

Death & Dying: Comparative Views

RS 2M03,
McMaster University
Term 1, 2017

Instructor: Adel Hashemi
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Lectures: Wednesday/Friday, 12:30-1:20pm

Room ABB/102

Course Description:

A comparative survey of the diversity of social and ritual practices, religious beliefs, and emotional responses surrounding death in a variety of non-Western cultural contexts.

Course Objectives:

Death is the most inevitable, yet mysterious, thing to happen to human beings. This makes death a fascinating topic to study. There are many questions that we may have regarding death: How to understand death? Is death good or bad for us? What is the best way of dying? What will happen to us after death? What should the survivors do following their loved one's death? These are the sorts of questions that different cultures and traditions approach in their own ways. This course will look at the variety of ways in which death is understood in a wide variety of cross-cultural settings and non-western religious contexts. We will explore ritual practices related to death in selected regions and cultures. You will be asked to reflect on your idea of perfect death and to plan your own memorial.

Required Text:

Articles and book chapters required for each week will be posted on Avenue.

Course Requirements and Evaluation:

- Tutorial Participation %10
- Avenue Participation %10
- Two LP Reflections @%5 %10
- Essay project %40
- Final Exam %30

Final Exam will be multiple-choice, fill in the blank and/or short answer style questions. It will cover material from lectures, class/tutorials discussions, readings, and audio-visual presentations.

Essay Project will bring together course information with your own experience of life and death. You will be required to plan in detail your own funeral, drawing on course materials and incorporating any cultural traditions of your choosing. A handout will be provided with detailed instructions for considerations, such as which symbols will be used and why, which rituals will be performed, what kinds of cosmology and/or eschatology will be assumed and presented. The essay should be eight to ten pages (double spaced) with proper Chicago-style citations. **Due: December 1, 11:59 pm.** More information will be posted on Avenue.

Learning Portfolio Reflections should be 200-300 words on some aspect of death and dying. Topics will be posted on Avenue. These will be submitted to the appropriate Avenue dropbox.

Schedule:

Week 1- September 6: Introduction to the course, scope and approaches.

Week 1- September 8: Why study death?

Readings: Riley Jr, John W. "Dying and the meanings of death: Sociological inquiries." *Annual Review of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1983): 191-216.

Week 2- September 13: Dying

Readings: Betty, L. Stafford. "Are they hallucinations or are they real? The spirituality of deathbed and near-death visions." *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying* 53, no. 1 (2006): 37-49.

View the following Ted Talks:

Matthew O'Reilly – "Am I dying?"

http://www.ted.com/talks/matthew_o_reilly_am_i_dying_the_honest_answer#t---211492

Stephen Cave --- "The four stories we tell ourselves about death."

http://www.ted.com/talks/stephen_cave_the_4_stories_we_tell_ourselves_about_death#t---784892

Peter Saul – "Let's talk about dying."

http://www.ted.com/talks/peter_saul_let_s_talk_about_dying#t---430038

Week 2- September 15: Death: the end or transformation?

Readings: Rosenberg, Jay. "Life After Death: In Search of the Question." In *Thinking Clearly About Death*. Englewood Cliffs: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983. pp. 30-52

Week 3- September 20: Good death and bad death: Do we have a choice?

Readings: Kastenbaum, Robert. "Good Death, Bad Death: In Other times and places." In *On Our Way: The Final Passage through Life and Death*. Univ. of California Press, 2004.

"Is Death Bad for You?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. *The Chronicle Review*, 13 May 2012.

Week 3- September 22: Good death and bad death: Do we have choice?

Film (in class): Die the Good Death

Week 4- September 27: Understanding Death: Theories, Practice, and Rites of Passage

Readings: Bell, Catherine. "Rites of Passage." In *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford University Press (USA), 1997.

van Gennep, Arnold. "The Rites of Passage." In *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross Cultural Reader*. Edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 213-223.

Turner, Victor. "Form and Attributes of Rites of Passage." In *The Ritual Process*. Aldine Transaction Publishers, 1969.

