

# Death and Immortality



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Department of Religion

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## Teaching Fellows:

Cristina García González ([crgg@bu.edu](mailto:crgg@bu.edu))  
Office hours (in Religion Grad Lounge, 145 BSR basement)  
Tu/Th 11-12 AM & by Zoom

Ateeb Gul ([ateebgul@bu.edu](mailto:ateebgul@bu.edu))  
Office hours (same place)  
Mon 2 to 4:15pm & by Zoom

Why is death such a central preoccupation of religious traditions around the world and through history? Why do we recoil from corpses, and why are funerals constructed the way they are (and how do they fail)? Where do souls end up after they leave their bodies, and why do they sometimes haunt us or visit us? Drawing on ancient religious texts and journalistic reports on modern funerary practices, as well as anthropological and religious-studies analysis, this course will confront the major traditions, concerns, fears, and practices around death – all as one area of the study of religion.

## **Religion Learning Outcomes:**

- A. Knowledge of multiple religious traditions, their history, ideas, rituals, and vocabulary.*
- B. Ability to interpret critically religious texts, ritual practices, and other forms of religious expression.*
- C. Understanding of major theoretical models for the study of religion*

## **HUB Learning Outcomes**

*Global Citizenship and Intercultural Literacy:* You will use the tools of comparative religion to understand the amazing diversity of religious beliefs, practices, symbols, actors, and institutions over time and across the globe. You will learn how to compare and contrast different understandings of the

funeral process.

*Philosophical Inquiry and Life's Meanings:* You will demonstrate knowledge of important works and ideas about the nature of social and individual experience and be able to apply them to cultural situations and to your own life, and you will gain a vocabulary to discuss death and its processes in culture and experience.

*Creativity/Innovation:* Dealing with death demands our creativity and our analytical capabilities, so in this course you will explore works of fiction and art that grapple with the challenge of our mortality. You will also exercise your creativity by designing a funeral for a beloved pet (yours or a friend's).

## Requirements:

- a. Lecture attendance [required; we will have occasional attendance-checks over the course of the semester]

- b. Discussion section attendance (required) and participation, including "discussion questions" ..... 20%  
This grade will also cover students' active and informed discussion of readings in section. Absences, arriving late, or exhibiting unfamiliarity with assignments all have a negative effect on this grade.

*What is a discussion question?* An issue or question concerning any aspect of the readings or lecture that you consider *important* or believe other people would find *interesting* to talk about. The best discussion questions (ca. 250 words) propose ways of applying ideas and models from class/readings to new materials, *phrased in the form of a question*. Effective discussion questions might refer back to a previous reading or to a classmate's observation in order to explore the uses of an idea. The Teaching Fellows will use these questions to learn what people are thinking about and may ask you to read or summarize your question in class in order to spark discussion. Late submissions not accepted. \*\*When a paper is submitted the discussion question is waived. *Discussion questions will be graded (✓, ✓+, ✓-) according to quality and thoughtfulness.*

**Instructions for submission:** your discussion question should be sent by email to your TF by NOON the day before section: D1/D2 by Sunday @noon to [ateebgul@bu.edu](mailto:ateebgul@bu.edu); D3/D4 by Tuesday @noon to [crgg@bu.edu](mailto:crgg@bu.edu). Please use subject-line: [your name] RN106 [section #]: DQ for Week [#1? 2?]

- c. Letter to my Professor (due: 1/22-24 in discussion section). Your assignment is to write me a letter – 250-word (maximum!), single spaced – telling me (and your TF) what you would *like us to know* about your own experiences with death, funerals, memorial gatherings, loss/grief, religious beliefs about death, cemeteries, and/or ghosts. How do you think this background has brought you to this course or might influence how you study religion in this course? Try not to write this letter in one sitting and certainly don't hand in the first things that come to your mind. Think about it. It will not be for general reading, nor do you have to share any of it with anyone else in class. (**N.B.:** The TF's will lead a discussion at the first section meeting about the diversity of students' backgrounds in death, religious practice, and related topics, and you should participate if you are able). If you do a good job with this letter and take it seriously, you can expect a grade of A or A- based on effort (this won't always be the case in this class!!). ..... 5%
- d. Quizzes. There will be four short (10-minute) quizzes over the course of the semester to make sure you are doing the reading and gaining essential vocabulary and comparative examples (lowest score dropped). ..... 15%

