Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan

by Jolyon B. Thomas

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Contemporary Japan is a paradox as far as religion is concerned.

On the one hand, Japan appears overwhelmingly religious. By the latest numbers compiled by the Japanese government, there are 180,853 discrete religious organizations in Japan that boast around 181,164,731 adherents. In other words, there is approximately one religious organization for every thousand people in Japan, and the total number of religious adherents in the country equals about 1.4 times the national population. Combined with the ubiquitous physical markers of Japanese religion—atmospheric shrines and imposing temples, meticulously maintained roadside shrines (*hokora*) and rough-hewn crossroads deities (*dōsojin*)—these numbers make Japan seem like one of the most religious places on earth.

On the other hand, research surveys about individuals' religious beliefs reveal a very different picture. According to these numbers, only about 10 to 20 percent of Japanese people describe themselves as "religious," and very few describe religion as being important. A majority of Japanese people regularly participate in the cycle of events that punctuate the calendar year (*nenchū gyōji*), visiting shrines on New Year's Day or cleaning ancestral graves at Buddhist temples on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (*ohigan*), but most prefer to use words like *custom* or *tradition* to explain such behavior. If the official governmental statistics suggest a country that is overwhelmingly religious, the survey data about religious belief suggest that Japan is one of the least religious countries in the world. To further complicate things, the same surveys that suggest that Japanese people are not very religious also reveal that very few Japanese people are atheists, and a slight majority affirm the existence of ghosts, deities, or supernatural phenomena.

I chose to study Japanese religions because I was fascinated by this conundrum. I wanted to know how things that looked "religious" to me would be interpreted by people who did not think of themselves as particularly devout. I thought that looking at religion in a seemingly unlikely place—popular illustrated media—might elicit some clarity about how people could be irreligious and yet be attracted to religious ideas or actively involved in ritual practices. I began my investigations by trying to find religious vocabulary and imagery in manga and anime, presuming that Japanese audiences were acting or thinking religiously even if they did not use that word. But I soon realized that even though finding seemingly religious content in illustrated media was easy to do, my approach to the question was fundamentally flawed.

Framing the Question

Like other fiction and film, manga and anime have no shortage of seemingly religious characters such as ghosts, deities, wizards, and priests. Settings include

Photo: The Yomiuri Shimbun

Dazaifu Tenmangū, a Shinto shrine in Dazaifu, Fukuoka Prefecture, annually draws in some 2 million worshippers during the New Year's holidays. Photographed on January 2, 2014.

Studio Ghibli director Takahata Isao checks the computerized data of an animated film.

places like hell (the television series *Hōzuki no Reitetsu*, season 1 directed by Kaburaki Hiro, ©2015 Sentai Filmworks); protagonists include religious founders such as Jesus and Buddha (Nakamura Hikaru, *Seinto☆Oniisan* [volume 1, Kodansha, 2008]); and story lines involve apocalyptic climaxes. Because religious ideas are an expedient way to endow characters with magical powers, it is quite common for protagonists to discover that they are *kami* (*Kamichu!*, anime, directed by Masunari Kōji [2005]) or that they alone have the power to save the world. In many cases, the religious ideas and imagery provided through manga and anime are irreverent and even satirical rather than pious or devotional. For example, artists turn bodhisattvas into pugilists who fight for justice (Takei Hiroyuki, *Butsu-zone*, in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* [Shueisha, 1997]) and make *kami* into wandering beggars (Adachitoka, *Noragami*, in *Monthly Shōnen* [Kodansha, 2011]). Because anime directors and manga artists often take artistic license with religious terminology, audiences may absorb somewhat distorted versions of classical mythology (e.g., *Kojiki*, compiled 711–12 CE), Buddhist didactic tales (e.g., *Nihon Ryōiki*, compiled between 787 and 824 CE), or illustrated folktales (e.g., *Otogi-zōshi*, ca. 14th–16th c. CE).

Not everyone is so cavalier. Famed Studio Ghibli director Takahata Isao (1935–2018) was deliberate in using anime to connect young people with Japan's religious heritage. For example, his 1994 film *Pom Poko* made explicit allusions to classical Japanese folklore and Buddhist devotional art. Morita Shūhei's anime short *Tsukumo* (*Possessions*, 2013) is a fairly faithful rendition of an old tale about possessed objects (*tsukumogamiki*). Some religious organizations also use anime to proselytize. Happy Science (Kōfuku-no-Kagaku) has produced numerous anime films that blend high production values with somewhat tendentious explications of doctrine, for example, and the Nichiren Buddhist temple Ryōhōji has partnered with a production company to create promotional animated music videos. Manga also serve as venues for authors and audiences to critique religion. After the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attacks, for example, several manga artists linked marginal religious movements to violence and abuse (Yamamoto Naoki, *Believers* [2 volumes, Shogakukan, 2000]); Urasawa Naoki, *20th Century Boys* [22 volumes, Shogakukan, 2000–2007]).

