

fREL3191 - Death and Afterlife
Spring 2025
Professor Vasudha Narayanan

Syllabus

Please read this Course Syllabus thoroughly and all the important course deadlines below the Syllabus.

Refer to this syllabus throughout the semester for any course-related questions. Once you have read through this entire syllabus, please complete the syllabus quiz available on Canvas.

Course Information

Credits: 3 credit hours

Course Term: Spring 2025

Class Meeting Time: NONE (but pay attention to strict deadlines, as outlined below)

Office Hours: By appointment

Prerequisite Knowledge: None

Instructor

Dr. Vasudha Narayanan - vasu@ufl.edu

Distinguished Professor, Department of Religion

Teaching Assistant

Prathik Murali – prathikmurali@ufl.edu

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Religion

*****Please be advised that you must use Canvas for all course communications; please include Dr. Narayanan and Prathik Murali in every message. *****

*****If you have any technical issues regarding your quizzes and/or other assignments, you must contact the UF Computing Help Desk immediately at 352-392-4357, option 2. Once you have done so, email your instructor and TA with the details of your problem along with your Help Desk ticket number. -- Please do not contact the instructors without the help desk ticket number. *****

Course Description

This course is divided into two sections examining conceptions of death and the afterlife. The first (and longer) section examines conceptions of death and the afterlife from the perspective of various religious traditions worldwide. Topics that will be explored in this section include: conceptions of a soul (if any), what happens to a person at death, funerary rites, various conceptions of the ultimate reality (theistic, monistic, and so forth), notions of salvation and/or liberation, judgment, and multiple conceptions time (e.g., linear or cyclical). The second section will explore how some of these religious perspectives are reflected in popular culture and spiritual movements. This section will focus on views of reincarnation and debates on near-death experiences.

Please note that this course approaches religion from an academic perspective, not personal or theological.

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Provide a background for each religious tradition to contextualize notions of death and the afterlife.
- Recognize basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according to various Western and Eastern religious traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Japanese, Indigenous, Christian, Judaic, and Islamic traditions) as exemplified through sacred texts (written or oral), ritual practices, and popular beliefs.
- Identify a few funerary practices associated with different religious traditions.
- Understand relationships between conceptions of death and the afterlife and key doctrinal positions maintained by the respective religious tradition.

****All learning objectives are provided within the individual modules throughout the course ****

Required Text

- Bregman, Lucy ed. *Death & Dying in World Religions*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2019.

Please do not use any other edition. The content and page numbers will be different.

****Other supplemental materials, such as videos will be provided Canvas. ****

Instructional Methods

There are readings, videos, and other materials corresponding to each course module, but this course is designed to be as interactive as possible. So, as a member of this class, you will be required to contribute to weekly discussion posts and peer responses based on the material for each week. You will also be required to complete quizzes that will test your comprehension of the material in each course module. The deadlines for all assignments and quizzes are clearly stated in Canvas (in the Calendar). There will be a final exam, and a two reflection papers that you will write during the course. Please see the **Modules** Tab in Canvas to view all videos, readings and other course materials.

*****It is recommended to use Canvas using Chrome on a computer and not a mobile device*****

Weekly quizzes will be administered in Canvas on Fridays in general. You can access them through the Modules tool, in the *Modules* page, or through *Assignments*. The first quiz will cover the *Syllabus* and *Start Here* sections. You are responsible for completing your quizzes by 11:59 pm on the due date.

Once you have completed the readings and discussion and viewed the lectures for that week, make sure you study the material thoroughly. After you've studied the material, you should be ready to begin. The quiz is timed, so it is necessary for you to know all the material before you start (**i.e., there will not be enough time to look up each answer in your notes, so you should prepare as if your notes were not available to you**). You will have 10 minutes to complete each quiz.

If you are still taking the quiz when the due time passes you will not be allowed to finish it – the system will auto-submit your quiz. Thus, you **MUST *finish* the quiz BEFORE the deadline**. No makeups are allowed, except for medical emergencies, for which a doctor's certificate documentation must be provided.

Please note that the first quiz of the semester, the syllabus quiz, is due on Friday 17, January.

