Death and Religion
the basics

Candi K. Cann
Death and Religion: The Basics provides a thorough and accessible introduction to dying, death, grief, and conceptions of the afterlife in world religions.

It leads readers through considerations of how we understand meanings of death and after-death, and the theories and practices attached to these states of being, with recourse to various religious worldviews: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Chinese Religions, and Native American belief systems. This inter-religious approach provides a rich, dynamic survey of varying and evolving cultural attitudes to death. Topics covered include:

- Religious perspectives of “the good death”
- Grief, bereavement, and mourning
- Stages and definitions of death
- Burial, cremation, and disposition
- Remembrance rituals
- Religious theories of the afterlife
- Death and technology

Featuring a glossary, suggestions for further reading in each chapter and key terms, this is the ideal text for students approaching the intersection of death and religion for the first time, and those in the fields of religious studies, thanatology, anthropology, philosophy, and sociology.

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The Basics Series

*The Basics* is a highly successful series of accessible guidebooks which provide an overview of the fundamental principles of a subject area in a jargon-free and undaunting format.

Intended for students approaching a subject for the first time, the books both introduce the essentials of a subject and provide an ideal springboard for further study. With over 50 titles spanning subjects from artificial intelligence (AI) to women’s studies, *The Basics* are an ideal starting point for students seeking to understand a subject area.

Each text comes with recommendations for further study and gradually introduces the complexities and nuances within a subject.

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**DRAMATURGY**
Anne M. Hamilton and Walter Byongsok Chon
For Maia
who taught me the “basics” of motherhood
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The study of death and dying, or as it is more clinically known, thanatology, is a fairly recent field of study and is taught in a wide variety of disciplines in college and university, ranging from sociology to medical humanities to religion, from psychology to anthropology to public health and medicine. The wide disciplinarity within the study of death makes thanatology a somewhat nebulous field of study with various disciplines claiming disciplinary authority over the subject matter, but each emphasizing a different (and equally important!) aspect of the field. Sociologists, for example, might examine death trends across a certain segment of society while psychologists might examine those same death trends from a perspective of individual motivation. A forensic anthropologist might examine the ways in which certain kinds of bodily decomposition reveal traumatic or unnatural death, while a biologist would examine that same decomposition from a completely different perspective. Public health analysts might examine particular trends in dying to critique inequitable healthcare systems, while a religion scholar might emphasize the religious worldviews of a patient and how this might impact end-of-life decisions. All of these different approaches to death and dying are equally important and reveal the importance of studying thanatology, but they all do so with different research methods and approaches. Which method and discipline speaks to you in the examination of thanatology may vary, but one thing is clear: The study of death, dying, and grief
is important because not only will each one of us die, but also the way we approach and think about death impacts the way we live and the choices we make in life.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF DEATH

Because thanatology as an interdisciplinary discipline is still fairly young, and most people study death from a firmly entrenched disciplinary perspective, a brief understanding of the history of death studies as a discipline might be helpful for the reader embarking in this field for the first time. Thanatology did not emerge as a solid discipline until the 1950s, and even then it was not until Dame Cicely Saunders’ founding of the hospice movement in the 1960s that death and dying became more normalized as a topic of study in the popular sphere (Saunders, 2001). Academics grappled with why death seemed to be a taboo field of study. English anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1955) argued that when sexuality became an acceptable topic of discussion, death became the “new taboo,” while French medieval historian Phillippe Ariès (1982) wrote that death disappeared from everyday society, displaced from the home with the professionalization of medicine and the emergence of the funeral home. Tony Walter (1997) argued that it might have been the obsession with hygiene and sanitation that caused the movement of the cemetery from the city sphere to its outskirts. Whatever the reasons, the result of not thinking about death as a part of life meant that it was something to be feared or prevented, which in turn has affected perceptions of health, sickness, old age, and even science and its functions. As Fonseca and Testoni write,

At the apex of the crisis in our relationship with death, science began to be employed as a weapon in the battle against death. The concepts of health and death became dichotomous concepts, death being considered a sickness, as pathos. Within this context, growing old was correlated with physical malfunction and was equated with death (Elias, 2001; Kastenbaum, 1995; Morin, 2002). In recent times, this mentality has made it common to “treat” old age, for either health or esthetic reasons, as if
abolishing old age would allow us to live forever, or at least to live within that illusion

\[(2012, \text{p. 160}).\]

Death and its study became contested ground as death and science became polarized from one another, as though science’s whole purpose was to prevent, or even banish death. Equally problematic was the fact that many medical schools did not teach about death and dying, so that healthcare practitioners were little prepared for their encounters with death in the hospital.

