

CRN 16291 Religious Studies 303 Japanese Religions, Fall 2026

Lectures: TYK 233; MW 2:00-3:50 pm; Lecture/Discussion

Instructor: Mark Unno

Office Hours - Zoom: Mon 4:30-5:15 pm <https://tinyurl.com/mr2z8yd6>; Tues 1:00-1:45 pm

<https://tinyurl.com/2v67atjx> or by appointment (email).

Email: munno (at) uoregon.edu Home Page: pages.uoregon.edu/munno/ See [University Course Policies](#)

This course explores prominent themes in Japanese Religions from their ancient origins through their modern expressions via multiple genres: philosophy, sacred scriptures, stories, fiction, autobiography, and film. These include the worship of the *kami*, or gods and goddesses, the creation of state religion, and multiple streams of Japanese Buddhism including Zen and Pure Land. Through these explorations, we will see how they unfold in history, how ideas come to life through stories and practices, and how they relate to cultural themes such as gender, sexuality, and cultural identity; ritual practice, mythology, and self-cultivation.

Requirements

1. Attendance: This is an in-person class with lecture/discussion format. Students can have two total unexcused absences including lecture and discussion without penalty. Each class missed thereafter will result in 1/2 grade penalty for the course grade.
2. Short exams: Two short exams based on readings, lectures, and course web site, administered on Canvas. First half of first exam is on writing papers.
3. Short papers: Two short papers on the readings. More specific instructions and topics will be provided on the course web site.
4. Medium-length paper: Each student will hand in a medium length final paper of 5-7 pages double-spaced. Suggested topics will be provided. Students may choose to create their own topics with the consent of their discussion section leader. In the case of the latter, a one-paragraph description of the topic must be submitted by email to the instructor one week prior to the due date.
5. Late policy on written assignments: Three grace days total will be allotted excluding the medium-length paper for which no extensions will be given. For all other assignments, a cumulative total of three late days will be allowed without penalty. Thereafter, each late day will result in a two-point deduction from the course grade.
6. Email Protocol. Suggestion: Begin the term using one of the following when addressing the instructor: Dear, Hello, Hi + Prof. Unno, Mr. Unno. If you like, you might later change to: Hello Mark, Hi Mark, etc., when you have established a working relationship with the instructor. Do NOT use: "Hey...." either with the instructor or with the GEs.

Learning Outcomes

In this course, you will: 1) gain a sampling (not a survey) of primary texts, ideas, and scholarship on prominent strands and themes in Japanese religions, 2) delve into the assigned readings and materials, uncovering layers of potential meaning, 3) gain an understanding of the historical contexts and contemporary expressions of the course materials, and 4) further develop in your ability to write papers as well as read texts closely and reason critically.

Grades ([Grading Criteria link](#))

- Short exam I 10%, Short exam II 10%, Short paper I 15%, Short paper II 15%
- Medium-length paper 35%, Attendance and Discussion 15%

Required Texts (RT) (Information listed here is given in footnote/endnote format.)

1. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Press, 2020) (Knight Lib res + online).
2. Maura "Soshin" O'Halloran, *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind* (Knight Library reserve + online).
3. Shinmon Aoki, *Coffinman*, (Anaheim, CA: Buddhist Education Center, 2002).
4. *Course Reader Pack, Religious Studies 303 Japanese Religions*, online through Canvas (see Files section).

Course Reader (CR)

1. Hayao KAWAI, "Japanese Mythology: Balancing the Gods," in his *Dreams, Myths and Fairy Tales in Japan* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1995) 67-97.
2. Joseph Kitagawa, "Chapter 6. The Shadow and the Sun: A Glimpse of the Fujiwara and the Imperial Families in Japan," in his *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 98-116.
3. Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow* (London: George Allen & Unwin) 104-126, 127-139.
4. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 9-26.
5. Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., "The Goddess," *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987) 56-63.
6. Helen Craig McCullough, tr. *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1988), 1-37.
7. Hayao KAWAI, "Torikaebaya: A Tale of Changing Sexual Roles," in *Dreams, Myths, and Fairly Tales in Japan* (Daimon Verlag, 1995) 123-152.
8. William LaFleur, "Chapter 2: In and Out of the Rokudo," in his *The Karma of Words* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 26-59.
9. Mark Unno, *Shingon Refractions: Myōe and the Mantra of Light* (Boston: Wisdom Publications: 2004) 1-11, 111-146.
10. Theodore M. Ludwig, "The Way of Tea: A Religio-Aesthetic Mode of Life," *History of Religions* (1974) 28-50.
11. Mark Unno, "Key Terms - Philosophical Terms in the Zen Buddhist Thought of Dogen"; Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, trans., "Shobogenzo Genjokoan," by Dogen Kigen, *The Eastern Buddhist* 5:2 (10/1972) 129-140.
12. Steven Heine, *The Zen Poetry of Dogen* (Boston: Tuttle, 1997), 1-34.
13. Barbara Ruch, "The Other Side of Culture in Medieval Japan," in *The Cambridge History of Japan - Volume 3 Medieval Japan, 500-511*.*
14. Henry Shukman, "Light and Dark: Koans and Dreams," *Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture*, vol. 89, 15-23.
15. Mark Unno, "The Original Buddhist Rebel," *Tricycle* (Winter 2017) 1-16. (15-Shinran-Rebel.pdf)
16. Taitetsu Unno, trans. *Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic* (Honolulu, HI: Buddhist Study Center Press) 4-9, 14.
17. Mark Unno, "The Nembutsu of No-Meaning and the Problem of Genres in the Writings and Statements of Gutoku Shinran," *The Pure Land* 10-11 (12/1994) 1-9.
18. Karen Smyers, "'My Own Inari' - Personalization of the Deity in the Inari Worship." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 23:1-2 (1996) 85-116.
19. Inoue YASUSHI, "Sekitei," trans. Mark Unno. *Kyoto Journal* 4 (Fall 1987) 1-8.
20. Nishitani Keiji, "Ikebana," *Kyoto Journal* 4 (Fall 1987) 33-35.