For many observers, the story of manga, anime, and religion ends here. Some view manga and anime as vessels that keep religion alive in an age when most people are estranged from their own cultural and religious heritage. Other researchers are more skeptical, seeing manga and anime as degenerate forms that debase "real" religious content.

But the story is probably more complicated than either of these perspectives suggests. Thinking about manga and anime simply in terms of their religious vocabulary and imagery does not explain, for example, how fans develop ritual practices such as pilgrimage (*seichi junrei*) to the real-world settings of anime scenes. Accordingly, rather than seeing popular illustrated media as tools that transmit "pure" or "adulterated" religious content to passive audiences, I think it is more productive to think of manga and anime as a set of representational techniques designed to trigger visceral responses, elicit emotional reactions, and prompt intellectual reorientations.

Drawing Audiences In

The point I want to stress here is that the techniques whereby manga and anime are made (composition, perspective, layout) and the mediums with which they are made (paper, ink, celluloid) help us think about how religion may be a matter of technical craft and technological apparatus at least as much as religion is a matter of abstruse doctrine or programmatic ritual. Rather than applying the logic of religion to manga and anime by asking whether they demonstrate fidelity to some canonical source or doctrinal creed, it is far more productive to apply the logic of illustration and animation to religion: How do people tell stories? What specific representational techniques persuade audiences to identify with a protagonist? How do audiences come to think of empirically unverifiable events as having significance for "real" life?

I ask these questions because in recent years scholars in my field have moved away from describing religion in terms of belief and affiliation, trying instead to show how religious commitments and behavior emerge as a product of affect (visceral reactions such as attraction and revulsion), emotion (states such as joy or sadness, which may reflect or be created by bodily habits), intellect (the ability to perceive and interpret the empirical world), and imagination (the capacity to ask the question "What if . . . ?" and the corresponding

ability to act *as if*). Manga and anime are helpful for thinking in such terms because artists and directors deliberately elicit visceral reactions and emotional responses in audiences, who in turn may respond to fictional material as if it were real. And what is religion if not a willingness to act *as if*, either temporarily or over the long term?

Get Your Mind in the Gutter

Consider any multipanel comic. Within each panel, stereotyped visual cues and various kinds of text provide dialogue, third-person omniscient commentary, and onomatopoeia (*giongo* represent sounds, while *gitaigo* represent sensations and states of being). Patterned backgrounds can indicate characters' emotional states, while a character's position in the panel can provide a first-person perspective or break the fourth wall. These compositional techniques rely on the sense of sight to create a synesthetic, immersive experience replete with virtual textures, smells, and sounds. They also foster emotional identification with some characters and revulsion toward others.

Composition is crucial to making an effective comic, but the real magic lies between panels in a space that comics theorists call "the gutter." For comics to work, readers have to imaginatively stitch together the content of one panel with another, filling in the gaps so that the story makes sense. Most of us do this fluidly and intuitively. We backtrack, skip forward, and rapidly scan the entire page until the story makes sense. Manga artists facilitate this interpretive work through varied brush strokes, different types of crosshatching, and creative panel layouts. In the beautifully drawn and wholly engrossing manga *Vagabond*, for example, artist Inoue Takehiko deftly switches from ink pen to watercolor to charcoal, juxtaposes panels that cascade and tumble over one another during

One of the exhibited works of Urasawa Naoki, a Japanese manga artist, displaying a multipanel comic with gutters, during an event titled "This is MANGA" held in London by Japan House London from June 5 through July 28, 2019.

thrilling sword fights, oscillates rapidly from photorealistic to abstract representation, and draws several successive pages—even entire chapters—with no spoken dialogue. Artists also play with time, indicating a flashback by changing the background color of a page (as in Oda Eiichirō's *One Piece* [Shueisha, 1997]) or by subtly rounding the corners of panels (as in Yamamoto Naoki's *Red* [8 volumes, Kodansha, 2007–14]).

What Does Any of This Have to Do with Religion?

Juxtaposing two or more panels takes imaginative work on the part of both the artist and the observer: the artist must convince the observer that the panels make an intelligible story, while the observer must use visual clues (perspective, juxtaposition, onomatopoeia) to make sense of the panels. Reading manga can feel effortless and even relaxing, but it requires suppressing our awareness of the space between panels so that we can allow ourselves to be drawn into the story. This active and willing suspension of disbelief is indispensable for engaging with illustrated fiction in the first

place; a secondary imaginative maneuver helps us interpret fictional stories as having takeaway implications for real life. Crucially, interpreting as real the empirically unverifiable claims that we usually associate with religion also requires a willing suppression of the gap between shared empirical experience and our subjective assumptions and commitments.

