

The Religion of Anime

M: Lecture (ANNS 110) W: Film Screening & Discussion (LEVN AUD) F: Recitation (Room Varies)

Learning Outcomes

The purpose of a liberal arts education is not merely the accumulation of factual information. You will leave this course with new knowledge about Japanese religion, culture, and history, but its primary objectives are to build and enhance the transferable skills of critical reading, sophisticated media analysis, spirited yet civil discussion, and meticulous analytical writing.

Weekly Tasks:

- 1) Attend Monday lecture 5:15–6:15.
- 2) Attend Wednesday film screening and discussion, 5:15–8:15 (bring snacks if you need an energy boost).
- 3) Complete assigned readings and post to the discussion board at least 12 hours before recitation (i.e., the night before).
- 4) Attend recitation on Friday.

Overview of the Course

Shrine maidens. Buddhist wizards. Poltergeists and possessions. Gods and demons. The popular Japanese illustrated media of manga and anime are filled with religious characters and ideas, but what does it all mean? This course uses popular illustrated media such as manga and anime, as well as live-action film, as tools for investigating how media and religion have been deeply intertwined in Japan, both historically and today. It also uses some key terms in religious studies to reveal fascinating connections between fan cultures, media, and ritual practice.

Assignments at a Glance

- 2 response papers of 500–1000 words each
- 1 midterm media activity: 30-second storyboard
- 1 final media activity: mini-lecture of 10 slides/1500 words
- 10 discussion board posts
- Regular attendance at recitation (at least 10 weeks)

Satisfies *Cross-Cultural Analysis* and *Arts & Letters* requirements.

Books to Buy (Print is preferable to ebook, but either is OK)

- URASAWA Naoki, *20th Century Boys* Perfect Edition (manga), vol. 1
- IOKA Waco, *Kakuriyo: Bed & Breakfast for Spirits* (manga), vol. 1

All other readings available in PDF on Canvas.

Video Syllabus

See an overview here:

<https://youtu.be/TTQwg7QdKx0>

SCAN ME



Attendance

I do not take attendance at lecture, but people who attend regularly usually do much better on the papers.

Recitation attendance and online participation are required and together comprise 20% of your grade.

You have 13 recitations over the course of the term, and you may miss 3 of them without penalty, no questions asked. However, if you know ahead of time that you will be absent, please be courteous enough to email your TA beforehand.

You may skip discussion posts on busy weeks, but you must do 10 total (of 12 possible posts).



An Edo-period print of fashionable ladies

Expectations

- Attend lectures and be fully present. Arrive on time!
- Keep up with the readings; finish before Friday recitation.
- Attend recitation; participate in discussion actively.
- Demonstrate awareness of your own biases and healthy suspicion regarding stakeholders' truth claims, both in your writing and in your contributions to class discussion.



Discussion Board Posts

Beginning in Week 2 and continuing through the semester, you should post a question or comment to the designated discussion board for your recitation, preferably 24 hours before the Friday meeting.

Your question or comment should cite or refer to a specific passage in the readings or a specific scene from the assigned films. It should not just be a request for factual information or a simple yes or no question, but should rather be a point of interpretation (trying to figure out the meaning of a confusing passage, for example) or perhaps a point of comparison (picking out two passages or scenes and highlighting an apparent continuity or discontinuity between them).

You are welcome to respond to somebody else's post to satisfy this assignment, but please make sure that your response addresses the person's question substantively or takes the conversation in a new direction.

You must post at least 10 times over the term. This policy gives you the flexibility to skip up to 2 posts. *You do not have to post in Week 1, the week of Fall Break, or the week of Thanksgiving (no recitation that week).*

Workload

The course is designed so that the readings and lecture reinforce and complement each other. You need information from both to write the papers.

Each week you will have approximately 50 pages of academic reading. In some weeks you will read one or more volumes of manga instead of watching a film.

Lectures feature analysis of specific clips, historical background, and introductions to technical terminology.

Periodically, I will stop the lecture and give you time to reflect on an open-ended question, either by yourself or in conversation with those around you. Please come to class with a notepad and writing utensil handy for jotting down your thoughts.

It is very easy to do well this course as long as you apply steady effort, but an "A" is not guaranteed. You must keep up with the readings, attend lectures, regularly post to the discussion board, and attend recitation. If you do those things, the assignments should be straightforward.



Professional cosplayer Enako surrounded by snap-happy fans
(photo courtesy of @7yu_mt)

You Have Four Assignments:

- The first (a paper) asks you to think about the problems of applying the category “religion” to a country with low levels of institutional affiliation but high rates of ritual participation.
- The second (a media activity) invites you to apply what you’ve learned about techniques used to make manga, anime, and film by having you reproduce a scene via the Storyboarder application.
- The third (a paper) asks you to think about how Japanese media have represented religious ideas—and how religious institutions have deployed media to promote their messages—across Japan’s long history.
- The fourth (a media activity) asks you to “think like the teacher” by synthesizing the analytical skills and conceptual themes of the course in a mini-lecture (a slideshow with embedded images, video, and an analytical argument).

