REVIEW

Jolyon Baraka Thomas, ***Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan***

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Previous studies on Japanese manga and anime have been very poor, especially in the field of Japanese religious studies. According to Jolyon Baraka Thomas, they have tended to focus on famous artists like Tezuka Osamu and Miyazaki Hayao, characterizing their view on religion as peculiar to Japan, and appraising the art of manga and anime as unique to Japanese culture (6). They have gone no further than analyses of narrative contents or a typology of genres and categories and have not taken into consideration how audiences received these works (58). There was also a movement among Japanese scholars of religion to teach Miyazaki's films in their university classes as useful texts on Japanese religious history, not as illustrative examples of contemporary religiosity (121–22).

Drawing on Tradition begins with an outline of the history of the predecessors of manga and anime, particularly the development of vernacular religious media like *emaki, etoki, kibyōshi, dangi-bon*, and so on. However, Thomas also points out that modern manga and anime are not the direct descendants of these predecessors and have been influenced decisively by European and American comic art (40–42).

Having confirmed the discontinuity between the past and the present, the author gives a compact but complicated description of why and how manga and anime with religious elements are popular in Japanese secular society. The point of the discussion is the continuum between a didactic type of manga and anime that "tells" religion and exhorts the audience on the one hand, and an aesthetic type that "shows" religion and entertains the audience on the other (58–59). The author argues that the former, serious type has failed to gain popularity, while the diverting latter type has, paradoxically, affected people's religiosity. One of the bases of this argument is a survey of about one hundred college students in a class where the author was invited to give a guest lecture (59–60). The sample size was small, and may not represent a general tendency, but the results would arouse no surprise among scholars

of religion who teach Japanese students. According to the author, the entertaining type of religious manga and anime falls into a category of what he calls *shūkyō asobi* or "recreating religion" (16–17) and represents "playful religiosity" (123).

On the other hand, the author makes the criticism that previous studies on religious manga and anime have overemphasized text, narrative content, and implicit religious doctrines. Instead of these elements, he turns to an analyses of images, and how audiences receive manga and anime (8, 22). He refers to the audiences' inner function of constructing reality by connecting one image with another and of accepting the verisimilitude of vicarious experiences as "religious frames of mind," presumably suggesting a kind of inner projection of the frames of manga:

> The reception of religion, fiction, art, and film is characterized by the willing suspension of disbelief, which can be described as the willful suppression of awareness of the gap between the imagination and empirical reality. I suggest that the same noetic process that allows individuals to view individual synchronic frames of manga and anime as meaningful parts of a diachronic story also allows viewers to frame certain events, characters, and settings with religious significance (27).

Religious frames of mind enable one to receive visual media. The author relates them with the mental function of believing and attaches the adjective "religious" to the term. Thus he suggests that there is a certain kind of religiosity in the reception of visual media (27–30).

We have already seen several dichotomies—between text and image, between artwork and audience, and between doctrinal religiosity and playful religiosity. However, these dichotomies are not systematically correlated with one another. On the one hand, texts, works of manga and anime, and doctrinal religiosity are all associated with the modern concept of religion that recognizes, as the essence of religion, the fixed written scripture and an inner belief in the doctrines taught in the text. On the other hand, image, the audiences' reception, and playful religiosity are not directly connected to each other. This theoretical incompleteness may leave the readers with the impression that the author seems to rebel against the terms *text*, *narrative*, and *doctrine*.

Actually, there are some tools in postmodern cultural theory that unite the three elements of image, audience, and playful religiosity. For example, Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation describes the multiplication of images in contemporary popular culture (Baudrillard 1994). An image that copies original reality or truth liberates itself from the origin and multiplies itself by producing a large quantity of copies that in turn make another image appear. This theory can be applied to the case of religious manga and anime, which appropriate various religious and mythical images and assemble them with similar appearances to the original images but with different contexts and content. Far from doctrinal religiosity, the creators of religious manga and anime do not care about copying religious images (that is, whether the copy is the same as the original), nor do they stick to authenticity and truth. Those

simulacra of religious images allow audiences a "secondary creation" or a playful recreation with parody, alteration, and even *cosplay* (costume play); that is, the mimicry of characters in manga and anime that one likes.

The audience become the creators in the culture of secondary creation, *cosplay*, and online communication dealing with manga and anime. The author refers to this as corresponding to "ritual" by adopting the analogy of religion, but does not treat it as an important subject. Here, recipients not only enjoy the images passively but probe into them, reinterpret them, criticize others' interpretations, reproduce them in their own works, and imitate them performatively with their own bodies.

This secondary creation culture embodies playful religiosity better than certain works of manga and anime. Nevertheless, in the second half of the book the author does not focus on the audiences' recreational culture but deals with Miyazaki's films and Aum-related manga. He shows that these manga and anime feature supernatural powers and the apocalypse, which have had an affect on the audience. Some of his female respondents answered that Nausicaä (a protagonist of Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*) was their role model when pursuing their career. The author argues that Aum Shinrikyō was influenced by manga and anime that have "aesthetics of extremity." This term is the author's, and literally means the attraction and appeal of extreme protagonists, extreme antagonists, and extreme settings, and specifically refers to a typical plot of the apocalypse where a small number of protagonists endowed with supernatural powers and esoteric knowledge build a new world order (129–30). Nausicaä was indeed taken up in Aum's publications just before the sarin gas terrorist attack (131). After the Aum incident, according to the author, several manga modeled on Aum explained critically how a cult like Aum develops to commit crimes or abuse, and the "aesthetics of extremity" illustrated in these works appealed to the audiences' interest (152–53).