Before taking your first quiz, view the Canvas video tutorial on taking quizzes

Every week students are expected to write a minimum of two posts on the online course discussion forums in Canvas. **This assignment (most of the time; do check each week) opens each week on Monday and closes on Friday, at 11:59pm**. The first post will respond to the course readings and/or lectures required for that week. The first post must be uploaded before **Wednesday, at 11:59pm**. The second post will respond to a fellow classmate and must be submitted **before Friday at 11:59pm**. Students should feel free to post about a topic from the readings and/or videos for that week that most interest them. A few example topics and questions will also be made available to students should selecting a topic prove too difficult.

****Note: For credit, the reflection post must be submitted by the appropriate deadlines. Both the initial post and the peer response are required for full credit. Half credit will be docked if you do not respond to another student's post. A quarter will be docked if your post lacks a citation (see below). Every discussion post is worth 1 point. No points will be awarded for late or missing posts****

In every initial post, you must cite (at least) one of the videos and/or the texts corresponding to the appropriate Module. **All initial posts must include clear in-text citations. The citation must be from the text or video assigned to the particular module. You must mention sources and include page numbers and/or video-stamps.** Chicago author-date style is recommended but other formats (such as MLA or APA) are also accepted. We do not want you to use outside sources here. Please stick to the assigned readings and videos.

While there are no word limits for these posts, there is a word minimum. A minimum of 250 words for the initial post and 150 words for the response is a good rule to follow.

All posts should be articulate, thorough, and adhere to the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling of the English language. They should be respectful, well written, and carefully edited and should exhibit your analytical thinking. You are welcome to go beyond the minimum requirements and respond to multiple students. The responses must be thoughtful! A simple "*I agree*" or "*I like what you wrote*" will not suffice. Instead, both the initial post and response must contribute to and provide something substantive for a useful discussion in order to receive credit. While there is not a word limit for these posts, a minimum of 250 words for the initial post and 150 words for the response is a good rule to follow.

Additionally, all posts should be courteous, academic and non-aggressive. Rude and demeaning online behavior will not be tolerated for any reason and could adversely affect your grade. While students may certainly be critical, responses and observations should be presented respectfully in a professional and academic manner. Please note that this may not be the place to articulate one's personal beliefs without other theoretical and academic frames.

Students are encouraged to make multiple (relevant) posts, although this is not mandatory. You can use audio, video, and/or written mediums of communication in the discussion section.

Please be warned that factual inaccuracies will result in you receiving a 0 for that particular discussion response.

Reflection Papers

You are required to write two reflection papers for this course. The first reflection paper is due on Feb 23, 2025. It is made available to you from Feb 03, 2025. The second reflection paper is due on Apr 15, 2025, and is made available to you from Apr 01, 2025. The first reflection paper will be based on a list of movies that are provided to you in the assignment on Canvas that deal with religion and death. You will choose a movie, watch it, and reflect on it, connecting it to the course material.

Your reflection paper must consider what themes from the different religions you have hitherto studied are played out in these movies. Please limit the essay to two traditions or less to avoid over-generalizations. Among the themes you may want to consider are classical and popular notions of heaven, hell, "in-between state," reincarnation, survival of personalities through lifetimes, survival as ghosts, this-worldly justice, judgment on individual souls, unfinished business, wish-fulfilment in life, lessons to be learned on earth, guardian angels, contact between human beings and the dead, guidance from the dead, untimely death, and so forth. This list is not exhaustive and you are encouraged to identify themes not listed. Some questions you may wish to ask yourself are, "How are such themes addressed and handled in the movie(s)?" "Do such themes coincide with what a particular tradition upholds." "If so, how?" "If not, why?" Make sure to draw upon the course readings and lectures in order to support your observations and conclusions. For additional details on grading and structure, please refer to the Grading Rubric in the Assignments tab.

Reflection Paper II

You will be visiting a digital exhibit on Death and Afterlife in Himalayan Traditions by the Rubin Museum and write a 5-page reflection note. Sources will be provided to you along with detailed instructions and rubrics on the canvas page. You will be able to see the instructions on Apr 01, 2025. Your second paper is due by Apr 15, 2025.

Final Exam

This course will conduct a **final exam that will be administered online via Canvas starting on April 28, 2025. The exam will be available until April 30th, 11:59 pm.** Please make sure

to start your exam with enough time to finish it, as the exam will close at 11:59 pm whether or not you have completed it.