Papers should be written in 12-point font with one-inch margins; they must cite relevant assigned readings using a consistent citation style. A grading rubric for each assignment (including media assignments) is available on Canvas.

Please seek help from your TA or the [Writing Center](#) if you are having trouble starting or finishing these assignments.

Grading Scheme (100 Points Total)

Recitation Attendance and Participation	(1 point per session, you must attend at least 10 sessions)	10%
Discussion Board Posts	(1 point per post; you must make at least 10 posts total)	10%
Response Paper #1		20%
Media Activity #1: Storyboarder Assignment		20%
Response Paper #2		20%
Media Activity #2: Mini-lecture/Slideshow		20%



A votive tablet (ema) featuring Sailor Mars at Hikawa Shrine (氷川神社) in Tokyo. The Hikawa Shrine (火川神社) in *Sailor Moon* is modeled on this shrine. Photo by Prof. Thomas, 2010.

Extension Policy

If you are struggling to finish an assignment on time, talk with your TA about getting an extension. We expect you to make deadlines, but will grant extensions (usually no more than 3 days) if it means that you can do your best work.

Academic Honesty

Academic writing is a particular type of disciplined thinking. It requires you to marshal evidence in support of a thesis, to organize your ideas so that others can easily follow them, and to anticipate and respond to potential objections.

These skills are foundational to the college experience. When people hire college graduates, they expect them to be able to present complicated concepts in clear, persuasive prose. They also expect them to be able to generate and defend original ideas. It is therefore in your interest to embrace writing assignments as key opportunities to practice this valuable skill.

- *Plagiarism (copying someone else’s work) or asking someone else to do your work for you is prohibited.*
- *Using AI text generators (such as ChatGPT) to produce text counts as plagiarism by the standards of this course.*
- *“Spinning” existing text by running it through translation or thesaurus software also counts as plagiarism.*

Instances of academic dishonesty will result in failure on the assignment and appropriate disciplinary action.

Drop-in Hours

I hold drop-in hours according to the schedule in the header above. You can schedule an appointment via Canvas (include a note letting me know what you want to discuss), or you can just drop by. Priority goes to those with appointments.

This Course is Rated "R"

I provide content warnings (CW) for some course content, but I cannot anticipate everything that will be uncomfortable for you. Please approach all material as if it has an "R" rating—you can expect explicit sex and violence, including scenes of sexual assault. If this will bother you, please take another course.

Communication

As practice for the post-baccalaureate professional world, your e-mail communication with the professor and teaching assistants should be formal. You are expected to use a formal salutation ("Dear" works well), identify yourself ("My name is X and I am in RELS 0790"), and write clearly and politely about what it is you need ("I am afraid that I am going to miss recitation on Friday because I am ill").

Teaching Assistants

- Caitlin Adkins: adkinsca@sas.upenn.edu
- Claire Elliot: celliot@sas.upenn.edu
- Joonyoung Lee: joonylee@sas.upenn.edu



This postcard by illustrator Fukiya Kōji (1898-1979) was included in a New Year's issue of the popular girls' magazine *Shōjo Club* sometime during the Fifteen Years' War (1931-45). It depicts visits to shrines as a pleasurable leisure activity.

Detail, *Chōjūgiga*



Grade Grubbing

Don't do it. I will only entertain concerns about fairness in the very exceptional cases where there seems to be a major inconsistency. The TAs and I meet regularly to discuss grading practices and to ensure consistency across discussion sections. Needlessly needling me or your TA about a grade may very well work against you.

That said, honest mistakes can happen. If you catch a calculation error, I promise to fix it immediately.



