Description
This course is an introduction to the academic study of religion through the theme of death and immortality. Death is an inescapable fact of life, and all religious traditions attempt to come to grips with it. This course examines death in light of the myriad ways humans have attempted to accept, overcome, defeat, or transcend it. Is there a good and a bad way to die? How should we dispose of a corpse? Do we have a soul and does it reincarnate? Is there an afterlife? Is immortality possible? What techniques are used in attempts to achieve it? Religious traditions have tried to answer these questions for millennia, and we will work to understand how. Topics such as ancestor worship, cremation, salvation, near death experiences, ghosts, mourning, and reincarnation will be considered in light of the American Spiritualism, Hinduism, and Christianity. We will come to see how the body and soul are conceived of differently in each of these traditions and how that relates to conceptions of death and immortality.

Objectives
You will be expected to learn how humans have dealt with mortality and hoped for immortality in different times and places. You will also be asked to critically analyze those approaches and to explore and modify your own ideas and values about death and dying. Throughout the course of the semester, you will also be expected to think critically about how you understand and interpret religions.

Requirements
1. Attendance and Participation in lectures and discussions (7.5%). Your participation in class discussions is an essential part of this course and you will not receive full credit simply by showing up to class. If it is clear that you did not do the readings or assignments prior to class, your grade will be adjusted accordingly. Attendance is required. 4 absences are allowed. More than 4 absences will negatively affect your grade and you will be dropped from the course if you miss 10 classes.
2. Three In-Class Exams (12.5% each = 37.5% total). Dates: Sep. 24, Oct. 22, Nov. 19
3. First Writing Assignment: Obituary Essay (5%). Write your obituary (300 words) as you imagine it might be published in a newspaper. State the name of the newspaper and the date. Include in the obituary your life story, including how old you were upon your death, where you were living at death, cause of death, your major accomplishments (if any), family left behind, etc. Be sure to read some obituaries before writing this so you have a sense of the genre. See, e.g., the New York Times obituary of the obituary writer Hugh Massingberd (December 30, 2007). You might also look at obituaries in small-town newspaper (a very different style). The website www.legacy.com is also a useful source. You should also consider looking at Marilyn Johnson’s book The Dead Beat,
which provides a colorful look at the world of obituary writing. **Due Sep. 13**

4. Second Writing Assignment: Funeral or Memorial Service Essay. Choose either Option 1 or Option 2. (10%). **Due Nov. 10**
   a. **Option 1.** Design a one-to-four-page bulletin for your funeral or memorial service. Include your name and the place and date of the service. Include also an order of service (beginning to end) that lists precisely what is going to happen (including whether there is a body or cremated remains and what, if anything, is done with either). Possibilities: music, prayers, meditation, eulogy or eulogies, homily, readings from scripture or literature, specific ritual acts (carrying a coffin in or out, scattering ashes, etc.) Next, analyze (500 words) your service. What beliefs, if any, about life, death, and the afterlife does the service articulate? Which of the five models does it most closely track, and how? By which religious tradition or traditions is it most closely informed? And how, if at all, does it diverge from it/them?
   b. **Option 2.** View a funeral or memorial service from a film or television show – either fictional or documentary. (See me if you need ideas.) Describe (100-200 words) and analyze (500 words) the service. What beliefs, if any, about life, death, and the afterlife did the service articulate? Which of the five models did it most closely track, and how? By which religious tradition or traditions was it most closely informed? And how, if at all, did it diverge from it/them? Be sure to include the specific citation for the film or show.

5. Third Writing Assignment: Research Paper (20%). This assignment is a six page thesis-style research essay on a particular aspect of death and immortality in two different religious traditions. This essay should be based on at least three different non-Internet sources, which should be included in notes or a bibliography. And it should develop and sustain an argument. Potential topics include: cremation in India and the US; heaven in Medieval Christian Europe and 19th century American spiritualism; divine judgment in the Mahabarata and the Bible; afterlife imagery in the works of Andrew Jackson Davis and Augustine; etc. Your topics **must be approved** by me by **Nov. 5**, and it is a good idea to submit your topic prior to that. You can submit to me a brief (1-2 paragraph) précis via email or bring a hard copy to class. You are also welcome to come by during my office hours to discuss your topic. **Due on Dec. 6.** Papers can be handed in earlier than the due date if you prefer.

