islam, Mexican
Catholicism, and Confucianism; ethical debates about euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide within Hinduism, Chinese religions, and Christianity; and different perspectives on the problem of evil in Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Chinese religions.

3. Written communication: Students will improve their writing skills by writing weekly papers discussing different religious perspectives on death, the afterlife, and issues relating to medical ethics. This class is a writing intensive class, so students will receive feedback on their weekly writing assignments both to improve their writing and to improve their knowledge of class concepts. The weekly assignments will build toward larger assignments; for example, the essay exams will ask students to integrate material from the homework assignments into longer synthetic essays. Furthermore, the themes raised in the self-reflection paper at the beginning of the class will be revisited in the final paper in a more elaborate and informed way.

Required Texts

Kenneth Kramer, *The Sacred Art of Dying*
Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*
Shawn Haley and Curt Fukuda, *The Day of the Dead*
Harold Kushner, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*
Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*

Essays posted on Blackboard

Assignments and Grading (1000 point scale)

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Grading will be on a 1000 point scale. 935 or more points, A; 895-934 points, A-; 875-894 points, B+; 835-874 points, B; 795-834 points, B-; 775-794 points, C+; 735-774 points, C; 695-734 points, C-; 675-694 points, D+; 595-674 points, D; below 595, F.

Participation (150 points):

I will take attendance, and I will monitor student participation. If you have an illness or another problem which will affect your ability to attend class regularly, you must let me know as soon as possible. If you miss more than three classes without a valid excuse, it will hurt your attendance grade.

Good discussions require that participants be prepared, ask questions, make contributions to the conversation, and listen attentively to others in the class. I will also take into account your
participation in small-group discussion exercises as part of this grade. If you are texting, playing games on your computer, or otherwise impolite in class, this will negatively affect your participation grade.

If you regularly come in late or leave early, this will also negatively impact your participation grade. If you have a serious and compelling reason to leave class early, please let me know in advance. It is your responsibility to make sure I know you were in class if you arrive after attendance has been taken.

Homework (200 points):
In order for our class discussions to be successful, it is essential that everyone complete the required readings and reflect on them. To ensure this, there will be brief homework assignments approximately every week.

Throughout the calendar of required readings you will find Homework questions. These questions are due by 2 p.m. on the date listed in the syllabus, and should be turned in via Blackboard. Responses to questions should be one page (250 words, which is about 2-3 long paragraphs). Please type directly into the submission box on Blackboard (or cut-and-paste from a Word file) rather than submitting an attachment.

Homework questions will be worth 10 points each. If you submit an assignment late, you will receive half-credit for it—this will be true even if you are sick or have to miss class for a university-sponsored event. In both cases you should still submit the assignment online. If Blackboard goes down, email me at plennon@csuchico.edu and let me know that, and I will give the whole class an extension.

Self-Reflection Paper (100 points)
2-3 pages
Due date: 2/4

This should be a brief reflection on your own views of death, dying, and the afterlife and the cultural sources which shaped these. Before you begin to write this paper, look at the exercises in “Personal Reflections on Death, Grief and Cultural Diversity” (posted on Blackboard). As you work through these exercises, think about the messages you have learned about death, the afterlife, or both, in your own life so far. What was your first experience with death? What did your parents teach you about death? What did your religion teach you? What did other sources (friends, family, books, movies, etc.) teach you about death and the afterlife? Write an essay which talks about the way all these sources have contributed to your own understanding of death.
This essay will not be graded on content; I will be looking for (A) the extent to which you have really tried to reflect on what your own views of death; (B) the extent to which you have attempted to analyze the sources of your ideas and perspectives on death, whether those sources are your family, your religion, the media, or other sources; and (C) the overall structure and organization of the paper.

Quizzes and Exams (350 points)

There will be two exams in this class, which will be a combination of multiple choice and essay questions. The multiple choice will cover major concepts, terms, and figures from the religious traditions we’re studying; I will give you a study guide with the vocabulary you need to know. The essays will be given out in advance, though you won’t be able to use notes when you take the test. Exams cannot be made up except in cases of severe illness or other significant emergencies (e.g. death in the family), and you must notify me in advance if you have such an emergency.