A traveling *kamishibai* performer entertains children.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week/Theme/Date	Readings	Media	Discussion Question
Part I: A Medium Theory of Religion			
This part of the course is a basic introduction to the academic study of religion. We'll be addressing religion from a constructivist angle, asking: " <u>Who</u> calls <u>what</u> <i>religion</i> , and <u>why</u> ?"			
Week 1 A Medium Theory of Religion 8/30		<ul style="list-style-type: none">ŌTOMO Katsuhiro, supervising dir. <i>Short Peace</i> (2013; 68 minutes)CW: Violence and implied sexual assault.	
Week 2 Religion: Beyond Belief 9/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">McCloud, "Religions are Belief Systems," 11–15 ONLYSmith, "Religion Concerns the Transcendent," 55–58 ONLYLoRusso, "Everyone Has a Faith," 131–35 ONLYKawano, <i>Ritual Practice in Modern Japan</i>, 1–6; 21–37	<ul style="list-style-type: none">KON Satoshi, dir. <i>Paprika</i> (2006; 90 minutes) CW: psychological manipulation, abduction, physical harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">How can we talk descriptively about religion without speaking normatively or prescriptively about what counts as "good" religion?
Week 3 Practical and Playful 9/11 and 9/13	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reader and Tanabe, <i>Practically Religious</i>, 1–32Thomas, "<u>Tongue in Cheek, Just in Case.</u>"Thomas, "Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan," 3–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">SHINKAI Makoto, dir. <i>Your Name.</i> (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">How can we define religion in a way that reconciles the statistical discrepancies between professions of belief and ritual practice in Japan?
Response Paper #1 Due 9/22	Statistically, most Japanese people do not describe themselves as "religious," but Japanese participation in "religious" rituals remains quite high. Explain this discrepancy, citing the readings from Part 1 of the course. 500–1000 words.		
Part II: Suspending Disbelief			
This part of the course is an orientation to media studies, with a specific focus on formal analysis: Through what techniques, and with what technologies, do media producers make film, manga, and anime?			
Week 4 Cinema: Mise-en-Scene, Cinematography, Editing, Sound 9/18 and 9/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Plate, <i>Religion and Film</i> [new edition], ix–xvi; 1–15Last, "A Style-Sensitive Approach to Religion and Film," 545–52 <u>only</u>Cho, <i>Seeing Like the Buddha</i>, 67–86.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">KUROSAWA Akira, <i>Rashōmon</i> CW: Sexual assault	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What can cinema do that other forms of storytelling cannot?Does Cho's analysis pay attention to cinema <i>style</i> as Last describes it? If so, how? If not, what could she have added?

Week/Theme/Date	Readings	Media	Discussion Question
Week 5 Manga: Composition and Sequencing 9/25 and 9/27	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Natsume, “<u>The Functions of Panels in Manga</u>”Takahashi, “Opening the Closed World of Shōjo Manga,” 114–36	BRING YOUR MANGA TO CLASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What stylistic differences do you see between the manga for this week?Artistic Option: draw a manga of no more than 4 pages and upload to your discussion board.
Week 6 Anime: The Multiplanar Image 10/2 and 10/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Lamarre, <i>The Anime Machine</i>, 3–44 (This is a bit dense. Read slowly and carefully. NOTE: Lamarre uses the word “machine” in an abstract sense, distinguishing it from mere technological “apparatus”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">TAKAHATA Isao, dir. <i>The Tale of the Princess Kaguya</i> (2013, 137 mins.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What can anime do that other mediums cannot? What makes anime feel the way it does?EXTRA CREDIT: Attend the screening of <i>Momotarō’s Sea Eagles</i> on 10/2
Midterm Media Activity Due 10/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Download Storyboarder and familiarize yourself with how the software works. In addition to drawing, play around with making a “shot” by adjusting camera angles, lighting, and so forth.Pick ONE of the anime clips available in the designated clip library (you have 3 choices).Recreate the shots of the clip in Storyboarder. YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE A GOOD ARTIST TO DO THIS. (Storyboarder lets you populate shots with pre-drawn figures.) Your storyboard should include the same number of cuts with similar timing; camera angles should roughly match.Export your storyboard as a video file (not GIF) and upload to Canvas		
	Part III: Drawing on Tradition		
This part of the course investigates change over time. We examine how Japanese people have used various media forms to share ideas about cosmology, morality, security, and collective memory.			
Week 7 Karma, Cosmology, and the Problem of “Bad Death”: Picture Scrolls in Ancient and Medieval Japan 10/9 and 10/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Kimbrough, “Preaching the Animal Realm in Late Medieval Japan,” 179–204Ruch, “Woman to Woman,” 537–80	<ul style="list-style-type: none">YUASA Masaaki, dir. <i>Inu-oh</i> (2022, 98 mins.)	
Week 8 Parody and Piety: <i>Kibyōshi</i> and Other Illustrated Fiction in Early Modern Japan 10/16 and 10/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Miura, “The Buddha in Yoshiwara,” 225–54 (CW: poop and sexy times)Leuchtenberger, <i>Conquering Demons</i>, 1–12; 24–31	<ul style="list-style-type: none">NAKAMURA Kenji, dir. <i>Mononoke</i>, eps. 1–5 (2007, approx. 2 hours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What can we learn about Tokugawa-period religion from this week’s anime and readings?
Week 9 Propaganda Makes “Good Death”: <i>Kamishibai</i> and Empire 10/23 and 10/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Orbaugh, “Kamishibai and the Art of the Interval,” 78–100Orbaugh, trans. “The Unsung Mother,” 305–25	<ul style="list-style-type: none">KATABUCHI Sunao, dir. <i>In This Corner of the World</i> (2017, 128 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What made the media of imperial Japan seem “religious” to outsiders?

