

REL 2750: LIFE, DEATH, AND AFTERLIFE

Monday-Friday, 1:30pm-4:30pm | Elon University, Winter Term 2025

Professor Natalie M. Reynoso

Office Hours: 12:30-1:00pm or By Appointment

Course Description

The themes of our course—life, death, and afterlife—provoke a number of centuries-old questions:

- *Life*: (1) Who do we answer to? (2) What does it mean for a life to go well? (3) What should we do when we fail? (4) What is the role of suffering in a good life?
- *Death*: (1) How do we talk about dying, death, and the dead? (2) What is death? (3) What characterizes a meaningful and dignified death as well as the opposite? (4) Is there such a thing as “good grief”? (5) How can thinking about death inform the way we live?
- *Afterlife*: (1) Is there life after death? (2) If one is to believe in an eternal afterlife, how might one characterize it? (3) Does an expectation of eternal life drain this life of all its meaning? (4) Is there a possibility for humans to achieve immortality, and if so, in what ways?

Many individuals throughout space and time have sought answers to these questions, some through a religious lens. This course will examine a diverse range of religious texts, traditions, and thinkers from the ancient world up to and including our own that discuss life, death, and the afterlife. As we learn from their ideas, we will reflect on how we might answer these questions (as listed above as well as others that emerge from these) for ourselves. The goal is not to arrive at any certainties on these topics, for such is impossible. Instead, our goal will be to continue asking questions as we wrestle together with the uncertainties of human life, the reality of death, and the possibility of an afterlife. To this end, this course is divided into three units aptly titled: Life (Unit I), Death (Unit II) and Afterlife (III). In addition to the course material and in-class sessions, each unit will also have at least one class session (or part of one) that is outside of the classroom including, but not limited to, a visit to a local funeral home and to the Animal Park at the Conservators Center; this will prompt students to think further about how questions of life, death, and the afterlife are always and everywhere pertinent.

Course Principles

This course will aim to do the following:

- *Pursue existential meaning* by way of exploring answers to the questions above and asking new questions.
- *Pursue truth-seeking pluralism* by engaging with a wide range of ideas from our readings, from one another, and from outside interlocutors in our wider community who will share their time and space with us.
- *Develop critical thinking skills* by exploring what it means to interpret a religious or theological text analytically and to investigate what is at stake in the assumptions and arguments that drive different critical approaches to questions surrounding life, death, and afterlife; and by examining the religious discourses, rituals, and issues as well as the social and historical contexts that situate them.
- *Encourage first person engagement* through weekly reflection exercises that prompt students to consider their own perspectives on the themes of the course, in-class writing reflection

exercises within which students will be asked to orient themselves towards the questions of the day, and storytelling in class discussions.

- *Cultivate a life-giving learning community* through (1) engaging in active listening with one's peers and doing so with openness and respect; (2) learning from and together with community members in and beyond Elon; and (3) being an active participant in all class activities and discussions.

Learning Outcomes

- Students will be able to articulate how the pursuit of existential meaning is not a monolith, and thereby students will recognize the wealth of perspectives across religious traditions, individual thinkers, historical time periods, and so forth. Furthermore, students will destabilize the category of the "human" in ways that enable them to see some of the strains, or injustices rather, on the questions this course poses.
- Students will demonstrate their ability to both think critically and imagine charitably about that which can be categorized as "religious." To this end, students will recognize and explain ways in which "religion" has cultural, political, and/or economic significance and/or ways in which cultural, political, and/or economic phenomena have significance for "religion." We will particularly do so with respect to how religion has historically and presently shaped conversations and rituals of life, death, and afterlife.
- Students will learn and experience that being in community is not a static thing, but rather, it requires the commitment and care of all its members to work. In building a community of learners, students will realize that the texts of their lives and that of their peers are incredibly valuable and worth bringing into dialogue with one another and with the thinkers we will encounter.

