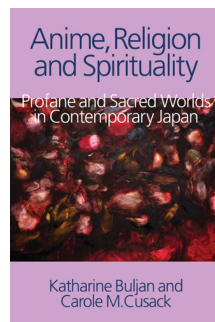


Anime, Religion and Spirituality: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Contemporary Japan,
by Katharine Buljan and Carole M. Cusack

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Katharine Buljan is a talented artist-scholar with a love of Japanese manga (cartoons) and anime (animation; a.k.a. manga movies), while Carole M. Cusack is an accomplished religion scholar with an interest in the East; both have teamed up to explore some religious dimensions of the Japanese anime phenomenon. Their work focuses primarily upon Shintoism, Buddhism, Animism, the supernatural, magic, mythology, and folklore, with various asides into Confucianism,



Daoism, Christianity, and New Religious Movements. The penetration of this Asian art form into the Western world is nowadays so great that “manga and anime as words ... have become part of colloquial English” (1), and an adherent is respectfully called an anime “‘aficionado’ more often than ‘fan’ (or the [negative] Japanese *otaku*, which generally is understood as ‘extreme fan’ or ‘nerd’)” (165).

This book sits comfortably alongside *Japanese Mythology in Film: A Semiotic Approach to Reading Japanese Film and Anime* (Yoshiko Okuyama, 2015), *Miyazaki’s Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences* (Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, 2014), *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Jolyon Baraka Thomas, 2012), *The Fairy Tale and Anime: Traditional Themes, Images and Symbols at Play on Screen* (Dani Cavallaro, 2011), *Magic as Metaphor in Anime: A Critical Study* (Dani Cavallaro, 2010), and a sea of anime books devoted to auteur artists, animation studios, aesthetic styles, and various genres dealing with robots, cyborgs, transhumanism, apocalypticism, environmental degradation, social rebellion, cultural decay, and the post-human.

The authors claim in various odd spots that: the “book investigates anime, focusing on its historical antecedents (graphic and narrative), its religious and supernatural content, its generic and thematic variety, and its popularity and reception among fans” (5); the “aim of this study ... is to interrogate the symbiotic relationship of religion and the spiritual with anime (and the related art form of manga), focusing on the way magic and the supernatural are fused with science and science fiction, to produce a unique cultural product” (60); the “focus is on a selection of elements from a set of religions present in Japan that can be identified in anime” (74); the book was written for readers “who desire to know more about the religion and mythology of Japan and how it informs the manga and anime genres” (8).

Structure-wise, the book consists of the usual academic apparatus comprising of title pages, publication details, “Contents,” “Acknowledgements,” plus an overall book “Introduction” (1–9) followed by four dedicated chapters containing potted histories, ad hoc anime selections (sometimes retold with fanciful glee), and numerous tangential excursions into non-Japanese exemplars, as follows:

Chapter 1, “Japanese Modernity and the Manga and Anime Art Forms” (11–61), with subsections: (a) “Introduction” (11), (b) “The Graphic and Narrative Origins of Manga” (12–23), (c) “Japanese Modernity and the Emergence of Manga in the Twentieth Century” (23–36), (d) “The Tran-

sition from Manga to Anime” (37–48), (e) “Contemporary Religion, Spirituality and Popular Culture” (48–60), and (f) “Conclusion” (60–61).

Chapter 2, “The New Life of Old Beliefs: Religious and Spiritual Concepts in Anime” (63–115), with subsections: (a) “Introduction” (63), (b) “Religious Traditions in Japan” (63–89), (c) “Animal Transformations in Japanese Folklore and Anime” (89–100), (d) “Supernatural Themes and the Anime Genre” (100–114), and (e) “Conclusion” (114–15).