REL 303 Japanese Religions – Class Schedule

Read assigned texts by the class meeting date indicated.

(CR: Course Reader; CR 1 = Course Reader Selection No. 1; RT: Required Text)

Week 1 – Introduction; Japanese *Kami* worship, Shinto, and State Religion

09/28 Mon: Introduction: Syllabus; What is “Japan”? What is “Religion”? What is “Japanese Religion”?

09/30 Wed: The World of the Kami: Gods and Goddesses. Read: Kawai, "Japanese Mythology," CR 1 (Focus: 69-77).

Week 2 – The Formation of State Religion; Japanese Shamanism; Buddhism Background

10/05 Mon: The Formation of State Religion

Kitagawa, “The Shadow of the Sun: A Glimpse of the Fujiwara,” CR 2; “Shinto,” Wikipedia entry: “Shinto,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinto> (Read through “Cosmogony”); Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow*, 104-139, CR 3.

10/07 Wed: Buddhism Background

Early Buddhism: The Buddha and His Teachings; Mahayana Buddhism “The Buddhism of the Great Vehicle”

Read: Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, CR 4; *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, CR 5 (Focus pages: 58-63).

Week 3 – Medieval Japanese Buddhist Stories and Ideas

10/12 Mon: Two Tales: The Tale of the Heike and the Changelings (Torikaebaya)

Read: *The Tale of the Heike*, CR 6 (focus 1-6, 17-19, 23-37); “Torikaebaya: A Tale of Changing Sexual Roles” CR 7.

10/14 Wed: Lafleur, *The Karma of Words*, CR 8 (focus 48-54).

Week 4 – Myōe the Dreamkeeper; Medieval Japanese Art of the Way of Tea

10/19 Mon: Unno, *Shingon Refractions*, CR 9.

Short exam A

10/21 Wed: Ludwig, “The Way of Tea: A Religio-Aesthetic Mode of Life,” CR 10.

Week 5 – Dōgen and Zen Buddhism: Medieval Origins and Modern Manifestations

10/26 Mon: Read: Unno, "Philosophical Terms in the Zen Buddhist Thought of Dogen," "Shobogenzo Genjokoan," CR 11; Heine, *Zen Poetry of Dogen*, CR 12; Ruch, “The Other Side of Culture in Medieval Japan, CR 13 (focus 500-511)..

10/28 Wed: Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, RT (also Knight Lib).

Short paper I due

Week 6 – Shinran and Shin Buddhism: Ancient Influences and Medieval Origins

11/02 Mon: Read: Shukman, "Light and Dark: Koans and Dreams," CR 14; Unno, *The Original Buddhist Rebel*, CR 15.

11/04 Wed: Read: Unno, *Tannisho*, 4-9, 14, CR 16; Unno, “The Nembutsu of No-Meaning,” CR 17.

Week 7 - Zen Buddhism – A Contemporary Irish-American Account

11/09 Mon: Veteran’s Day (No class)

11/11 Wed: The Zen life of Maura “Soshin” O’Halloran

Read: Maura “Soshin” O’Halloran, *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind*, RT (also Knight Lib).

Week 8 – Shin Buddhism – A Contemporary Japanese Account

11/16 Mon: Aoki the Coffinman and the film *Departures*

Short paper II due

Read: Aoki Shinmon, *Coffinman*, “Preface, 1-72, RT; Film: *Departures*.

11/18 Wed: Discussing the Memoir and Film

Read: Aoki Shinmon, *Coffinman*, 73-131, RT.

Week 9 – Stories of Transformation: The Fox Deity and Modern Anime

11/23 Mon: Inari: The Fox as a Trickster Deity: Film, *Paprika*.

Short exam B

11/25 Wed: Discussing the “My Own Inari” and *Paprika*

Read: Karen Smyers, “My Own Inari,” CR 18.

Week 10 - Modern Manifestations: The Zen Rock Garden and Zen Arts

11/30 Mon: “Sekitei” (Rock Garden) by Yasushi Inoue, a modern Zen romance?

Read: Yasushi Inoue, “Sekitei,” CR 19; Nishitani, “Ikebana” CR 20.

12/02 Wed: Wrap-up lecture and discussion

Final papers due