

RLST 1710: Religions of Japan

MWF 11:10AM-12:00 PM, Calhoun 104

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Office hours: By appointment (MWF preferred)

Course Description

This course will provide an introduction to the religious traditions of Japan from the earliest myths to present day practices. We will use primary texts from diverse genres, groundbreaking secondary scholarship, and occasional films to explore the central role religion has played in shaping Japanese society and culture. By looking at practices and teachings that do not easily map onto monotheistic traditions, we will learn to question our commonly held assumptions about religion and consider fundamental human problems from new perspectives. Throughout the semester, we will reflect on a question underlying the entire course: what does religion mean for a culture in which the majority of the people identify themselves as nonbelievers but still regularly engage in seemingly religious acts?

The course is arranged thematically to consider key issues in religious studies including myth, cosmology, ritual, death, and modernity. By examining religions including Buddhism, Shintō, Christianity, and new religious movements, we will gain an appreciation for the ways diverse traditions interacted and coexisted throughout Japanese history. We will engage in a range of activities including writing assignments, debates, small group exercises, and even occasional drawing.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, the successful student will be able:

- 1) To identify Japan's major religious traditions, doctrines, and practices and understand the way they developed in relationship to one another over roughly 1,500 years.
- 2) To use primary sources to construct clear and original arguments in written and oral form and consider various ways to approach religious studies as scholars.
- 3) To trace connections between the past and present and think more carefully about how history shapes our values, attitudes, and practices.
- 4) To see religion in a new way by recognizing that religion in Japan may operate under radically different cultural assumptions than our own.

Student and Teacher Responsibilities

Learning requires an effort by both the student and the teacher. Only if we both agree to the following can the above learning objectives be met:

- 1) **To punctually attend and actively participate in class:** This class will include lectures, discussions, and assorted group activities. In the classroom, we will introduce materials and ideas not included in the readings. Students should attend all classes and notify me by email if you expect to be absent for any reason. I will similarly start and end class in a timely manner and provide diverse activities to meet a range of learning styles.

- 2) **To complete all assignments by the date indicated:** Many of the classroom activities will assume that you have completed the readings, so be sure to finish them by the start of class for the day listed on the syllabus. **Twenty-four hour notice is required for extensions on written work.** Extensions will be granted at the discretion of the instructor and are by no means guaranteed. Students will be penalized a third of a letter grade for each day late including weekends (ex. a B+ will become a B if one day late, a B- if two days late, etc.). The instructor will return written work within one week.
- 3) **Critically engage the materials presented in the course:** Critical engagement is a two way street: we should be open-minded enough to allow the assignments to challenge our assumptions but should also actively question the arguments and ideas advanced in the texts and class. This type of reflection is expected both in discussion sections and in your written work for teacher and students alike.

Honor Code

All academic work at Vanderbilt is done under the Honor System. Students may collaborate in preparation for class, but all written assignments are to be completed independently. Please be sure to provide proper citations in your papers. If you have any questions about citation practices or the honor code, please do not hesitate to ask.

Accommodations

If you have a learning or physical disability, or if you learn best utilizing a particular method, please discuss with the instructor how I can accommodate your learning needs. I am committed to creating an effective environment for all learning styles and will maintain confidentiality. If appropriate, you should contact the [Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services Department](#) to get more information on accommodating disabilities.

Evaluation

- 1) Active class participation: Students will be assessed on attendance as well as regular participation in classroom activities, including but not limited to Friday discussions. To receive an “A” level grade in class participation, a student should attend every class and participate in a way that shows careful reflection on the assignments and awareness of your relationship with your classmates.
- 2) Online Timeline and Presentation: Students will create a timeline on Tiki-Toki. The timeline will contain at least 60 entries of three sentences each. A detailed assignment will be distributed on the second day of the course. Students will also sign-up for an oral presentation of their timeline (5 minutes followed by discussion).
- 3) Paper: You will complete a four-page double spaced paper related to your timeline. A detailed assignment will follow.
- 4) Final Exam: This exam will be cumulative and will include multiple-choice questions on key terms, IDs of important passages from the readings, and essay questions. Some of the essay questions will ask you to synthesize material from different weeks of the course. A more detailed explanation will be provided toward the end of the semester.

Grading

Class participation: 20% (10% attendance, 10% in-class participation)

Online Timeline: 25%

Presentation of Timeline Entries: 5%
Paper: 20%
Final exam: 30%

	A 94-100	A- 90-93
B+ 87-89	B 84-86	B- 80-83
C+ 77-79	C 74-76	C- 70-73
D+ 67-69	D 64-66	D- 60-63
F 59 and below		

Please note that grades do not round-up and are non-negotiable. A 93.99999 is still an A- without exception. I am happy to discuss the reasons you received a given grade, but I will not change your grade, unless you found an obvious mistake (an answer that was correct but marked wrong). I also will not give any extra credit opportunities to boost your grade beyond the standards outlined above.