Chapter 3, “From Realistic to Supernatural: Genres in Anime” (117–60), with subsections: (a) “Introduction” (117–18), (b) “The Rise of Generic Hybridity in Anime” (118–29), (c) “Western Pagan Ideas in the Supernatural Subgenre of Anime” (129–35), (d) “The Supernatural in Anime with Realistic Subject Matter” (135–46), (e) “The Child/Young Adult Protagonist and the Supernatural” (146–59), and (f) “Conclusion” (160).

Chapter 4, “Power Within: The Fan’s Embrace of Profane and Sacred Worlds in Anime” (163–208), with subsections: (a) “Introduction” (163–64), (b) “A Story of Devotion: Anime and its Western Aficionados” (165–81), (c) “The Fulfilment of Cosplay” (181–87), (d) “Audiences and the Religious-Spiritual Content of Anime” (187–95), (e) “Anime Pilgrimage” (195–207), and (f) “Conclusion” (207–8).

This was followed by “Conclusion: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Anime” (209–12), a comprehensive “Bibliography” (213–31) and a detailed “Index” (232–49), plus five full-page images (ii, 10, 62, 116, 162) crowned by a colourful cover-page picture.

Production-wise, the book is clearly printed, of good quality paper and binding with clean, legible footnotes, but missing was a List of Illustrations and a List of Abbreviations, e.g., “BDSM” (2; unexplained but “bondage, dominance and submission, sadomasochism”); “sci-fi” (124; unexplained but “science fiction”); “NHK” = “Nihon Hikan Kyokai (Japan Pessimists’ Association)” (176); “ST” = “*Star Trek*” (183); “TOS” = “the original series” (183); “IDIC” = “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations” (183); “MMORPGs” = “Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games” (187); “SOS Brigade” (199; unexplained but “Spreading Cheer to Our Student Body Brigade”), “JNTO” = “Japan National Tourism Organization” (198, 199, 233). A family tree of anime genres would have been useful, but most annoying was the missing Contents page subheadings. What was gained by their elimination (which forces readers to manually search the book for guidance) when including them is easy, more scholarly, pragmatically useful, and an inexpensive book-selling feature?

Illustration-wise, there were two Japanese art prints (10, 62), two anime TV stills (ii, 116), and a photograph of an unnamed Sydney cosplayer dressed as Howl (162) from *Howl's Moving Castle* (a film otherwise ignored therein), and no stills from *any* anime film (although comparing the anime and cosplay Howl would be useful). Furthermore, Buljan's 2012 artwork, "Sacredness of Cherry Blossom" on the book cover had no apparent anime reference (but possibly some faces (?) in the blossoms), was *not* discussed in the text or indexed, and was apparently selected to promote her art/business. A montage of iconic anime characters would have been more appropriate and much more readily catch the aficionado's eye-cum-purchase.

Reading-wise, the information provided is so dense in some places, coupled with numerous tongue-twisting Japanese words, names and concepts, that it made reading the book for non-Japanese speakers an uncomfortable experience. Added to the information overload and the foreign language discomfort were the numerous academic asides best left as footnotes, e.g., Gilgamesh (134); Bob Marley (165); Hungary (177), which disrupted the reading flow with a stop-start action. Especially disruptive was the recounting of detailed plot features *before* making their point(s) and then returning to their narrative trajectory. Overall, it sometimes felt like reading a dictionary (i.e., the storyline was very hard to follow, but magnificently explained along the way).

These reading discomforts were further compounded by the authors' stylistic choice of providing an overall "Introduction" and "Conclusion" *along with* four additional chapter "Introduction" and "Conclusion" sections (better relabelled as "Preface" and "Summary"). The authors had deployed the old pedagogic formula of: (a) tell them what you are going to tell them, (b) tell them, and (c) then tell them what you just told them, that is, five sets of repetitious recounting within the book! Minor incidents of redundant repetition occurred early on, namely: "The terms 'anime' and 'manga' have found their way into modern English" (2), which was basically a repeat of their footnote 1 on the previous page.

