

COURSE SYLLABUS
Religious Studies 2M03 Death & Dying: Comparative Views
Winter 2020 / Online
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<i>COURSE OVERVIEW:</i>	2
<i>COURSE OBJECTIVES:</i>	2
<i>REQUIRED TEXTS:</i>	2
<i>ASSESSMENT:</i>	2
WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF LECTURES, READINGS AND AV MATERIALS	3
<i>January 6: Introduction</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>January 13: Introduction to Death Studies</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>January 20: Concepts of Death - Ritual</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>January 27: Concepts of Death – Caring for the Dead</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>February 3rd: Concepts of Death – Grief & Mourning</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>February 10: Politics of Death – Gender & Death</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>February 17: READING WEEK!</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>February 24: Politics of Death - Medical Aid in Dying Debates</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>March 2: Politics of Death - Dark Tourism</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>March 9: The Western Experience - Dying While Poor</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>March 16: The Western Experience - Indigenous Experiences</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>March 23: The Western Experience - Indigenous Experiences Continued</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>March 30: The Western Experience - Black North American Experiences</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>April 6: The Western Experience – Black North American Experiences Continued</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>April 13: Exam TBD</i>	<i>7</i>
ADDITIONAL READINGS	8
RESOURCES	8
<i>How to Cite:</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>How to Write an Essay:</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>How to Use Commas:</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>How to Use Semi-Colons:</i>	<i>8</i>
UNIVERSITY POLICIES	9
<i>ACADEMIC INTEGRITY</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>AUTHENTICITY / PLAGIARISM</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>ONLINE CONSENT</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>REQUESTS FOR RELIEF FOR MISSED ACADEMIC TERM WORK</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS, INDIGENOUS OR SPIRITUAL</i>	
<i>OBSERVANCES (RISO)</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES</i>	<i>10</i>

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course will compare various funerary and bereavement practices from around the world. Through consideration of examples as diverse as Indonesian mummy cleaning, Tibetan corpse exposure, dark tourism, and North American death-care practices, students will discover how relationships to death and to the dead are formed by culture, politics, history and religion. In the first half of the course, students will situate death and bereavement practices from around the world within their particular historical and cultural circumstances, including how colonialization and globalization create changes in mortuary practices.

The second half of the course will turn to North America in order to complicate the notion of a uniform “Western” experience of death. Students will consider how familiar “Western” practices are also shaped by culture, politics, history and religion, including how indigenous and black North American experiences fit into our rich mosaic of death, dying and bereavement.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. To provide students with an introductory survey of selected aspects of the cultural, historical, political and religious considerations of death, dying and bereavement.
2. To familiarize students with interdisciplinary perspectives around issues of death and dying within the fields of anthropology, religious studies, gender studies, geography, history, etc.
3. To cultivate analytical, reflective and critical thought regarding student’s own and others’ attitudes toward death, dying and bereavement.
4. To demonstrate an understanding of the complexities involved in funeral experiences and death rituals.
5. To challenge assumptions regarding contemporary “Western” funeral and burial practices, through gendered, class and racialized experiences in North America.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Journal articles can be found on the [McMaster Library](#) website. Book chapters are on Avenue as .pdf files.

Films will be accessible through Kanopy, Vimeo, YouTube, PBS or the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Links will be posted on Avenue, and are available within this syllabus.

One of the following books will be required for the book review. More information about the assignment, and links to purchase books will be made available on Avenue.

- Doughty, Caitlin. 2017. *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Holloway, Karla F. C., 2002. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: a Memorial*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kagan, Shelly. 2012. *Death*. Yale University Press.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 2013. *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

ASSESSMENT

Each student is responsible for completing all the assigned weekly readings and watching the posted video lectures and films. These will prepare you for the weekly online discussion questions and course assignments. PowerPoint slides will be made available before the video lectures are posted each week. Video lectures will be uploaded to YouTube, but will be taken offline after exactly one week. All written assignments must be uploaded to Avenue in .docx or .pdf format (NO .pages).