Texts for Purchase (all also available on reserve at Central Library)

Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (RCJ on syllabus)
George Tanabe (ed.), *Religions of Japan in Practice* (RJP on syllabus)
Endō Shūsaku, *Silence*
All other readings have been posted in e-reserves on Blackboard.

Schedule

Week One: Intro I

Monday (1/11): Intro to syllabus; defining religion

Wednesday (1/13): What is religion in Japan; Overview of Timelines Assignment

Read: RCJ, chapter 1

Friday (1/15): *Matsuri: A Tribute to Eight Million Japanese Gods* (in-class screening and activity); Trouble shooting for Timelines; **all meet in Calhoun 104**

Week Two: Intro II

Monday (1/18): **No class Martin Luther King Day**

Wednesday (1/20): Defining Religion in Japan and Discussion of *Matsuri*; Sign-up for timeline presentations

Background on Weizhi account

Read: RCJ, chapter 2

*****Special event: Lecture by Richard Jaffee, "Following the Cotton Road: Japanese Corporate Pilgrimage to India, 1926-1927," Thursday January 21 at 4:10 PM; all who attend are excused for one timeline post this week and will only need 59 posts total (you will receive full credit for the equivalent of one post for attending)**

Friday (1/22): Timelines Presentation 1; Discussion of Weizhi

Read: Kidder (trans.), excerpt from the Weizhi (Blackboard)

Week Three: Japan's Earliest Myths

Monday (1/25): Japan's Earliest Myths

Borgen and Ury, “Readable Japanese Mythology” (Blackboard)
Wednesday (1/27): Japanese Mythology and Religions through the Ages: A Preview
Read: Kōnoshi, “Constructing Imperial Mythology” (Blackboard)
Friday (1/29): Timeline Presentations 2; Discussion of Gender and Japanese Mythology
Read: Ambros, “Ancient Japanese Mythology: Female Divinities and Immortals” (Blackboard)

Week Four: Buddhism in Japan

Monday (2/1): Background on Buddhism and Buddhist Myths
Read: Lopez, “The Universe” (Blackboard)
Wednesday (2/3): The Introduction of Buddhism to Japan
Read: LaFleur, “In and Out the Rokudō” (Blackboard)
Friday (2/5): Timeline Presentations 3; Discussion of Nihon ryōiki
Read: Kyōkai, selections from *Miraculous Stories* (Blackboard)

Week Five: Kami and Buddhas (and the difficulties in separating them)

Monday (2/8): Shintō and Buddhism in Medieval Japan
Read: Teeuwen and Breen, “Kami Shrines, Myths, and Rituals in Premodern Times,” 24-44 (Blackboard)
Wednesday (2/10): The Birth of Shintō
Read: Teeuwen and Breen, “Kami Shrines, Myths, and Rituals in Premodern Times,” 45-65 (Blackboard)
RCJ, chapter 3
“The Shintō Wedding Ceremony: A Modern *Norito*” (*RJP* no. 12)
Friday (2/12): Timeline Presentations 4; In-class screening of *Spirits of State*; **all meet in Calhoun 104**
Read: Breen, “Introduction: A Yasukuni Genealogy” (Blackboard)

Week Six: Ise and Yasukuni

Monday (2/15): Revisioning Ise
Read: Teeuwen and van der Veere (trans.), “The Purification Formula of the Nakatomi” (*RJP* no. 21)
Robert Morell (trans.), “Mujū Ichien’s Shintō-Buddhist Syncretism” (*RJP*, 38)
Wednesday (2/17): Timeline Presentations 5; Background on Yasukuni; Preparation for Debates
Read: Takahashi, “Legacies of Empire”**
Nitta, “And Why Shouldn’t the Prime Minister Worship at Yasukuni”**
**Half the class will read Takahashi and the other half will read Nitta in preparation for Friday’s debate.
Friday (2/19): Debate on Yasukuni Shrine
No reading assignments for Friday

Week Seven: The Lotus Sutra and its Followers

Monday (2/22): Original Enlightenment in Tendai
Read: Saichō, “Universal Buddha Nature” (Blackboard)
Stone (trans.), “The Contemplation of Suchness” (*RJP* no. 20)

Wednesday (2/24): Tendai and Nichiren; Background on New Religious Movements

Read: Saichō, “Vow of Uninterrupted Study of the *Lotus Sutra*”

Stone, “Nichiren School” (Blackboard)

Nichiren, “The One Essential Phrase” (Blackboard)

Friday (2/26): Timeline Presentations 6; Discussion of Lotus-based New Religious Movements