Major incidents of redundant repetition occurred regarding the term "cosplay," namely: "cosplay (costume role-play)" (2); "cosplay activities (costume role-playing, dressing up as characters)" (40); "cosplay ('costume play')" (163); "cosplay, a type of performance by anime aficionados" (181); "anime aficionados have made an art out of donning costumes and acting the part of favourite anime characters. It was Nobuyuki (Nov) Takahashi who coined the term 'cosplay'" (182); the "term 'cosplay' is an abbreviation of 'costume'

and ‘play’; the costumes are a vital part of cosplaying as they assist fans to emulate the anime character” (185); “the act of cosplaying can be seen as symbolic stepping into an alternative reality, the diegetic world of anime narratives” (164). Similar widespread redundant repetition occurred regarding the demeaning Japanese term *otaku* (8, 12, 105, 165, 173, 174, 175, 176). Overall, it appears as if the two authors did not coordinate their multiple explanatory efforts to avoid such unnecessary repetitions.

The reading discomfort was again compounded by the multiple meanings attached to specific terms. For example, the religious concept of “*kami*” was defined, described and referred to in the following ways: “(the supernatural beings of the Shintō religion)” (4); “Shintō’s deities, the *kami*” (5); “*kami* (spirit)-filled natural world” (7); “*kami* (spirit beings)” (66); “*kami* (divine spirits)” (114); “the dead were also called *kami*” (67); “anything that appeared ‘superior, mysterious, fearful, powerful, or incomprehensible’ and it included not only animate but also inanimate entities” (67–68); “the intangible *kami* that, in Shintō belief, permeate all of life” (78); “in Japan, the Shintō *kami* and both society and the universe are interpellated” (96). Then there is “the common *kami* (sacred) nature”; (67); the “powerful female *kami*” (131); “the local *kami*” (110); “the *kami* of rivers and other natural phenomena” (110); the explanation that “people of the mountains venerate mountain *kami* called *yama-no-kami*, while rice farmers worship the paddy-field *kami*, *ta-no-kami*, and those living by the sea worship the sea *kami*, *umi-no-kami*. The term *kami* can also be applied to plants, animals and landforms” (67); “‘evil’ and ‘mysterious things’ were referred to as *kami*” (67); “*kami* have imperfections, and *kami* can also refer to supernatural forces in addition to specific persons” (5).

One wonders how the average non-specialist reader can keep track of their variety, let alone the different perspectives and subtle nuances. Given its obvious importance to the book and field, the term should have been defined and elaborated early on, possibly given its own subheading to explore more thoroughly its richness and diversity, rather than widely spread out the various meanings in an uncoordinated fashion. Furthermore, although “manga” and “anime” (2) are terms defined therein, many technical terms were not (e.g., “myth,” “supernatural,” “magic”); apparently the authors automatically assumed that readers know what they mean by them (let alone what the Japanese meant by them per religion and per historical period).

Given the book’s factual density, sorely missed were: (a) a Japanese word glossary with succinct meaning and/or explications of the terminology em-

ployed (e.g., *awatee*, *baku*, *bishōnen*, *dōjinshi*, *hakama*, *hentai*, *hikikomori*, *ikebana*, *kamishibai*, *komikkusu*, *mangaka*, *mu-kokuseki*, *musume-yaku*, *otoko-yaku*, *ōtsu-e*, *seichi junrei*, *shōjo*, *shōnen*, *shunga*, *ukiyo-e*); (b) a glossary of Japanese deities, folklore, mythological and magical creatures, religious terms and concepts (e.g., *bakemono*, *bodhisattvas*, *Gaki Zoshi*, *gohō*, *kami*, *kappa*, *mahō shōjo*, *miko*, *shinbutsu shūgō*, *shin shin shūkyō*, *shūkyō asobi*, *tengu*, *yingyang*, *yōkai*, *Yomi-no-Kuni*) and ideally with a family tree indicating their interrelationships; (c) a filmography (e.g., *Appleseed*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Ponyo*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*); (d) a listing of TV series (e.g., *Astro Boy*, *GeGeGe No Kitarō*, *Kimba the White Lion*, *Princes Knight*, *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*), with all media entries having their Japanese name, English translation, year(s) of release, and director name(s) provided; (e) a brief plot of each film/TV episode mentioned, so as to set the scene for the uninitiated; and (f) the bracketed name of the main voice actors alongside the character quoted within the text.

