Death and Dying: The Western Experience
Religious Studies 2N03
Spring 2017
McMaster University

Instructor: Dr. Sherry Smith
Email: smithsa9@mcmaster.ca
Office: UH B112
Office Hours: Wednesdays 12:00–1:00 pm
Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays 1:30-4:30 pm
Location: CNH B107

CALENDAR DESCRIPTION
Drawing on theoretical perspectives and evidence from religious studies, anthropology and related fields, this course examines death and dying in Western contexts, focusing on social, cultural and biomedical themes.

COURSE OBJECTIVES
In this course we will examine whether the idea and reality of death are taboo subjects in contemporary Western societies. Through course readings, lectures and audio-visual material, the medical context of dying will also be explored, along with issues including brain death, organ transplantation, and debates about the legalization of assisted suicide. Students will be introduced to changing patterns of funerary ritual in the contemporary Western world, and to the ways in which people in our own society construct ongoing relationships between the living and the dead.

REQUIRED COURSE MATERIAL
1) Journal articles and other resources available electronically.
Select one of the following:

EVALUATION OF GRADES
Reflection Paper (due May 17th) 20%
Midterm Exam (May 24th) 25%
Book Review (due June 12th) 25%
Final Examination (June 14th) 30%

EXAMS (25% + 30%)
The midterm and final examinations may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, matching, essay and/or short answer style questions. The mid-term will be 1 hour in length and the final exam will be 2 hours in length. Both will cover material from lectures, required course materials and audio-visual presentations. The mid-term examination will include material covered from May 1 to May 17 (inclusive). The final examination will not be cumulative; it will only include material covered after the May 24th mid-term. Audio-visual materials will only be shown in the scheduled classes.
REFLECTION PAPER (20%)
The purpose of this paper is to explore your personal experiences with death and how these experiences have shaped you and your attitudes toward death. This paper will entail a chronology of your death experiences from your first to your most recent. For each event, you will provide the following: a detailed description of the event (who died, how old were you at the time, how the person died, circumstances surrounding death etc.); reflections of your physical, cognitive and emotional responses to the event; your understanding of how the event impacted others around you, family members, friends and even community if applicable; the funeral/memorial service planning process, if you were privy to it; the funeral/memorial service; the short and long term effect on you and your family and friends; and finally, in a concluding paragraph you will discuss how your attitudes and reaction to death have changed since your first experience to now. Do you believe that your reactions to your death experiences reflect a “healthy” response? Why or why not? Do you feel a need to change your response pattern and, if so, what resources do you need to assist you with this? While this paper should concentrate on death experiences, (the loss of a family member, friend, neighbour, pets) you may describe other events of loss or separation such as a divorce. If you have one significant death you would like to write about instead of a “chronological account,” you are welcome to do so. Your reflection paper should be between 4-5 pages in length. Though this paper will be written as a narrative, it must reflect university level writing (e.g. correct spelling, grammar, format etc.). You may use the pronoun “I.” The review is due on Wednesday, May 17th by 11:59 PM. Please submit your review to the appropriate drop box on Avenue to Learn.

BOOK REVIEW (25%)
For the review you are to choose either Phil Dwyer’s Conversations on Dying: A Palliative-care Pioneer Faces his own Death or Paul Kalanithi’s When Breath Becomes Air. The review is due on Monday, June 12th by 11:59 PM. Please submit your review to the appropriate drop box on Avenue to Learn. Your review should be approximately 1000-1250 words (4-5 pages, double-spaced, 1 inch margins). Imagine that you will be preparing this review for Thanatology and Narrative, a fictitious academic journal. Although you may find that it is helpful to read others’ reviews of your selected book, please be sure that you do not inadvertently copy or plagiarise someone else’s ideas. To avoid plagiarism, please review McMaster University’s Academic Integrity policy:

http://www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity/students/typeofad/plagiarism/index.html
TIPS FOR PREPARING THE BOOK REVIEW
Read through the book. As you are reading think about how the author makes sense of death, dying and bereavement. You should also make note of how the author incorporates religion or spirituality into the narrative. Your review should include the following sections:

a) Bibliographic information: do not include a title page for your review. Instead, begin your review as follows (before your introduction):

b) Introduction: write a very brief paragraph introducing the author (4-6 sentences). Who is he/she? Has the author written other books? Briefly comment on the book you are currently reviewing.

c) Explanation: write 1-2 paragraphs explaining the book’s contents. What is the novel about? Is there a main thesis the author is arguing for?