- e. Mid-term (3/18): in class, with blue-books ..... 20%
- f. Paper, due 4/5 (3-5pp.): *death at the Museum* ..... 10%
- The goal of this assignment is to get you out in the world of art and sacred representations, to learn yourself how imagining death (corpses, martyrs, Hell, cemeteries, burial) inspires creativity and thought. In the weeks before this assignment is due we will examine several paintings in class, so you will get a sense of “what I am looking for” in terms of analysis. In order to find your subject you will visit the Museum of Fine Arts, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, *and/or* the Harvard Art Museum and look for a painting, sculpture, or other type of object (from any culture or period) that addresses death in some way that you can discuss in your paper. The object must be accessible on the museum web-page (please include URL), and you must include your own photo of yourself by the piece, so we know you saw it! In your paper you must first explain the history, culture, and context from which it comes (<1 page) – that is, how would it be displayed or used when it was first made? Who would have used it? – and then (1-2 pages) you must discuss how it addresses death. In your discussion you should make reference to ideas and materials discussed in the course
- g. Final Exam ..... 30%

### **Class Decorum and Expectations**

- *Arrive on time* to lectures and discussion section; late arrivals are extremely distracting, both to your classmates and the professor.
- *No web-surfing allowed.* You may use your laptops **ONLY** to take notes and access required readings from Blackboard. Any other use of laptops will involve embarrassing sanctions.
- Cell phones must be OFF
- All work must be your own, according to the BU Academic Conduct Code. If you use sources (from this course, from the library, from the web), you must *meticulously cite* them, using Chicago or MLA style! **CHEATING** or any sort of dishonesty in the presentation of written work is a **VERY SERIOUS MATTER**. Use of ChatGPT or other AI paper-composition tools *counts as cheating*, since you are not the one doing the composition. If the Teaching Fellows and I discover evidence (*not proof, just evidence!*) of cheating or dishonesty of any sort, we will refer you directly to the CAS Dean’s Office and eliminate you from this course. Don’t test this policy; it could ruin your college career. *Read this very carefully:*  
[www.bu.edu/academics/files/2011/08/AcademicConductCode.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/academics/files/2011/08/AcademicConductCode.pdf)  
 (See also an additional sheet about plagiarism posted on the Blackboard page under Course Information).

### **Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignments**

*A note on reading assignments:* There is no textbook for this class, since the main ideas will be presented in lectures. For each topic or day there are listed readings you should read before the lecture, so you know what I am talking about. For topics that carry over

several days, I put all the readings with the first day. You may choose to skim the readings or to ignore them entirely, but then you will not be getting much out of the course, which gives you the opportunity to think and read widely about this topic death. So it is really your choice whether you take “read” as *recommended/optional* or as a stimulating opportunity to immerse yourself in the topic before the lecture. Finally, it may be difficult to pass the quizzes and exams without doing the readings.

*All assigned and recommended readings are accessible through  
the course Blackboard page or as **E-Books** available through the B.U. Library*

1. 1/19 Opening class

### **Part I: How We Make Sense of Mortuary Beliefs and Traditions**

2. 1/22-26 Death as a social passage  
**Read:** Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, pp. 1-4, 10-13, 15-25, 26-40
3. 1/29-2/2 The funeral passage  
**Read:** Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 146-65; Eliade, *FPTZ* §163 (Toradja); “Jewish Mourning Practices”; Gross, “Jewish Ritual is Adapted” (2001); Kakutani, “Rituals for Grieving” (2001); Knipe, “Journey of a Lifebody”; Sharma, “Ritual Lens”; “Strippers at Chinese Funerals”  
**Quiz #1** (2/2)
4. 2/5 The transition of the corpse  
**Read:** *FPTZ* §163 (review); “Corpse Impurity in Early Judaism”; Boxer, “The Lure of the Dead” (1995); Bannerjee, “Cleansing Iraqi Bombing Victims” (2004); Danforth, “Death as Passage” (1982); “Giving New Life to Vultures” (2012); Faison, “Tibetans and Vultures” (1999); *Recommended:* Young, “How Disgust Explains Everything” (2021); Gaur, “The Ganges Cannot Lie” (2021)
- 2/9 No Class
- 2/12 The transition of the corpse (cont’d)
5. 2/16 The transition of the soul  
**Read:** *FPTZ* §§173-75 (northern native peoples); Fiction: Brockmeier, “The Brief History of the Dead” (2003). Also on Egyptian passage of the soul: *FPTZ* §§166-67 (Pharaoh’s soul); selection from *Book of Traversing Eternity* (any soul as akin to Pharaoh’s); recommended: Derchain, “Death in Egyptian Religion”
- 2/19 No BU Classes
- 2/21 The transition of the soul (cont’d)
6. 2/23-26 The necessity and clarity of the funeral passage  
**Read:** Sengupta, “Why Disposing of the Dead Matters to the Living” (2002); Frenkel, “They Thought They Knew Death . . .” (2024); Abdulrahim, “As Gaza

Losses Mount . . .” (2024); R. Frankfurter, “‘Dead Body Management’ and Ebola” (2016); *Fiction*: Mukasonga, “Grief” (2020)  
**QUIZ #2** (2/26)

