

Session 8

Religion and Spirituality in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Manga

Time Wednesday 15:30-17:30

Room J236

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Comics – that is, narratives using static images – are often used to convey religious propaganda (e.g., the life of the Buddha). Religious motives also occur in mainstream comics, such as Norse religion in Valhalla, Catholic morality and imagery in Tintin, the Muslim superheroine in the Ms. Marvel series, or a religious calling in the graphic novel Blankets. Often elements from different traditions interact.

Also intriguing is the strong commitment to reading, discussing, and studying comics, both individually and collectively, including on mega-events called Comic Cons, where visitors dress up as characters from comics, games, and movies.

Here, the research theme approaches the domain of the study of fiction-based religion. Another point of interest is the often critical perspective of the portrayal of religion in comics and cartoons given by religious actors.

This session is meant to give an impetus to an upcoming field of study, inviting papers using various methods and approaches.

Andreas Häger

“Autobiographical comics and Hindu sacred texts”

The topic of the presentation is religion in the autobiographical comics of Kaisa and Christoffer Leka from Finland. They are adherents to the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition within Hinduism, and their religion is a recurring topic in their comics. We view their comics as narratives of lived religion. Life and religion are intermingled in the comics. This presentation focuses on two albums, which are adaptations of Hindu sacred texts within an autobiographical narrative framework. One is a travelogue of a bicycle trip from Finland to France, with the subtitle "The yoga of road cycling", and with a structure adapted from the Bhagavad Gita. The second album tells the tales of Vishnu's (or Krishna's) most important avatars, interwoven with autobiographical episodes from the life of the artists. The paper presents analysis of how the Hindu texts are transformed and translated into comics: how they are updated and contextualized; how they are at times the object of a joke; but also how they are faithfully represented. We discuss the applicability of lived religion to this material, through analysis of embodied religion and of the tension between lay religiosity and religious expertise present in the Leka comics.

Mark MacWilliams

“Manga Pilgrimages: Visualizing the Sacred/Sacralizing the Visual in Japanese *Junrei*”

This presentation focuses *manga* or comic books directly connected to Japanese pilgrimages (*junrei*). One type are *junrei manga*. They are published by religious organizations as well as commercial presses with stories tied to traditional pilgrimages. *Junrei manga* visualize famous sacred sites (known as *reijō*, *fudasho*, or *seichi*) using photo-realistic figurative and caricatural art. They have the power to entertain by catching their reader’s attention as leisure commodities. They are also informational, conveying important facts about the pilgrimage. A second major type of *manga* (which often become animated films (*anime*) or *vice versa*) is the source of a major pop spiritual/cultural phenomenon popular in Japan today. These are *manga* that are the source of fan centered pilgrimages to “holy lands” *seichi junrei*. Manga and anime that become hugely popular in Japan can inspire their own real life pilgrimages. Fans will travel to sacred locales (*seichi*) associated with their stories. In this presentation, I will argue that, beyond providing information and entertainment, *junrei manga* and *seichi junrei manga* can create, as Paul Ricoeur calls it, a “figure of the sacred.” They can visualize normally hidden deeper dimensions of reality that have meaning, value, and power for the fans, tourists, and pilgrims who visit their sacred sites.

Olav Hovdelien & Pål Ketil Botvar

“How religion and secularity are adressed in Asterix and Valhalla”

The Danish comic series Valhalla was created by Peter Madsen as the Nordic counterpart to the french Asterix made by Goscinny & Uderzo. Like Asterix Valhalla plays around with myths from the past. Even if Valhalla concentrates on Norse mythology, one also finds comments on themes in contemporary public debate. Both in style of drawing and storytelling Valhalla draws heavily on the Franco-Belgian school of bandes dessinée. In this paper, we will compare the way religion and secularity is treated.

The Valhalla series reached its peak in popularity at a time when neopagan groups was formally established in all the three Scandinavian countries. Norse religion is not only seen as mythology but in some parts of Scandinavia is a living religion in contemporary society. Like other religions it is recognized by the state and gets state funding. In France the principle of “laïcité” regulates the relation between religion and the state and is also influencing the way people look at religion and the cultural sector. On the basis of these different contexts it is interesting to compare the way religion and secularity is portrayed in the two comic book series.

Paulina Niechcial

“The Reception of Comics with Zoroastrian Content”

In the paper, I focus on comics with content related to Zoroastrianism: an ancient Iranian religion that survived for a few millennia, despite difficulties and shrinkage in numbers. Inspired by observations of different Zoroastrians’ reactions to the portrayal of their religion and cultural traditions in various products of popular culture, I investigated how religious actors receive comic books with Zoroastrian content.

I focused on two works aimed at a wide audience to familiarize them with Zoroastrianism, albeit in a very different way: Indian *Zarathushtra* (1974 and reissued), presenting the legend of the prophet Zoroaster, and French *Ainsi se tut Zarathoustra* (2013; *Silent Was Zarathoustra* 2016), a spy thriller set in contemporary Iran. Data were collected through a survey distributed among Zoroastrians. I will share the findings, focusing mainly on the first publication, as it triggers more attention among Zoroastrians. The research shows that it is quite well received, despite its shortcomings, because Zoroastrians appreciate that it presents their disappearing religion to the outside world. I will comment on how religious actors value the simple way in which this publication tells about their values and how they criticize it for not fitting their expectations.

Sofia Sjö

“Comic books, graphic novels and meaning making”

This paper brings together the reflections of six keen comic book and graphic novel readers. The focus is on the meaning that reading comic books and graphic novels has played, and plays, in the participants’ lives – basically what, why and how do they read. The participants are all adults – the youngest is in his late thirties and the oldest in his early sixties – and they have read comic books and/or graphic novels more or less all their lives. Theoretically the study ties into the discussion of lived religion, exploring how meaning is related to practice, the role popular culture can play in peoples’ lives and how perspectives used in the study of religions can help us comprehend contemporary meaning making. The chapter brings the participants’ thoughts into conversation with the findings of three earlier studies of popular culture and meaning making, highlighting both resemblances and variations. The way reading comic books and graphic novels provides an important break in everyday life is highlighted, as are the corporal, material and ritual aspects of reading.