d) Evaluation: your evaluation is the largest section of the review (500-600 words). In this section you should evaluate how the author makes sense of death, dying and bereavement. Since this is a religious studies course, I would also expect you to include how the author incorporates religion or worldview into their narrative. This section is integrative so I would expect you to include issues or themes that you have learned in class. I do not expect you to reference course material. However, you must provide page references from the novel. For example, if a novel discussed social death, you might write: This book provides an example of social death when the author describes how her daughter’s fiancé ceased to be an actor in the world of the living when he entered the intensive care unit (12). Quotes may be used, but all phrases and sentences directly quoted should be enclosed in quotation marks, and page references should be provided: “Hannah re-discovered many of the techniques used by those experts in mourning, the Victorians” (22). Do not use too many quotes – rely primarily on your own words.

e) Conclusion: write a brief paragraph (4-6 sentences), discussing your overall view of the novel. What is your reaction to the book? You should not say this “book was horrible” or “this book was boring.” Instead, you might suggest that this book had “shortcomings” or that it “felt weak.” Remember to be objective and professional as you provide a rational for your negative reactions. Since you are writing this review for a specific journal, you should also state something about who you think should read this book? Why would it be useful to the intended audience?

f) Reviewer Information: immediately following the conclusion, include your name, student number and institutional affiliation:
   John Doe (15261639)
   Religious Studies, McMaster University

Late Papers: There will be a 2% per day penalty for late assignments unless accompanied by a medical certificate or other reason for tardiness has been accepted.
**CLASS LECTURES, READINGS AND AUDIO-VIDEO MATERIALS**

*Assigned weekly readings and films do not necessarily correspond to weekly lecture module material. It is expected that you attend lecture each week.*

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<th>MODULE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
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| Course Introduction: Changing Attitudes toward Death | May 1 | Reading:  
Class Film: *Facing Death* (2010) 54 minutes |
| Perspectives on Death: Cultural and Historical | May 3 | Reading:  
Class Film: *Vampire Skeletons Mystery* (2012) 45 minutes |
| Medicalized Death | May 8 | Reading:  
Class Film: *The Suicide Tourist* (2007) 56 minutes |
| The Ideology of Rescue and the Hospice Alternative | May 10 | Reading:  
Class Film: *Wit* (2001) 99 minutes |
| A Right to Die? | May 15 | Reading:  
(1) Bill C-14  
Home Viewing:  
(2) *The Trouble with Dying* (2014) 45 minutes  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIF_18YedZE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIF_18YedZE)  
(3) 24 & Ready to Die (2015) 21 minutes  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWWkUzkfJ4M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWWkUzkfJ4M)  
Class Film: *The Suicide Plan* (2012) 85 minutes |
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<td>REFLECTION PAPER IS DUE TONIGHT</td>
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<td>May 24</td>
<td><strong>MIDTERM EXAM</strong> (1:30-2:30 pm)</td>
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DEPARTMENT, FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY POLICY STATEMENTS

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY: You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects 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 behaviour 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: 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.

TURNITIN.COM: In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal plagiarism. Students will be expected to submit their work electronically to Turnitin.com and in hard copy so that it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to submit their work to Turnitin.com speak with me immediately. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, etc.). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity

AVENUE TO LEARN: In this course we will be using Avenue to Learn. 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 e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. 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.

MCMASTER STUDENT ABSENCE FORM: This is a self-reporting tool for Undergraduate Students to report absences DUE TO MINOR MEDICAL SITUATIONS that last up to 5 days and provides the ability to request accommodation for any missed academic work. Please note, this tool cannot be used during any final examination period. You may submit a maximum of 1 Academic Work Missed request per term.
• It is YOUR responsibility to follow up with your Instructor immediately (NORMALLY WITHIN TWO WORKING DAYS) regarding the nature of the accommodation.
• If you are absent for reasons other than medical reasons, for more than 5 days, or exceed 1 request per term you MUST visit your Associate Dean's Office (Faculty Office). You may be required to provide supporting documentation.
• This form should be filled out immediately when you are about to return to class after your absence.
• MSAF is now available in MOSAIC Student Center (in the drop down menu under Academics).

*If you find it necessary to submit the MSAF during this course you must submit the assignment before the last class. I do not redistribute grades for missed assignments.*

NOTE ON CHANGES IN THE COURSE: 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 her/his McMaster email and course websites weekly during the term and to note any changes.

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.

LAPTOPS AND PHONES: As a courtesy to those sitting behind you please ensure that you are discreet and not a distraction to others when using your device(s). Please ensure that your cell phone is on “vibrate” before entering the classroom. (I too will try to remember this!)