Overview

REL 444/544 Medieval Japanese Buddhism focuses on selected strains of Japanese Buddhism during the medieval period, especially the Kamakura (1185-1333), but also traces influences on later developments including the modern period. The course weaves together the examination of religious thought and cultural developments in historical context. We begin with an overview of key Buddhist concepts for those without prior exposure and go onto examine the formative matrix of early Japanese religion. Once some of the outlines of the intellectual and cultural framework of medieval Japanese Buddhism have been brought into relief, we will proceed to examine in depth examples of significant medieval developments. In particular, we will delve into the work of three contemporary figures: Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253), Zen master and founding figure of the Sōtō sect; Myōe of the Shingon and Kegon sects, focusing on his Shingon practices; and Shinran, founding figure of Jōdo Shinshū, the largest Pure Land sect, more simply known as Shin Buddhism. We conclude with the study of some modern examples that nonetheless are grounded in classical and medieval sources, thus revealing the ongoing influence and transformations of medieval Japanese Buddhism. Themes of the course include: Buddhism as state religion; the relation between institutional practices and individual religious cultivation; ritual practices and transgression; gender roles and relations; relations between ordained and lay; religious authority and enlightenment; and two-fold truth and religious practice. The seminar format includes lecture, student presentations, and discussion. Students will have latitude to develop their own final research projects.

Requirements

1. Attendance: Required. Students can have one unexcused absence without penalty. Each class missed thereafter without prior permission will result in 1/2 grade penalty for the course grade.

2. Short exams: There will be two short, in-class exams, based on materials from the readings, lectures, and course web site.

3. Medium papers: There will be two medium-length papers (3-4 pages) based on topics that will be provided by the instructor.

4. Presentation: Students will make a presentation on the readings for one of the section meetings. The presenter should not summarize the reading but should use the presentation to discuss why the selected ideas/passages in question are important for understanding the reading and proceed to explain as well as raise questions about these ideas/passages. The primary purpose of these presentations is to launch the discussion, not to demonstrate breadth of knowledge or to lead the discussion. Each presenter will prepare a handout with 2 questions and brief, corresponding quotations from the readings. More detailed instructions will be provided on the course web site.

5. Final paper: Each student will hand in a final paper of 8-11 pages double-spaced (A longer final paper of 12-15 pages will be required for those who have registered for REL544.) Suggested topics will be provided. Students may choose to create their own topics in consultation with the instructor. In the case of the latter, a one-paragraph description of the topic must be submitted by email to the instructor at least one week prior to the due date, but an earlier consultation is recommended.

6. Late policy on written assignments: Three grace days total will be allotted excluding the final paper for which no extensions will be given. For the short papers, 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. Weekends are not counted against the grace days.

7. Be sure to bring the readings to class.

Grades

Short exam A 10% Short exam B 10% Short paper I 15% Short paper II 15%
Presentation 10% Discussion 10% Final paper 30%

Outcomes

In this course students will: a) acquire background knowledge relevant for the study of Medieval Japanese Buddhism, b) learn of key developments in Shin Buddhism, Shingon Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism, including primary texts in a range of genres, religious thought, and cultural and historical context, c) examine instances of contemporary transformations and outgrowths, and d) develop critical research, writing, reading, and discussion skills. Students will acquire these skills through a combination of assignments including textual readings, in-class exam, class presentations, and writing assignments.

Required Texts

6. Course Packet-REL 444/544 Medieval Japanese Buddhism (Fall 2019)
Course Packet REL 444/544 Medieval Japanese Buddhism, Fall 2019 (Focus pages marked with asterisk*)

Introductory background material for those without coursework in Buddhism or Japanese Religion


Matrix of Japanese society and religion leading up to the Kamakura Period


The Zen Buddhism of Dōgen

1. Mark Unno, “Philosophical Terms in the Zen Buddhist Thought of Dōgen.”*

The Shin Buddhism of Shinran

1. Mark Unno, “Key Terms – Pure Land Buddhism and the Philosophy of Hōnen and Shinran.”

Further readings on the background of women and gender in Buddhism and in the context of the Kamakura Period

REL 444/544 Medieval Japanese Buddhism: Weekly Schedule

[All readings from Course Packet unless followed by (RT)=(Required Text)] (Focus pages marked with asterisk*)

Week I: Oct 3: Introduction-Course Overview: The Background of Buddhism; Buddhism and Japanese Religion

Week II: Oct 10: Background of Japanese Buddhism-Religion and the State; Karma in Medieval Japan
William LaFleur, "Chapter 2 In and out of the Rokudo," Karma of Words-Buddhism and the literary arts in medieval Japan (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1983), 26-59 (48-59*).

Week III: Oct 17: Buddhism in the Kamakura Period: Themes and Background

Week IV: Oct 23: Myoe Koben: Kegon and Shingon Monk
Mark Unno, Shingon Refractions: Myŏe and the Mantra of Light (Boston: Wisdom, 2004), (1-72, 111-149*) (RT).
Lori Meeks, Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan, 250-300.

Week V: Oct 30: Eihei Dogen: Zen Master of the Soto School
Mark Unno, "Philosophical Terms in the Zen Buddhist Thought of Dōgen."*
Steven Heine, The Zen Poetry of Dogen (Boston: Tuttle, 1997), 1-34.

Week VI: Nov 6: Gutoku Shinran: Foolish Being of Pure Land Buddhism

Week VII: Nov 13: Bridging Pre-modern and Modern I: Coffinman

Week VIII: Nov 20: Bridging Pre-modern and Modern II: Natalie Goldberg
Natalie Goldberg, A Long Quiet Highway (NY: Bantam, 1994)(RT).*

Week IX: Nov 27: Film: Departures; Discussion of Paper Topics

Week X: Dec 4: Wrap Lecture and Discussion
Wrap-up remarks and discussion.