

Religious Studies 286: *Death and the Afterlife*  
Rhodes College  
Professor Milton Moreland  
Spring, 2011

I can be reached at my office, Clough 404; office phone: 843-3379,  
E-mail: [morelandm@rhodes.edu](mailto:morelandm@rhodes.edu).

**Office Hours:** Students should feel free to consult with me about the course and their work. Often this works best if you see me before or after class at which time we can arrange a mutually convenient time for us to meet.  
**Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday: 10:00-11:00 am and by appointment.**

**1. COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Through an analysis of ritual studies, history, archaeology and a focus on the local Memphis community, this course will examine a wide array of beliefs and practices related to death, burial and the afterlife in modern America, while involving students in civic engagement projects. The goals of the course are fourfold: 1) we will explore modern ideas of the afterlife and death rituals (burial customs, cemeteries, grave markers, symbols) in a historical introduction of ideas and rituals from Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Eastern cultures. 2) We will combine methodologies from history, archaeology, anthropology, and religious studies in order to better understand the connection between burial rituals, symbols, and afterlife beliefs. 3) We will take advantage of the historical cemeteries in Memphis as we examine funeral practices and related belief systems since the 1820s in the local community. 4) In conjunction with the historic Zion Cemetery in Memphis, we will engage in community engagement processes in which students will help plan and implement restoration projects or develop and write research material related to the long-term relationship between local communities and historic cemeteries.

**2. REQUIRED TEXTS:**

Bremmer, Jan N., *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*, Routledge, 2001, ISBN: 0415141486.

Davies, Jon, *Death, Burial and the Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (Religion in the First Christian Centuries), Routledge, 1999, ISBN: 0415129915.

Laderman, Gary, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, 2003, ISBN: 019513608X.

Metcalf, Peter and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Cambridge University Press; 2 edition, 1991, ISBN: 0521423759.

Parker Pearson, Michael, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (Texas A&M University Anthropology, 3), Texas A&M University Press, 2001, ISBN: 158544099X.

Keister, Douglas, *Stories in Stone: The Complete Guide to Cemetery Symbolism* Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2004, ISBN: 158685321X.

### **3. ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE AND READINGS:**

We begin the class with three books that will introduce us to modern death rituals and the archaeology//anthropology of death ritual and monumentality. We are going to load up on theory and modern application, before we dive into the ancient world of death practices and beliefs in the afterlife. Metcalf and Huntingdon will provide us with a general introduction to anthropological theories related to death rituals on a global level. Parker Pearson will then introduce us to the archaeological arena, as we look at ancient burial practices and relate them to our own rituals and monuments. Laderman will introduce us more thoroughly to the rise of modern American rituals related to death, especially having to do with the origins of the American funeral. Throughout the course, we will be focused on the Memphis setting. Following the mid-term exam, we will begin in earnest to explore local cemeteries and death rituals. Our goal in the first half of the class will be to think through many of the archaeological issues and anthropological theories, and apply them to modern practices. Then, in the second half of the semester, we will use Davies and Bremmer to examine the evidence from the ancient world, thinking particularly about how the ancient traditions still impact our modern practices and ideas. We will also use Keister's book to help decipher particular cemetery symbols and iconography.

### **4. ACTIVITIES OF PARTICIPANTS:**

1. Attend class sessions and participate in the course dialogue. You must be prepared to speak in class and lead class discussions.
2. Read assigned books and articles. You should be prepared to spend at least 2 or 3 hours outside of class preparing for each of our meetings.
3. Write 3 papers that deal with the course readings.
4. Prepare and give oral reports and group reports.
5. Complete a civic engagement project and report on your work at the end of the semester.
6. Participate in one mid-term exam and a final exam.

