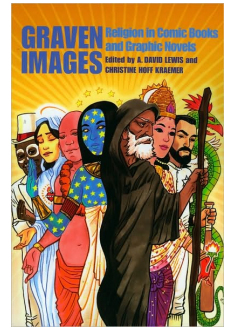
Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels, edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer



New York: Continuum, 2010 | 384 pages | ISBN: 978-1-4411-5847-5 (hardback) £50.00 | ISBN: 978-0-8264-3026-7 (softback) $34.95

The most succinct, media-specific argument I've seen for comics as a praiseworthy scholarly subject, relevant to the study and understanding of religion, comes in the first three pages of *Graven Images*. There, in the foreword, graphic novelist and theorist Douglas Rushkoff suggests that it is in the "space between the panels"—known in the profession as "the gutter"—that "the magic of comics appears." In that blank crack separating one frame from the next, everything can change, anything might emerge; it is a place of unknowing, as connection and distance, absence and presence, are intertwined. Rushkoff opines, "It's the closest thing in comics to transubstantiation" (ix). This formal structure "makes human beings who are trapped within panels aware of the gutter beyond—even for just a fleeting moment, in the obscure shadows of inference" (xii). With that, *Graven Images* is off to a great start.

Edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, and growing out of a conference held at Boston University in 2008, this volume will become a benchmark for future research into the relation of comics and religion. There are other, more narrowly focused works out there, mostly from Christian theological and Jewish perspectives, but *Graven Images* provides a framework for a *religious studies* view. The volume is infused with solid scholarly objective standpoints, while, owing to the nature of the subject, the personal interests come through. The personal dimensions are given a boost by the fact that a number of comic book creators are included in the collection.

There are twenty-one essays, each of ten to fifteen pages, grouped in three general headings: "New Interpretations," "Response and Rebellion," and "Postmodern Religiosity." Since it would not be possible to review each contribution individually, my review makes some general comments about the volume in relation to the general study of religion and popular culture, using a few of the essays as examples.

One of the most important contributions the volume makes is an emphasis on the medium itself. Unlike so many studies of, say, "religion and

film" that continue to treat the audio-visual medium as if it were a type of literature, the contributors here take the comics medium seriously, juxtaposing analyses of words, frames, pages, and images, and pointing toward comics as a whole. Helpful images of comic panels and pages are reproduced throughout, and authors use the images as part of their argument. Several essays pay careful attention to the comic frames, commenting critically on reproductions within the essay. Julia Round's "The Apocalypse of Adolescence," for instance, has a nice analysis of two pages of the comic *Chosen*, paying attention to aesthetic aspects of repetition, close ups, and the necessity of brevity in characters' conversations. Other contributors, perhaps more *literary* minded, stick to overarching narratives, verbal stories, and/or use reproductions merely as illustration with no real comment.

Among other issues Rushkoff's foreword sets off for the contributors to the volume is the essential relation between word and image found in comics. That the narrative structure is inescapably *visual* is key. What happens in the frame (or, more narrowly, in the word bubbles) is not the only thing that counts. Rather, attention is drawn to how the frames are put together from page to page, and what happens in the interstices. The mind of the comic consumer must operate on (at least) two levels simultaneously, sustaining a verbal narrative arc in one corner of the mind, and a series of flashed images in another corner, while entire pages reveal elements of the story that overlay the shorter sequences. The whole experience is made up of semi-separable chunks of text and image, a co-mix of words, contours, shapes, symbols. So, Graham St. John Stott's look at the retelling of the *Book of Mormon* found in Michael Allred's graphic novel *The Golden Plates*, indicates ways in which visual representations tell slightly different stories than the text alone. There is a process of translation that occurs, which is not to say simplification, but a retelling that challenges the heart of scriptural authorities.

