Course Objectives

Our assumptions color the way we view our own experiences and those of others, therefore an awareness of our assumptions is important as we approach the study of worldwide death ways. Death is an important lens by which our lives, religious attitudes, and cultural experiences can be assessed. In turn, as our personal lives change, religious attitudes transform, and cultural experiences transition, our concepts of death change. Through the lens of death we can explore personal and worldwide experiences, religious attitudes, and cultural notions.

Certain religious attitudes and cultural changes (including the medicalization of death and the professionalization of the funerary industry) have placed death increasingly behind closed medical doors leaving many people culturally, ritually, and religiously removed from the death and dying process and the existential crisis of meaning that it facilitates. Interestingly there is a swift cultural development toward increasing access to virtual and cinematic death through popular movies and video games.

By focusing on a diverse range of world religions (including Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and others) and the ritual, theological, and cultural attitudes therein, we will cover the shared questions: Why do we die and how? What happens after we die? In which ways do we grieve and mourn death? How do our attitudes and actions surrounding death reflect and inform our religious notions? How does death affect the living? What can we learn about different cultures and ourselves by investigating these questions?

This course will answer these questions and more. Since the class is part of both the Diversity Studies Pathway and the Global Development Studies Pathway, we will examine how religious perspectives from India, Tibet, China, Mexico, the United States, Israel and the Muslim world shape beliefs and practices about death, the afterlife, and the overall meaning of life.
This class meets the Diversity Studies Pathway Area E “Learning for Life” requirement. It also meets the Global Development Studies Area E “Learning for Life” requirement. It also fulfills the Global Cultures requirement. There will be several short writing assignments and I will give you feedback on your writing to help you improve. Other GE SLOs this class addresses are discussed below.

**Required Texts**

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

Also, Internet access is required for this class, as most homework assignments will be turned in online.

**Assignments and Grading (1000 point scale)**

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<td>Final Paper</td>
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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.

I will post grades for each homework assignment throughout the semester. As far as possible I will post grades for all assignments on Blackboard.

**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 several classes without a valid excuse, it will hurt your participation grade.
The nature of this course lends itself to insightful discussions; come prepared with questions, and focus points from the reading to both contribute to, and gain from class time. This class will adhere to a policy of respect, listen attentively to others in the class and allow room for all opinions. I will also take into account your participation in small-group discussion exercises as part of this grade. There is no cell phone and no computer policy in class. I encourage handwriting class notes; if you have a valid reason for needing to type notes in class come see me.

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 interesting, it is essential that everyone complete the required readings and reflect on them. To ensure this, there will be brief homework assignments almost every meeting.

Throughout the calendar of required readings you will find Homework questions. These questions are due on Blackboard 10 AM on the date listed in the syllabus, and should be turned in via the Blackboard blog tool (not via email!) Responses to questions should be brief (about 2 paragraphs).

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 sgagnebin@csuchico.edu and let me know that, and I will give the whole class an extension.

No late homework will be accepted after 5 pm 5/11/15

**Short Reflection Paper 1 (60 points)**
**At least 1 page**
**Due date: Friday 1/30/15**

> Explore personal assumptions and ideas related to death, dying, and the afterlife. Touch briefly on held assumptions regarding death rites of other cultures/religions. Consider what these assumptions reveal about your approach to mortality and your approach to living “the good life.”
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. Writing in the first-person and using anecdotes about your life is expected, but please use formal grammar, spelling, and sentence structure in the paper. When you receive the graded paper back, please keep it, because the final paper will ask you about whether your perspectives on death have changed.

**Short paper 2 (60 points)**

**At least 1 page**
**Friday 3/13/15**

Explore briefly one aspect related to death, dying, and the afterlife. For example; theodicy, ritual rites, grieving/mourning, life after death, etc. Use class resources and, if you like, external research to cover this aspect from two religious/cultural perspectives. You may also consult the list of focus questions available for the final paper and frame your paper around one of those. This short paper will be graded on accuracy of content, grammar, spelling, and citation as well as depth of thought and connection.

**Short paper 3 (60 points)**

**At least 1 page**
**Friday 4/24/15**

Explore the medicalization of death and the professionalization of the funerary industry as it relates to our current American associations of death. Touch on virtual/cinematic portrayals of death and the juxtaposition of a “death free generation” that has “seen” more death than many. This paper will rely on what we have learned in class in terms of
readings and research as well as your own thoughts on the connections that exist (if any) between exposures to cinematic exposure to death in a “death-free” society.