Week 4- September 29: Rituals of Death

Film (in class): The Chasm

***** LP Reflection 1 (due October 3, 11:59 pm)**

Week 5- October 4: Grief and Mourning

Readings: Rosaldo, Renato. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." In *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross Cultural Reader*. Edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 167-178.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "Death Without Weeping." In *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross Cultural Reader*. Edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 179-193.

Week 5- October 6: Grief and Mourning

Film (in class): Letting Go

-----reading week-----

Week 6- October 18: Choosing death: Suicide

Readings: Brandt, Richard. "The Morality and Rationality of Suicide." In *Moral Problems*. Edited by James Rachels. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Stark, Rodney, Daniel P. Doyle, and Jesse Lynn Rushing. "Beyond Durkheim: religion and suicide." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1983): 120-131.

Week 6- October 20: Choosing death: Martyrdom in Christianity and Judaism

Readings: Brettler, Marc. "Is There Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible?." *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (2002): 3-22.

Straw, Carole. "A very Special Death': Christian Martyrdom in Its Classical Context." *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (2002): 39-57.

Week 7- October 25 Choosing death: Martyrdom in Islam

Readings: Ayoub, Mahmoud. "Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam." *Religious Resurgence: Contemporary Cases in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism* (1987): 67-76.

Brown, Daniel. "Martyrdom in Sunni revivalist thought." *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (2001): 107-17.

Kohlberg, Etan. "Martyrs and Martyrdom in Classical Islam." In *Religions and Cultures: First International Conference of Mediterranean (New York, 2002)*, pp. 91ff.

Week 7- October 27: Choosing death: Martyrdom in Islam

Film (in class): Dugma: The Button

***** LP Reflection 2 (due October 31, 11:59 pm)**

Week 8- November 1: Choosing death: Buddhist self-immolation

Guest Speaker: Dr. James Benn

Readings: Benn, James A. "Multiple meanings of Buddhist self-immolation in China—a historical perspective." *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 25 (2012): 203-212.

Week 8- November 3: Choosing death: Self-sacrifice in India and the Far East

Film (in class): The Human Torches of Tibet

Readings: Harlan, Lindsey. "Truth and Sacrifice: Sati Immolations in India." *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (2001): 118-131.

Hudson, Dennis. "Self-Sacrifice as Truth in India." *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (2001): 132-152.

Week 9- November 8: Chinese death and dying rituals

Readings: Sumegi, Angela. *Understanding Death: An Introduction to Ideas of Self and the Afterlife in World Religions*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013: Chapter 9

Watson, James L. "The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance." In *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. Ed Watson, J.L. Regents of University of California, 1988.

Week 9- November 10: Chinese death and dying rituals

Film (in class): To the Land of Bliss

Week 10- November 15: Death in Tibetan Buddhism

Readings: Corlin, Claes. "The Journey Through the Bardo: Notes on the Symbolism of Tibetan Mortuary Rites and the Tibetan Book of the Dead." In *On the Meaning of Death*, eds. Cederroth, S. et al. Almquist and Wiksell, 1988

Kramer, Kenneth. *The sacred art of dying: How world religions understand death*. Paulist Press, 1988: 70-80

Week 10- November 17: Death in Tibetan Buddhism

Film (in class): Tibetan Book of The Dead

Week 11- November 22: Death and burials in Japanese Buddhism

Guest Speaker: Dr. Mark Rowe,

Readings: Rowe, Mark. "Death, Burial, and the Study of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism." *Religion Compass* 3, no. 1 (2009): 18-30.

Week 11- November 24: Japanese Memorial Services Abortion, Ancestors and Grief

Film (in class): When I Die: Inside Japan's Death Industry

Readings: Klass, D. (1996). "Ancestor worship in Japan: Dependence and the Resolution of Grief." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, Vol 33, No. 4, 1996 (Wayne State Univ Press).

Smith, Bardwell. "Buddhism and Abortion in Contemporary Japan: Mizuko Kuyo and the Confrontation with Death." In *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed Grimes, R.L. Prentice Hall, 1996.

Desmond, Joan Frawley. "Apologizing to the Babies." *First Things*, No. 66, Oct 1996.