Final Reflection Paper (200 points)
3-6 pages (Due May 20)

Because Annie Dillard’s For the Time Being discusses theodicies from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Chinese religion, this essay will serve as a chance not only to reflect on the book but also to reflect on the course as a whole and to bring together many of the themes we’ve discussed in class. Before writing this essay, you should look back over the “self-reflection” paper you wrote at the beginning of the semester and reflect on whether your understanding of death has changed over the course of this class. A more complete study guide and set of guidelines for this paper will be posted on Blackboard.

General Guidelines for writing assignments

- Students are required to keep a copy of all written assignments submitted to me, and to resubmit written work if I request them to.

- All written assignments should be typed, double-spaced, on standard 8 1/2 by 11 paper. Margins should be one inch on all sides. Please use a 12 point font; I prefer Times New Roman. All assignments should include your name, class and section number, the day the assignment is due, and the title of your paper. A title page is not necessary. All assignments must be stapled! If you turn in an assignment in which the pages are not stapled together, I accept no responsibility for lost pages. Please do NOT turn in assignments in binders or plastic covers.

- All assignments other than homework assignments should be accompanied by a bibliography or works cited page, in addition to citations you use in the text. For homework assignments it is sufficient to use in-text citations, e.g. (Rinpoche, 47), without a works-cited page.
• Any instance of plagiarism or other academic dishonesty (e.g. copying someone else’s homework) will result in an “F” for the course and a report of academic misconduct submitted to Student Judicial Affairs. If you borrow the ideas of others in composing your written work, they must be cited; if you borrow the words of others, they must be enclosed in quotation marks and cited. If you have any doubts as to whether or not something needs to be cited, play it safe and cite it—or ask me about it. Any standard citation format (MLA, APA, etc.) is fine.

• You will need to upload the self-reflection paper and the Dillard paper to Turnitin.com. There will be a link on Blackboard for you to do this. You must also turn in hard copies of both papers to the instructor.

• Please note that material from the internet is still someone else’s work, and must be cited appropriately! If you are unsure of how to do this properly, consult the following website: http://www.csuchico.edu/engl/Links/style_guide.html

• If you are having health or work problems or personal crises which might tempt you to plagiarize, please talk to me. In some cases, I may be able to make accommodations for your situation; in other cases, I may advise you to take the late penalty (see below). Students who plagiarize on more than one occasion will be expelled from the university. In the long run, it is far better to receive a lower grade (or even a failing grade) than to jeopardize your entire academic career.

• Non-homework assignments (e.g. the self-reflection paper) will receive a 20% late penalty if submitted late. Homework assignments will be accepted late for half credit. The last day I will accept such late work is the last day of classes before finals (May 13).

Students with certified disabilities
Please notify me of any special need relating to your disability within the first two weeks of the semester. I will make every reasonable effort to facilitate your success in this course. Please note that you may be required to show documentation of your disability.

If you have a documented disability that may require reasonable accommodations, please contact Disability Support Services (DSS) for coordination of your academic accommodations. The DSS phone number is 898-5959 V/TTY or FAX 898-4411. Visit the DSS website at <http://www.csuchico.edu/dss/>.

Course Calendar and Assigned Readings

• Assigned readings are indicated by the author's last name or by “Blackboard,” which indicates an essay posted on Blackboard.

• Please note that this schedule is tentative and subject to change if necessary.
Readings should be completed by the date they are listed, e.g. by January 31 you should have read the selections on Blackboard from Lundquist and Levin, since we will be discussing it in class that day.

Introductory Unit:

1/23: Introduction to the class. I encourage you to take the syllabus quiz (available on Blackboard) after class; it is not due until 2/6 at 11:59 because people will still be adding through the first 2 weeks of class, but it’s a good idea to take it when it’s fresh in your mind.

1/25: Death and the self
Film: “After Life”

1/27: Exploring death and the afterlife
Film: “After Life.”

1/30: Exploring death and the afterlife
Film: “After Life”
Readings: Lundquist, “Personal Reflections on Death, Grief and Cultural Diversity” (Blackboard); Stephen and Ondrea Levin. “Who Dies,” (Blackboard)

Homework question: What does the film “After Life” suggest happens when you die?
How does this concept of an afterlife compare to what you think happens after death?
What do we learn about Japanese cultural attitudes about death from this film?

2/1: Examining attitudes about death
Reading: Selections from Studs Terkel, Will the Circle Be Unbroken (Blackboard);

Homework question: How have the life experiences of the firefighter, the doctor, and the actress influenced their understandings of death? How much do you think people’s ideas about death are shaped by their life experiences?