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Week 10 Nostalgia and Critique: Manga, Literature, and Video Games in Post-Defeat Japan 10/30 and 11/1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">MacWilliams, "Revisioning Japanese Religiosity," 177–189 <u>only</u>Miller, "Rebranding Himiko," 179–98Suter, <i>Holy Ghosts</i>, 108–37	<ul style="list-style-type: none">TAKAHATA Isao, dir. <i>Pom Poko</i> (1994; 119 minutes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">After the Asia-Pacific War, how did Japanese people renegotiate their relationship with traditional religious figures and ideas?
Response Paper #2 Due 11/10	Artists, authors, and directors have used art to make commentary on religion and religious professionals throughout Japanese history, and institutions have often used visual-verbal entertainment to attract new audiences and engender specific worldviews. Compare and contrast two concrete examples of how visual-verbal entertainment have done such work. Your examples should come from two different weeks of the course, contrasting two different mediums (picture scrolls, <i>kibyōshi</i> , manga, <i>kamishibai</i> , cinema, anime).		
	Part IV: Don't Let Words Do Your Thinking For You		
In the final part of the course, we pair classic terminology from religious studies with some anime, manga, and live-action films that exemplify some anxieties characteristic of contemporary Japanese society.			
Week 11 Cult 11/6 and 11/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hardacre, "Aum Shinrikyō and the Japanese Media," 171–204Thomas, "Horrific 'Cults' and Comic Religion," 127–51	<ul style="list-style-type: none">ŌKAWA Ryūhō, dir. <i>The Rebirth of Buddha</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">How have mainstream media outlets marginalized some movements, and how have these marginalized groups used media to transmit their messages?
Week 12 Fan 11/13 and 11/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Okamoto, "Otaku Tourism and the Anime Pilgrimage Phenomenon in Japan," 12–36Yamamura, "Contents Tourism and Local Community Response," 59–81	<ul style="list-style-type: none">No Wednesday class this week (i.e., no film)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">What's the relationship between media fandom and religion?
Week 13 Avatar 11/20	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sugawa-Shimada, "Emerging '2.5-Dimensional' Culture," 124–39Gwillum-Thomas, "The Actualizing Platform," 49–51; 56–69	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Monday class asynchronous/online this weekRecommended film (watch on your own): HOSODA Mamoru, <i>Summerwars</i>	
Week 14 Idol 11/27 and 11/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Galbraith and Karlin, "The Mirror of Idols and Celebrity," 1–32Porcu, "Pop Religion in Japan," 157–72	<ul style="list-style-type: none">KON Satoshi, dir. <i>Perfect Blue</i> (1997, 121 mins.) CW: Stalking & sexual assault, gruesome murder, mental illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"Idol" refers either to a material manifestation of a deity or to a celebrity. So is there a difference between <i>idolization</i> and <i>idolatry</i>?

Week/Theme/Date	Readings	Media	Discussion Question
Week 15 Fetish 12/4 and 12/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saitō, <i>Beautiful Fighting Girl</i>, 3-44 Nakamori, "What Kind of Otaku Are You?" (Short web essay) Kam, "The Anxieties that Make the Otaku," 39-61 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> KORE'EDA Hirokazu, dir. <i>Air Doll</i> (2009, 125 mins.) CW: Sexual assault, suicide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holding the 3 definitions in mind, how might you apply the concept of "fetish" to this week's film and readings?
Week 16 Wrapping Up 12/11	No readings, but do come to class.		
Final Media Activity Due on 12/15	<p>In Part IV of this course we have examined contemporary Japanese society while also thinking about some religious studies keywords (idol/idolatry, fetish/fetishism, cult, avatar, fan).</p> <p>Using one of these keywords as an organizing theme, generate a slide deck to teach <u>someone who has not taken the course</u> how this term relates to a scene from a manga, anime, or film we have viewed in this course. (You should use the course clip library available on Canvas. If you need a scene that is not there, please ask Professor Thomas well before the assignment deadline.)</p> <p>Here are the guidelines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your slide deck must include no fewer than 8 and no more than 10 slides At least half of the slides must have embedded images or video; you must analyze one video and one still image (it can be a video still) in your slides. You must include lecture notes (i.e., notes to self that are not visible to your audience). These should be paragraphs, no shorter than 150 and no longer than 250 words. The words must be your own, not AI-generated. Your audience should be someone who has not taken this course. Imagine someone specific: your roommate, your sibling, your parents, your teammates, etc. Your job is to teach them how to analyze media in light of the religious studies themes we have discussed in the course. It is a good idea to look at the evaluation rubric before you submit. 		