Week 12- November 29: Death and dying in Islamic culture

Readings: Sami A. Hanna, "Death and Dying in the Middle East," in *Deity & Death*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 33-60.

Sheikh, Aziz. "Death and dying--a Muslim perspective." *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 91, no. 3 (1998): 138.

Week 12- December 1: Death and dying in Islamic culture

Film (in class): TBA

***** Essay (due December, 11:59 pm)**

Week 13- December 6: Death and dying rituals in Hindu traditions

Film (in class): The Holier It Gets

Readings: Eck, Diana. "City of Death and Liberation." In Banaras: City of Light. Princeton University Press, 1982.

Harlan, Lindsay "Perfection and Devotion: Sati Tradition in Rajasthan." In Sati: The Blessing and the Curse. Ed Hawley, J.S. Oxford University Press (USA) 1994.

Sumegi, Angela. Understanding Death: An Introduction to Ideas of Self and the Afterlife in World Religions. John Wiley & Sons, 2013: Chapter 7

Required Readings --- In an attempt to reduce the financial burden on students, we will be using online articles or scanned book chapters uploaded on Avenue. If you do not have access to a computer and a printer, please let me know.

Your Responsibilities: You are responsible for all material on this syllabus and for making up missed lectures and assignments. Course content and scheduling may change, all notifications will be made on the course web page and, when possible, in lecture and tutorial. Students are responsible for regularly checking the course web page.

The instructor and university reserve the right to modify elements of the course during the term. The university may change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances. If either type of modification becomes necessary, reasonable notice and communication with the students will be given with explanation and the opportunity to comment on changes. It is the responsibility of the student to check their McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

The course website can be found on Avenue to Learn.

Note: Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of this course, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster email accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in this course will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

You are also responsible for bringing concerns about grading to the attention of your TA and myself in a timely manner. This means that if you have questions about your grade on a particular assignment or test, you must let us know within two weeks of the official posting of that grade. Your concerns must be specific. Please do not come to us with: "I think I deserve a better grade," or "I worked really hard."

Please also be aware that if you ask me to double check your grade on an assignment, there is just as much chance that your grade will go down as up.

Academic Dishonesty Statement: You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behavior in all of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity.

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behavior can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: "Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty"), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university.

It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the Academic Integrity Policy, located at <http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity>

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

1. Plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one's own or for which other credit has been obtained.
2. Improper collaboration in group work.
3. Copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

If you are ever in a situation where you are not sure if what you are submitting constitutes plagiarism, contact your TA or me immediately.

McMaster Student Absence Form of the MSAF

Use

The McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF) (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/msaf/>) is a selfreporting tool for Undergraduate Students to report MEDICAL absences that last up to 5 days and provides the ability to request accommodation for any missed academic work (that is less than 30% of the course grade). Please note, this tool cannot be used during any final examination period. You may submit a maximum of ONE Academic Work Missed request per term. It is YOUR responsibility to follow up with your instructor immediately regarding the nature of the accommodation. If you are absent for more than 5 days, exceed one request per term, are absent for a reason other than medical, or have missed work worth 30% or more of the final grade, you MUST visit your Faculty Office. You may be required to provide supporting documentation. This form should be filled out when you are about to return to class after your absence.

Social Sciences Faculty E-mail Communication Policy

Effective September 1, 2010, it is the policy of the Faculty of Social Sciences that all email communication sent from students to instructors (including TAs), and from students to staff, must originate from the student's own McMaster University e-mail account. This policy protects confidentiality and confirms the identity of the student. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that communication is sent to the university from a McMaster account. If an instructor becomes aware that a

communication has come from an alternate address, the instructor may not reply at his or her discretion. Email Forwarding in MUGSI:

<http://www.mcmaster.ca/uts/support/email/emailforward.html>

*Forwarding will take effect 24-hours after students complete the process at the above link.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. Academic accommodations must be arranged for each term of study. Student Accessibility Services can be contacted by phone 905---525---9140 ext. 28652 or e---mail sas@mcmaster.ca. For further information, consult McMaster University's Policy for Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities.