



REL 228/EAS 228

RELIGION IN JAPANESE CULTURE

M W 10:00–10:50 (live-attendance optional on Zoom), Precept TBA

How Do We Get in Touch?

Bryan Lowe (*he/him/his*)

bdlowe@princeton.edu

Drop-in Hours: T 9:00 AM–12:00 PM
(Zoom link on Blackboard)

Preceptors:

Kentaro Ide

kide@princeton.edu

Sinae Kim

sinae@princeton.edu

David Romney

dllromney@princeton.edu

Office hours through WASE

What to Buy?

Silence by ENDŌ Shūsaku

All other readings on Blackboard.

What Dates Should We Know?

9/21 McNicholl lecture @ 4:30 PM

10/9 Reflection #1 due @ 11:59 PM

10/14 Midterm due @ start of class

10/21 Baffelli lecture @ 4:30 PM

11/20 Reflection #2 due @ 11:59 PM

12/12 Final due @ 11:59 PM

External lectures are not required.

Timelines should be completed by
Saturday at 11:59 PM weeks 2–11.

What Is This Course?

What does religion mean for a culture in which the majority of people identify as nonbelievers but still regularly engage in seemingly religious acts? How do we define religion? Can we separate it from politics and culture? By looking at practices and teachings that do not easily map onto monotheistic traditions, we will learn to question commonly held assumptions about religion. In addition to addressing these broader issues, this course introduces the religious traditions of Japan from the earliest myths to present-day practices. By examining religions including Buddhism, Shintō, Christianity, and new religious movements from textual, historical, and ethnographic perspectives, we will gain an appreciation for the way 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. The course is arranged thematically to consider key issues in religious studies related to cosmology and practice.

How Are We Evaluated?

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

Online Timeline: 25% (1% per entry and 5% for overall quality)

Reflections: 10% (5% per reflection)

Midterm: 20%

Final exam: 25%

What Skills Will We Learn?

Identify Japan's major religious traditions, doctrines, and practices and chart the ways they developed in relationship to one another over roughly 1,500 years.
Trace connections between the past and present and recognize how history shapes values, attitudes, and practices.

Differentiate approaches to the study of religion and assess their advantages and disadvantages.

Construct clear and original arguments in written and oral form using primary sources and ethnographic data.

See religion in a new way and understand the real-world consequences of how we define it.

Responsibilities, Expectations, and Resources

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:

- *To actively participate in class:* This class will include lectures, discussions, and assorted group activities. This semester will present challenges in an online format (more on that below). But you are expected to either attend lecture live or watch the video prior to precept (sooner the better). You are also expected to be an active and respectful member of all group projects, both those done synchronously and asynchronously. **Notify me by email if there is a reason why you cannot attend, watch the video, or participate in a group activity.** I will similarly start and end class in a timely manner and provide diverse activities to meet a range of learning styles.
- *To complete all assignments by the date indicated:* Successful participation depends upon completing the readings by the start of class and **having them with you in hard or electronic copy. FORTY-EIGHT-hour notice is required for extensions on written work.** Extensions will be granted at the discretion of the instructor. Students will be penalized a third of a letter grade for each day late including weekends (e.g. a B+ will become a B if one day late, a B- if two days late, etc.). The instructor will return written work within ten days.
- *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 and in written work for teachers and students alike. It should always take place in a respectful manner.
- *Contact me promptly* with any questions or concerns (email is best). I will respond within forty-eight hours, Monday through Friday.

Evaluation

- *Attendance:* Attendance to the lectures can take place in the form of live attendance or watching the video. If you prefer to watch the video, simply send me a short question or comment about something that struck you by email. Please check Blackboard regularly to ensure that you are marked present for days you attend. Your grade will simply be the percentage of classes attended/watched.
- *Class participation:* An “A” for participation requires consistent contributions to class discussion and activities in a way that shows careful reflection on the assignments and an awareness of your relationship with your classmates, including respecting identities and viewpoints. One helpful/insightful comment or question is more valuable than frequently talking for talking’s sake. Sometimes a question can be more helpful than a comment. This will be assessed both through asynchronous activities and participation in precept.
- *Online Timeline:* Students will create a timeline in groups on Tiki-Toki. Each individual should write two entries per week for a total of ten weeks of the semester (weeks two through eleven). A detailed assignment will be distributed by the start of week 2.
- *Reflections:* You will complete two two-page reflections (double-spaced, twelve-point font with one-inch margins) that ask you to simply relate something you learned in this class on Japanese religions to a bigger issue in the world. For example, you might reflect on how definitions of religion could relate to court decisions about birth control in the U.S. Or you might reflect about how different countries memorialize the war dead and deal with difficult histories. I simply ask that you reflect seriously on something that interests you. These will be graded as pass/fail. As long as you show that you are thinking deeply, you will receive full credit.
- *Midterm:* Mostly essay questions with some short answer. These will be open-book, and you will be required to refer to your timelines in answering some questions. Details to be distributed in class.
- *Final:* Similar to the midterm in format but longer. Details to be distributed in class.