All course activities will be conducted via Canvas (<https://lss.at.ufl.edu/>).

Course Schedule

Under the 'modules' tab on Canvas you will find all of the readings, videos, assignments, discussions, and quizzes for each module of the course, along with their respective due dates.

Course Technology

Frequent access to a computer with a good broadband connection is required. See the Start Here section for details on the technology used in the class.

University Policies

University Policy on Accommodating Students with Disabilities

Students requesting accommodation for disabilities must first register with the Dean of Students Office.

The Dean of Students Office will provide documentation to the student who must then provide this documentation to the instructor when requesting accommodation. You must submit this documentation prior to submitting assignments or taking the quizzes or exams. Accommodations are not retroactive; therefore, students should contact the office as soon as possible in the term for which they are seeking accommodations.

Note on Plagiarism

All written assignments including discussion posts and papers must include the proper method of citation from the citation style of your choosing. Please see <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/> for more information on how to cite your work. Please go through the preventing plagiarism guidelines

The use of ChatGPT or other A.I. software is forbidden and goes against the university honor code.

Grading Breakdown

Discussions	20%
Quizzes	40%
Extra Credit Quiz	0%
Reflection Papers	20%
Final Exam	20%
Total	100%

*****Please note: A minimum grade of C is required for general education credit. *****

Grading Scale

A: 100-93;
A -: 92-90
B+: 89-87;
B: 86-83
B -: 82-80
C+: 79-77
C: 76-73;
C -: 72-70
D+: 69-67;
D: 66-63
D -: 62-60;
E: 59 or below

Resources at a Glance

Health and Wellness

U Matter, We Care: If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit U Matter, We Care website to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress.
(<https://umatter.ufl.edu/>)

Counseling and Wellness Center: Visit the Counseling and Wellness Center website or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services
(<https://counseling.ufl.edu/>)

Student Health Care Center: Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or visit the Student Health Care Center website (<https://shcc.ufl.edu/>)

University Police Department: Visit UF Police Department website or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies) (<https://police.ufl.edu/>)

UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center: For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website
(<https://ufhealth.org/locations/uf-health-shands-emergency-room-trauma-center>)

GatorWell Health Promotion Services: For prevention services focused on optimal wellbeing, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the GatorWell website or call 352-273-4450. (<https://gatorwell.ufsa.ufl.edu/>)

UF General Education Criteria Page: All undergraduate students (except those transferring to UF with an A.A. degree from a Florida public college or an A.A. certificate from a Florida public state university) are required to complete UF's general education requirement to graduate. Requirements listed here (<https://undergrad.aa.ufl.edu/general-education/gen-ed-program/program-requirements/>)

Academic Resources

E-learning technical support: Contact the UF Computing Help Desk at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at helpdesk@ufl.edu.

Career Connections Center: Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services.

Library Support: Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources.

Teaching Center: Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352- 392-6420. General study skills and tutoring.

Writing Studio: 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers.

Student Complaints On-Campus: Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage for more information (<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>)

Course Summary:

Date	Details	Due
Wed Jan 15, 2025	Discussion Topic Introduce Yourself	due by 11:59pm
Fri Jan 17, 2025	Quiz Syllabus Quiz	due by 11:59pm
Fri Jan 24, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Hinduism	due by 11:59pm
Fri Jan 31, 2025	Quiz Quiz 01	due by 11:59pm
Fri Feb 7, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Buddhism	due by 11:59pm
Fri Feb 14, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss East Asian Traditions	due by 11:59pm
Fri Feb 21, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Indigenous Traditions	due by 11:59pm
	Quiz Quiz 02	due by 11:59pm
Sun Feb 23, 2025	Assignment Reflection Paper 1	due by 11:59pm

Date	Details	Due
Fri Feb 28, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Christianity	due by 11:59pm
	Quiz Quiz 03	due by 11:59pm
Fri Mar 7, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Judaism	due by 11:59pm
Fri Mar 14, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Islam	due by 11:59pm
Fri Mar 28, 2025	Quiz Quiz 04	due by 11:59pm
Sun Mar 30, 2025	Assignment Reflection Paper 2	due by 11:59pm
Fri Apr 4, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Reincarnation	due by 11:59pm
Fri Apr 11, 2025	Discussion Topic Discuss Contemporary Culture	due by 11:59pm
Fri Apr 18, 2025	Quiz Quiz 05	due by 11:59pm
Wed Apr 30, 2025	Quiz Final	due by 11:59pm

