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Book Review

Assaf Gamzou / Ken Koltun-Fromm (eds.), Comics and Sacred Texts Reimagining Religion & Graphic Narratives

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Can a comic book be religious? Or even sacred? At first, it seems a somewhat strange idea to look for the holy in the most mundane form of popular culture. After all, the sacred and the profane are two strictly separated realms, as Émile Durkheim informs us, “two distinct classes, [...] two worlds between which there is nothing in common”.¹ However, as Assaf Gamzou and Ken Koltun-Fromm argue in their edited volume *Comics and Sacred Texts*, breaking up clear-cut distinctions and transgressing boundaries is the very nature of the graphic narrative itself. Comics are a hybrid medium of image and text defying any distinct categorization and highlighting the ambiguous space left blank in between the images: “In their *showing* and *telling*, in the stutter-step of the paneled narratives, comics offer us a *liminal* experience of reading, engaging, and constructing meaning. It is an experience ‘betwixt and between time’ [citing Victor Turner] that in its form as an *imagetext* both undermines the separation of media and harbors the potential for rethinking how media reveal the sacred” (xiv, emphasis in the original).

So yes, on second thought, the sacred can be found even or maybe especially in the world of comic books. It can be witnessed in the religion-like treatment of comic narratives as holy texts by fans and writers, where the authority of meaning is canonized in a continuity bible like the comprehensive Batman bible by *Batman* comic writer and editor Denny O’Neil.² Or think of

1 Durkheim 2008, 38–39.

2 See Brooker 2012, 154–155.

the many ways superhero comics function as modern-day myths, combining the sublime and the grotesque in excessively drawn bodies and reinforcing and subverting traditional moralities of good and evil.³ Even more explicitly, there is a whole genre for comic book adaptations of religious stories.

Gamzou and Koltun-Fromm point out that starting with Umberto Eco and Natalie Chilton's influential essay *The Myth of Superman*,⁴ there has been a long-standing tradition of analyzing the interplay between religion and comics (xiii). From the mythological qualities of Superhero stories in comic writer Grant Morrison's captivating *Supergods*⁵ to the growing number of publications on the specific Jewish tradition of comic books like Danny Fingeroth's *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics and the Creation of the Superhero*,⁶ comic writers and academics alike have written about the connection between comics and religion. It is no coincidence that authors of publications on religion and comics like Karline McLain⁷ or editors Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman⁸ also contributed to *Comics as Sacred Texts*. The book channels the results of various authors currently working on the subject and brings their studies up to date. Given this history of engagement with comic books from the perspective of religious studies, one might ask what is actually *new* about *Comics as Sacred Texts*. Primarily, it is the approach of the book: *Comics and Sacred Texts* looks at graphic narratives as "culturally educational, pedagogical texts able to motivate new modes of seeing the sacred" (xx). Reading and understanding a comic book is as much a culturally trained activity as is recognizing the sacred, both of which align in their complex manifestation in image and text: "As a visual and textual medium, comics expose the graphic interplay of seeing the sacred and reading about it" (xii). This approach enables the editors to collect a diverse selection of essays that explore not only the meaning but also the very form of how the sacred can be found in the words and pictures of a graphic narrative. In her essay "The Hebrew Alphabet as Graphic Narrative", Susan Handelman, for example, puts comic book theories and rabbinic interpretation into a dialogue. By focusing on the graphic shapes of the Hebrew letters, Handelman addresses the multi-modal qualities

3 Born 2017.

4 Eco/Chilton 1972.

5 Morrison 2011.

6 Fingeroth 2008.

7 McLain 2009.

8 Baskind/Omer-Sherman 2010.

that connect comics and Torah texts, “with parallel tracks of text and images colliding and interacting, sounding and resounding” (27).

Its unique perspective expressed in a variety of views makes *Comics and Sacred Texts* so appealing. The collection organizes its fifteen essays into four sections. The first section, “Seeing the Sacred in Comics”, focuses on script and language as the modes of representation in which the sacred is articulated in graphic texts. Besides Handelman’s essay, the section includes an intriguing visual analysis of the graphic novel *Habibi*⁹ in “Writing the Sacred in Craig Thompson’s *Habibi*” by Madeline Backus and Ken Koltun-Fromm. The authors take on the critique of the graphic novel’s orientalist framework, tracking the construction of the space and gaze of the oriental sacred as the imagined other in the transgressive use of the Arabic calligraphy. In the graphic novel, the sacred words merge with the drawn natural landscapes, mythical animals and the female body of the protagonist Dodola, creating a magical world which exposes the evoked orient as projected fantasy: “The exotic and even erotic forms of calligraphy stylize a natural and imminently accessible sacred that works within the oriental mode of visual exposure” (5).