Exams (350 points)

There will be two exams in this class (Wednesday 2/25/15 and Friday 3/27/15), which will be a combination of multiple choice and essay questions. The multiple choice section 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. 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 Paper (120 points)

3-6 pages (Friday 5/15/15 by 5pm)
This paper is meant to connect and assess personal assumptions, cultural diversity, and current American understandings of death in order to reveal the broad and grand impact of death ways upon humanity.

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. Therefore, you may craft your final essay around Annie Dillard’s work, or you may choose a different relevant topic. 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, a set of guidelines, and potential focus questions for this paper will be posted on Blackboard.

General notes on writing assignments

- This is not a Writing Intensive class, though there will be some short writing assignments and I will give you feedback on your writing to help you improve. We will spend some time in class working on common writing problems and the craft of writing good essays. The content of this class is interesting; take the time and attention to write interesting papers and reflections.

- Students are required to keep a copy of all written assignments submitted to me, and to resubmit written work if I request them to.
• Most writing assignments will be submitted through Blackboard Learn using the Blog tool. Please don’t submit your homework in the comment field!

• The three short papers and the final paper should be handed in on paper. For these papers, please double-space and use a 12-point font (Arial, Times New Roman, Calibri or something similar, please). When handing in assignments on paper, be sure to 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.

• 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.

• Papers will receive a 20% late penalty if submitted late. Homework assignments will be accepted late for half credit. I will accept late work until 5 pm on Friday 5/8/15. No late work will be accepted after this time.
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 the Accessibility Resource Center (ARC, formerly called Disability Support Services) for coordination of your academic accommodations. The ARC is located in Student Services Center 170; their phone number is 530-898-5959 and their website is http://www.csuchico.edu/arc

This class meets the Diversity Studies Pathway Area E “Learning for Life” requirement. It also meets the Global Development Studies Area E “Learning for Life” requirement. It also fulfills the Global Cultures requirement. There will be some short written responses that I will feedback on as appropriate. Other GE SLOs this class addresses are discussed below.

General Education Information
This is an approved GE course, part of both the Diversity Studies Pathway and the Global Development Studies Pathway.

1. Global Engagement: Students will demonstrate an understanding of the basic tenets of several major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others—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 others; 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 responses discussing different religious perspectives on death, the afterlife, and issues relating to medical ethics. This class is not a writing intensive class, though students will receive some feedback as appropriate 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.

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.
Unit One: Introductions and personal reflections

Wed 1/21: Introduction to the class.
Go over syllabus as a class, answer questions, and introductions.

Fri 1/23: Discussion Day: Death and the self /Examining attitudes about death.
Readings to have done today:
-Selections from Studs Terkel, Will the Circle Be Unbroken (Blackboard).

Homework questions due today (1/23) on blackboard by 10 AM:
*How much do you think people’s ideas about death are shaped by their life experiences? Talk specifically about at least one of the people we read about (the firefighter, the doctor, etc.), but you can also talk about your own experiences as a sort of rough draft for the self-reflection paper.
(Remember to come prepared with a question/comment about the readings and lectures for discussion.)

Mon 1/26: Introducing “Deathways.”
Readings to have done today:
-Lundquist, “Personal Reflections on Death, Grief and Cultural Diversity” (Blackboard).
Start film: “Groundhog Day”

Wed 1/28: Deathways continued.
Readings to have done today:
-A Good Death pgs. 1-27 “Dying Well: The Death of Judith Obodov Hardin.” (Blackboard)
Finish film: “Groundhog Day”
*Turn in Groundhog Day vocab worksheet at the end of class.

Fri 1/30: Discussion Day
Homework due today in class: *1-2 page reflection paper: Explore personal assumptions and ideas related to death, dying, and the afterlife. Touch briefly on held assumptions regarding death rites of other cultures/religions. Consider what these assumptions reveal about your approach to mortality. Please bring a hard copy to class (stapled).
(Remember to come prepared with a question/comment about the readings and lectures for discussion.)
Unit Two : Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese Religions

Mon 2/2: Hinduism: An introduction/Hindu concepts.
Readings for today:
- Easwaran, “A Dialogue with Death” (Blackboard)
- Katha Upanishad (Blackboard)
**Homework question due today (2/2) on Blackboard by 10 AM:**
*What does Death teach Naciketa/s (Naciketa, Nachiketas—all the same name) about the true nature of the self?*
*What do you think about the chariot and driver metaphor used to describe the human condition?*

Wed 2/4: Hindu ways of dying.
Readings for today:
- Murata, “Grieving Tradition in a New Land: Hindu Death and Dying Rituals in America.” (Blackboard)
**Homework question due today (2/4) on Blackboard by 10 AM:**
*What are some of the rituals associated with death in Hinduism? What is the central ideation reflected in these practices?*
*How are American Hindu practices different from those of Hindus in India?*

Fri 2/6: Discussion day
(Remember to come prepared with a question/comment about the readings and lectures for discussion.)