The author avoids identifying "aesthetics of extremity" simply with a narrative plot. He does not give a detailed explanation of the reason he adopted the term "aesthetics." Perhaps he is referring to the principle of the power to appeal to the elements that cause an extreme sensation, and the corresponding effects on the audience. The following illustrates his subtle terminology:

> The aesthetics of extremity is related to the *thrill* of narratives depicting religious violence, but it also provides the *appeal* for the heroism of characters like Kanna and Kenji. The cult of veneration surrounding these protagonists within the narrative is intimately related to the *epic structure* of the narrative itself" (152, emphases by the reviewer).

Thus, the "aesthetics of extremity" itself refers to a tendency to choose more entertaining extremities but also relates to those narrative structures of the apocalypse or the heroic epic whose basic theme is the dualism of good and evil. Of course, one can easily find that a narrative pattern of the myths of hero or eschatol-

ogy has been repeated in manga and anime, and that in turn affected Aum. The author is not totally against narrative analysis and admits the necessity of it:

> Parts of this study necessarily recapitulate manga and anime plots.… Some of my interpretations are necessarily speculative, extrapolating authorial or audience motives and attitudes from story lines, but I have supplemented such speculation with ethnography wherever possible (22).

However, the ethnography in this study is not so systematic and thorough; just a few surveys in a college class, a small number of interviews, and posts on Mixi BBS. What is more problematic than the size and the design of the research is that the author considers mainly one-way influences on the audience when he discusses the reception of manga and anime. The tendency to see the relationship between creator and audience as being in binary opposition might make it difficult to see the importance of recreational culture where the audience become creators. Instead, by mainly taking up Miyazaki's films and Aum-related manga, the author shows a linear influence, whether successful or not, of a pattern of powerful religious narratives such as apocalypse or eschatology upon an audience. This seems close to the model of doctrinal religiosity. Even though the author has a useful toolkit of *playful religiosity*, he fails to pick an appropriate research object, the audience as secondary creators, and looks for traces of *doctrinal religiosity* in manga and anime as static texts.

The author posits the question of why religious manga and anime have acquired popularity in Japanese secular society, but does not answer this clearly in the conclusion. Yet, there are enough findings in this book to suggest that playful religiosity is more influential in a secular society than doctrinal religiosity. He could have answered that playful religiosity is strong in Japan *because of* its secularism, not in spite of it.

The reason why he did not conclude with this theoretical standpoint is that he stuck to the concept of "religion" and understood it as opposed to secularism. Secularism is understood as a systematic demarcation of the public and the private, an assignation of religion to the private, and subordination of religion to the formal and abstract norms (ASAD 2003). Private enjoyment of religious manga and anime is not inconsistent with the idea of secularism. Rather, some religious manga and anime may find themselves in trouble with established religion in a more conservative society (for example, Pokemon was accused of representing a kind of Satanism by conservative Christians).

Privatized consumption of religious resources is harmonious with secularism, but one must be careful to use the word "religion" in the Japanese cultural context. The creators of manga and anime do not like their activities or works to be identified with "religion" because of its negative image. As the author mentions, Miyazaki did not hide his feeling of aversion to organized religion and adopted the term "spirituality" or "my own religion" with his environmentalist or animist tone (110). Especially after the Aum affair, those who are interested in subculture related to manga and anime tend to show a cynical attitude toward religious and/or spiritual issues, as seen in the *otaku* (geek) online communication on mega-BBS sites like "2

Channel." Japanese creators and *re*-creators would naturally agree that non-religious or spiritual fantasies could develop by modifying and utilizing religious and mythical characters, plots, and world views at one's will, because Japanese society is highly secularized to tolerate this. From this perspective, asking why could lead to a "false problem"—why can *religious* manga and anime flourish in highly secularized Japanese society, since they have never had anything to do with "religion"?

I do not think there is no connection at all between what the author calls "religious manga and anime" and what most Japanese people call "religion," but it sounds more appropriate to use the term "spirituality" to refer to the religious phenomena outside organized religion, particularly when those who are concerned dislike being called "religious." The adjective "religious" functions very often as a pejorative label in Japanese popular culture.

This book is an important work because it vividly depicts the vast and complicated world of Japanese religious manga and anime culture by means of elaborate theoretical tools. However, I understand why native Japanese scholars have previously failed to write such a book. This kind of study depends greatly on the researcher's choice of materials. The research cannot be objective and comprehensive unless one explains why certain materials were selected, and until one maps the genres and categories of manga and anime with the demographic data of the audience of each genre and category. The more you are familiar with the enormous scope of Japanese manga and anime culture, the better you understand how difficult this task is. The author honestly admits that he could not take into consideration the manga and anime for women and avoids the issue of gender, but still he is unclear about why he chose his material. Even within the limit of religious manga and anime for males, there are different categories and genres: SF, fantasy, history, quasi-history, comedy, serious works, violence, horror, and so on. They are clearly targeted at specific demographics—for boys, young adults, adults, and so on. The author should account for his choice of materials.

Nevertheless, as he correctly states, previous studies have been very poor in this field. In the future, it will be necessary to map manga and anime culture and describe the demographics of audiences and their culture of re-creation. This book will surely stimulate such studies.

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