

California State University, Sacramento
Topics in the Humanities and Religious Studies: Death and Afterlife
Spring 2007

Humanities and Religious Studies 190-01
Mendocino 1024
Tuesday and Thursday, 3:00-4:15

Professor Jeffrey Brodd. Email: jbrodd@csus.edu
Office: Mendocino 2028. 278-7703. Hours:
T 10:20-11:20, 4:20-5:20; R 12:20-1:20; by appt.

This is the Humanities and Religious Studies capstone course and is intended for majors in the senior year. The topic this term is death and afterlife in cross-cultural and historical perspective. Our study will incorporate consideration of relevant art, architecture, history, literature, philosophy, music, and religion, and will apply the approaches studied in the Department's two core methodology courses (HRS 105: "Approaches to the Humanities" and HRS 108: "Approaches to Religious Studies"). The course will employ a modified seminar format, emphasizing analysis of primary and secondary material mainly by way of discussion. Class sessions will incorporate a variety of 'texts' in addition to the literature, including presentations of art and architecture, music, and film.

Learning Objectives

The course is designed to provide a culminating intellectual experience for Humanities and Religious Studies majors, and thus will incorporate the primary learning objectives of the program. As they apply to this course, these objectives are:

- Through reading and discussion of a variety of challenging literary works (see "Texts" below), each student will demonstrate the development of analytical reading and oral communication skills.
- Through the writing of an analytical term paper, along with expository/analytical essays on the final exam, each student will demonstrate writing skills appropriate to our field.
- Through study and discussion of visual and musical representations of themes relating to death and afterlife, each student will demonstrate the development of techniques of formal analysis within an interdisciplinary (i.e. historical, anthropological, psychological, etc.) context.
- Through an emphasis on the historical development of themes relating to death and afterlife, each student will demonstrate the ability to identify and analyze changing perspectives on beauty and spirituality. Students will also demonstrate the development of an historical/contextual understanding of religions.
- Especially due to the cross-cultural approach employed in the course, students will demonstrate the appreciation of diverse cultures.
- Virtually all aspects of the course will require students to use and enhance critical reasoning skills.

Texts

The Bible (any translation)

The Egyptian Book of the Dead (trans. Faulkner)

Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*

Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization*

Padma Sambhava, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (trans. Thurman)

Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (trans. Ranum)

Course Reader, with various excerpts from other selected texts

(Various brief readings and charts provided by instructor during the course of the semester)

Requirements and Grading

Each student will write a term paper (of approximately 15 pages) requiring substantial research and analysis. Students will also be required to complete a midterm (in-class) exam and a final (take-home) exam. Especially due to our modified seminar format, active participation in class is expected. All reading assignments are to be completed prior to the meetings for which they are listed (see “Schedule and Assignments”). Attendance is required, as per departmental attendance policy. Course grades will be based on the following:

Quality of engagement in class sessions	10%
Midterm exam	25%
Final exam	25%
Term paper (and review of another’s draft)	40%

Schedule and Assignments (reading assignments are underlined)

Introduction

Tues 1/30 Introductions

Thur 2/1 Approaches to death and afterlife. Greek and Roman attitudes toward death and afterlife. Plato’s “Myth of Er” and Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Bk. VI (both in Reader)

Mythologies of death and afterlife

Tues 2/6 Greek and Roman attitudes toward death and afterlife (cont.). Biblical attitudes toward death and afterlife. Psalms 88 and 116; Ezekiel 37.1-14; Daniel 12; Thessalonians 4; Matthew 24-25; Revelation 20-21

Thur 2/8 Biblical attitudes towards death and afterlife (cont.). Introduction to Ancient Egypt. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, pp. 13-18, 139-154

Tues 2/13 Envisioning the Egyptian afterlife. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, Plates 1-10, 27, 29-31, 34-37, and accompanying commentary on pp. 154-170

Thur 2/15 Envisioning the Egyptian afterlife (cont.)

Experiential perspectives

Tues 2/20 The medieval otherworld journey narrative. Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, Parts I and II

Thur 2/22 The medieval otherworld journey narrative (cont.)

Tues 2/27 The modern near-death experience narrative. Zaleski, Parts III and IV

Thur 3/1 The modern near-death experience narrative (cont.). **Due:** Initial statement of paper topic(s)

Tues 3/6 Library session with Christy Stevens (LIB 2023)

Thur 3/8 Introduction to Tibetan Buddhist perspectives on death and afterlife. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, xvii-xxii, 5-50, 83-91

- Tues 3/13 Interpretation and application of the *Bardo thos grol*. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 96-199
- Thur 3/15 The *Bardo thos grol* (cont.). **Due:** Final statement of paper topic and preliminary bibliography
- Tues 3/20 **Midterm exam**
- Thur 3/22 Introduction to Native American cultural history

(Spring Break)

- Tues 4/3 A Native American perspective on eschatology. Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization*, chs. 1-5; John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, chs. III and XXII (in Reader)
- Thur 3/5 (Cesar Chavez Birthday; holiday, campus closed)
- Tues 4/5 A Native American perspective on eschatology (cont.). Kehoe, chs. 6 and 8
- Thur 4/10 Perspectives on death in the ancient West (revisited)

Perspectives and attitudes of the living

- Tues 4/12 Death in medieval and early-modern Western culture. Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, chs. I and II
- Thur 4/17 Death in medieval and early-modern Western culture (cont.). **Due:** First draft of term paper (two copies)
- Tues 4/19 Evolving perspectives on death in the West. Ariès, ch. III and IV
- Thur 4/24 Evolving perspectives on death in the West (cont.)
- Tues 4/26 Death and modern consciousness. Film (in class): *The Seventh Seal*
- Thur 5/1 Death and modern consciousness (cont.)
- Tues 5/3 The existential dilemma of death. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 1-30 and 276-285 (in Reader)
- Thur 5/8 The existential dilemma of death (cont.). **Assigned:** Take-home final exam
- Tues 5/10 Comparative reflections
- Thur 5/15 Summary and epilogue. **Due:** Final draft of term paper and first draft with colleague's review

Final exam: Due by 5:00 on Tuesday, May 22