Grades

Letter grades translate to the following numbers:

A+ 97–100	A 93–96.99	A– 90–92.99
B+ 87–89.99	B 83–86.99	B– 80–82.99
C+ 77–79.99	C 73–76.99	C– 70–72.99
D 60–69.99	F 59.9 and below	

Please note that grades do not round-up and are non-negotiable. A 92.99999 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.

Honor Code

All academic work at Princeton is done under the [Honor System](#). Students may collaborate in preparation for class, but all papers and exams are to be completed independently. If you have any questions about citation practices or the honor code, please do not hesitate to ask.

Learning and Wellness Resources

Part of a college education is learning to learn. We can all get better at this. The [McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning](#) offers a number of resources to teach these skills, including materials for learning remotely. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of their services.

Moreover, you cannot learn if you do not take care of yourself. Don't overexert yourself—you will be a better student if you are rested. Sleep. If you are having any trouble at all, [Counseling and Psychological Services](#), is a valuable and confidential resource available to all students, even remotely in a telehealth setting. Please let me know if you are having any problems, and I will try my best to connect you to people who can help.

Accommodations

I am committed to creating an effective and welcoming environment for all. If you have any type of disability or require any accommodations, the University requires that those requests be made through the [Office of Disability Services](#).

Sensitive Topics

History is full of difficult topics, and throughout the course we will discuss religion as it intersects with race, gender, and sexuality. It is sometimes hard to predict which assignments or classes may be sensitive, as individual experiences differ. But I should highlight the following potentially problematic weeks: week six will deal with both abortion and war; week nine addresses a hell of menstrual blood and misogyny (misogyny will also be discussed in other weeks as well); week ten deals with torture and persecution of Christians and will also contain a film clip with sexual violence; week eleven will deal with a sarin gas attack on public transit and the 3/11 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster; week twelve's reading by Thomas contains some sexualized images. If you ever feel that a topic is too traumatic, you may be excused from that class. Just simply tell me that you are uncomfortable. I do not expect any more detail than that.

Online Learning

As you know, this class will take place entirely online. This presents challenges but also opportunities. I am committed to working to accommodate every student to the best of my ability. This is still new, so I should stress that we will be experimenting quite a bit. Some things may work better than others and all of this is subject to change. I ask for a bit of patience as well as a willingness to try new learning styles.

1) **Lectures/synchronous activities:** I will lecture twice a week at the scheduled class time. I will not lecture for the whole 50 minutes (I seldom do this anyway; see more under #3 below). You are encouraged to attend so that you can ask questions in real time, but you are not required to do so. We will also often do small group activities such as breakout rooms, polls, etc. in addition to lecture. I will upload videos after each lecture to Blackboard. Students who do not attend should watch the video and send me a question or comment based on the lecture via email. I will use this to mark you as “present” for the day, and I’ll send an individualized reply.

2) **Precepts:** We will have weekly precepts. I hope that most students will be able to attend these synchronously. They will be an opportunity to discuss the readings as well as to occasionally take part in more structured activities. If you cannot attend a synchronous section, I will design a format to replicate precepts outside of class. I’m honestly unsure what this will look like, because it will depend on the number of students who prefer this option. It could involve a combination of online discussion boards as well as conversations with other asynchronous students. We’ll see. But I’ll do my best to make it work.

3) **Asynchronous activities:** There will be required asynchronous activities for everyone each week. These will include activities such as poster-making, paired conversations, and debate preparation. I aim for these to be collaborative. I will set a time limit for each activity so that you are replicating the amount of time we would usually spend in class on these types of activities. (In my in-person classes, I typically also utilize hands-on activities during class time, as research shows that 50-minute lectures are not a good way to learn). I will adjust the length of my lecture each week to ensure that you are never doing more than 100 minutes of work total for “in-class work” (this is separate from homework and graded activities, see below). In other words, the time of synchronous activities plus the time set aside for asynchronous activities should total the amount of time you would spend in the classroom had this been an in-person class (100 minutes plus precept).