Over the course of forty-five years of surveys from 1975 to 2020, sociologist George Dickinson (2011) has traced the expansion of teaching end-of-life care in American medical schools. He found that by 2007, while most medical schools taught at least one sixty-minute class, less than one-fifth of US medical and nursing schools offered a semester length course on death and dying. By 2020, this had not really changed. Interestingly, advances in technology may be inadvertently responsible for deceasing medical students’ direct interaction with death. Dickinson’s 2020 survey found that nearly two-thirds of today’s medical school anatomy labs utilize virtual reality and 3D cadavers, rather than actual human cadavers (this is far less costly and allows students to easily practice various techniques on virtual bodies; human cadavers are expensive, but also prove far more interesting since each one is unique). Dickinson notes that as a result, medical students may be missing out on a key part of their medical formation. He argues that for most medical students, “Perceptions of medical students about cadaver dissections proved to be a crucial stage of self-reflection and useful for the formation of their identities as doctors, sometimes thought of as a “rite of passage” into the medical profession (Dickinson, 2022, p. 9; Yoo et al. 2021). For medical students preparing to enter healthcare professions, this presents a serious lack of preparation regarding death and dying, particularly for those who need to learn how to talk about it with future patients and their families. More importantly, within a medical care system that frames death as a failure, it has caused many healthcare professionals to feel as though they had not done their job well. It is important to learn that death is a part of life.
The emergence of the **Hospice movement** has also been key to death education, as it is a movement concerned with end-of-life and palliative care services, founded by Dame Cicely Saunders in 1967, at St. Christopher’s in the United Kingdom. Scholar Robert Kastenbaum argues that the hospice movement can be viewed as a response to the impersonal, highly medicalized view of death, and its inclusion of an entire system of care (the patient, the patient’s family, the community, and the medical practitioners) in its ethos allowed for a deeply transformational approach toward death that was more holistic than traditional medicine. Certainly, hospice care helped create more conversations about and around death, which allowed for death to become a bit less of a taboo topic.

Similarly, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s work on pediatric hospice, and her book *On Death and Dying* (1973) provided the first critique of a highly medicalized system of healthcare and publicly offered another way of thinking about both the dying process and death itself. Like Saunders and Kübler-Ross, Jessica Mitford’s (1963) exposé on the American funeral industry and the death business, *The American Way of Death*, offered another important counter-critique not of dying, but of the funeral industry. Mitford examined the business practices of the funeral industry, exposing the predatory practices of the industry and the ways in which they took advantage of their grieving customers. Mitford’s book eventually led to a second reprint and was fundamental to the establishment of government oversight of the funeral industry in the United States. Death studies has emerged largely as a critique and commentary to the totalizing influence of social constructs and beliefs surrounding the ways in which people live. To study death is to bring meaning to life.

**WHY THIS BOOK?**

Writing a book titled *Death and Religion: The Basics* is a fairly ambitious undertaking—particularly when there are many different religions, cultures, and even different definitions of what it means to die, or how each culture or religion believes we should grieve. Thus, this book is not meant to be comprehensive, but intends to be an introduction to the vastly wide intersection between both
thanatology and religion. It is my hope that this book will aid the reader by offering a concise explanation of dying, death, and grief from an accessible and readable viewpoint that will inspire further research. This book will lead readers through considerations of how we understand meanings of death and after-death, whether in grief, afterlife conceptions, or technologies. Most importantly, this book questions the ways in which religion might impact the dying process, disposal practices, and mourning customs. It is important as our world becomes increasingly pluralistic and inter-religious that we have at least a rudimentary understanding of the ways in which different religious traditions and cultures understand death and the afterlife, as these cosmological conceptions often impact the way we view the world and how we view the role of grief and mourning in our cultures.

A FEW CAVEATS

With every book, there are difficult decisions about what must be written and what must be left out. As such, it should be noted that within each religious tradition itself there is often wide diversity that a book covering “The Basics” cannot possibly address, and the rich variety within each tradition is sometimes overlooked in favor of a general framework in order to inform the reader. Additionally, religious traditions have great historical and cultural diversity, but because these religions experience change and develop over time, many of the religious customs and traditions described here cannot be taken as normative in all times and places. Religion is dynamic and constantly changing, and I have chosen to focus on contemporary lived religion, rather than utilize the traditional historical approach. I have done this primarily because there are many books written from the historical and textual perspective, but there is not enough written about how people actually live out their religious beliefs and practices, and I feel that this perspective will be the most useful for those working in medical environments or with religious communities. I have always felt that religion is what people do and not what people say they believe. Regrettably there are also some gaps and silences in this text as I have mainly focused on larger religions with substantial numbers of adherents. For this reason, some religions have been left out, and while I wish I could include all
religious customs and practices, it is my hope that this book inspires you to do further research on your own. On a last note, this text explicitly deals with death in parts of the world where Western medical technology is predominant and widely used and where people generally have access and resources to Western medicine. People in rural undeveloped areas with a lack of access to medical care will not have the same anxieties or options as the readers of this book.

