

## RELS 103-3: Death and the Afterlife

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Office Hours: By appointment

Fall 2023  
Online Synchronous  
TR 10:50 AM – 12:05 PM

**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** This course is a comparative introduction to religion organized around the themes of death, conceptions of the self and/or soul, cosmologies, perceptions of ultimate reality, and the relationship between the living and the dead. These topics will be analyzed through engagement with religious and culturally specific understandings and ritual practices. The religious and cultural traditions from which these are drawn are vast and include Indigenous and Afro-Atlantic perceptions, select European and Mediterranean folk cultures; the traditions Judaism and Christianity; Hinduism and Buddhism; Daoism and Confucianism, and Shinto. Additionally, we will examine current research on life after death in a variety of studies linked to scientific investigation of post-mortem reality independent of religion or philosophy.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

- Archangel, Dianne. *Afterlife Encounters: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Experiences*. (Hampton Road Publishing, 2005)
- Danaos, Kosta. *The Magus of Java: Teachings of an Authentic Taoist Immortal*. (Inner Traditions, 2000)
- Markides, Kyriacos C. *The Magus of Strovolos: The Extraordinary World of a Spiritual Healer*. (Penguin Books, 1989)
- Moreman, Christopher M. *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017)
- *These texts will be supplemented by PDFs and Videos to be found on our course page.*

### **GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

This course satisfies the General Education requirements for a course in the Humanities, which address these two additional Student Learning Outcomes: 1) Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture; 2) Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the discipline and interpret the material in weekly writing assignments and a final paper.

### **COURSE QUESTIONS:**

- How do various religious and cultural traditions perceive death?
- How do these various traditions construct a relationship with the dead?
- What, if any, role to the dead take in relationship to the living in these traditions?
- What are these traditions' perceptions of cosmology and ultimate reality?
- What ritual technologies are used in relation to death, afterlives, and ultimate realities?

## **COURSE MAP:**

Our course is relatively straightforward, our zoom sessions will be structured around the assigned readings for a given day. Our readings will be our main focus, and they will be supplemented by material I will post to OAKS. This course will be organized into modules within OAKS. In **Module 1**, we will have a general introduction to our course and discuss current understandings and anxieties pertaining to death and dying. We will conclude this module by analyzing the role the dead occupied in Ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean cultural spheres and the types of encounters with the dead people experienced in these places. In **Module 2**, we will learn about contemporary traditions in Africa and pay special attention to the syncretic traditions of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora such as Vodou. We will also have a brief discussion of North American indigenous traditions. In this module we will encounter various methodologies of ancestor veneration, reciprocity, and ritual technologies pertaining to spirit contact and communication. **Module 3** will see us move towards the more populous religious traditions of the world. Within, we will cover the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In this module we will begin to discuss mysticism and ritual technologies meant to facilitate experience of ultimate reality. In **Module 4**, we will analyze the ritual and conceptual approaches to death and dying in South and East Asian traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. As in the other modules, we will pay attention to cosmologies and conceptions of dying and the dead in the respective cultural areas of these traditions. We will also undertake an analysis of techniques aimed at developing preternatural awareness and capabilities for the living such as the development of awareness of subtle energies such as Chi and how proficiency with this and other energies can be used to interact with the dead and ultimate reality. **Module 5** will see us learning of scientific approaches and studies related to death and ultimate reality and how they intertwine with established religious traditions. Furthermore, we will analyze emergent practices in death studies and hospice care such as the usage of entheogenic plants to help the dying approach the death process with minimal anxiety. By the time you read this, all the material should be posted to OAKS so if you are curious about a specific culture or religion's approaches to death, please feel free to read ahead and explore the content. As we are working through a variety of complex topics, I feel it pertinent to have our assignments be based on writing and critical engagement with the topics we encounter. Each week you will submit a very short blog post pertaining to a topic you are interested in from the readings or the OAKS content. You will choose a research topic later in the semester. Additionally, you will produce a prezi and a final research paper related to this topic.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND ASSIGNMENTS:**

**Weekly Discussion Posts and Responses (300 pts.):** You will be expected to submit brief 200-300 word posts on a weekly basis. These posts are to be on something you found interesting in either the readings or supplemental content for a given week. Please have this initial post submitted by **Friday of each week**. You will also be expected to make a response to one of your classmates' posts. Please provide this response post by **Sunday of each week**. These assignments will serve to supplement the ongoing discussions that we will have in this course.