Assignments and Evaluation:

1. Participation (25%): Participation in this course can be thought of on multiple registers.
 - A. At the most basic level, class attendance, class preparedness (which for this course means having completed the assigned readings for the day and having your course reader with you every day), and thoughtfully completing in-class writing activities (to be worked on at the very beginning of each class session and to be submitted at the end of each class session) are crucial to participation. Together they facilitate a way for students to intentionally and meaningfully enter into each class session.
 - B. One purpose of a course like this one is to provide the opportunity for dialogical learning, not only between students and faculty or between members of our class and the authors of our texts, but also among students. Consequently, the quality of your participation in class greatly influences the relative success or failure of this course. Accordingly, your participation will be assessed. Since the goal is a flourishing course, not a competition for "participation points," participation cannot be reduced to "saying smart things frequently." Please put some thought into how you contribute to the classroom environment. As you do so, bear the following in mind: (1) Be curious! Asking questions of our texts and of one another should come not from a place of judgment but from a place of curiosity. (2) Quality matters more than quantity. (A few moments of silence spent thinking things through is nothing to be afraid of.) (3) Charity counts for more than cleverness. Scoring points at another's expense is not to be smiled upon. (4) Listening should demand more of your attention than talking. You

are here primarily to learn, not to perform. Wondering how you might participate fruitfully in seminar? Consider these examples:

- i. Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are curious about the ideas in a given text, that expresses how a text is challenging you, or that suggests how you might challenge the author of the text. Questions of clarification are also always welcome.
- ii. Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person says.
- iii. Ask a question or make a comment that encourages another person to elaborate on something they have already said.
- iv. Take notes when your classmates speak, so you can remember their contributions and formulate good questions and comments in response.
- v. Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions.
- vi. Make a comment that summarizes our conversation so far and/or suggests new direction and questions to be explored in the future.
- vii. Make a comment indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful.
- viii. Contribute something that builds on, or springs from, what someone else has said.
- ix. Find a way to express appreciation for the insight you have gained from the discussion.

In order to help monitor this crucial component of the course, students will be asked to submit periodic self-assessments of course preparation and participation. These assessments will be given following the reading quizzes described below.

- C. At various points in the term, we will engage with fellow members of the Elon community and of the broader community of Elon, NC and Burlington, NC. In some cases, we will go to them, and in other cases, they will join us in our classroom. The participation guidelines outlined thus far apply in these instances too. These fellow community members are generously sharing of their time and insight with us. Let's meaningfully enter into conversation with them.
2. (3) Reflection Papers (20%): At the beginning of each unit, students will be asked to turn-in a 2-page reflection paper. The prompts are as follows:
- A. *Life* (**due Monday, January 6**): Read Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day." Once you have done so, please respond to the last line of her poem: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Or to put it another way, where and how do you hope to engage the world, and why? As you respond, consider what you envision as a good life.
 - B. *Death* (**due Friday, January 10**): Take some time to brainstorm the losses—both death and non-death losses—that you personally have experienced. How have you experienced and coped with your personal losses? Do you think there is a right way to grieve loss? With respect to death, is there a right attitude or spiritual stance to have towards it?
 - C. *Afterlife* (**due Friday, January 17**): What do you think happens to us after we die? As you respond, try to recall how you arrived at these beliefs and what or who influenced your thinking on the topic. Are there ways that your beliefs about the afterlife align with or diverge from what you have been taught to believe? What impact, if any, do

you believe an expectation of eternal life has on how an individual attributes meaning to life?