2/3: Self-reflection paper due. Please bring a hard copy to class (stapled!!)

UNIT TWO: Understandings of death, selfhood, and the afterlife in Asian religions

2/6: Hinduism: An introduction.
Readings: “Hindu Attitudes toward Death,” (Kramer)

2/8: Hindu concepts of self and other
Readings: Easwaran, “A Dialogue with Death” and the Katha Upanishad (Blackboard)

Homework question: What does Death teach Naciketas (Naciketa, Nachiketas—all the same name) about the true nature of the self?
2/10: Hindu ways of dying
Readings: Gupta, “Death Beliefs and Practices from an Asian Indian American Hindu Perspective” (Blackboard). Feel free to skim the first few pages of the essay, but read carefully everything from p. 251 on (“Results: Hindu American Beliefs Related to Death”).
Homework question: What are some of the rituals associated with death in Hinduism? How are American Hindu practices different from those of Hindus in India?

2/13: Buddhism: an introduction
Reading: “Buddhist Attitudes toward Death” (Kramer); Rinpoche, chapter 6

2/15: Buddhist v. American understandings of death
Reading: Rinpoche chapters 1-3
Homework question: How does the Tibetan perspective on death compare to the American perspective? What do you think of Rinpoche’s criticisms?

2/17: Buddhist death rituals
Reading: Rinpoche chapter 5 & 4
Film: Jacob’s ladder

2/20: Tibetan Buddhism on the dying process.
Readings: Rinpoche, chapter 11-14
Film: Jacob’s ladder

2/22: Tibetan Buddhism and the bardo state
Film: Jacob’s ladder

2/24: Jacob’s ladder: discussion
Homework Question: What are some events people experience in the bardo state? Where do we see examples of these in Jacob’s Ladder?

2/27: Confucian and Taoist perspectives on death
Reading: “Chinese attitudes toward death” (Kramer); Li Shuang, “The Funeral and Chinese Culture” (Blackboard).
Homework Question: What are some rituals associated with dying and with funerals, according to Kramer and Shuang?

2/29: Review for Asian religions exam

3/2: Asian religions exam

Unit Three: Understandings of death and the afterlife in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

3/5: Judaism: An introduction
Reading: “Hebraic Attitudes toward Death” (Kramer); Samuel Heilman, “Shivah: Seven Days of mourning” (Blackboard)
3/7: Mortality in the Jewish tradition  
Reading: Start reading Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*  
Film: Generation to Generation

3/9: Judaism and the problem of suffering  
Readings: Kushner, chapters 1-2; optional: Book of Job (you can read it online at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com))  
**Homework question:** List 3 or 4 of the common explanations for suffering (theodicies) Kushner talks about in chapter 1. Why does he reject them? Do you agree with him?

3/12: Jewish theodicies  
Reading: Kushner, chapters 3-8  
**Homework question:** What is Kushner’s solution to the problem of reconciling an omnipotent, loving God with the suffering in the world? What do you think of his solution?

3/14: Islam: An introduction  
Reading: “Islamic Attitudes toward Death” (Kramer)

3/16: Islam and death  
Reading: Juan Campo, “Muslim Ways of Death” (Blackboard)  
**Homework Question:** What are some of the core Islamic teachings on funerals and the afterlife? How do individual Muslim observances of grief sometimes challenge official teachings?

3/26: Christianity and death  
Reading: Christian attitudes toward death (Kramer)

**Unit Four: The material culture of death: memorialization, funerals, and debates over dead bodies**

3/28: Christianity, indigenous religion and death  
Reading: “The Roots of the Day of the Dead” (Haley and Fukuda)

4/2: The material culture of death in Mexico  
Reading: “The Day of the Dead” and “Oaxaca and its people” (Haley and Fukuda)  
Film: La Ofrenda

4/4: Ritual and The Day of the Dead  
Reading: “Funerals and Death” and “The Day of the Dead Markets” (Haley and Fukuda)  
**Homework question:** What are some specific rituals associated with Day of the Dead, according to the readings and the films? What cultural values are reflected in these rituals?

4/6: Remembering Loved Ones through material culture  
Reading: “Preparation” and “November First” (Haley and Fukuda)  
**Homework question:** Bring into class some example of a way that a dead person has been memorialized: for example, a song lamenting the death; a poem; a printout or picture of a shrine or other kind of memorial (e.g. material left at the Vietnam Veterans memorials; the shrines that spring up around sites like victims of automobile accidents,
or Ground Zero, etc.). You don’t have to write anything about it unless you miss class, in which case you must describe the item and explain its significance, and compare it to the type of memorialization associated with “Day of the Dead.”

