Visions of the Afterlife

“The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?” ~ Edgar Allen Poe

Course description

What happens to humans after they die? Are they reborn into another body? Do they enter a spiritual realm? Does consciousness hibernate, only to be reborn in a body at a later date? Or does consciousness simply cease? In this course, we will analyze a range of beliefs concerning the afterlife drawn from world religions, new religions, the humanities and the sciences. Beginning with examples from traditional religions (Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Taoism), the course will turn to religious afterlife beliefs in America. The course closes by investigating ways in which secular disciplines such as anthropology, neuroscience, and philosophy have theorized the survival of human consciousness after death. Exploring these views shows the ways in which afterlife conceptions are conditioned by ideas of the person, cosmos, embodiment, and ethics regnant in a time and culture.

FWIS learning objectives:

By taking this First-year Writing-Intensive Seminar, you will:

• Enhance your understanding of the central place of writing and communication in the learning process and in academic life.
• Learn strategies for analyzing, synthesizing, and responding to college-level readings.
• Improve your ability to communicate correctly and effectively in writing and in speech, taking into account audience and purpose.
• Become comfortable with writing as a process and learn strategies – such as prewriting, outlining, and revision – for working through that process.
• Learn appropriate use of the work of others and, where necessary, specific practices of citation.
• Learn to articulate oral arguments and to respond productively to arguments of others in formal presentations and in class discussion.

Additional course objectives:

• Develop critical reading and writing skills.
• Compare and contrast a range of afterlife beliefs drawn from religions east and west, ancient and modern, with current views in the sciences and humanities.
• Critically engage these conceptions of the afterlife (including scientific views) as products of unique local, historical contexts prone to change over time.
• Analyze the ways in which afterlife conceptions are conditioned by ideas of the person, cosmos, embodiment, and ethics regnant in a time and culture.

The Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication (CWOVC)

Students in the FWIS have an incredible resource at their disposal: The Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication. Students can make appointments with peer consultants at the CWOVC for any
assignment in this course, and it is recommended they do so for at least one of the major assignments. Consultants do not edit or proofread your work, but they provide feedback on the organization of your paper, the coherence of your argument, appropriate syntax, and grammatical errors. For further information, visit: http://cwovc.rice.edu

**Required texts:**
- Other required readings will be posted on Owlspace. Enter here: https://owlspace-ccm.rice.edu/portal

**Recommended texts:**

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES**

**I. Grading**

*Weekly assignments*
Reading responses: 15% (1 point if response completed. 0 points if not.)
Participation: 10% (1 point if student participated. 0 points if not.)

*Minor assignments (full grade if completed)*
Statement of interests and writing objectives: 2%
Edit a colleague’s booknote: 3%
Edit a colleague’s encyclopedia article: 3%

*Major writing assignments (grading scale below)*
Booknote (250 words): 8%
Encyclopedia article (2.5-3 pages): 14%
Final paper (3.5-4 pages): 20%
Oral presentation (8-10 minutes): 15%

Grading Scale (%)
98+ (A+); 97.9-94 (A); 93.9-90 (A-); 89.9-87 (B+); 86.9-84 (B); 83.9-80 (B-); 79.9-77 (C+); 76.9-74 (C); 73.9-70 (C-); 69.9-67 (D+); 66.9-64(D); 63.9-60 (D-); 59.9-(F).

For an overview of all assignments, please refer to the last pages of this syllabus.

**II. Attendance and Absences:**
According Rice University policy, “Students are expected to attend all scheduled activities for all of the classes for which they are registered during the entire course of the academic semester for which they are enrolled.” Instructors can make exceptions based upon the following: a) a university-sponsored event conflicts with the scheduled class. If that is the case, please notify me as far in advance as possible; b) absences for activities that are not university-related may be negotiated with the Instructor on a case-by-case basis. Please notify me as far in advance as possible; c) in the case of illness, please notify me of
your inability to attend the day’s class in advance. If the student will miss more than two classes for an illness, please secure a note from a medical physician.

III. Deadlines and Late Work

“No student should be given an extension of time or opportunities to improve a grade that are not available to all members of the class, except for verified illness or justified absence from campus.” See Rice University guidelines here: http://professor.rice.edu/professor/grading_guidelines1.asp

To verify illness or justify another absence (primarily due to medical or family emergency), please send me an email in advance if possible. If not, please send the email as soon as possible thereafter. Extensions will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Otherwise all deadlines in this course are final. Late work will not be accepted.