Mon 2/9: Buddhism: An introduction
Readings for today:
- Wilson, “The Great Matter of Life and Death: Death and Dying practices in American Buddhism.” (Blackboard)
- Rinpoche, chapter 6
Start film: “Jacob’s Ladder”
Wed 2/11: Buddhist death rituals /Buddhist v. American understandings of death

Reading for today:
-Rinpoche chapters 1-3
-World Religions: Eastern Traditions Ed. Oxtoby Pg. 237-238 (Blackboard)
Cont. film: “Jacob’s Ladder”

Homework Question due today (2/11) on Blackboard by 10 AM:
*How does the Tibetan perspective on death compare to the American perspective?
*What do you think about Rinpoche’s/the Tibetan ideas regarding “practicing death”(pg 22)?

Fri 2/13: Tibetan Buddhism on the dying process/Tibetan Buddhism and the Bardo state.

Readings for today:
-Rinpoche, chapter 11-14
-James Whitlark, “The Paranoid Jacob’s Ladder” (on Blackboard).
Cont. film: “Jacob’s Ladder”

Homework Question due today (2/13) on Blackboard by 10 AM:
*What are some events people experience in the Bardo state? Where do we see examples of these in Jacob’s Ladder?
*How do practicing Buddhists prepare for the confusion and fear of the Bardo state?
*Turn in Jacob’s Ladder vocab worksheet at the end of class.

Mon 2/16: Buddhism and Bardo states.

Readings for today:
-Rinpoche, chapter 18
Finish “Jacob’s Ladder”

Wed 2/18: Confucian and Taoist perspectives on death.

Reading:
-Shuang, Li “The Funeral and Chinese Culture.” (Blackboard)
-Ludwig, “The Confucian story” and “Rituals in the life cycle in China” (Blackboard)

Homework Question: *What are some Chinese rituals associated with dying and funerals, according to the readings? Be specific and cite pages.
Fri 2/20: Discussion day:
(Remember to come prepared with a question/comment about the readings and lectures for discussion.)

Mon 2/23: Review for Asian religions exam:

Wed 2/25: Asian religions exam

Friday 2/27: Discussion day
(Remember to come prepared with concluding thoughts or questions about the unit.)

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

Mon 3/2: Indigenous Religion and Death: “Primal burial practices” or a new age return to old burial ideals.
Reading:
- Shorty and Wiethous, “Dine (Navaho) Narratives of Death and Bereavement.” (Blackboard)
- Ceisiwr Serith, “The Pagan Family” Ch 11 Death. (Blackboard)

Homework:
*What is the Native American view of ancestors and their graves? How does this make learning more about ancient burial practices difficult?*
*Based on the Serith reading, what values do modern Pagans hold regarding death?*

Reading:
- Samuel Heilman, “Shivah: Seven Days of mourning” (Blackboard)
- Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People Ch. 1-2
Friday 3/6: Discussion Day.
- Kushner, chapters 3-8

**Homework:**
* List 2 or 3 of the common explanations for suffering (theodicies) Kushner talks about in chapter 1.
* Why does he reject them?
* What is Kushner’s solution to the problem of reconciling an omnipotent, loving God with the suffering in the world?

Mon 3/9: Judaism and the problem of suffering.
**Readings:**
- Book of Job (you can read it online at www.biblegateway.com)

**Homework question:**
* How did Job’s community react to his misfortune and subsequent outburst toward God?

Wed 3/11: Christianity and death; Many different views.
**Reading:**
- Boisclair, “The Rituals for Dying, Death, and Bereavement among Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians.” (Blackboard)

**Homework Question:**
* What are some of the main differences between Christian denominations (including the one you were assigned) regarding death and dying?
* Is there any common theme throughout the traditions?

Fri 3/13: Discussion Day.
* 1-2 page paper due: Explore briefly one aspect related to death, dying, and the afterlife. For example; theodicy, ritual rites, grieving/mourning, life after death, etc. Use class resources and external research to cover this aspect from two or more religious/cultural perspectives

**Spring Break 3/16-3/20**

Reading:

Homework Question:
*What are some of the core Islamic teachings on funerals and the afterlife?*
*Are these teachings and observances different in the United States?*


Fri 3/27: Christian/Muslim/Jewish/Pagan Exam.

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

Mon 3/30: The material culture of death in Mexico Ritual and The Day of the Dead.