6. Final examination (20%). A cumulative essay exam will be held on **Dec. 11 at 12 pm (section 4)** or **Dec. 10 at 12 pm (section 5)**.

**Grading Scale:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>92-100 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>89-91 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>86-88 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>82-85 (3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>80-81 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>79-81 (2.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>76-78 (2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>72-75 (2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>69-71 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>67-70 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>66-68 (1.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>62-65 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>59-61 (.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>58-60 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>below 59 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Required Readings**

Christopher Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions*

C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*

The other readings can be found online at [http://ereserve.cofc.edu/](http://ereserve.cofc.edu/). The password is ****.
Late Papers/Makeup Policy
Exams will not be rescheduled. Papers are due at the beginning of class on the due dates. Papers may be handed in late, but will be marked down half a grade for each day or portion of a day they are late. (No excuses are necessary.) Exceptions will be made for illness with doctor's note, death/sickness in the family, or approved athletic reasons only.

Honor Code
Any form of academic dishonesty including plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course. Any student who takes credit for work that is not his or her own or is caught cheating in any way, will fail the course. This means that anyone caught taking credit for work that is not his or her own, or cheating in any other way, will receive a failing grade for not just the assignment – but the entire course. Note that students who are found responsible for academic dishonesty receive a XF in the course, which indicates that the course was failed because of academic dishonesty. Please consult the College of Charleston’s honor code policies, which can be found in the Student Handbook (online at http://studentaffairs.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php).

Classroom Electronics
Students must turn off all electronic devices before class starts. You are not permitted to text, email, or surf the web while class is in session. If you wish to use a computer for taking notes, that is fine. However, you can only use your computer to take notes. Every violation of this code will result in a deduction of points from your attendance and participation grade; repeated violations will result in a failing grade for the course.

SNAP
If there is a student in this class who has a documented disability and has been approved to receive accommodations through SNAP Services, please feel free to come and discuss this with me during my office hours.
Course Schedule

**Introduction**

Aug. 25: Course Structure and Introduction to the Academic Study of Religion

Aug. 27: Thinking About Death and Immortality: Three Models

**The Spiritualist Model – American Spiritualism(s)**

Aug. 31: Introduction to the Spiritualist Model, History and Context of 19th Century American Spiritualism
(Reading: Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, ch. 1)

(Reading: Davenport, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, preface, ch. 12)

Sep. 3: Confronting Death - Mediumship, Proving (or Disproving) the Afterlife
(Reading: Moreman, ch. 8, “The Spiritual Question in Boston”)

Sep. 6: Death Practices – Seances, Table Tipping, Slate Writing, and more.
(Reading: Clark, Plain Guide to Spiritualism, ch. 6; Images: US Patents)

Sep. 8: Death Practices - Scientific Innovations, Spirit Photography
(Readings: Cloutier, “Mumler’s Ghosts”; Apraxine, “The ‘Margery’ Case”)

Sep. 10 Afterlife Journeys – The Mysterious and Mischievous Dead
(Moreman, ch. 9)

Sep. 13 Afterlife Journeys - Textual Sources
(Reading: Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, ch. 2)

**OBITUARY ASSIGNMENT DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS**

Sep. 15 Afterlife Journeys - The Summerland and Other Iterations
(Readings: Andrew Jackson Davis selection, Swedenborg selection)

Sep. 17 Contemporary Spiritualisms: - Channeling and Mediumship in the 20th and 21st Centuries
(Readings: Shirley Maclaine selection; Web Assignment: check out the website for John Edward - http://www.johnedward.net/)

Sep. 20 Contemporary Spiritualisms - Cassadaga
Eloise Page”)

Sep. 22  Contemporary Spiritualisms - Popular Culture, Ghosts on the Screen
(TV Assignment: Watch at least one current television program that involves communicating with the dead (see me if you need ideas) and come with at least two critical questions about what you have seen.)