Although their book title is *Anime, Religion and Spirituality: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Contemporary Japan*, the authors had frequently burst their own boundaries by referring to the supernatural, magic, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology (as if unproblematic and interchangeable with religion and spirituality). Further, instead of “*Contemporary Japan*” many references discussed modernity and the antecedents of manga art, comics, paintings and persons.

Temporarily ignoring that cosplay is *not* anime, the authors devoted extraordinary space to the American cult science fiction TV-cum-film series, *Star Trek*, devised by the American Gene Roddenberry, plus its cosplay conventions in the United States, Germany and Hungary (56, 163, 166–69, 177–78, 181–85, 192, 206–8)! The authors deemed the two phenomena “appropriate as a comparison” (167) for gaining insight into Japanese cosplay, but one wonders why their main focus was not upon Japanese cosplay in Japan. It is dangerous to assume an international equivalence here, or to make the equally dangerous assumption that because “anime aficionados can ... manifest a deep, almost religious, devotion to anime in various ways” (163) that it actually *is* something (pseudo?)-religious.

For a book primarily about anime, it also devotes a disproportionate amount of space to the history of manga art. The authors did not get to the religion-and-anime aims of the book until page 100 with “Supernatural Themes and the Anime Genre.” This is an exceptionally long wait for those wanting to get to anime quickly. Given the heavy manga focus, one

wonders why the book was not titled *Manga, Anime, Religion and the Supernatural*. Additionally, the downside of the authors' intimate knowledge and passionate recounting of artists, historical periods and events is their assumption that the reader instantly recognizes what they are talking about and is able to follow the (sometimes convoluted) jumps from storyline, character and media modality *without* any prior preparation. This problem is especially pronounced with long-running anime series, e.g., 24 episodes (175), 52+ episodes (140), that automatically renders any full explanations complex, and frequently results in a glossing over of the subject matter.

A few blemishes mar the work, notably, excessive words, e.g., “mainstreaming of of [sic] this art form” (170); mismatching cases, e.g., “*shūkyō asobi*” (79) versus “*Shūkyō asobi*” (246); un-italicised titles, e.g., “Ribon no Kishi” (190); inconsistent naming formats, e.g., “*Hanasaku Iroha – Blossoms for Tomorrow*” (116), “*Blossoms for Tomorrow*” (135), “*Hanasaku Iroha* (2011, English: *Blossoms for Tomorrow*)” (143), “*Blossoms for Tomorrow*” (2011)” (209), “*Hanasaku Iroha (Blossoms for Tomorrow)*” (237); missing Index items, e.g., the six film/TV titles in the quotation (126); erroneous Index links, e.g., “*kami 65*” under “*Blossoms for Tomorrow*” (233) but the film title is missing (65); and inconsistent bibliographic formats (e.g., “Avramides ... XV/I” (214) not “15.1” as done elsewhere).

Overlooking the information density, foreign words, and unnecessary repetitions, there are copious interesting information and noteworthy anime exemplars that will help sensitize readers to the range, influence, and pedagogic potential of popular culture for post-Millennial religion studies in this age of Hollywood. The text is an interesting addition to any academic film book collection, whether for professional, pedagogic or personal purposes. Readers need only dip randomly into its pages to realize how extensive and exciting anime art can be, and to appreciate just how deeply it has penetrated the western consciousness (and is affected by it in return). Hopefully, Buljan and Cusack's text will whet the appetite of readers to delve deeper into this important subgenre of the religion-and-film/TV field. One looks forward to their future works; possibly a book specifically devoted to Christianity within anime that complements and extends their current Asian religion work.

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