Read: McLaughlin, “Sōka gakkai in Japan” (Blackboard); web based activity on Sōka Gakkai and NRMs

Week Eight: Esoteric Buddhism

Monday (2/29): Kūkai: Life and Thought

Read: Kūkai, selections from *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Blackboard)

Wednesday (3/2): Cult of Kūkai; In-class screening of *Arukihenro: Walking Pilgrims* (start)

Read: Tanabe (trans.), “The Founding of Mount Kōya and Kūkai’s Eternal Meditation” (*RJP* no. 33)

Friday (3/4): Timeline Presentations 7; In-class screening of *Arukihenro: Walking Pilgrims* (continued); **all meet in Calhoun 104**

Read: Reader, *RCJ*, chapter 6

Week Nine: Mountains and Asceticism

Monday (3/14): Asceticism in Japan: Past and Present

Read: Reader, *RCJ*, chapter 5

Wednesday (3/16): Shūgendō and Asceticism

Read: Keenan (trans.), “En the Ascetic” (*RJP* no. 32)

Blacker, “The Symbolic Journey” (Blackboard)

Friday (3/18): Timeline Presentations 8; Discussion of “Shugendō Now”

Film: *Shugendō Now* (view before class; details of film screening to follow)

Week Ten: Zen Practice and Thought

Monday (3/21): Chan from China to Japan

Read: Yampolsky, “The Development of Japanese Zen” (Blackboard)

Wednesday (3/23): Dōgen and Just Sitting

Read: Dōgen, “[Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen](#)” and

“Instructions for the Cook” (Blackboard)

Friday (3/25): Timeline Presentations 9; Discussion of Hakuin and Kōan

Read: Hakuin, “Orategama” (excerpts, start at bottom of 115) (Blackboard)

Week Eleven: Pure Lands

Monday (3/28): Pure Land Buddhism before Pure Land Sects

Read: Dobbins (trans), “Genshin’s Deathbed Nembutsu Ritual in Pure Land Buddhism” (*RJP* no. 16)

William Deal (trans.), “Women and Japanese Buddhism: Tales of Birth in the Pure Land” (*RJP* no. 17)

Wednesday (3/30): Pure Land and True Pure Land Buddhist Sects

Read: Hōnen, selections from *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Blackboard)

Dobbins (trans), “Shinran’s Faith as Immediate Fulfillment in Pure Land Buddhism” (*RJP* no. 27)

Hirota (trans.), “Plain Words on the Pure Land Way” (*RJP* no. 26)

Friday (4/1): Timelines Presentation 10; In-class Screening of *Souls of Zen*; **all meet in Calhoun 104**

Read: Reader, *RCJ*, chapter 4

Week Twelve: Caring for the Dead

Monday (4/4): Ghosts and Funerals

Read: Plutschow, “The Fear of Evil Spirits in Japanese Culture”

Richard Payne, “Shingon Services for the Dead” (*RJP* no. 15)

Wednesday (4/6): Pet Funerals

Read: Ambros “Petto Kuyō: Changing Views of Animal Spirits in Contemporary Japan” (Blackboard)

Friday (4/8): Timelines Presentation 11; Discussion of Abortions in Japanese Buddhism

Read: Underwood, “Strategies of Survival: Women, Abortion, and Popular Religion in Contemporary Japan”

LaFleur (trans.), “Buddhism and Abortion” (*RJP* no. 19)

Week Thirteen: Christianity in Japan

Monday (4/11): Propagation, Persecution, and Hiding

Read: Start reading *Silence* (finish by Friday)

Wednesday (4/13): Christianity in Contemporary Japan

Read: Mullins, “Christianity in Contemporary Japanese Society” (Blackboard)

Friday (4/15): Timelines Presentation 12; Discussion of Endō

Read: Endo, *Silence* (note that this is a novel and is longer than our usual assignments; **start early**)

Week Fourteen: Crises and Religious Responses

Monday (4/18): The Aum Incident

Read: Murakami, *Underground*, selections (Blackboard)

Paper due at 11:59 PM

Wednesday (4/20): 3/11 Disaster

Read: McLaughlin, “What Have Religious Groups Done After 3.11? [Part 1: A Brief Survey of Religious Mobilization after the Great East Japan Earthquake Disasters](#) and [Part 2: From Religious Mobilization to “Spiritual Care”](#)” (Blackboard)

Friday (4/22): Timeline Presentation 13; Christian Weddings and “Non-religious”

Read: LeFebvre, “Christian Wedding Ceremonies in Contemporary Japan” (Blackboard)

Week Fifteen: Review and Reflection

Monday (4/25): Review for Exam and reflections on the course

Final Exam: The final exam will be held on Monday May 2 at 9:00 AM. I will not offer the exam at the alternate time. Please make your end-of-semester travel plans accordingly.