## Part II: Visions, Stories, and Doctrines about the Afterlife

7. 2/28-3/4 **Hell** and other zones of the afterlife
  - (1) **Read, on Lands of the Dead:** *FPTZ* §170 (Egypt); §172 (Zoroastrian); “Sheol in the Biblical Tradition”
  - (2) **. . . on the origin of Hell:** “Theodicy and Hell in the Jewish and Christian Traditions”; Plato’s *Myth of Er* (*FPTZ* §182 or longer version); “Who inflicts punishments in Hell?” “Early Muslim Mortuary Transition”
  - (3) **. . . on the Experience of Hell:** *The Apocalypse of Paul*; “It’s Fun to Make Hell on Earth (This American Life)”
  - (4) **Study:** The depiction of Hell in Hieronymus Bosch’s great painting “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (also on Blackboard: scroll down from the image to find some discussion questions).
  - (5) **. . . on the origin of “Purgatory”:** Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981), pp. 1-14.
8. 3/6 Visiting the Dead: Myths of Crossing the Divide  
**Read:** “A Tale of Necromancy from Ancient Israel”; “*Odyssey* 10-11”; “Orpheus & Eurydice”; “The Descent of Inanna.” *Recommended:* *FPTZ* §158 (Descent of Ishtar); Recommended: Johnston, “Ancient Greek Tales of the Afterlife”; Kripal, “Comparative Practice: Re-Death, Near-Death, and After-Death Experiences” (2014)
9. 3/8 Spirits of the Dead: Haunting, Horror, Fellowship with Ancestors  
**Read:** Chomsinsummun & Fuller, “The Visitor” (2015); “A Chinese Ghost-Exorcism”; Kenny & Forsythe, “House-hunting in Hong Kong”; Suon, “A Marriage Problem” (2023); “Ghosts who stay in Houses”; “Día de los Muertos,” Gods of the Dead as Saviors: “Masters of the Dead in Haitian Vodou”; “Baron Samedi performed”; “Santa Muerte”

## ☼ ☼ ☼ *Spring Break* ☼ ☼ ☼

10. 3/18 **Mid-term Exam**
11. 3/20 “Death” as a social state  
**Read:** Turner, “Betwixt-and-Between”
12. 3/22-25 Asceticism and Appropriations of “Death”  
**Read:**; “The Life of Onesima”; “The Life of Simeon the Stylite”; “Vamaksepa the Tantric Saint”

13. 3/27-29 The transcendence of death: from martyrdom to resurrection to Savior-God of Christians (holy day of Easter: 3/31)  
 (1) **Read/view:** on the idea of resurrection, *FPTZ* §190 (ancient Iranian; see notes on Blackboard); Ezekiel; Daniel 12; Paul to Corinthians; Resurrection in the Qur'an and Hadith: *FPTZ* §191; Signorelli, "The Resurrection of the Flesh" (1502 painting).  
 (2) **Read/view:** on the celebration of Good Friday (which is on March 29th!), the story of the crucifixion of Jesus (Mt 26-28); "Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem"; video: "Holy Week in Granada, Spain"
14. 4/1-3 The transcendence of death: martyrdom  
**Read:** on early Christian *martyrology*: "The Martyrdom of Perpetua & Felicitas"; "Martyrdom of Polycarp."  
**Read/view:** on the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala (Shiite Muslim tradition), "The Story of Hussein"; "When Fatima Came to Karbala" (lament/animation); "Asura Procession in Dearborn MI, 2015".  
**Guest lecture** on Karbala and Asura: Ateeb Gul  
**Quiz #3** (4/1)
15. 4/5 **Paper due:** Death at the Museum  
 (Requiring your visit to the MFA, Gardner Museum, Harvard Museum, or further afield). See **Requirements**, above, for specific instructions.
16. 4/8 The transcendence of death: mythic quests for immortality  
**Read:** *FPTZ* §159 (Epic of Gilgamesh – ancient Babylonian); §187 (Glorification of the Righteous before God – Islam)  
**Guest lecture** on Gilgamesh and Immortality: Cristina Garcia Gonzalez
17. 4/10-12 The transcendence of death: collective suicide  
**Read:** David Chidester, *Salvation & Suicide* (1988) BU Library E-book, Introduction + Chapter 5. Recommended: Higgins, "... To Starve to Meet Jesus" (2023).
- 4/15 No BU Classes
- 4/17 Collective Suicide (cont'd)
18. 4/19 The transcendence of death: *nirvana*  
**Read:** Lester, from "Buddhism" (1993); *FPTZ* §192.
- 4/22 No Class (Passover)
19. 4/24 Nirvana (cont'd)  
**Quiz #4**
20. 4/26-30 The Death of the World  
**Read:** on the renewal of the world in cosmic eschatology, "Two Apocalyptic Visions of Renewal"; *FPTZ* §194 (American Sioux; read especially "messiah letter"). Review *FPTZ* §190-92.  
**Read:** on the decline of the world under global warming, Waterman, "Thirty-Six Years Later"; Vasquez-Manoff & White, "In the Atlantic Ocean";
21. 5/1 Conclusions