3. (2) Reading Quizzes (30%): There will be two reading quizzes to primarily assess your comprehension of the assigned texts. Secondly, you will be prompted to engage the texts in response to the questions guiding our course and the readings at hand. Attached to the end of each quiz will be the participation self-assessment form students are expected to fill out.
4. Final Portfolio (25%): The final portfolio includes several components, and it is recommended that students approach it in the order outlined below.
 - A. Students are to first revisit each of their three reflection papers, and revise them to reflect the ways in which their thinking on these prompts have shifted throughout our course.
 - B. Students are then asked to submit a newly drafted introduction and conclusion (each 2-3 pages).
 - i. The introduction ought to meaningfully articulate what you see as undergirding your reflection papers. What are the tensions and synergies existing between papers already submitted and since revised? Identify and explain the changes you ultimately decided to make in your reflection papers.
 - ii. For the conclusion, reflect on the following: Do you find that the tensions you noticed and discussed in your introduction require resolution or not? Are there any insights that come from the synergies you noticed? Having edited your previous reflections, what conclusions, questions, lessons, and insights are you left with it? How, if at all, has your thinking on life, death, and afterlife shifted throughout our course? What most impacted the shifts in your thinking or the deepening of your thoughts on life, death, and afterlife (this could include specific readings, activities, conversations, or insights contributed by others in our course)?
 - C. There will be an oral component to this final assignment. Students are to be prepared to share some of the observations written in their portfolio with their peers for the final gathering. Ahead of the final gathering, further instructions will be given.
 - D. Please note that attendance is required at this final gathering, and the oral component of the final portfolio will take place then. You are asked to bring with you a hard copy of your portfolio to this final community gathering.
5. Extra Credit: Extra credit opportunities, which allow students to further engage the topics of this course, will be announced throughout the course. There will also be a list on Moodle with these options that the professor will continue to update throughout the term. The professor will let students know about upcoming events in advance via email, in class, or both. Students are limited to one extra credit opportunity over the course of the semester.

Course Policies

A Few Notes Regarding the Course

Given that this course devotes an entire unit to the topic of death and that the afterlife section will often refer back to our conversations on death, this course may be a particularly difficult one to take for anyone who has experienced a recent loss. Therefore, it is recommended that students who have lost a loved one within the last year refrain from taking this course. Ultimately, however, the decision is left up to the student.

Additionally, we will often be reading about and discussing other challenging matters including, but not limited to, sexual trauma, euthanasia, persecution, and death in the criminal justice system. At times, the content will include graphic descriptions related to these topics. Therefore, please take care of yourselves, and be attentive to what you need. If classroom conversations ever become too difficult and you need to step out for a break, please do so. If you find yourself in need of further help, please seek out counseling and psychological services, the information for which is included below. Lastly, be open to the perspectives and considerate of the experiences of your peers, remembering that the work we are doing in this class is academically challenging and at times might be psychologically so as well.

ADA Notice

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the programs and activities of Elon University. If you believe that you have a disabling condition that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, coursework, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule an appointment to speak with someone at Disabilities Resources: Belk Library 226 | disabilities@elon.edu | (336) 278-6568

Attendance Policy

Attendance will be taken daily. Students are expected to attend every class of every course for which they are registered, and to be punctual. Repeated lateness will result in the student's final participation grade to be lowered by 1/3 of a letter grade (i.e., from an A to an A- and so on). Faculty members are permitted to allow unexcused absences. The policy of this instructor is to permit a **maximum of one (1) unexcused absences**.

However, while acknowledging the critical importance of class attendance, the institution also recognizes that there are times when absence from class is unavoidable. And as your instructor, I acknowledge that a student's ability to attend class could be compromised at any moment by a number of factors. Additionally, absences for reasons of religious holiday, serious illness (including Covid-19), death in the student's immediate family, or required participation in a university-sponsored event are, with the appropriate documentation, excused absences, and students will be given an opportunity to make up class examinations or other graded assignments. In cases where unusual circumstances cause a student to miss a significant amount of class time for reasons beyond the student's control, the student should confer with the faculty member and class dean to ascertain if it is feasible to complete the work of the course.

Belk Library

The librarians in Belk Library can help you find appropriate resources for your assignments. You can schedule an appointment to meet with a librarian: <https://elon.libcal.com/appointments/> or chat with a librarian on the library website: <https://www.elon.edu/library/>.