Within such translations, retellings, and transmutations, there exists a predilection for transgression and blasphemy, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. Some of the contributors in the second section take on the more deliberate mis-tellings. Mike Grimshaw notes the death of God in the series *Preacher* (by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon), only here God is hunted down and killed in Western film style. And Clay Kinchen Smith charts a relation between underground comics and perversions of Christian theology, seen succinctly in the homophonic title God Nose, in which artist Jack Jackson creates a parody of an iconic "old man/white bearded" God. Grimshaw and Smith are both clear that these artistic heresies are not for the sake of

heresy alone, but they encourage human response, encouraging questions of received religious doctrine, and the seeking of new theodicies.

Such possible responses on the parts of the readers open another dimension. Rushkoff tells how the comic characters who are "trapped within panels" might fleetingly become aware of something beyond their world. Yet, this can occur in the space between reader and page as well, allowing the reader to imagine other worlds, and many a teenage boy story is told about dreaming of leaving his dull existence, these weak powers, behind and becoming Batman. If only for a moment. Unfortunately there is too little in the volume that dwells on this facet, on the gutter between reader and comic, and this is missed from time to time since that too is where the magic is, the potentials for transubstantiation, not *within* the pages, but *with* the pages.

Yet, viewing comics in the ways these authors do enables an ongoing reception history of sacred myths, texts, and symbols. Since so many comics creators were part of this project, we find ways that religious histories have influenced, provoked, and upset artists, with that response spilling out into their work. Other scholars trace the personal influence of religion on the creators, like Steve Jungkeit's analysis of the marvelous memoir *Blankets* by Craig Thompson. In the graphic novel, Thompson relates his young life growing up in a conservative evangelical home, ultimately exploring dimensions of his sexuality that take him away from his past. Jungkeit smartly demonstrates the visual representations of Thompson's early life as indicative of a latent *eros*, with symbolic markers turned into new meanings.

No volume can be complete, and the missing dimensions of *Graven Images* only show how much more there can be done in this vibrant field of comics and religion. I personally was hoping for more on *Amar Chitra Katha*, more on *manga*, something on Naif Al-Mutawa's *The 99*, and at least a note on Kerry James Marshall's West African-inspired *Rythm Mastr*. Granted, Karline McLain's 2009 study *India's Immortal Comic Books* is quite thorough on the former. And the editors acknowledge regret for not including something on Osamu Tezuka's *The Buddha*, while Jolyon Baraka Thomas's forthcoming *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* helps take care of the second. Perhaps *The 99* was still too new to include in this collection, and Marshall gets overlooked because he's more firmly in the visual art world and not taken seriously as a comic artist. But such strong and popular works that are rooted in such different religious and cultural traditions would help flesh out and expand the theories given here. The volume's title of course reflects the ancient Hebrew commandment, which is tradition-

ally taken up in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and many of the theoretical elements of the volume spend some time trying to find their way around that injunction. But beginning from a West African, or Japanese, or South Asian perspective would entail wholly different starting points, if not wholly other ends.

What is still needed is an evolutionary religious history of comics, showing the modern medium's connections to ritualized performances of South Asian *kavad* (story box), of Japanese *emaki*, of Christian European stained glass, of Egyptian hieroglyphs. These are not equivalences, and they are all different media, but there is something in the word-image conjunction that makes the co-mix useful and productive for religious traditions and graphic novels alike. Comics as a medium are relatively new, meanwhile containing quite ancient roots. By charting such a rhizomatic history we would find the religious roots of contemporary pop culture, but also bring forth a challenge to scholars of religion to rethink histories of myths, rituals, and symbols—to get out of the logo-centrism still inherent in the field and realize that myths have always been visual, rituals sonic, and symbols tactile. The religious study of pop culture should not be an end in and of itself, but should provoke a rereading of religious history as a whole.

I realize I'm asking for something beyond the resources of the conference and a single volume, and I raise it simply to say this is a vast and important field. Just recently, major works in the United States like Craig Thompson's *Habibi*, and the first volume of the three-part *Graphic Canon*, have been published. These will continue, and hopefully the academic interest will as well.

Graven Images establishes comics as a vital subject matter, and provides an array of strong essays that display various ways the comic-religion relation can be seen. In paying careful attention to the medium of comics, the volume provides a needed argument for the importance of popular culture in understanding religion in general, and sets the stage for many studies to come.

S. Brent Plate
Hamilton College