

Religion and Popular Culture in Japan

RLG290Y (Summer 2026)

University of Toronto Summer Abroad Program

Professor Ken Derry

Course Description:

How can we understand the clothing styles of Harajuku using ideas from Buddhism? What can Shinto tell us about Miyazaki's great film, *Spirited Away*? This course will examine multiple ways in which it is possible to think about connections between religion and popular culture in Japan. We will learn about Shinto and various schools of Japanese Buddhism, and think about their connections to different examples of popular culture, including movies, J-Pop, anime, food, fashion, gift-giving, shopping, and sports. Our discoveries will be enhanced by excursions in and around Tokyo, as well as day trips to Hakone and Kamakura. We will visit several temples and shrines along with shopping districts, stadiums, urban forests, the ocean, and a view of one of the most sacred spots in Japan: Mount Fuji!

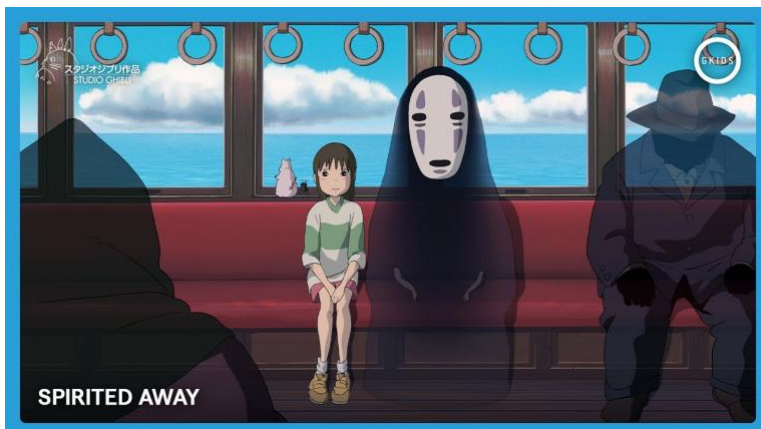


Sensoji Temple

Evaluation:

The requirements for this course are as follows:

Participation.....	15%
Critical reflection.....	10%
Class presentation.....	20%
Two in-class tests (15% each)	30%
Final project.....	25%



Course Readings:

Readings will consist of a combination of texts that provide information on specific Shinto and Japanese Buddhism, as well as on broader points of Japanese history, culture, politics, and language. The principal required reading for this course is Christopher P. Hood's *Japan: The Basics* (2nd edition). [This book is available online through the UofT library](#). Additional smaller readings and videos will be provided by the instructor throughout the term.



Hakone Shrine + Mount Fuji

Instructor:

Dr. Ken Derry is Professor (Teaching Stream) in the Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga, focusing on comparative religion and modern culture. He has been teaching at UofT since 1996 in the areas of religion, literature, popular culture, violence, and film. He received his PhD from UofT and has published research on Margaret Atwood, early Christianity, John Woo's *The Killer*, superheroes, Indigenous literature and film, and *Star Wars*. Ken has received numerous awards for teaching and student service, including the 2013 UTM Faculty Teaching Excellence Award, the 2022 UofT President's Teaching Award, and the 2023 3M National Teaching Fellowship.



Harajuku Fashion