Reading:
- Haley and Fukuda “The Day of the Dead” pgs. 1-35

Homework Question:
*What are some specific rituals associated with Day of the Dead, according to the readings, the films, and your own experience?*
*What cultural values about life and death are reflected in these rituals?*

Wed 4/1: Art and Death

Readings:
- Haley and Fukuda, “The Day of the Dead Markets” pgs. 36-57

Homework:
*Bring an artistic depiction of death, dying, afterlife (Nothing graphic please.) Make sure whatever you bring has your name on it and can be taped on to the wall.*

Fri 4/3: Discussion Day
Mon 4/6: Remembering the dead/mourning vs. grieving/rituals.

Reading:
-Sarah York, “Giving Sorrow Words” (Blackboard)
-Visit Alan Wolfelt website at http://www.centerforloss.com/

Homework question:
*Why, according to York and Wolfelt, are funeral services important?*
*What do you want done with your bodily remains when you die? OR What do you want your own funeral/memorial service to look like?*

Wed 4/8: Nineteenth-century America burial practices /The cremation controversy and the transformation of the funeral industry.

Readings:
-Colleen McDannell, “The Religious Symbolism of Laurel Hill Cemetery.” (Blackboard)
- James Farrell, “The Modernization of the funeral service.” (Blackboard)
-http://www.foreverfernwood.com/ See Gran Yarok and Green Cemetery descriptions

Homework question:
*What was new about the design of Laurel Hill Cemetery? *What cultural changes in attitudes about death are reflected through these readings?* 
*Why do you think green burials becoming more popular?*

Fri 4/10: Discussion Day
*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.).*
Unit Five: The Medicalization of Death and Its Consequences: Cross cultural debates over the end of life.

Mon 4/13: Medicalization of death rituals: the hospital and the funeral home.
Readings:
-“Five Wishes” Document.
-Marilyn Webb, A Good Death, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” (Blackboard)

Homework:
*What are some pros and cons of the medicalization of death?
*How does the “5 wishes” reflect American Death ways?
*How does the “hidden” nature of death in America compare to Cinematic/video game depictions of death?

Readings:

Fri 4/17: Discussion Day

Mon 4/20: Ethical Issues in Dying: A Hindu case study/ Ethical Issues in Dying: Hinduism v. other religions
Reading:
-S. Cromwell Crawford, “The Ethics of Euthanasia.” (Blackboard)
Start film “Guzaarish” (50 min)

Homework Questions
*You have been assigned one of the religious perspectives discussed in the essay (Greco-Roman perspectives, Judaism, Christianity, or Hinduism). What does the religious tradition you are assigned teach about euthanasia? Post on blackboard and respond to a peers’ post.
Cont. film “Guzaarish” (50 min)

**Homework question:**
*What are some arguments for and against euthanasia that are raised in the film Guzaarish?*

Fri 4/24: Discussion day (Finish 25 minutes of Guzaarish)

Homework: *1-2 page paper: Explore the medicalization of death and the professionalization of the funerary industry as it relates to our current American associations of death. Touch on virtual/cinematic portrayals of death and the juxtaposition of a “death free generation” that has “seen” more death than many.*

Mon 4/27: Dr. Kevorkian and moral responsibility.

Reading:
Webb, *A Good Death*, “Dr. Kevorkian’s Challenge”(Blackboard)

**Unit Six: Making Sense of Life and Death: No Easy Answers**


Reading:
- Allen Klein, *The Courage to Laugh* Chapter 1: Humor and Death: “tasteless” or “triumphant”? (Blackboard)

Fri 5/1: Discussion Day. 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.

**Homework question:** **Answer one of the following questions:**
*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 Jewish mystics like Isaac Luria and the Baal Shem Tov. How do these teachers explain evil?*

Mon 5/4: The Individual in the span of history

Reading: Dillard chapters 3-4

**Homework question:** **Answer one of the following questions:**
*1. 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?
*2. Why do you think she chose the themes she did (birth, sand, China, clouds, numbers, encounters, etc.)? What do they have in common?

**Wed 5/6:** Religious explanations for impermanence  
*Reading:* Dillard chapter 5-7.

**Homework question:** Answer one of the following questions  
*1. 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).
*2. What do you think Dillard thinks about God? How might her culture/upbringing influence these thoughts?  
**ALSO** Upload a song that you would want played at your memorial or funeral.

**Fri. 5/8:** Review for final paper. Turn in late work. Class “wake.”

**5/11-15:** Finals week. No class meeting.  
*All Late work must be turned in by 5 PM on Monday 5/11/15  
*Final paper due by 5pm on Friday 5/15/15

This syllabus is subject to revision if necessary.