Grades will be determined on the following basis:

Participation 15%: Students will be graded based on their weekly participation on the Avenue discussion board, and for watching the weekly video lectures. It is your responsibility to answer the posted discussion questions, and participate in conversation with fellow classmates.

Discussion questions will be closed once the following week's question is posted (Monday nights). In order to receive a grade each week (1% per question), students have the option of either answering the posted question directly, or providing a thoughtful and respectful response to another student. Answers and responses must be a minimum of 60 words to a maximum of 250 words, and must engage with the course readings. You are not graded on grammar, but you are still expected to write coherently and clearly.

Quizzes 30%: Three online quizzes will be posted on Avenue. The questions will relate to course material (films, lectures, readings) from before the date of the quiz. Students will have 24 hours to initiate each quiz on Avenue, and one hour to complete each quiz once initiated.

Book Review 30%: Students will pick one book from a short list (see above). Students will have until March 23, 2020 to read their chosen book, write, and submit their review. Students are advised to pick a book based on their interest in the given topic. Students will be asked to critically reflect on the book in their review. Detailed instructions will be posted on Avenue.

Final Take-Home Exam 25%: Format and date TBD.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF LECTURES, READINGS AND AV MATERIALS

January 6: Introduction

Overview of the course, and details for the book review. Initial exploration of why studying death and diverse cultural practices is important.

Film:

- Death Around the World (2:45min) - https://youtu.be/JPcp58i_5Nw

Readings:

- Gire, James. 2014. "How Death Imitates Life: Cultural Influences on Conceptions of Death and Dying." *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 6(2). 3-22
- Laqueur, Thomas. 2015. "Do the Dead Matter?" in *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press. 35-54

January 13: Introduction to Death Studies

Exploring classic literature in the study of death and dying.

- Ariès, Philippe. 1974. "The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies." *American Quarterly* 26, no. 5: 536-560
- van Gennep, A. 2017. "The Rites of Passage." In A. C. G. M. Robben (Ed.). *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. 34-43

January 20: Concepts of Death - Ritual

Death rituals within various cultural contexts.

Film:

- Sky Burial: A Tibetan Death Ritual (11:25min) - <https://mcmaster.kanopy.com/video/sky-burial-tibetan-death-ritual>

Readings:

- Mueggler, Eric. 2018. "Playing with Corpses: Assembling Bodies for the Dead in Southwest China" In, *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*. 45-58
- Tsuji, Yohko. 2018. "Evolving Mortuary Rituals in Contemporary Japan" In, *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*. 17-30

January 27: Concepts of Death – Caring for the Dead

Remembering and caring for the dead.

- De Orellana, Margarita, Michelle Suderman, Dominique Dufétel, et al., "Day of the Dead Ritual Serenity." *Artes De México*, no. 62 (2011): 65-80.
- Topsfield, Jewel. 2017. "Life Among the Dead." *Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2017/toraja-death-ritual/>
- Bacigalupo, Ana Mariella. 2018. "Shamanic Rebirth and the Paradox of Disremembering the Dead among Mapuche in Chile." In, *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*. 279-292

February 3rd: Concepts of Death – Grief & Mourning

Understanding emotional responses to death across cultures.

Quiz #1

Film:

- Nagoro: The Valley of Dolls (6:30min) - <https://vimeo.com/92453765>

Readings:

- Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." In, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1-21.
- Joralemon, Donald. 2016. "Grief: Is It Complicated?" In *Mortal Dilemmas*. New York: Routledge. 81-94

February 10: Politics of Death – Gender & Death

The role of gender in death and dying.

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1993. "Islam and the Gendered Discourses of Death." In, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25: 187-205.
- Retsikas, Konstantinos. 2010. "The Sorcery of Gender: Sex, Death and Difference in East Java, Indonesia." *South East Asia Research* 18, no. 3: 471-502.
- Fletcher, Kami. "Feminist Death Work: A History" <https://deadmaidens.com/2018/01/24/feminist-death-work-a-history/>

February 17: READING WEEK!