Counseling & Psychological Services

If you are experiencing personal difficulties or mental health distress, you are encouraged to seek free and confidential assistance at Counseling Services. Counseling Services advances the educational mission of Elon University by providing quality psychological interventions, outreach, and consultation services to address the emotional, social, and academic needs of Elon University students. To make an appointment, or for more information please visit: <https://www.elon.edu/u/health-wellness/counseling-services/>

Remember that seeking and asking for help is the kindest, smartest, and most courageous thing you can do for yourself and for your loved ones.

Disabilities Resources

Students with disabilities (physical, learning, psychological, chronic, or temporary medical conditions, etc.) who would like to request reasonable accommodations and services under the Americans with Disabilities Act must register with Disabilities Resources in the KLC/Belk Library, Suite 226. Students who are new to Disabilities Resources or who are requesting new accommodations should contact DR at (336) 278-6568 or at disabilities@elon.edu to discuss the programs and services offered. Students who are already registered with Disabilities Resources and who would like to maintain their accommodations must renew previously granted accommodations by logging into the [accommodations site](#) and making a semester request. Students are reminded to renew previously granted accommodations at the beginning of each semester. Reasonable accommodations can be requested at any time throughout the semester; however, they are not retroactive. Students are strongly encouraged to contact their professors to discuss the testing and academic accommodations that they anticipate needing for each class. For more information about Disabilities Resources, please visit the [DR website](#).

Grading Policy

Please see below for the detailed grading system. According to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a student's parents may not contact the professor to discuss the grade that the student has received unless the student has filed an affidavit confirming that the student is a dependent and has waived FERPA privacy rights.

The following grading scale will be used. Please note that the grade for average work is a C+.

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| 4.0 | A | 94-100 | Excellent. Honors level or superior work. |
| 3.7 | A- | 90-93 | Still excellent, but with slight imperfection. |
| 3.3 | B+ | 87-89 | Very good work. Nearly excellent, but with minor problems. |
| 3.0 | B | 83-86 | Good. Solid and above average level of performance. |
| 2.7 | B- | 80-82 | Still above average, but lacking some depth in critical thinking or completeness/accuracy. |
| 2.3 | C+ | 77-79 | Average level of performance. |
| 2.0 | C | 73-76 | Satisfactory/acceptable work, although lacking sufficient critical thinking or with some completeness/accuracy problems. |
| 1.7 | C- | 70-72 | Minimally acceptable work. |
| 1.0 | D | 60-69 | Passing, but unsatisfactory. Below average performance. |
| 0.0 | F | 0-59 | Failure. Inferior performance. |

Honor Code

Elon's honor pledge calls for a commitment to Elon's shared values of honesty, integrity, responsibility, and respect. To be clear about what constitutes violations of these values, students should be familiar with code of conduct policies described in the student handbook.

Students with questions about the specific interpretation of these values and violations as they relate to this course should contact this instructor immediately. Violations in academic-related areas will be

documented in an incident report which will be maintained in the Office of Student Conduct, and may result in a lowering of the course grade and/or failure of the course with an Honor Code F.

Violations specifically covered by academic honor code policies include, but are not limited to: plagiarism, cheating, lying, stealing, and the facilitation of another's dishonesty. Multiple violations may result in a student's suspension from the University

Late Paper Policy

All papers must be submitted in person at the start of the class period in which they are due. Additionally, a digital copy of your papers must likewise be submitted on Moodle on the day in which they are due. You will incur a penalty of one level grade for every day a paper is late. I understand, however, that sometimes life happens in ways that might interfere with your completion of assignments in a timely manner. In the case that unexpected and emergency circumstances make it difficult for you to submit a paper on time, please be in touch as soon as possible.