### **5. GRADED ASSIGNMENTS:**

The most important requirement of this course is active involvement, by which I mean reading the assignments and interacting with them critically in class discussions and written work. Completing the following requirements will constitute the final grade:

1. **Mid-term exam**, 25% of the final grade.
2. **Final exam**, 25% of the final grade.
3. Active **participation** in class activities and discussions, 10% of the final grade.
4. **Group Report: Memphis Cemeteries**, 5% of the final grade.
5. **3 Papers**, 30% of the final grade. In general, these will be typed, 3-4 page responses to particular questions that will be related to a specific set of readings from one section of the course. Each writing assignment must be completed prior to the class meeting, typed, at least 3 pages, 12 point font.
6. **Individual civic engagement project** on Zion Cemetery in Memphis, 10% of the final grade. This project will be due at the end of the semester, including a short

report to the class. The student's project topic will be determined in consultation with Prof. Moreland prior to the Spring Break. See below for possible topics.

## **6. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROJECT:**

With 30,000 burials dating from 1870 through 1930, the Zion Cemetery is the first known burial site for formerly enslaved people in the Memphis area. Since the 1950s, this privately owned, 17 acre cemetery in the heart of Memphis has been practically abandoned and completely overgrown to the point that it was unrecognizable as a historic cemetery. Students in the class will examine burial customs and related belief systems in order to better understand the social, political, and economic reasons that cause once lively cemeteries to become blights in some urban settings. Why do some cemeteries become significant cultural sites with large endowed funds for upkeep, while others are nearly forgotten? In the class, students will be encouraged to engage with local community groups and work with volunteers to continue the process of reclaiming and restoring this important burial site. Initial efforts by local volunteers have led to four acres of the cemetery being cleared and maintained. Additionally, two Rhodes students have recently worked to design a website that provides historical background about the cemetery and a searchable database of 22,000 names for people interested in genealogy ([www.zioncemeteryproject.org](http://www.zioncemeteryproject.org)).

Memphis is a great setting for observing burial practices over the past 200 years. Students will be asked to think about issues of race, religion, gender, economics, and nationalism as they explore local burial customs. The setting of Zion will offer students a wide array of opportunities to study the history of Memphis, specific burial customs, symbols related to death rituals, group identities in the Post-bellum South (church, community, fraternal clubs, etc., which are often referenced on the grave markers), and intriguing afterlife beliefs that are presented on various grave markers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Zion will also provide us with a “workshop” for engagement in the community. Among other civic engagement opportunities, students may be involved in the process of planning restoration policies, writing description of those who are interred at Zion for the website, restoring grave markers, and organizing volunteer groups to help with the on-going clearing of the cemetery.

## **7. DETERMINATION OF FINAL GRADE:**

Your grade will be based on the percentage of the total number of points accumulated during the semester. Grades will be given as follows:

A (96-100), A- (92-95), B+ (87-91), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D+ (67-69), D (63-66), D- (60-62), F (below 60)

## **8. HONOR CODE and PLAGIARISM:**

All work for this course is to be done under the auspices of the Rhodes Honor Code. If you have any questions about plagiarism (and how to avoid it), please ask me or consult with the staff at the Writing Center. Carelessness in documenting sources, even if not technically plagiarism will be penalized as the instructor deems appropriate.

## **9. ATTENDANCE POLICY AND DUE DATES:**

The lectures and classroom discussions are critical components of the learning process; therefore, regular attendance will be expected of all students. If you miss one class, you will

miss a large portion of material. **More than three unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade. You should expect to fail the course if you have more than 5 unexcused absences.** Only absences for travel to athletic competitions or other college-sanctioned events are considered “excused.”

All exams, papers, reports, and assignments are due on the dates specified (either the dates listed in the syllabus or the dates I announce in class). **NO EXTENSIONS OR EXCEPTIONS OTHER THAN THE FOLLOWING:** If you are absent from class for travel to athletic competitions or for other college-sanctioned purposes, your name must be on a list submitted by your coach or other responsible person, and you are expected to make up all the work missed. If you know that you will be traveling prior to a test, you need to make preparations to study for that exam ahead of time. If you are missing a test on the scheduled date because of athletic or other approved college travel, you need to schedule a time to take the test, preferably prior to the scheduled date. *The only other possible exceptions are serious personal illness or death in the family.*

**10. ACCOMMODATION OF SPECIAL NEEDS:**

I make every effort to accommodate special needs of students with respect to speech, hearing, vision, seating, or other concerns. You should consult the Office of Student Disability Services (SDS) at Rhodes College (x 3994, Tuthill Hall) if you have any needs or concerns.