**Research Prezi (100 pts.):** You are to select a topic of your choosing with which to produce a research paper. Before the paper, however, you will record a prezi discussing said topic to submit to OAKS. In order for you to have adequate time to dedicate to the prezi and your accompanying paper, please email me your topic of choice **no later than Thursday November 2<sup>nd</sup>**. Your prezi is to be uploaded to OAKS by **Thursday November 16<sup>th</sup>, 11:59 PM**.

**Research Paper (100 pts.):** This will be the research paper related to your prezi topic. The paper should be 6-7 pages double spaced (1500-1750 words). I will expect you to provide in-text citations of your sources using MLA, a guide to which may be found [here](#). **You should aim to have 5 Academic Sources for this, I will provide a short video describing what these are towards the beginning of our course.** This paper is to be submitted to OAKS no later than **Friday December 8<sup>th</sup>, 11:59 PM**.

**A note on deadlines:** Barring extenuating circumstances, I adopt a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to late submissions. If you feel you cannot submit an assignment in time, please email me at least three days in advance of the due date and we can discuss.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE:**

### **Module 1 (Introduction and Ancient Traditions)**

#### **Week 1, Introduction: 8/21 – 8/27**

- Introduction, Syllabus Overview
- Moreman 1-8; Archangel 1-15
- Signed syllabus contract due **8/25 by 11:59 PM**
- Post 1 due **8/25 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 8/27, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 2, Traditions of the Ancient World: 8/28 – 9/3**

- Moreman 11-32
- Arcangel 16-64
- Post 2 due **9/1 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 9/3, 11:59 PM**

### **Module 2 (Continental African and Afro-Atlantic Traditions)**

#### **Week 3, Continental African Traditions: 9/4 – 9/10**

- Moreman 143-164
- Brodd 67-83
- Post 3 due **9/8 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 9/10, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 4, Afro-Atlantic Diaspora: 9/11 – 9/17**

- Brodd 84-97
- Hurbon PDF
- Religion for Breakfast: Vodou
- Post 4 due **9/15 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 9/17, 11:59 PM**

### **Module 3 (Abrahamic Traditions and an Introduction to Christian Mysticism)**

#### **Week 5, Judaism: 9/18 – 9/24**

- Moreman 33-48
- Markides 1-46
- Post 5 due **9/22 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 9/24, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 6, Islam: 9/25 – 10/1**

- Moreman 69-86
- Markides 47-87
- Post 6 due **9/29 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 10/1, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 7, Christianity: 10/2 – 10/8**

- Moreman 49-68
- Markides 88-122
- Post 7 due **10/6 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 10/8, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 8, Gnosticism and Greek Orthodox Mysticism: 10/9 – 10/15**

- Markides 123-220
- Post 8 due **10/13 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 10/15, 11:59 PM**

### **Module 4 (South and East Asian Traditions & Subtle Energies)**

#### **Week 9, Hinduism: 10/16 – 10/22**

- Fall Break 10/16 – 10/17
- Moreman 87-104
- Post 9 due **10/20 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 10/22, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 10, Buddhism: 10/23 – 10/29**

- Moreman 105-124
- Post 10 due **10/27 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 10/29, 11:59 PM**

#### **Week 11, Chinese Traditions: 10/30 – 11/5**

- Moreman 125-142
- Danaos 1-75
- Post 11 due **11/3 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 11/5, 11:59 PM**

**Week 12, Daoist Immortals and the Cultivation of Chi: 11/6 – 11/12**

- Danaos 99-132, 147-161
- Post 12 due **11/10 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 11/12, 11:59 PM**