Sep. 24:  Exam on the Spiritualist Model

Sep. 27:  **NO CLASS**

**The Docetic Model – Hinduism**

Sep. 29:  Introduction to The Docetic Model, Hinduism, and the Indian Way of Death
(Reading:  Moreman, chapter 5)

Oct. 1:  The Indian Way of Death, ctd. – Karma, Samsara, Reincarnation, Moksha
(Reading: Hopkins, “Hindu Views of Death and the Afterlife”)

Oct. 4:  Confronting Death – Text and Tradition
(Readings: selection from Katha Upanishad, selection from Mahabarata)

(Readings: selections from The Grihya Sutras, “Death” from Rig Veda)

Oct. 8:  Death Practices – Death in Modern India, Death in Banaras
(Reading: Justice, Dying the Good Death selection)

Oct. 11:  **FALL BREAK – NO CLASS**

(Reading: Justice, Dying the Good Death selection; In-Class Film: Ganges: River to Heaven)

Oct. 15:  Afterlife Journeys – Voyages of the Dead
(Reading: Filippi, Mrtyu, chs. 10, 12)

Oct. 18:  Afterlife Journeys – Becoming an Ancestor, Memorialization
(Reading: Knipe, “Sapindikarana: The Hindu Rite of Entry into Heaven”)

Oct. 20:  Afterlife Journeys - Death, Rebirth, Death, Rebirth…Breaking the Cycle?
(In-Class Film: Groundhog Day)

Oct. 22  Exam on the Docetic Model
The Psychosomatic Model – Christianity

Oct. 25: Introduction to the Psychosomatic Model and History of Christianity
(Reading: Moreman, ch. 3)

Oct. 27: History of Christianity – Biblical Backdrop
(Reading: Keck, “Death and Afterlife in the New Testament)

Oct. 29: Confronting Death – Promises of Immortality or Resurrection?
(Reading: McDannell and Lang, Heaven, selections)

Nov. 1: NO CLASS

Nov. 3: Confronting Death - Middle Ages to the Reformation, Catholic Deathways and Protestant Critiques
(Reading: McDannell and Lang, Heaven, selection)

Nov. 5: Confronting Death - Death in Early America:
**Paper topics must be approved by today**

Nov. 8: Confronting Death - Memorialization in American Culture – Cemeteries and Burial Grounds
(Readings: Yalom, American Resting Place selection, Lewis, The Great Divorce preface, chs. 3-5)

Nov. 10: Death Practices - Christian Funerals
(Lewis, The Great Divorce preface, chs. 6-8; Book of Common Prayer, “The Order for the Burial of the Dead”; Funeral liturgies)
**FUNERAL PAPER DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS**

Nov. 12: Afterlife Journeys - Contemporary Christianity
(Lewis, The Great Divorce chs. 9-11; McDannell and Lang, selection)

Nov. 15: Afterlife Journeys - The Great Divorce
(Lewis, The Great Divorce chs. 12-14)

Nov. 17: Afterlife Journeys - Modern Evangelicalism and Near Death Experiences
(Piper, 90 Minutes in Heaven selection; Black, Flight to Heaven selection)

Nov. 19: Exam on Psychosomatic Model
Reflecting on Death and Immortality

Nov. 22: Death in America - Dead Presidents and the History of Modern American Deathways
         (Laderman, The Sacred Remains, selections)

Nov. 24: THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS

Nov. 26: THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS

Nov. 29: Death in America – Picking up the Pieces
         (In-Class Film: Six Feet Under, episode 1)

Dec. 1: Death in America – The Business of Death
        (Reading: Mitford, The American Way of Death selection, Lynch, The Undertaking selection)

Dec. 3: Death in America - Cremation In and Out of Context, Creative Memorialization
        (Readings: Prothero, “Lived Religion and the Dead: The Cremation Movement in Gilded Age America,”

Dec. 6: Course Wrapup
        (Moreman, chs. 13, 14)
        **RESEARCH PAPER DUE AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS **

Final Exam (Dec. 11 at 12 pm for section 4 or Dec. 10 at 12 pm for section 5)

*This order and schedule of the lectures, readings, and assignments listed in this syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor and you will be notified of any and all changes*