**11. COURSE SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO MODIFICATION)**

|       |             |  |
|-------|-------------|--|
| Thurs | January 13  | Introductions  |
| Tues  | January 18  | The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual,<br>Symbols of Death and Transition<br>Read: Huntington and Metcalf, pp. 1-61  |
| Thurs | January 20  | Attitudes Toward Death: Theory & Rites of Passage<br>Read: Huntington and Metcalf, pp. 62-130  |
| Tues  | January 25  | The Dead King: Social Funerals &<br>American Deathways<br>Read: Huntington and Metcalf, pp. 133-161, 191-214   |
| Thurs | January 27  | Death in 20 <sup>th</sup> Century America<br>Read: Laderman, XV-XLII<br>JFK FUNERAL:<br><a href="http://concise.britannica.com/ebc/art-82882">http://concise.britannica.com/ebc/art-82882</a><br><b><i>FIRST PAPER DUE TODAY</i></b> |
| Tues  | February 1  | The Great American Funeral<br>Read: Laderman, Chapters 1-2   |
| Thurs | February 3  | American Death Rituals<br>Read: Laderman, Chapter 3  |
| Tues  | February 8  | “Six Feet Under”<br>Read: Laderman, Chapters 4-5   |
| Thurs | February 10 | Response to <i>Rest in Peace</i><br><b><i>SECOND PAPER DUE TODAY</i></b>   |

|       |                   |   |
|-------|-------------------|---|
| Tues  | February 15       | The Archaeology of Death<br>Read: Parker Pearson, Chapters 1-2                                  |
| Thurs | February 17       | Destroying, Eating, Adorning the Body<br>Read: Parker Pearson, Chapter 3                        |
| Tues  | February 22       | Grave Goods and Social Status<br>Dress, Gender and Kinship<br>Read: Parker Pearson, Chapter 4-5 |
| Thurs | February 24       | Separating the Dead from the Living<br>Read: Parker Pearson, Chapter 6-7                        |
| Tues  | March 1           | EXAM  |
| Thurs | March 3           | Memphis Cemeteries<br>Read: Keister, Chapter on Flora   |
| Tues  | March 8           | Memphis Cemeteries<br>Read: Keister, Chapters on Human Condition and Secret Societies           |
| Thurs | March 10          | Group Reports on Memphis Cemeteries: Symbolism, iconography, monumentality                      |
| TTh   | March 15-17       | Spring Break: NO CLASS  |
| Tues  | March 22          | Archaeology of the Ancient Near East<br>Read: Davies, 1-68                                      |
| Thurs | March 24          | Burying the Jewish Dead<br>Read: Davies, pp. 71-109   |
| Tues  | March 29          | Resurrection Ideas<br>Read: Davies, pp. 110-124; Bremmer, pp. 1-55                              |
| Thurs | March 31          | Roman and Greek Death<br>Read: Davies, pp. 127-154  |
| Tues  | April 5           | Christian Burial Traditions<br>Read: Davies, pp. 187-220<br><i>THIRD PAPER DUE TODAY</i>        |
| Thurs | April 7           | Early Christian Ideas of the Afterlife<br>Read: Bremmer, pp. 56-70                              |
| Tues  | April 12          | Near Death Experiences<br>Read: Bremmer, pp. 87-102   |
| Thurs | April 14          | Memphis Cemeteries: connecting to our city through our memorials (research and field trips)     |
| Tues  | April 19          | Memphis Cemeteries: connecting to our city through our memorials (research and field trips)     |
| Thurs | April 21          | Easter Break  |
| Tues  | April 26          | Student Reports   |
| Thurs | April 28          | Student Reports   |
| Tue   | MAY 3,<br>5:30 pm | FINAL EXAM  |