**Module 5 (Contemporary Research, Accounts, and Phenomena)**

**Week 13 Mediumship and Preternatural Phenomena: 11/13 – 11/19**

- Moreman 165-210
- Arcangel 171-201
- Research Prezi due **11/16 by 11:59 PM**
- Post 13 due **11/17 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 11/19, 11:59 PM**

**Week 14: 11/20 – 11/26**

- Holiday Break

**Week 15, Near Death and Out of Body Experiences: 11/27 – 12/3**

- Moreman 211-246
- Post 14 due **12/1 by 11:59 PM**
- Response to classmates due by 12/3, 11:59 PM**

**Week 16 Concluding Thoughts: 12/4 – 12/10**

- Moreman 247-282
- Arcangel 271-276
- Post 15 due **12/8 by 11:59 PM**
- You will not be required to provide a response to your classmates for this post.**
- Research Paper due **12/8 by 11:59 PM**

**ADDITIONAL COURSE NOTES & COLLEGE POLICIES**

**Writing Lab:** I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Lab in the Center for Student Learning (Addlestone Library, first floor). Trained writing consultants can help with writing for all courses; they offer one-to-one consultations that address everything from brainstorming and developing ideas to crafting strong sentences and documenting sources. For more information, please call 843.953.5635 or visit <http://csl.cofc.edu/labs/writing-lab/>.

**Grading Scale:** A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82; C+: 77-79; C: 73-76; C-: 70-72; D+: 67-69; D: 63-66; D-: 61-62 F: 60 or below.

**Late Policy:** As this is an accelerated course with a strict time table, **late assignments will not be accepted.**

**SNAP:** If you have a disability that qualifies you for academic accommodation, please present a letter from the Center for Disability Services at the beginning of the semester. For more information regarding accommodation and the SNAP program, see: <http://www.cofc.edu/~cds/index.htm>.

**Academic Integrity Statement:** Lying, cheating, attempted cheating, and plagiarism are violations of our Honor Code that, when suspected, are investigated. Each incident will be examined to determine the degree of deception involved.

Incidents where the instructor determines the student's actions are related more to misunderstanding and confusion will be handled by the instructor. The instructor designs an intervention or assigns a grade reduction to help prevent the student from repeating the error. The response is recorded on a form and signed both by the instructor and the student. It is forwarded to the Office of the Dean of Students and placed in the student's file.

Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly by the instructor and/or others having knowledge of the incident to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible by the Honor Board for academic dishonesty will receive a XXF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty. This status indicator will appear on the student's transcript for two years after which the student may petition for the XX to be expunged. The F is permanent.

Students can find the complete Honor Code and all related processes in the Student Handbook at: <http://deanofstudents.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/>."

**Netiquette:** As this course will be online synchronous, we will utilize Zoom and OAKS. Twice a week we will have class on Zoom and throughout the course you will find your assignments and discussion boards on OAKS. I encourage you to come to class with questions from the readings, or from appropriate outside sources. I will be making space for discussions centered around these questions in our lectures and it is my hope you will participate. As instructor, I will facilitate our discussions and will respond accordingly to the discussion forums. We are going to encounter dense topics and the best way to better understand them is to talk about them together. I will be available for "office hours", but they will be by appointment only. They will be conducted over Zoom and I will provide you the link should you wish to drop in. Outside of Zoom, we will primarily be communicating via email. I will do my best to respond within a 24 - 48 hour period.

We will be interacting with one another not just in class over zoom, but via discussion posts. It is my goal for us to create a healthy classroom community centered around spirited discussion of the topics at hand. I will be facilitating these discussions and will provide additional points as needed. In these discussions I will expect you to frequently ask questions and to respond to your peers. I would like to take this opportunity to remind you all that we will be talking about death and religion in manifold forms in addition to worldviews, research, and philosophies that will be

unfamiliar to many of you and that may be triggering in some way. I request that you conduct yourselves accordingly and to maintain respect for the topics at hand and each other as we establish an online classroom community.