The important question of representation continues in the following section, titled “Reimagining Sacred Texts through Comics”. The essays in this section look at the many ways sacred texts like the Bible or the Indian Ramayana are adapted into comic books. In contrast to other media representations, these comics both reimagine and rework the source material, as Gamzou and Koltun-Fromm highlight in their introduction to the section, which leads to a new reading experience: “So if the comic is successful, a reader will not only see the text differently but also read the text anew. The scripted text itself, and not merely its representation in image, has changed for the comic reader” (75). In his essay “Transrendering Biblical Bodies: Reading Sex into *The Action Bible* and *Genesis Illustrated*”, Scott S. Elliott describes, for example, the distinct strategies of the two comics through Roland Barthes’s concepts of readerly and writerly texts. On one hand a readerly text like *The Action Bible*¹⁰ straightens out all the gaps and contradictions in the source material in order to produce a coherent and easily accessible narrative with a plain message. On the other hand, as a writerly text, Robert Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*¹¹ challenges the reader by highlighting the inconsistencies and

9 Thompson 2011.

10 Cariello/Mauss 2010.

11 Crumb 2009.

complexities of the Bible instead of concealing them, creating a fragmented, at times even irritating reading experience. Both are defined by their way of engaging the reader in a dialogue about their understandings of biblical texts. Elliott summarizes: “I would suggest that the creators of *The Action Bible* and *Genesis Illustrated* similarly testify to how texts function as readerly or writerly interlocutors with readers – not as sources of authority, but as problematic renderings of the sacred” (146).

The contributions are equally strong in their quality and very insightful in their own ways, which makes it nearly impossible to single one out without wrongfully neglecting the others. The articles mentioned here thus merely function as a *pars pro toto* representing the high standard displayed throughout all of the collected essays. In “Transfigured Comic Selves, Monsters and the Body”, the third section of the volume, the authors explore the monstrous bodies of comic books as boundaries of meaning and limits of the sacred. In the case of the Marvel comic *X-Men: The Dark Phoenix Saga*,¹² the liminal body of Jean Grey/Phoenix raises critical questions of agency and identity. Samantha Langsdale argues in her essay “The Dark Phoenix as ‘Promising Monster’” that despite the feminist critique that the comic links “female desire and female sexuality with psychoses, lack of control, monstrosity, and ultimately destruction” (153), the troubled protagonist should be read as representing the promises of monsters: “Like female Christian mystics, Jean/Phoenix is bodily, she is mythical, she is textual, she is divine, and she is a human woman” (169).

The last section, “The Everyday Sacred in Comics”, examines comics that display the presence of the holy in the mundane and teach how to look for the sacred in the everyday. And it is most fitting that this section (and the book itself) closes with an analysis of Will Eisner and *A Contract with God*,¹³ the origin of the modern American graphic novel. In “Will Eisner: Master of Graphic Wisdom”, Leonard V. Kaplan compares Eisner’s drawn parables with the Jewish thinker Isaiah Berlin’s and Walter Benjamin’s conceptions of the German Tragic Drama. All confront the messianic mythos of the Jewish tradition: “Eisner’s hope for a messianic politics is always tempered by the knowledge that we will fall short. Such is progress in the everyday sacred” (279). Like none other, Eisner opened a new path in the relation between comics and sacred texts. He elevated the comic book perceived as low-brow to an inspiring art form, influencing generations of comic writers and artists and encouraging

12 Claremont/Byrne 2006.

13 Eisner 2006.

the reader to rediscover the sacred in the most uncommon places. If one was to find something like a common denominator for all the diverse and inspiring essays collected in *Comics and Sacred Texts*, this would be it: the recognition, reminding of Martin Buber, that the experience of the sacred in the modern world is nothing more than a personal encounter in the shape of a comic book in the hands of an inquisitive reader.

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