



Visual Storytelling

EXPLORING MEANING, ETHICS, AND BELIEF THROUGH JAPANESE ANIME

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WHAT PROMPTED THE IDEA FOR THE COURSE “ANIME AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: CULTURAL AESTHETICS IN JAPANESE SPIRITUAL WORLDS”? As a scholar who studies Japanese religion and has a lifelong love of visual storytelling, I started using anime in my class to spark conversations around the Buddhist ideas of karma and Shintō notions of “kami,” or spirits in nature.

When I introduced the idea of karma, a scene from “Mob Psycho 100”—a Japanese manga and anime series from 2016 to 2022 about a shy teenage boy with powerful psychic abilities—came up in discussion. It sparked a conversation about how our intentions and actions carry real moral weight. In Buddhism, karma is not just about punishment or reward in a future life. It is believed to play out in the present—shaping how we relate to others and how we grow or get stuck as people.

Later, when I explained kami in Shintō, a quiet moment from “Mushishi” helped students think differently about the world around them. “Mushishi” is a slow-paced, atmospheric anime about a wandering healer who helps people affected by mysterious spiritlike beings called mushi. These beings are not gods or monsters but part of nature itself – barely seen, yet always present. The series gave students a visual language for imagining how spiritual forces might exist in ordinary places.

The Japanese animation movie “Mushishi.”

Over the years, two moments convinced me to create a full course. First was my students’ strong reaction to Gyōmei Himejima, the Pure Land Buddhist priest in “Demon Slayer.” He is a gentle but powerful guardian who refuses to hate the demons he must fight. His actions lead to honest and thoughtful conversations about compassion, fear and the limits of violence.

One student asked, “If Gyōmei doesn’t hate even the demons, does that mean violence can be compassionate?” Another pointed out that Gyōmei’s strength does not come from anger, but from grief and empathy. These kinds of insights showed me that anime was helping students think through complex ethical questions that would have been harder to engage through abstract theory alone.

The second moment came from watching “Dragon Ball Daima.” In this 2024 series, familiar heroes are turned into children. This reminded me of Buddhist stories about being reborn and starting over, and it prompted new questions: If someone loses all the strength they had built up over time, are they still the same person? What, if anything, remains constant about the self, and what changes?

WHAT DOES THE COURSE EXPLORE? This course helps students explore questions of meaning, ethics and belief that anime brings to life. It examines themes such as what happens when the past resurfaces? What does it mean to carry the weight of responsibility? How should we act when our personal desires come into conflict with what we know is right? And how can suffering become a path to transformation?

WHAT MATERIALS DOES THE COURSE FEATURE? We start with “Spirited Away,” a 2001 animated film about a young girl who becomes trapped in a spirit world after her parents are transformed into pigs. The story draws on Shintō ideas such as purification, sacred space and kami. Students learn how these religious concepts are expressed through the film’s visual design, soundscape and narrative structure.

Later in the semester, we watch “Your Name,” a 2016 film in which two teenagers mysteriously begin switching bodies across time and space. It’s a story about connection, memory and longing. The idea of “musubi,” a spiritual thread that binds people and places together, becomes central to understanding the film’s emotional impact.

“Attack on Titan,” which first aired in 2013, immerses students in a world marked by moral conflict, sacrifice and uncertainty. The series follows a group of young soldiers fighting to survive in a society under siege by giant humanoid creatures known as Titans. Students are often surprised to learn that this popular series engages with profound questions drawn from Buddhism and existential thought, such as the meaning of freedom, the tension between destiny and individual choice, and the deeper causes of human violence.

The characters in these stories face real struggles. Some are spirit mediums or time travelers. But all of them must make hard decisions about who they are and what they believe.

As the semester goes on, students develop visual or written projects such as short essays, podcasts, zines or illustrated stories. These projects help them explore the same questions as the anime, but in their own voices.

WHY IS THIS COURSE RELEVANT NOW? Anime has become a global phenomenon. But even though millions of people watch it, many do not realize how deeply it draws on Japanese religious traditions. In this course, students learn to look closely at what anime is saying about life, morality and the choices we make.

Through these characters’ journeys, students learn that religion is not just something found in ancient texts or sacred buildings. It can also live in the stories we tell, the art we create and the questions we ask about ourselves and the world. ●

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