Module 1: Introduction

- **Reading**
 - Bregman, Introduction, pp. ix-xiii
 - [Moore & Williamson, “The Universal Fear of Death and the Cultural Response,” pp. 3-12 in *Handbook of Death & Dying*.](#)
- **Lecture**

- [Welcome & Introduction Lecture](#) by Dr. Vasudha Narayanan
- **Video**
 - [What happens when we die?](#)

Module 2: Hindu Traditions

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Elaborate on the beliefs and/or practices relating to death and the afterlife for Hindu traditions.
- Identify a few important Hindu sacred texts.
- Summarize Hindu cyclical conceptions of time.
- Differentiate (Sanskrit) terms relating to death and the afterlife such as: *samsara*, *karma*, *moksha*, *atman*.
- Summarize the beliefs and/or practices relating to death and the afterlife for Hindu traditions.
- Explain basic concepts of Samkhya thought.
- Identify and explain the Sanskrit terms *samskara* and *pitṛ*.
- Discuss the concept of karma in greater detail.
- Discern between the different Hindu stages of life.
- **Reading**
 - [Murata, "Grieving Tradition in a New Land: Hindu Death and Dying Rituals in American," pp. 127-148](#)
- **Lecture**
 - [Hinduism - Part 1](#) by Dr. Vasudha Narayanan,
 - [Hinduism - Part 2](#) by Dr. Vasudha Narayanan,
 - [Hinduism - Part 3](#) by Dr. Vasudha Narayanan,

Module 3: Buddhist Tradition

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Identify a few beliefs and/or practices from Buddhist traditions.
- Discuss basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according to Buddhist traditions.
- Identify a few funerary practices associated with Buddhist traditions.
- Analyse the relationships between conceptions of death and the afterlife and a few key doctrinal positions maintained by the Buddhist religious tradition.
- **Reading**
 - Bregman, Chapter 8, pp. 107–120

- [Strong, “The Death and Parinirvana of the Buddha” and “The Distribution of the Relics,” pp. 45–49](#)
- [Strong, “Introduction: Relics of the Buddha,” pp. 1-20](#)
- **Lecture**
 - [Introduction to lectures](#) by Vasudha Narayanan
 - [Buddhism: Death & Rebirth](#) by Phillip Green
 - [Buddhist Stuppas at the Harn](#) by Phillip Green
 - [Bodhisattvas at the Harn](#) by Alyssa Peyton
- **Video**
 - [What happens when we die?](#)

Module 4: East Asian Traditions

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- **Identify basic beliefs and/or practices for some Chinese and Japanese traditions.**
- **Discuss basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according some Chinese and Japanese traditions.**
- **Describe important questions about death and the afterlife from the standpoint of Chinese and Japanese traditions.**

Reading

- Bregman, Chapter 9 & 10, pp. 119 -152

Lecture

- ["Notions of Death and the Afterlife in China"](#) by Kendall Marchman
- ["Mizukokuyo Case Study" Japanese Traditions](#) by Jason Purvis

Module 5: Indigenous Traditions

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- **Identify the beliefs and/or practices for some Indigenous traditions.**
- **Discuss basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according to some Indigenous traditions.**

Reading

- Bregman, Chapter 11, pp. 153 - 167

Lecture

- [Death of the World, Movements in Indigenous Cultures](#) Part I by Dr. Robin M. Wright
- [Death and Afterlife According to the Baniwa](#) Part II by Dr. Robin M. Wright

- [Religions in Andean Region](#) by Dr. Maya Stanfield-Mazzi
- [Exhibit of the Kongo](#) by Dr. Robin Poyner

Video

- [Life that Doesn't End with Death](#) (TED Talk) by Kelli Swazey
- [What happens when we die?](#)

