Representing Religions in Contemporary Japanese Manga

My childhood coincided with the glory days of Marvel Comics, whose many god-like characters included an actual god, Thor. Marvel’s Thor adventures illustrate how religion can be source-material for popular culture like comic books or the more contemporary phenomenon of graphic novels. But, as Jolyon Baraka Thomas’ study of Japanese manga and anime shows, these popular culture genres can also be source-material for religion. In his own words, his book is “not so much about the incidence of Buddhism, Shinto, or Christianity in manga and anime as it is about the creative and sundry ways in which the constituents of manga and anime culture deploy, receive, interpret, and mentally and physically interact with narrative and visual content” (2012: 31-2).

Reminding us that “religion” is a Western concept and category that may not apply directly to a society like Japan, Thomas quickly explains that reading or viewing audiences “need not recognize a narrative as formally religious for it to serve an inspirational or instructive function akin to that found in conventional religious hagiographies [biographies of saints] and myths, and narrative need not be characterized as doctrine to have a hortatory [speech intended to encourage or urge a certain course of conduct] or edifying effect akin to that of orthodox religious homilies [sermons] and parables” (11). Thus, he stresses that the point is not what is or is not “religion” but how people create and re-create, present and re-present, interpret and use idioms that come from, go to, or merely in some way resemble “religion.”

Visualizing religion or religious topics and beings (including spirits and gods) is not new and hardly began in Japan or elsewhere with the advent of modern comics or manga. Thomas describes how Buddhist tradition encouraged visual representations of doctrine (not the least being statues of the Buddha or other figures from Buddhist history and lore). By the sixth or seventh century Japan had developed a
tradition of *emaki*, combining art and religion “to advertise the particular benefits that could accrue from the patronage of a particular deity or temple, simultaneously providing entertainment and salvation” (36). Similarly, in the *etoki* genre “temple priests and itinerant preachers have used pictures to expound on religious doctrine, both for semiliterate and illiterate commoners and for the edification of literate elites,” treating images “as a technology for helping to introduce audiences to religious concepts with which they may not have been familiar, simultaneously serving ritualistic, pedagogical, devotional, and entertaining functions” (39). Still closer to modern comics and manga were *kibyoshi* and *kamishibai*. *Kibyoshi* combined pictures and text in religious and sacrilegious ways, absorbing material “that had traditionally been associated with religion...as a focal point for satire as well as for belief” (41).

By the late nineteenth century, *kamishibai* (literally “paper plays”) had appeared, consisting of “oral performances of stories that are accompanied by large illustrated cards slotted into a wooden frame in succession; each illustration accompanies a different scene in the story” (43). Significantly, the “content of *kamishibai* seems to have developed primarily in a fashion similar to American comic books, with superhuman protagonists fighting evil villains in the name of justice” (43).

With the advent of modern manga books and anime films, religious characters and themes would inevitably become incorporated into these new genres and technologies. Some manifestations are more obviously and formally religious, like *Dōgen*, which Thomas describes as a “pedantic manga” dramatizing the life of the founder of the Soto sect (50). Tezuka Osamu’s illustrated life of the Buddha, simply titled *Buddha*, “avoids overly pedantic discussions of doctrine and excessively pious adulation of his chosen subject, and he denies that he is a ‘pious Buddhist,’ preferring to think of the Buddha as an inspiring philosopher” (51). Other products have been decidedly more irreverent, like *Seinto onii-san* (“Saint Young Men”), which features Jesus and the Buddha “living as roommates in Tachikawa, a suburb west of Tokyo” (57).
In contemporary Japan Thomas identifies a range of manga and anime titles standing in a complex set of relationships to religion, such as “cosmetically religious manga and anime” that use religious words and images without being “explicitly pious or scriptural” (64); “occult manga and anime”; textbooks; “propaedeutic manga and anime” that “are designed to introduce audiences to religious information as a way of educating curiosity and, presumably, greater commitment in practice or belief” (79); “polemical manga and anime” that “blend stories about fictive or actual religious groups with social commentary, including satire and critique” (83); and “religiously nationalist manga.” Among some of the best-known and best-loved religious graphic novels and films from Japan are the works of Miyazaki Hayao, including *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* as well as *My Neighbor Totoro, Princess Mononoke, and Spirited Away*.

What is particularly fascinating, but not utterly unprecedented, is how manga and anime has sometimes served as the source for religious beliefs, communities, or sects. For instance, he mentions a claim that a manga writer named Yamamoto Sumika founded a religious community called Shinzankai (Holy Mountain Society) whose members are mostly fans of her artwork. Better substantiated is the case of Kuroda Minoru, an occult manga author whose publications “gradually took on the character of scripture as his fan community displayed strong attraction to the ideas within his works and as the author himself experimented with information from the extant religious traditions around him” (93). The outcome was the *Subikari Koha Sekai Shindan* or Divine Corps of the World of the Lightwaves of Su. Several hundred people subscribe to this organization and indulge in “ritual practices that would seem ‘religious’ to an outside observer, including ritual ablutions before entering sacred space and bows and claps before an altar where various deities are enshrined” (96). But then, popular books, movies, and
television shows have been source-material for semi-religious beliefs and organizations in the United States, such as Star Wars with its spiritual “force.”

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