February 24: Politics of Death - Medical Aid in Dying Debates

The right to life, and the right to death.

Film:

- How to Die in Oregon (1hr 47min) - <https://mcmaster.kanopy.com/video/how-die-oregon>

Readings:

- Lavi, Shai. 2008. "How Dying Became a 'Life Crisis'" in, *Daedalus* 137, no.1: 57-65.
- Newell, Christopher. 1996. "Critical Reflections on Euthanasia and People with Disability." *The Australian Quarterly* 68, no.3: 48-58.
- Rinaldo, Jen. 2016. "Safeguarding Against Abuse" - <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/safeguarding-against-abuse>
- **OPTIONAL:** "Religion and Euthanasia." BBC - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/euthanasia/religion/religion.shtml>

March 2: Politics of Death - Dark Tourism

Fetishizing the dead, exploiting the living – The moral ambiguity of Thanatourism.

Film:

- Vultures of Tibet: The Tradition of Sky Burial (21:38min) - <https://mcmaster.kanopy.com/video/vultures-tibet>

Readings:

- Adams, Kathleen M. 2018. "Leisure in the "Land of the Walking Dead." In, *Western Mortuary Tourism, the Internet, and Zombie Pop Culture in Toraja, Indonesia*". 97-121.
- Johnston, Tony. 2015. "The Geographies of Thanatourism." In, *Geography* 100, no. 1: 20-27.

March 9: The Western Experience - Dying While Poor

What does death look like at the margins? Are the poor treated differently in dying and in death?

Quiz #2

Film:

- Browse through the Hart Island Project website. Watch the 8min video found here: https://www.hartisland.net/aids_initiative
- What Happens to the Poor When They Die? (39min) - https://youtu.be/pwN_rfOoIuA

Readings:

- Moller, David Wendell. 2012. "Introduction" and "Dying Poor: An Invisible World." In *Dancing with Broken Bones*. Oxford University Press. 1-31
- Rich, M. 2016. "The Privilege of a Good Death" - <https://deadmaidens.com/2016/11/27/the-privilege-of-a-good-death/>
- **OPTIONAL:** Trebay, Guy. 1992. "The Last Place" In *Grand Street*, No. 42. 118-131

March 16: The Western Experience - Indigenous Experiences

Death in a Canadian context: missing & murdered indigenous women.

Film:

- Finding Dawn (1hr 13min) - https://www.nfb.ca/film/finding_dawn/

Readings:

- Razack, Sherene H. 2000. "Gendered Racial Violence and Spatialized Justice: The Murder of Pamela George." In *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*. 15 (2): 91–130.
- Ibbitson, John. 2017. "Missing Children, Unmarked Burials a Legacy of Residential Schools" - <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/missing-children-unmarked-burials-a-legacy-of-residential-schools/article27772367/>

March 23: The Western Experience - Indigenous Experiences Continued

Indigenous end-of-life experiences & reclaiming tradition.

Book Review Due

Film:

- Carved from the Heart: A Portrait of Grief, Healing and Community (29min) - <https://mcmaster.kanopy.com/video/carved-heart>

Readings:

- Hampton, Mary. 2010. "Completing the Circle: Elders speak about end-of-life care with Aboriginal families in Canada." In *J Palliat Care*. Spring;26(1): 6-14.
- Leung, Wency. 2018. "Patient Navigation Specialists are Helping Indigenous Cancer Patients Navigate Their Care." - <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/article-patient-navigation-specialists-are-helping-indigenous-cancer-patients/>

March 30: The Western Experience - Black North American Experiences

The Cemetery: "Jim Crow when you're alive, and Jim Crow when you're dead." Film:

- Miami's Historic Black Cemetery Struggles To Survive (6:31min) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV1hBnl-raI>

Readings:

- Fletcher, Kami. "Race & The Funeral Profession: What Jessica Mitford Missed" - <http://www.talkdeath.com/race-funeral-profession-what-jessica-mitford-missed/>
- King, Charlotte. 2010. "Separated by Death and Color: The African American Cemetery of New Philadelphia, Illinois" In *Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 44, No. 1: 125-137
- Nelson, Charmaine. 2018. "Black Cemeteries Force Us to Re-examine Our History With Slavery" In *The Walrus*. <https://thewalrus.ca/black-cemeteries-force-us-to-re-examine-our-history-with-slavery/>

April 6: The Western Experience – Black North American Experiences Continued

Empowerment through funeral & cemetery services.