BOOK STRUCTURE

For those newer to the field of thanatology, this book offers a comprehensive understanding of the field of death studies and the history of definitions of death (brain, cardio-pulmonary, etc.) and the relationship of these various definitions to religious understandings of the afterlife. It is my hope that this book will educate and prepare those planning to work with populations from a variety of multi-cultural and multi-religious backgrounds in the hospital or religious setting, so that they are better equipped to work with populations who may hold a differing viewpoint from their own.

The outline of the chapters in this book is below:

- **Chapter 1: The Good Death**
  This chapter examines death in a highly medicalized culture that tends toward death denial. An examination of the intersection of medical culture with various religious worldviews will be made. The chapter then examines the understanding of dying across religions and examines how “the good death” might be defined and understood in each religious tradition.

- **Chapter 2: The Process of Dying and the Definition of Death**
  This chapter examines definitions of death (cardio-pulmonary death, partial brain death, and whole brain death), the differences between these various types of death and why and how they matter, particularly in light of religious understanding and conceptions of the afterlife.

- **Chapter 3: Disposal**
  This chapter examines various forms of disposal, including burial, cremation, and other emergent technologies such as reef burial, burial pods, etc., studying the ways in which religions
 prescribe or proscribe particular disposal traditions. In addition, the chapter examines the latest technologies in death disposal examining the ways in which technology impacts death and remembrance rituals across religions.

- **Chapter 4: Grief, Bereavement, and Mourning**
  This chapter addresses the role of grief, the development of grief theory, focusing on psychological and sociological theories on grief. It examines the ways in which these theories have either helped or hindered grieving, and provides a lens through which to examine the religious ritualization of grief and bereavement.

- **Chapter 5: Mourning and Bereavement from a Religious Perspective**
  This chapter turns toward various religious understandings and interpretations on grief, as a way to examine grief from both an academic and religious perspective, and also serves as a good intermediary chapter between death practices and religious grieving rituals, in which the various religious concepts of the afterlife are examined.

- **Chapter 6: Afterlives and Afterdeaths: Remembrance and Ritual**
  This chapter explores various conceptions and understandings of the afterlife in different religious traditions and how these conceptions have, in turn, shaped thoughts on death and dying, and the ways in which people interpret death after life. Focus here will be placed on examining religious notions of afterlife and how they intersect with death practices and the implications of afterlife belief on those practices.

- **Chapter 7: Technological Afterlives**
  This chapter examines the shifting landscape of grief and afterlife beliefs and how technology developments may influence that landscape. Particular attention will be paid to emergent technologies surrounding alternate afterlives through transhumanism, the Internet, smartphones, etc., examining the ways in which technology and death intersect.

- **Chapter 8: Conclusion**
  This chapter concludes the landscape of dying, death, grief, and the afterlife, with final reflections examining non-religious points of view.
Lastly, it is my hope that you will come away from this book not merely having learned more, but that you think about death in your life too. We all die. But that doesn’t need to scare us. Death can prepare us and help us live better lives, full of rich meaning and joy. It can also help us live with more care and compassion for others. Death is a part of everyday life and it is important that we live life fully each and every day.

Questions about Death

Ask yourself some of these questions about death.

1. If you were to die today, is there anything you would regret not doing?
2. What can you learn from your inevitable death?
3. Have you shown those around you that you care for them if they were to die this week, next month, this year?
4. What do you think about the afterlife? Is it real? If so, what does it look like, sound like, smell like? If not, what do you think happens when you die?
5. What are you most proud of in your life?
6. What do you want your life to look like when you die?

REFERENCES


**FOR FURTHER READING**


This is an interesting comparison of two English speaking countries and their systems of death education, training, and academic study. The reader may be surprised how much the medical culture informs attitudes towards life and death.


This is a succinct examination of the history of thanatology and death education up until the early 2000s.


A classic read, this book remains pertinent and eye opening more than fifty years after its publication.


Walter does a nice job examining various trends and themes in the study of death from a sociological perspective.