Religious Holidays Policies

In supporting religious diversity, Elon has a policy and procedures for students who wish to observe religious holidays that are in conflict with the academic calendar, allowing students an excused absence. Students who wish to observe a holiday during the semester must complete the online Religious Observance Notification Form (RONF) by September 13, 2022.

This policy does not apply during the final examination period. Students are required to make prior arrangements with the instructor for completion of any work missed during the absence. Once the completed RONF is received, the Truitt Center will send an e-mail to the instructor and the student that a RONF has been submitted. Students may contact the Truitt Center staff with any questions (336-278-7729).

Supporting Fellow Students in Distress

As members of the Elon community, we each share a personal responsibility to express concern for one another and to ensure that this classroom and the campus as a whole remains a healthy environment for learning. Occasionally, you may become worried or concerned about a fellow classmate's well-being. When this is the case, I would encourage you to share these concerns with me or to Elon's Student Care and Outreach program: <https://www.elon.edu/ShareYouCare>

Although you can report anonymously, it is preferred that you share your contact information so they can follow up with you personally.

Technology Policy

The use of laptops, tablets, cell-phones or any other electronic devices is NOT permitted in this class. Exceptions will be made for those who have previously arranged for accommodation with the Office of Disability Services.

Title IX: Mandatory Reporting

As a faculty member, I am a mandatory reporter and am required to contact and provide information to Campus Safety and Police, the Dean of Students, and/or the Title IX Coordinator if I learn that any of my students have been sexually harassed (verbally or physically), sexually assaulted or raped, stalked, had domestic violence or dating violence occur in a relationship, or been a victim or survivor of any behavior prohibited by the University's Sexual Misconduct Policy and procedures. Once

reported, the University will promptly seek to properly support any student and make efforts to stop the discrimination, prevent it from recurring, and remedy its effects. There are resources on campus by which you can seek support from a confidential advocate, namely the following: AK Krauss, Assistant Director of the GLC for Violence Response at akrauss3@elon.edu or (336)278-5009, or contact Safeline 24/7 at 336-278-3333.

The Writing Center

Elon's [Writing Center](#) in the [Center for Writing Excellence](#) is staffed by well-trained peer consultants who can help you with all of your writing projects (for any class or major and for any extracurricular, personal, or professional purpose), so take advantage of this excellent academic resource and include a visit to our Writing Center as part of your writing process. The Writing Center is a welcoming place for all writers, regardless of experience or expertise.

In one-to-one sessions of 30 or 45 minutes, [Writing Center](#) consultants will work with you on any kind of writing (such as research or analysis papers, slide or poster presentations, or applications of any kind) at any stage of the writing process (such as understanding an assignment; brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing; developing a research question or starting your research; or completing in-text citations and bibliographies/works cited).

We have two multimedia production studios so you can create and work with a consultant on your multimedia and visual texts (such as slide presentations, infographics, or websites). Visit our presentation practice room where you can easily record and critique yourself giving a presentation and get feedback from a consultant on your accompanying visuals.

Please consult the [Writing Center website](#) for hours of operations and location.

Zoom Etiquette and Overview of Zoom Sessions

With respect to virtual office hours via Zoom, which will be by appointment, I ask that you **please have your camera and microphone on. Additionally, please attend Zoom sessions with proper attire.** I acknowledge that not everyone is comfortable sharing their surroundings in which case a virtual background, which Zoom allows users to employ, can be a great solution. If you happen to lose connection during a Zoom session or if you experience any other technological difficulties during our meeting, please email me as soon as possible to let me know. If my internet connection is ever disrupted during our Zoom sessions, I will email immediately to provide further instructions.

UNIT I: LIFE

Friday, January 3: An Introduction

Monday, January 6: Who do we answer to?

Reflection Paper 1 is due at the beginning of this class session. Please also expect a binder check for Unit 1 readings.

- Tanakh (excerpt)
- Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Skywoman Falling” and “The Council of Pecans” in *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Tuesday, January 7: What does it mean for a life to go well?