IV. Policy on Electronic Devices

It is highly recommend that students avoid the use of electronic equipment, but I will not prohibit its use. Many of the texts we will read this semester are available in electronic formats. I also understand many young students have taken notes on their laptop since childhood and cannot imagine doing so by another method. As such, electronic equipment will be allowed unless it becomes apparent it is being used to distract the student and those around them.

Please note that research by neurologists and cognitive-scientists has proven the old-fashioned pen-and-paper strategy of notation produces higher levels of retention, comprehension, and understanding. See for example: http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/take-notes-by-hand-for-better-long-term-comprehension.html. The reason is quite simple: these devices are engineered to be distracting! Entire libraries of books, images, websites, videos, and games are at our fingertips waiting to be clicked.

V. What to bring to class

To facilitate and ground our discussion of the reading, please bring all of the texts for the day to class. Electronic editions are permitted.

VI. Class preparation

The discussion of every class meeting will center on the assigned text(s) and reading-response questions. As such, it is imperative that both the reading and response have been completed prior to class. When everyone is prepared, seminars can become dynamic, intellectually ambitious forums for discussion. Each student benefits by sharing his or her insights, queries, and concerns with others, and hearing alike in turn.

VII. Writing and revision

Writing is not a talent. It is a craft. Great writing requires training, practice, editing, revision, and more practice. In this class, I emphasize learning the craft of writing through daily practice. Every class requires the student to produce a one-half page reading response to pointed questions. Take these responses as an opportunity to practice the writing techniques and strategies that we explore over the course of the semester. Perhaps in one you work closely on your thesis statement. In another you might focus on varying the length of your sentences and how this produces a flow. Later, you might use a reading response to practice proper citation, quotation, or paraphrase of evidence. I will provide feedback on them, but they will not be graded. Consider reading responses your drawing board.

Each of the major papers for this course expect that you take the strategies you have exercised in reading responses and put them into practice. Moreover, I require that a draft of your paper is turned in to me two-weeks in advance of the final due-date. These will not be graded. Let the paper sit for a week and return to it with fresh eyes. Revise the paper. If you have allotted enough time, revise again. Great writing is the
product of diligent revision. Be sure to take advantage of resources you can use for revision, including my office hours, consultants at the CWOVC, or a peer in class.

For further details on the stages of writing and revision, please see the description of each assignment at the end of this syllabus.

VIII. Honor code
The Rice University Honor Code is available here: http://honor.rice.edu/honor-system-handbook/. All students are required to abide by its honor system and by-laws.
In this class, those sections of the Honor Code referencing writing, plagiarism, citation, and paraphrasing are most pertinent. Given this is course intends to train students in practices of paraphrase, citation, and scholarly attribution, I will take an educational approach to such matters. That means I will take transgressions of these procedures as an opportunity for teaching and correction, rather than as instances of academic dishonesty. However, instances of repeat or egregious transgressions can and will be brought to the attention of the Rice Honor Council.

All writing you produce in this course must be your own. No collaboration on writing is permitted. Collaborations in reading, textual discussion, critiquing other students’ writing, or revisions are strongly encouraged.

IX. ADA statement
If you have a documented disability and will be seeking academic adjustments or accommodations, please let me know during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible. Students with disabilities will need to contact Disability Support Services in the Allen Center. See https://dss.rice.edu/

X. Add/Drop
The registration and drop process for the FWIS is unique. Please follow the instructions here: http://registrar.rice.edu/fwis_reg/#how

XI. Syllabus Agreement
I reserve the right to change any of the reading assignments or the ordering of the readings. The assignments, policies, course goals, and grading, however, will not change.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Traditional Religions

Mon, 1/9:
Before class: watch hour of youtube video “Eben Alexander: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey to the Afterlife.”
In class: Course introduction and overview. Explanation of the “Journal of Afterlife Studies” we will produce as a class. Watch youtube video of a channel and interpret.
After class: Email your statement of interest and writing goals to me (md12@rice.edu) by 11:59pm.

Wed, 1/11:
Before class: Read Ellwood, “Afterlife and Myth” (owlspace).
In class: Asking the right questions: avoiding supernatural and materialist pitfalls. Introduce ancient concepts of the afterlife. Watch short video on reincarnation cases (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l7bcb3aoGc). Interpret reincarnation and Eben Alexander’s NDE from the perspective of myth studies.

