
GRAVEN IMAGES – A COMMANDING READ

By Martin Lund

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Lewis, A. David, and Christine Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. Continuum, New York, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8264-3026-7. 384 pages.

Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels is the end-result of a creative and intellectual process that all in all has to have taken somewhere around three years' time from conception to print. In 2008 at Boston University, academics, comics creators, and fans met up to discuss a topic that is near and dear to my own personal and professional tastes – comics and religion. Some of the papers presented there were subsequently fleshed out for publication and additional texts by writers who did not attend were added. They were then divided into three sections: *New Interpretations*, *Response and Rebellion*, and *Postmodern Religiosity*.

The first section contains readings of comics that are characterised by the editors as aiming to examine “traditional religious themes ... to reveal those religions’ hopes, fears, prejudices, and values” (p. 5). Chapters include Alan Ricker Parks’ critical discussion on how a violence-tinged reading of the Book of Revelation has affected, and continues to affect, superhero comics; Emily Taylor Merriman’s survey of Alan Moore’s sacred psychogeography of London in *From Hell*; and Laurence Roth’s analyses of J.T. Waldman and Johann Sfar, via Will Eisner, as expressing a renegotiation of the “troubling category” of the heroic in Jewish tradition. Anne Blankenship contributes a discussion of the *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact*, a series of Catholic comics published between 1946–63, in which American Catholic youths could learn how to become perfect American citizens. Starting out with *The Golden Plates*, a graphic retelling of the Book of Mormon, G. St. John Stott uses constructs and argument that graphic adaptations of sacred texts should not be seen as “lesser” products but rather as intersemiotic translations on equal standing with printed Bibles or Books of Mormon.

In “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections,” Darby Orcutt traces the interplay between the two constituent parts of his chapter’s title to argue that there is something more than “*just* comics that happen to be about the religious, nor religious expressions that *just* happen to be in comics format” (p. 104), hoping to inspire both readers and scholars to look at comics and religion from new angles. Next, Andrew Tripp engages in a theological discussion on images of the divine in graphic narratives, arguing that they do not constitute idolatry, but rather contextual and ineffectual representations that – in the end – show God’s ineffability. Continuing on the theological track, Saurav Mohapatra interprets – although acknowledging that he might see a pattern where none exists (“When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail!” being the epigraph to his chapter’s last section) – superhero comics as embodying vedic conceptions of reincarnation. The final chapter of the section deals with the “Christianizing of Animism” in



translations of both the manga and anime versions of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. According to Eriko Ogihara-Schuck, the English-language versions downplay the animism in the work by applying a dualism endemic to Christendom but alien to its creator, changing the text and in doing so muddling its message.

The section labeled *Response and Rebellion*, in which “contributors highlight how comics provide unique opportunities to either subvert traditional religious iconography or to extend it in controversial new directions” (p. 7) starts with Mike Grimshaw's “On *Preacher* (Or, the Death of God in Pictures)”, a chapter that argues that “*Preacher* represents Gen X in search of itself, a generational reading of a loss (the death of God) heard in their parents' generation...” and that the series “reflects the sensibility of a generation willing to suspend disbelief in anything as long as it is *not* traditional, orthodox Christianity...” (pp. 161–162). Following this, A. David Lewis argues against the common interpretation of Superman as a Christ figure, seeing him instead as a different kind of savior who preserves, through his nature as an endless story, other narratives. Next, Julia Round reads Mark Millar and Peter Gross' *Chosen* as a *bildungsroman*, arguing that it both satirises Christian millennial expectations and undermines audience expectations by playing with conventions and misdirection.

Clay Kinchen Smith argues that Jack Jackson, an early profile in underground comics, wrote theological underpinnings similar to those characterising contemporary liberal Christian theology into his critique of American culture. In her chapter, Kate Netzler discusses evangelicals' use of comics, how they brand their products to differentiate them from other comics, and how their ambitions sometimes clash with established conventions of mainstream comics. Kerr Houton argues that Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* evolves, through the application of both Zoroastrian and Marxist perspectives, from an initial set of dichotomies to a more complex world-view which rejects Muslim fundamentalism as much as it rejects amoral secularism; openness and education are central to the mature Satrapi who has told the story of her path to this conclusion with religion playing an important part.

Finally, *Postmodern Religiosity* explores “fresh and innovative ways of being religious in comics” (p. 8). In its first chapter, G. Willow Wilson tackles the possibility of a primordial intellectual tradition cropping up in comics. Following this is two chapters on uses of magic by comics creators Grant Morrison and Alan Moore in *Invisibles* and *Promethea*, respectively. Comics creator Mark Smylie then reflects and expounds on the creation and use of religion in his own series *Artesia*. Ending the book is Emily Ronald's “Present Gods, Absent Believers in *Sandman*” which argues that while the supernatural is alive and thriving with the diegesis of Neil Gaiman's classic series, belief in it is underrepresented.



Being an advocate of the study of the relationship between religions and comics, I was overjoyed when I found out that *Graven Images* was in press. Since this is a topic that interests me – a lot – I became cautiously... giddy, I guess... when I got the news; on the one hand, I thought this could be a book that marked a significant step along the road to the establishment of a sound basis for the study comics and religion, but on the other hand, I supposed it could turn out to be just another superficial collection of articles that one, at best, had the energy to trudge through, from cover to cover. It turned out, largely, to be of the former variety.

But it is not without flaws. My biggest issue with the book is that some chapters treat religious ideas *as religious* (the perspective so vehemently critiqued in Russell McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion*) and, consequently, fail to regard the texts studied with sufficiently critical perspectives on their ideology or effect, opting instead to use comics to promote certain views on religious practice. This goes hand in hand with another concern I have with the book: entertaining reading though they may be, the speculations of comics creators on issues of religion and comics are perhaps not the most fitting contributions to an academic volume, and certainly not in the abstract form some of them take.

Despite this, and while some chapters only scratch the surface of their subjects – thanks also in large part, I think, to the limitations inherent in the format of the edited volume –, *Graven Images* is a book well worth picking up. In my estimation it is a significant step toward the establishment of religions and comics as a topic of academic study in its own right. However you view comics or those human phenomena we commonly label “religion,” this book is required reading for anyone who wants to study the ways in which the two interact.