Quiz #3

Film:

- Homegoings: Funeral Rites in the African American Community (57min) - <https://mcmaster.kanopy.com/video/homegoings-0>

Readings:

- Beverly Bunch-Lyons. 2015. "'Ours is a Business of Loyalty': African American Funeral Home Owners in Southern Cities". *The Southern Quarterly* 53, no. 1: 57-71.
- Jones, Diane. 2011. "The City of the Dead: The Place of Cultural Identity and Environmental Sustainability in the African-American Cemetery" In *Landscape Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 2: 226-240

April 13: Exam TBD

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Classic literature within the field of death studies. These are not required reading, but I am making them available for anyone interested in the subject.

- Ariès, Philippe. 1974. *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ariès, Philippe. 1981 *The Hour of Our Death*. New York: Knopf.
- Becker, Ernest. 1973. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press.
- Berger, Peter & Justin Kroesen. 2016. *Ultimate Ambiguities: Investigating Death and Liminality*. New York: Berghahn.
- Chidester, David. 1990. *Patterns of Transcendence: Religion, Death, and Dying*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub.
- Davies, Douglas. 2002. *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*. London: Continuum.
- Green, James W. 2008. *Beyond the Good Death: The Anthropology of Modern Dying*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mitford, Jessica. 1963. *The American Way of Death*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Plato, and John Burnet. 1967. *Plato's Phaedo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (or any edition)
- Walter, Tony. 1994. *The Revival of Death*, London: Routledge.

RESOURCES

I encourage students to seek help from classmates, your TAs, or from the instructor, if they find themselves struggling in the course. A reminder that [Student Services](#) offers psychological counselling, services for those who are food insecure, [crisis support](#), and academic tutoring.

How to Cite:

- “How do I Cite Sources?” - <https://www.plagiarism.org/article/how-do-i-cite-sources>
- MLA - https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_in_text_citations_the_basics.html
- Chicago - https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html
- APA - <https://guides.libraries.psu.edu/apaquickguide/intext>

How to Write an Essay:

- “How to Write an Essay” - <https://www.utoronto.ca/ccds/how-write-essay>

How to Use Commas:

- “13 Rules For Using Commas Without Looking Like An Idiot” - <https://www.businessinsider.com/a-guide-to-proper-comma-use-2013-9>

How to Use Semi-Colons:

- “Using Semi-Colons” - <https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/grammarpunct/semicolons/>

UNIVERSITY POLICIES

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:

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

AUTHENTICITY / PLAGIARISM

In this course we will be using a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. Students will be expected to submit their work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via Avenue to Learn (A2L) plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty. Students who do not wish to submit their work through A2L and/or Turnitin.com must still submit an electronic and/or hardcopy to the instructor. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to Turnitin.com or A2L. All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). To see the Turnitin.com Policy, please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity.

Undergraduate Course Management Policies December 13, 2017, effective September 1, 2018.

ONLINE CONSENT

In this course we will be using Avenue to Learn (A2L). 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. 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.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. 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 Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities policy.

REQUESTS FOR RELIEF FOR MISSED ACADEMIC TERM WORK

McMaster Student Absence Form (MSAF) In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar “Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work”.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS, INDIGENOUS OR SPIRITUAL OBSERVANCES (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the RISO policy. Students requiring a RISO accommodation should submit their request to their Faculty Office normally within 10 working days of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, A2L and/or McMaster email.