- David Foster Wallace, “This is Water,” <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>
- Santiago Slabodsky, “It’s the Theology Stupid! Coloniality, Anti-Blackness, and the Bounds of Humanity”
- Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks, “Letter 4: On the Pursuit of Happiness,” in *Letters to the Next Generation 2: Reflections on Jewish Life*

Wednesday, January 8: What should we do when we fail?

- A. Helwa, “Tawba: Repent and Return to Unity” in *Secrets of Divine Love*
- Corinne Chin and Erika Schultz, “Disappearing Daughters,” The Seattle Times, <https://projects.seattletimes.com/2020/femicide-juarez-mexico-border/>
- Nancy Pinedad-Madrid, “Suffering: A Social Reality,” in *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juarez* (excerpt)
- Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Thursday, January 9: What is the role of suffering in a good life?

- Oscar Wilde, *De profundis* (excerpt)
- James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

UNIT II: DEATH

Please note that as part of this second unit, there will be a field trip to a funeral home and crematorium. Details, including the date, are forthcoming.

Friday, January 10: How do we talk about dying, death, and the dead?

Reflection Paper 2 is due at the beginning of this class session. Please also expect a binder check for Unit 2 readings.

- Asvaghosa, *The Life of Buddha* (excerpt)
- Paul Kalanithi, “Before I Go” in *Stanford Medicine*, <https://med.stanford.edu/stanmed/2015spring/before-i-go.html>
- Atul Gwande, *Being Mortal* (excerpt)

Field Trip (for Unit 1: Life): Animal Park at the Conservators Center (Burlington, NC)

Monday, January 13: What is death?

- Lisa Guenther, “Introduction” in *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, xi-xxx
- James L. Bernat, “Defining Death,” in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Dying*, 399-410
- Rachel Aviv, “What Does It Mean to Die?” in *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/05/what-does-it-mean-to-die>

Tuesday, January 14: What characterizes a meaningful and dignified death as well as the opposite?

- *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*
- Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (excerpt)

We will have a Death Café, a conversation about death over sweet treats and beverages, during the second half of this class session. We will be joined by members within and beyond the Elon community for this conversation.

Wednesday, January 15: Is there such a thing as “good grief”?

Reading Quiz No. 1 will be given at the beginning of class.

- The Mourner’s Kaddish
- David Shyovitz, “The Subversive Kaddish,” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-subversive-kaddish>
- Shelley Richman Cohen, “A Mother’s Kaddish” and Aviva Ephraim Maller, “Pray for Me” in *Kaddish: Women’s Voices*

Thursday, January 16: How can thinking about death inform the way we live?

- Lejla Demiri, “‘He who has created death and life’ (Q 67:2): Death in Islamic Theology and Spirituality,” in *Theological Anthropology in Interreligious Perspective*, 67-82

UNIT III: AFTERLIFE

Friday, January 17: Is there life after death?

Reflection Paper 3 is due at the beginning of this class session. Please also expect a binder check for Unit 3 readings.

- Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher: Kunzang Lama'I Shelung* (excerpts)

Monday, January 20: MLK, Jr. Day | NO CLASS

Tuesday, January 21: If one is to believe in an eternal afterlife, how might one characterize it?

- Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* (excerpt)
- Fereydun Vahman (trans.), "Ardā Wirāz Nāmag - 'The Iranian 'Divina Commedia'"

Wednesday, January 22: Does an expectation of eternal life drain this life of all its meaning?

- Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (excerpt)
- LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (excerpt)

Thursday, January 23: Is there a possibility for humans to achieve immortality, and if so, in what ways?

Reading Quiz No. 2 will be given at the beginning of class.

- Caitlin Doughty, "Mexico: Michoacán" in *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*, 77-104

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Friday, January 24: Final Community Gathering

Final Portfolio is due, and the oral component of this project will be delivered at this time.