Mon, 1/16: Martin Luther King Jr. Day. No class meeting.
Wed, 1/18:
*Before class:* Read selections from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *The Teachings of Zarathustra* (owlspace).
*In Class:* Discussion and interpretation of Egyptian and Zoroastrian afterlife beliefs.
On writing: retrieving and assessing sources.

Mon, 1/23:
*Before class:* Read “Judaism” in Moreman and selections from *The Book of Daniel* (owlspace).
*In class:* Discussion and interpretation of ancient Judaic afterlife beliefs. What notions of embodiment and cosmology do these afterlife views suggest?
Read example booknotes on owlspace.

Wed, 1/25:
*Before class:* Read selections from Philo’s *On the Creation* and the Jewish apocalyptic text *1 Enoch*.
*In class:* Discussion and interpretation of later Judaic afterlife beliefs. How do we interpret this shift from unconscious or embodied afterlife beliefs to a disembodied, conscious model?
*After class:* **Begin work on booknote.** Locate an article on a topic that you would like to summarize.
*Writing:* Introducing rhetoric and mechanics.

Mon, 1/30:
*Before class:* Read “Christianity,” in Moreman. Read Paul’s *1 Corinthians* chapter 15 and *2 Corinthians* chapter 9.
*In class:* Lecture on Christianity and the afterlife. Analysis and discussion of *1 & 2 Corinthians*.
*After class:* **Begin work on your encyclopedia article topic.** If you must read ahead, do so.

Wed, 2/1:
*Before class:* Read selections from *Revelation* and full text of *Treatise on the Resurrection* from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.
*In class:* Discussion and analysis of resurrection of the dead versus spiritual resurrection in early Christianity. What differences in anthropology, ethics, and cosmology are implicit in this comparison?
*After class:* **Draft booknote due to instructor at md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm.**

Mon, 2/6:
*Before class:* Read “Islam” in Moreman.
*In class:* Lecture on Islamic views of the afterlife.
On writing: citation.

Wed, 2/8: Spring Recess, no class meeting.

Mon, 2/13:
*Before class:* read al-Ghazzali’s *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* (selections).
*In class:* Discuss and interpret *The Remembrance of Death* and excerpts from *The Qu’ran and Hadiths*.
*Editing:* **Return booknote to original author with helpful suggestions and comments.**

Wed, 2/15:
*Before class:* Read “Hinduism” and *The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad with the Commentary of Sankaracarya*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (selections online).
*In class:* Lecture on Hindu views of the afterlife. Analyze and discuss *The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*.
*After class:* **Encyclopedia article topics due to instructor. Email topics to md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm.**

Mon, 2/20:
Before class: Read Sri Aurobindo’s “Rebirth and Other Worlds: Karma, the Soul, and Immortality” from *The Life Divine*.

In class: Discuss and analyze “Rebirth and Other Worlds.” In what ways does Aurobindo’s conception adapt the classical Upanisadic model to western material, individualism, and evolutionary theory?

After class: Final draft of booknote due to md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm.

**Wed, 2/22:**

*Before class:* Read “Buddhism” in Moreman.

*In class:* Lecture on Buddhist views of the afterlife. Analyze and discuss Pali-Buddhist models of the afterlife. What do these models suggest about the self, embodiment, and ethics?

*On writing:* organization and flow.

*After class:* plot the organization of your encyclopedia article.

**Mon, 2/27:**

*Before class:* Read selections from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Chogyum Trungpa translation, online).

*In class:* Analyze and interpret *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Compare and contrast this reading with Aurobindo and *The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*.

*After class:* Draft of Encyclopedia article due to md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm.

New Religions and Secular Disciplines

**Wed, 3/1:**

*Before class:* Read selections from *The Book of Mormon* and Joseph Smith’s “King Follett discourse: April 7th, 1844.”

*In class:* Lecture on Mormonism. Analyze and interpret the writings of Joseph Smith on the afterlife.

*On writing:* introductions and conclusion.

*Editing:* Return encyclopedia articles to authors with helpful comments and suggestions.

**Mon, 3/6:**

*Before class:* Read selections from Andrew Jackson Davis’ *The Harmonial Philosophy*.

*In class:* Lecture on Spiritualism. Analyze and interpret *The Harmonial Philosophy*. What shifts in civil rights, sexual mores, politics, and gender norms are reflected in Davis’ afterlife model?

*After class:* Reread your draft. What revisions do you want to make? Consider your argument, evidence, organization, flow, research, introduction and conclusion.

**Wed, 3/8:**

*Before class:* UFO religions and the afterlife. Read selections from Rael, *Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers*.