5) **Office hours:** I will hold three hours of office hours (or as I call them, “Drop-in hours”) per week via Zoom. In addition, I’m always open for a scheduled meeting and can accommodate whatever time zone you find yourself in. I expect that you will come to at least one session over the course of the semester even just to say hi for a few minutes, though I do not require it.

Each Friday, I will upload a plan for the following week to Blackboard. This plan will tell you exactly how many minutes you should spend on synchronous and asynchronous activities, which will be completed in addition to the assigned readings on the syllabus. The plan will also include a reading guide.

Other Zoom policies: I will record all lectures, but these may not be distributed or shared. Cameras are great, and I love to see you. But they are not required—do what makes you comfortable. Mute when I’m lecturing, unless you have a question. Try to use the raise your hand function. If your mic doesn’t work, chat is great. Please don’t multitask. I ask that you be fully present for all synchronous sessions. If there are internet problems on either end, don’t worry. If your internet stops working, you can watch the recording. If mine stops working, I’ll record and upload. Things will go wrong. And that’s ok.

All of this is subject to change, hopefully for the better.

Schedule

The first part of the course (weeks 1–7) focuses on the broad theme of gods, buddhas, and ghosts. This part serves as an introduction to Japanese religions by considering the deities that populate Japanese myths and cosmology. We will explore how these beings challenge facile classifications into categories of Shintō, Buddhist, or folk. We will also see how ideas about gods, spirits, and ghosts continue to animate Japanese religiosity today. The second part of the course (weeks 8–13) focuses on different ways people understand their place in this world and the next. In this section of the course, we will challenge the idea that religion is necessarily otherworldly by paying attention to discourses on this world as the source of enlightenment and the connection between living and dying through multiple methods ranging from ethnography to textual study. We will also assess a number of real-world problems including persecution, violence, natural disasters, pandemic, and secularization. Throughout the course, we will explore the definition of religion and how it applies to and also obfuscates the Japanese case.

All readings should be completed by the start of class on the day listed (i.e. read Reader, Kavanaugh and LeFebvre by the start of class on 9/2). We will refer to them in class, and you may be asked to respond.

Week 1: Introductions and Defining Religion in Japan

Date	Readings	Assignment
August 31 Introductions	None	
Sept. 2	Ian Reader, “Turning to the Gods in Times of Trouble” Christopher Kavanaugh, “Religion without Belief” Jesse LeFebvre, “Christian Wedding Ceremonies: Nonreligiousness in Contemporary Japan”	

Week 2: Religion (?) and Myth in Early Japan

Date	Readings	Assignment
Sept. 7	Edward Kidder (trans.), excerpt from the <i>Weizhi</i> (only read 14–18) Barbara Ambros, “The Prehistorical Japanese Archipelagos”	

Sept. 9	Robert Borgen and Marian Ury (trans.), “Readable Japanese Mythology” (only read 65–81)	Timeline
	Barbara Ambros, “Ancient Japanese Mythology”	

Week 3: Buddhist(?) Cosmology

Date	Readings	Assignment
Sept. 14	William LaFleur, “In and Out the Rokudō” (focus on 26 – 48, skim rest)	
	<i>Kyōkai</i> (trans. by Kyoko Motomichi Nakamura), <i>Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition</i> , 1:3, 1:7 1:23, 1:30, 1:31, 2:5, 2:25, 2:26, 3:1 3:19, 3:31	
	Jason Josephson, “When Buddhism Became a Religion”	
Sept. 16	Helen Hardacre, “The Esoterization of Medieval Shintō”	Timeline
	Teeuwen and Hendrik van der Veere, “The Purification Formula of the Nakatomi”	

Week 4: Is Shintō Japan’s Indigenous Religion?