**Tech Requirements:** This class is online and synchronous. We will be utilizing OAKS to submit assignments and we will be meeting on Zoom for our class sessions and office hours. We will frequently utilize Zoom as I believe face to face interaction is important for establishing a classroom community and general human interaction is healthy. As such, reliable internet and a camera & microphone are **required**. If you need help getting either of these resources, check out the IT page: <https://it.cofc.edu/laptops/>. This has resources for loaner computers, financial aid for tech, etc. If you are having trouble with Zoom or OAKS, please contact me directly for troubleshooting. If my technical know-how is not enough, I will direct you to CofC's IT Helpdesk. Finally, **please do not join our online class meeting on your phone**. It can be distracting for you, for others, and for me. If there are circumstances beyond your control where you need to "phone in", that is acceptable, but please provide me with an email explanation.

**OAKS:** OAKS, including Gradebook, will be used for this course throughout the semester to provide the syllabus and class materials and grades for each assignment, which will be regularly posted.

**Mental and Physical Wellbeing:** At the college, we take every students' mental and physical wellbeing seriously. If you find yourself experiencing physical illnesses, please reach out to student health services (843.953.5520). And if you find yourself experiencing any mental health challenges (for example, anxiety, depression, stressful life events, sleep deprivation, and/or loneliness/homesickness) please consider contacting either the Counseling Center (professional counselors at <http://counseling.cofc.edu> or 843.953.5640 3<sup>rd</sup> Robert Scott Small Building) or the Students 4 Support (certified volunteers through texting "4support" to 839863, visit <http://counseling.cofc.edu/cct/index.php>, or meet with them in person 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Stern Center). These services are there for you to help you cope with difficulties you may be experiencing and to maintain optimal physical and mental health.

#### **Food and Housing Resources:**

Many CofC students report experiencing food and housing insecurity. If you are facing challenges in securing food (such as not being able to afford groceries or get sufficient food to eat every day) and housing (such as lacking a safe and stable place to live), please contact the Dean of Students for support (<http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/about/salt.php>). Also, you can go to <http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/student-food-housing-insecurity/index.php> to learn about food and housing assistance that is available to you. In addition, there are several resources on and off campus to help. You can visit the Cougar Pantry in the Stern Center (2nd floor), a student-run food pantry that provides dry-goods and hygiene products at no charge to any student in need. Please consider reaching out if you need more assistance.

## Syllabus Contract and Expectations:

While I expect certain things of you in the course, participation, attendance, timeliness, and good engagement, you also should and could expect certain things of me. Think of the syllabus as a **tool** and also a **contract**. First, the syllabus is a tool. It can offer answers and solutions to problems. The syllabus can help you piece together the course to create an entire picture of what the final product will look like. Look to the syllabus first. Second, the syllabus is a contract. The syllabus says, to you, “This is what Professor Fitzgerald expects of you.” There’s nothing sneaky, tricky, or underhanded about it. But, the syllabus also holds me accountable to you. You know what to expect of me with regard to office hours, email response time, assignment expectations, and grade performance. Your first assignment will be to return this page to me, uploaded as an assignment (Syllabus Contract), and signed (typed name is fine).

I can expect you:

- To show up to class on time and ready to participate/listen.
- To be attentive and engaged for lectures and discussions
- To spend an appropriate amount of time on our readings, podcasts, videos, assignments, etc. each week.
- To turn in your assignments on time
- To engage with all parts of the material even if you may disagree
- To **ASK FOR HELP**.

You can expect me:

- To start and end class on time
- To answer emails within 24-48 hours during weekdays, and within 72 hours of weekends
- To assign readings, videos, movies, or podcasts that cover the material, are the appropriate reading level, and that are informative and engaging
- To give assignments that are fruitful, reflective of the material, and helpful to your overall construction of the course.
- Be available during the week to offer help

Signed (by professor): Padraic M. Fitzgerald (he/him)

Signed (by student):