*In class:* Lecture on UFO religions and the Raëlians. Analyze readings from Rael. In what way has Rael translated classical ideas (creation, resurrection, immortal life) into a scientific register?

**Fri, 3/10:**

Final draft of encyclopedia article due to md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm.

**Mon, 3/13:** Spring Break! (Think about topics for your final paper.)

**Wed, 3/18:** Spring Break! (Think about topics for your final paper.)

**Mon, 3/20:**

In class: Watch portion of *Left Behind* (film) in class. Analyze and interpret Apocalyptic Evangelical thought with an anthropological lens.

*After class*: Begin researching and sketching ideas for your final paper.

**Wed, 3/22:**
*Before class*: Zombies as contemporary myth of the afterlife. Read “Post-Apocalyptik Gothick” in *Gothika* (owlspace).


*After class*: Keep researching and sketching ideas for your final paper.

**Mon, 3/27 – Thurs, 3/30:**
All students are required to meet with instructor to discuss their final paper topic.

**Mon, 3/27:**

*In class*: Watch the film *Unmistaken Child*.

**Wed, 3/29:**
*Before class*: Work on final papers.

*In class*: Analyze and interpret *Unmistaken Child*. Compare explanatory models from Buddhism, Hinduism, philosophy, and anthropology. What provides the best explanation of the evidence presented in this film?

*After class*: Begin pre-writing for your paper. Write down thoughts you have for an argument and what evidence you might summon. Rank and order your ideas.

**Fri, 3/31:** Final paper topics must be sent to md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm. Begin research on your final paper.

**Mon, 4/3:**
*Before class*: The Society for Psychical Research and the psychological-scientific study of mediumship. Read selections from Myers’ *Human Personality and the Survival of Bodily Death*.

*In class*: Lecture on the Society for Psychical Research. Analyze and discuss Frederic Myers’ afterlife model. What part of the person survives? What relationship does survival have to ethics? Where are the dead located.

*After class*: outline the argument and evidence for your final paper.

**Wed, 4/5:**
*Before class*: Contemporary philosophical interpretations of mediumship. Read Alan Gauld’s essays “Mediumship: General” and “The Mediumship of Mrs. Piper.”

*In class*: Analyze and interpret Gauld’s arguments. What does the evidence of mediumship suggest about survival to Gauld? What survives? What constitutes a person?

**Fri, 4/7**: Draft of final paper due to md12@rice.edu by 11:59pm

Begin work on your oral presentation if you have not done so already.

**Mon, 4/10:**
*Before class*: Carol Zaleski’s “Explanations and Counter-explanations” from *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times*. 
In class: Analyze near-death experiences through the physio-neurological explanations offered by Zaleski. Are you persuaded by these explanations? How do we interpret the relationship between physiology and culture in near-death experiences?

Wed, 4/12:
In class: Analyze NDEs through neurological and philosophical models. What model best accounts for the evidence? What notions of personhood, ethics, and cosmology do the models imply?
After class: reread your draft. What revisions do you want to make? Consider your argument, evidence, organization, flow, research, introduction and conclusion.

Mon, 4/17:
In class: Oral presentations.
After class: provide helpful suggestions and feedback to your classmates.

Wed, 4/19:
In class: Oral presentations.
After class: provide helpful suggestions and feedback to your classmates.

FINAL PAPER DUE: May 3rd, 11:59pm.

After I have received the final versions of all booknotes, encyclopedia articles and research papers I will assemble our Journal of Afterlife Studies. Every student will receive a copy.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTIONS AND INSTRUCTIONS

Weekly reading responses (½ page per week for 14 weeks = 7 pages total):
Once per week, I will distribute 2-4 questions on the reading. Answer one of these questions to the best of your ability with a one-half page response. Responses are due to my email (md12@rice.edu) by 1:59pm the day of class. The purpose of these reading responses is two-fold. First, they prime you to critically analyze university-level primary and secondary texts. Second, they offer a venue to practice aspects of your academic writing (pre-writing, argument structure, flow, description, and style). Feedback will be provided for each response.

Participation:
The designation of FWIS courses as seminars indicates these classes have a conversational, dynamic quality distinct from standard lectures. While I will lecture when necessary, my goal as an instructor is to promote group interpretation, analysis, and debate through focused questions. Your participation will be graded on two elements: a) articulation of your own interpretation and analysis; b) responses to the interpretation and analysis of your fellow students.