Date	Readings	Assignment
Sept. 21	Teeuwen and Breen, “Kami Shrines, Myths, and Rituals in Premodern Times”	
	Teeuwen and Breen, “An Alternative Approach to the History of Shinto”	

Sept. 23	Hardacre, “Introduction” and “Heisei Shintō”	Timeline
----------	--	----------

Week 5: Ghosts and Spirits

Date	Readings	Assignment
Sept. 28	Herbert Plutschow, “The Fear of Evil Spirits in Japanese Culture” View scroll “Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine” from the Met and listen to accompanying audio	
Sept. 30	Josephson, “The Mystical ‘Occident’ or the Vibrations of ‘Modernity’ in the Mirror of Japanese Thought” Ambros, “Petto Kuyō: Changing Views of Animal Spirits in Contemporary Japan”	Timeline

Week 6: Spirits, State, and Survival

Date	Readings	Assignment
Oct. 5	Meredith Underwood, “Strategies of Survival: Women, Abortion, and Popular Religion in Contemporary Japan” LaFleur (trans.), “Buddhism and Abortion”	Midterm Posted (due October 14)
Oct. 7	John Breen, “Fine Words Indeed: Yasukuni and the Narrative Fetishism of War” Takahashi Tetsuya, “Legacies of Empire” or Nitta Hitoshi, “And Why Shouldn’t the Prime Minister Worship at Yasukuni” **Half the class will read Takahashi and the other half will read	Reflection #1 due by Friday October 9 at 11:59 PM Timeline

Nitta in preparation for a debate in precept.

Week 7: Animism and Animation

Date	Readings	Assignment
Oct. 12 No class-fall recess	No readings—fall recess	
Oct. 14	Watch Shinkai Makoto, <i>Your Name</i> Jolyon Thomas, “Spirit/Medium: Critically Examining the Relationship between Animism and Animation”	Midterm exam due by October 14 at the start of class Timeline

Week 8: Being Buddhist in This World

Date	Readings	Assignment
Oct. 19	Jacqueline Stone (trans.), “The Contemplation of Suchness” Dōgen, “Instructions for the Cook” Stone, “Medieval Tendai Hongaku Thought and the New Kamakura Buddhism”	
Oct. 21	Linda Keenan (trans.), “En the Ascetic” Heather Blair, “Affective Landscape” Naoko Kobayashi, “Sacred Mountains and Women in Japan Fighting a Romanticized Image of Female Ascetic Practitioners”	Timeline

Week 9: Awakening in Other Worlds: Pure Lands and Funerals

Date	Readings	Assignment
Oct. 26	James Dobbins (trans), “Genshin’s Deathbed Nembutsu Ritual in Pure Land Buddhism”	

Stone, "A Realm Apart"

Oct. 28

Duncan Williams, "The Origins of the Blood Pool Hell Sutra for Women's Salvation" Timeline

Lori Meeks, "Women and Buddhism in East Asian history: The case of the Blood Bowl Sutra, Part II: Japan"

Duncan Williams, "Funerary Zen"

Week 10: Faith/Works: Locating Christian Salvation

Date

Readings

Assignment

Nov. 2

Start reading Shūsaku Endō, *Silence* (finish by Wednesday's class)

Nov. 4

Finish reading *Silence* Timeline

Week 11: Responding to Human and Natural Disasters

Date

Readings

Assignment

Nov. 9

Haruki Murakami, *Underground*, selections

Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, "Impact and Ramifications: The Aftermath of the Aum Affair in the Japanese Religious Context"

Nov. 11

Levi McLaughlin, "Religious Responses to the 2011 Tsunami in Japan" Timeline

Bryan Lowe, "Protection without Punishment: Turning to Buddhist Gods during Covid-19"

Week 12: Religious Japan? Secular Japan?

Date	Readings	Assignment
Nov. 16	<p>Ian Reader, “Secularisation, R.I.P.? Nonsense! The ‘Rush Hour Away from the Gods’ and the Decline of Religion in Contemporary Japan”</p> <p>Mark Rowe, “Charting Known Territory: Female Buddhist Priests”</p>	
Nov. 18	<p>Carina Roth, “Essays in Vagueness: Aspects of Diffused Religiosity in Japan”</p> <p>Thomas, “The Buddhist Virtues of Raging Lust and Crass Materialism in Contemporary Japan”</p> <p>Nakamura Hikaru, <i>Saint Young Men</i>: “Sacred Fall Festival” and “Bon, Bon, Bon”</p>	Reflection #2 due by Friday November 20 at 11:59 PM

Week 13: Wrap-up

Date	Readings	Assignment
Nov. 23	No reading: Wrap-up	