To be sure, few people would describe their engagement with manga as a matter of belief. But they act *as if* the static images on the page tell a story, and at times they even interpret that story as having significance beyond its narrative frame. In most cases, the vicarious experience provided by illustrated fiction helps audiences see the world slightly differently, but only temporarily; it does not necessarily transform their lives in a conversion-type experience. But occasionally the magic of manga prompts lasting changes in perspective.

Manga have even given birth to religions. For example, horror manga artist Kuroda Minoru established the religious corporation Subikari Kōha Sekai Shindan in 1980, with membership largely coming from fans who were attracted to his manga. Similarly, Miuchi Suzue's manga *Amaterasu* (4 volumes, Kadokawa Shoten, 1987–2001) paired

Walt Disney gives a painter advice on painting on the transparent cels, which will be photographed to make a film. Photographed in 1943 at Burbank, California.

Shintō themes with the author's own mystical experiences; Miuchi now leads an informal network of fans who are interested in paranormal events.

The Magical Multiplane Camera

Just as manga techniques can draw readers into a story, animation has its own engrossing logic that is dictated by the apparatus used to make it (see Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009], esp. 3–44).

Most hand-drawn cel (celluloid) animation is shot with a multiplane camera, a contraption that allows animators to break a single image apart into several layers. Each layer is painted on a transparent cel, and cels are then superimposed atop one another to give the original two-dimensional image actual depth. Moving the individual layers up and down and side to side while taking a series of still images, animators maintain a realistic sense of perspective while also giving static images the illusion of movement. This allows directors to engender a sense of verisimilitude that is difficult to achieve by simply juxtaposing a series of slightly varied two-dimensional drawings (as in a flipbook).

This ingenious animation technique has side effects, however. To give the illusion of an object moving through space, for example, cel animators usually show spaces moving laterally past objects. Because drawing thousands of cels is time-consuming and expensive, animators also cut corners by regularly reusing the same cels and by shooting at a slower frame rate: animators might shoot only eight frames per second as opposed to the standard twenty-four frames per second used by most film directors. This "limited animation" technique saves on costs, but it also creates a distinctive sense of time: moments

Citizens of Hida City, Gifu Prefecture, go into a municipal culture hall where the anime Your Name. *is shown for citizens. Hida City includes several locations where the story takes place, that became popular as pilgrimage sites for anime fans. Photographed on November 6, 2016.*

stretch as the camera pans across faces or as characters hang frozen in midair.

Cel animation therefore has its own distinctive grammar. Even though most animators working today use computers rather than painstakingly drawing thousands of cels by hand, the visual logic of the multiplane camera continues to influence how directors build their worlds: Shinkai Makoto's computer-generated 2016 smash hit *Your Name.*, for example, features the lateral motion common to cel animation in the many scene transitions featuring sliding doors.

So What Does the Visual Logic of the Multiplane Camera Tell Us about Religion?

Just as directors superimpose cels to create a sense of verisimilitude, audiences imaginatively superimpose the illustrated worlds of anime on everyday reality. This is particularly evident in fan pilgrimage, or "contents tourism." When fans of *Sailor Moon* visit the Hikawa Shrine in Tokyo's Azabu Jūban, the real-world shrine becomes its fictional counterpart (also called Hikawa Shrine), and the character Sailor Mars (a shrine maiden in the anime) becomes an object of devotion. Similarly, *Lucky☆Star* fans' patronage of Washinomiya Shrine has changed not only the economy of the town of Washimiya (now part of Kuki City, Saitama Prefecture) but also local rituals: Since 2008, fans have paraded a

Lucky☆Star shrine next to the official portable shrine at the annual Hajisai festival. Recently, ardent fans of *Your Name.* have visited Hida Sannōgū Hie Shrine in Gifu Prefecture to walk in protagonist Mitsuha's shoes as she runs down the shrine's steps and begs the deity to be reborn as a handsome boy living in Tokyo.

A Medium Theory of Religion

I have focused on manga and anime as artistic mediums because it allows for thinking about religion not in the misleading terms of belief or affiliation but, rather, as a matter of technique and imagination. Manga and anime show us how even irreligious people can treat empirically unverifiable stuff—a narrative premise, a religious doctrine—as meaningful, inspiring, even "real." Rather than cramming manga and anime into the constraining category of religion by investigating how these illustrated media preserve or adulterate religious content, I think it is more fruitful to see how our understanding of religion becomes more capacious and robust if we think according to media logic: How do technical practices like composition facilitate the imaginative act of superimposing fictive worlds on empirical experience? How can engaging with empirically unverifiable claims be both frivolous and serious? Answering these questions can probably tell us much more about religion in Japan than statistics ever will. ❑