Statement of interests and writing objectives (1 page):
- This paper asks, simply, why have you taken this class? What interests you about the topic of the course? What skills do you hope to obtain as a writer by the end of the semester?
- Due January 10th, 11:59pm.

Booknote (240-270 words):
• The purpose of a booknote is to summarize the essential points of a book (in this instance, an article) and critique them within a limited word-count.
• Read at minimum four sample booknotes (available on Owlspace).
• Locate the article you intend to note and read it over twice.
• This assignment emphasizes pre-writing. Take notes. What information is absolutely essential for the reader to know? What can you leave out? What main critique(s) do you want to make?
• Write your booknote. Keep in mind booknotes work best when using laconic and limpid prose.
• It is okay to go over the word limit in your draft. However, you will need to edit down to 270 words for the final version.

Encyclopedia Article (2.5-3 pages):
• The purposes of this assignment are to develop effective research strategies and to synthesize complex sources. Choose one afterlife models that has interested you in our readings. Potential topics for these articles will be distributed in early September, although you are welcome to produce a unique topic. All students are required to confirm article topics with the instructor no later than 2/14/17.
• Using the Fondren library catalogue, find five sources that pertain to the topic of your encyclopedia article. At least one of these sources must be from the library stacks (hard copy), while another must be accessed electronically via JSTOR or another journal database.
• Read these sources. In the case of a book, read a single chapter.
• Read at least 2 sample encyclopedia articles (owlspace) to get a feel for the style.
• After you have read these sources, begin pre-writing. First, draft some ideas you feel might be included in your article. Next, consider what topics need to be summarized craft your opening paragraph accordingly. Third, outline your article, including evidence and quotations that can be included section by section.
• To cite the publication, use footnote citation, according to the Chicago Manual of Style (ch.14), which can be accessed electronically. See http://library. rice.edu/collections/eresources/chicago-manual-of-style
• At the end of your document, include a bibliographic entry for all publications, according to the Chicago Manual of Style.
• Using your pre-writing outline, produce a draft no later than 2/23/17. Be sure that your draft includes proper citation in Chicago Style and a bibliography of all sources used. Although you will not be graded, email me this draft to confirm it has been completed.
• Leave the paper alone until 3/2/17. Reread it. What do you see needs work? Is your argument clear? Is the writing crisp and easily understood? Revise where needed.
• Final versions due 3/10/17

Final paper (3.5-4 pages):
• The purpose of this paper is to take all aspects of writing we have explored (research, argument and evidence, pre-writing, style, writing, and revision) and bring them together.
• The paper will be based on two models of the afterlife of particular interest to you. Each paper must utilize a comparative-historical model. In terms of comparison, choose two examples for comparison. Potential topics for comparison include: location of the afterlife; what aspect of the “person” survives; what happens to consciousness after death; ethics in the afterlife; and sexuality or gender in the afterlife. In terms of history, how do these differences relate to the time, culture, and religion in which they are produced?
• After you have chosen your topic (no later than 3/31/17), begin researching immediately. Locate at least five sources relevant to your examples and read them. Take notes.
• Meet with instructor for 30 minutes to discuss topics and research during the week of 3/27-3/30.
• Begin pre-writing. First, draft some ideas you feel might be included in your paper. Next, consider what argument it is you desire to make and craft your opening paragraph and thesis statement. Third, outline your argument, including evidence and quotations that can be included section by section.
• Using your outline, produce a draft of your final paper no later than 4/7/17. Although it will not be graded, send this draft to me to ensure it has been completed. Let it sit.
• After receiving feedback on your oral presentation, consider what further revisions you need to make to your paper. Did your fellow students notice an area of your paper that needs work? Do you need to make your argument more clear? Do you need to do further research on your topic? Address these issues.
• Final papers due 5/3/17 by 11:59pm.

**Oral presentation (8-10 minutes):**
• The purpose of this assignment is to practice delivering your research and argument in a formal setting.
• Base your presentation on your final paper. You will not have time to read your entire paper, so focus in on your argument and marshal only as much evidence is necessary to make it.
• Draft a one-page handout that provides an outline of your paper to the audience. Your handout might include quotations, evidence, and examples that are useful for understanding the thrust of the paper.
• Determine whether you want a full script or prefer a set of prompts. Write your speech accordingly.
• Practice delivering your paper at least twice in advance. Make sure it comes in at 8-10 minutes.
• Prepare for questions that the audience might ask when you have finished.
• Utilize the questions and criticisms that arise from your presentation to refine your final paper.