4/9: Nineteenth-century America burial practices
Readings: Colleen McDannell, The Religious Symbolism of Laurel Hill Cemetery; Roberta Halpern, “American Jewish Cemeteries.” (Blackboard) You might also look at this online site: “A Brief History of Cemeteries”, www.alsirat.com/silence/history.html
Homework question: What was new about the design of Laurel Hill Cemetery? What cultural changes in attitudes about death are reflected in the design of this cemetery?


4/13: Remembering the dead
Reading: Sarah York, “Giving Sorrow Words” (Blackboard)
Homework question: Why, according to York, are funeral services important? What do you want done with your bodily remains when you die? What do you want your own funeral/memorial service to look like?

Unit Five: The Medicalization of Death and Its Consequences: Cross-cultural Debates Over the End of Life
Please note: because we are having at least one guest speaker in this unit who hasn’t confirmed a date yet, the material in this unit may be rearranged. Please check Blackboard for announcements about syllabus updates etc.

4/16: Medicalization of death rituals: the hospital and the funeral home
Readings: Michael Kearl, “Death and the Medical System” (Blackboard)

4/18: Ethical problems caused by the medicalization of death: Terminating medical care
Case study: Terri Schiavo
Readings: Matt Conigliaro, “The Terri Schiavo information page”; Joan Didion, “The Case of Theresa Schiavo.” (Blackboard)
Homework question: Before this class, you will be assigned to write for or against the removal of Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube. Write about 2 paragraphs in support of your assigned position; if you like, you may conclude with your own position on this issue.

4/20: Ethical Issues in Dying: A Hindu case study. Film: Guzaarish

4/23: Ethical Issues in Dying: A Hindu case study. Film: Guzaarish
Homework Question: Crawford discusses a number of Hindu and other religious perspectives on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in this essay. You can either write 2 paragraphs comparing issues raised in the essay to the film Guzaarish, or compare one of the Hindu perspectives to that of another religious tradition he discusses. What similarities and differences do you see?

4/27: Ethical controversies raised by the medicalization of death: Physician assisted suicide
Guest Speaker: Dr. Joel Zimbelman

4/30: Physician Assisted Suicide in Cross-Cultural Perspective
Readings: Ho Mun Chan, “Euthanasia, Individual Choice and the Family: A Hong Kong Perspective” (Blackboard); Ming-Xian Shen, “To Have a Good Birth as well as a Good Death: The Chinese traditional view of life and its implications for Modernity” (Blackboard). Optional: Margaret Battin, “Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide.” (Blackboard)
Homework question: Based on Zimbelman (or Lennon)’s lecture as well as the Chan essay, what seem to be the moral issues involved in the debates over euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide? Do you see significant ethical differences between these? Are there any significant cultural differences in the debate over end-of-life care in Hong Kong v. the U.S.?

5/2: Review for the exam

5/4: Exam 2

5/7: Making sense of death, making sense of life
Reading: Dillard chapters 1&2. Before reading Dillard, take a look at the study guide in the reader. Optional reading: Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System.” (Blackboard)

5/9: The Individual in the span of history
Reading: Dillard chapter 3-4
Homework question: Answer one of the following questions from the Dillard study guide:

1. Dillard uses a number of powerful images in the first four chapters. Which did you find most striking, and why?
2. Dillard makes several references to kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). How does the kabbalah explain evil?
3. What did you think of Dillard’s discussion of the relationship between the number of humans who are dead and the number of those who are living?

5/11: Religious explanations for impermanence
Reading: Dillard chapter 5-7.
Homework question (Double points): Answer one of the following questions from the Dillard study guide (on Blackboard):

1. Why do you think she chose the themes she did (birth, sand, China, clouds, numbers, encounters, thinkers, evil, now)? What do they have in common?
2. What theodicies does Dillard reject? Is there any theodicy she accepts? (As you answer this, be aware that she is often ironic in tone throughout the book; sometimes her apparent agreement with a statement is a veiled criticism of its absurdity).
3. What do you think Dillard thinks about God?

5/18: Final paper due at noon. in the regular classroom.

This syllabus is subject to revision if necessary.