Module 6: Christian Traditions

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Identify the beliefs and/or practices for the Christian religious tradition.
- Discuss basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according to Christian traditions.
- Analyze the relationships between conceptions of death and the afterlife and key doctrinal positions maintained by the Christian religious tradition.
- Identify important questions about death and the afterlife from the standpoint of the Christian religious tradition
- **Reading**
 - Bregman, Chapters 4 & 5, pp. 43-76
 - [Holten, "Hell and the Goodness of God"](#)
 - [Editors of ChristianHistory.net, "What did Luther actually say in the 95 Theses that sparked the Protestant Reformation?"](#)
 - [Gin, "Why the Hell Does Hell Still Matter?"](#)
 - [Interview with Rob Bell, "Hell, in Rob Bell's Own Words: State of Belief Radio"](#)
- **Lecture**
 - [Death and the Afterlife in Christianity](#) by Dr. Dan Johnson
 - [Death and the Afterlife in Renaissance Italy](#) by Dr. Elizabeth Ross
 - [Controversies Concerning Hell](#) by Dr. Sean O'Neil
- **Video**
 - [Heaven & Hell \(PBS\)](#)
- **Optional Reading**
 - [Q&A: Francis Chan on Rob Bell and Hell](#)

Module 7: Judaism

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Discuss basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according Judaism.
- Identify common funerary practices associated with Judaism.
- Explain important questions about death and the afterlife from the standpoint of Judaism.

Instructional Materials

- Reading
 - Bregman, Chapter 3, pp. 29-42
 - [Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz, *Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Belief in the Afterlife, Past Lives and Living with Purpose*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish](#)

[Light Publishing, 2001. Pp. 33-39 and 81-101.](#)

[Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz, Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Belief in the Afterlife, Past Lives and Living with Purpose. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Light Publishing, 2001. Pp. 33-39 and 81-101.](#)

- Lecture
 - [Judaism: Death and Afterlife](#) by Rabbi David Kaiman
- Video
 - [What happens when we die?](#)

Module 8: Islam

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Discuss basic conceptions of death and the afterlife according to Islam.
- Analyze the relationships between conceptions of death and the afterlife and key doctrinal positions maintained in Islam.
- Identify important questions about death and the afterlife from the standpoint of Islam.

Instructional Materials

- **Reading**
 - Bregman, Chapter 6, pp. 77-90
- **Lecture**
 - [Death and Dying in Islam](#) by Dr. Zoharah Simmons

Module 9: Reincarnation

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Recognize how conceptions of death and the afterlife are reflected in popular culture, Spirituality, and New Age movements.
- Explain the topic of reincarnation and past lives.

Instructional Materials

- **Reading**
 - [Shroder, "Reincarnation May Lead to Life After Death," pp. 190-200](#)
 - [Emmons, "The Spiritualist Movement: Bringing the Dead Back"](#)
 - [Weiss, *Many Lives, Many Masters*, Preface & Chapters 1-3](#)
 - [Do You Believe in Life After Death? These Scientists Study It: NYT Article](#)
- **Video**
 - ["In Another Life: Reincarnation in America"](#)

Module 10: The Afterlife in Contemporary Culture

By the end of this module students will have completed the following objectives:

- Explain the debate surrounding the topic of an afterlife and near-death experiences.

- Recognize how some of the concepts of death and religion are portrayed in some forms of contemporary culture (specifically Star Trek)

Instructional Materials

- **Reading**

- [Smith, “There Is an Afterlife”](#)
- [Kurtz, “There Is No Afterlife”](#)
- [Sharp, “Near-Death Experiences Are Glimpses of the Afterlife”](#)
- [Ebbern, Mulligan and Beyerstein, “Near-Death Experiences Are Not Glimpses of an Afterlife”](#)
- [Kraemer, "What Happens When You Die," in *Religions of Star Trek*](#)
- [Alexander, “Proof of Heaven: A Doctor’s Experience With the Afterlife,” in *Newsweek*](#)

- **Video**

- [Dr. Vasudha Narayanan introduces Dr. Louis Ritz](#)
- [On Consciousness, Near Death Experience, and Meditation](#) by Dr. Louis Ritz, Department of Neuroscience, University of Florida
- [What happens when we die?](#)

- **Optional Reading**

- Opposing Viewpoints Readings
 - [Seidman, “Near-Death Experiences Have Natural, Not Spiritual, Causes”](#)
 - [Ring, “Near-Death Experiences May Be Glimpses of an Afterlife”](#)
 - [Groothuis, “Near-Death Experiences May Not Be Glimpses of the Afterlife”](#)
 - [Singh, "Inner and Outer Peace through Meditation"](#)