

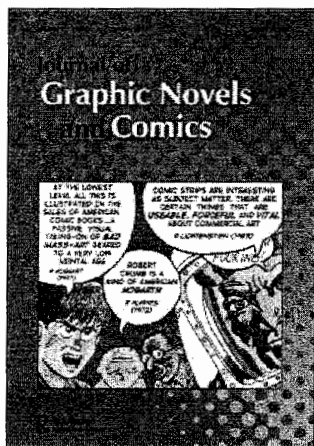
This article was downloaded by: [Oksman, Tahneer]

On: 20 June 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 938766421]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t914454983>

### Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels, edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer

Tahneer Oksman<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> New York, CUNY Graduate Center,

Online publication date: 17 June 2011

To cite this Article Oksman, Tahneer(2011) 'Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels, edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer', Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics, 2: 1, 96 – 98

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2011.578421

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2011.578421>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The book will be an invaluable resume for any researcher into Marvel comics, especially if their work deals with narrative structures. It will be a vital purchase for libraries where any kind of serious research into popular American comics is being undertaken. This is the kind of detailed, authoritative empirical work that film scholars have been able to take for granted for some time, and it demonstrates how much more of this kind of exhaustive research still remains to be done in the comics field.

### Reference

Starlin, J. and Wrightson, B., 1987. *The Incredible Hulk and The Thing in The Big Change*. New York: Marvel.

David Huxley  
 Manchester Metropolitan University  
 d.huxley@mmu.ac.uk  
 © 2011, David Huxley

**Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels**, edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010, xii + 366 pp., US\$34.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-826430-2-67

*Graven Images*, an anthology of essays on comics and religion, is a text devoted to locating the function and potential of images in explorations and deconstructions of the religious. The title of the book is derived from the directive, in Exodus, that 'thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image', and the premise of the book is that the sequential art form allows for unique and often provocative ways of exploring the constructed binaries between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, the faithful and the faithless. As the editors, Christine Hoff Kraemer and A. David Lewis, explain in their introduction, the graphic narrative has often been used as a vehicle for the promotion of religious ideologies, even as it has just as often presented cynical, questioning views of these (and other) ideologies. The power of the image is very much grounded in its context, as all of the essays in this anthology make clear. And it is this very maneuverability of the image, and especially of the image alongside the word, that makes the comics a useful medium for the dissemination and the deconstruction of such salient ideas and questions.

Kramer and Lewis define the 'religious' in broad terms, relying on Catherine Albanese's description of religion as a way that a group of people 'orients [itself] in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings, and values' (quoted in Introduction p. 3). The essays cover everything from Catholic educational comics for children to Christian themes in Manga and Anime to the use of magic as religious practice in graphic novels. The diversity of texts under inquiry is bound to cause a bit of restlessness (and dizziness) for any reader hoping to come away with a definitive understanding of what we can learn by identifying and historicizing the relationship between comics and religion. Yet, the broad scope of the anthology also allows for some unexpected connections and themes to emerge. In reading these essays, I found myself, for instance, frequently returning to the notion of both comics and religion as ritualistic, as spaces where the everyday, the mundane, and the serial meet the mythical, the exceptional, and the iconic.

The book is divided into three parts, although the themes of the individual essays (especially in the second and third parts of the anthology) often easily fit into more than one section. The first part, 'New Interpretations', focuses on the ways that sequential art can lead us into traditional religious themes and texts. For instance, Laurence Roth examines how graphic novels by Will Eisner and J.T. Waldman, which play with classical Jewish texts and questions, can make new and exciting what has, for many, become strange and irrelevant. Similarly, G. St. John Stott explores how a graphic retelling of the *Book of Mormon* can be understood as a translation of the original text, expanding on its source even while maintaining a certain loyalty to it. Other essays in this section trace the significance of symbols and icons in the context of both comics and religion. For example, Andrew Tripp argues that symbolic depictions of god in comics allows for multiple and shifting understandings of the divine. In this way, '[s]ymbols themselves fight idolatry' (p. 117), thereby demonstrating how graphic narratives can, in many ways, best impart certain religious beliefs.

The second part, 'Response and Rebellion', focuses on the subversive possibilities of sequential art and, specifically, the ways that comics and graphic narratives respond (in often controversial ways) to traditional religious narratives and subjects. Several of the essays focus on comparisons between iconic superheroes and religious figures. A. David Lewis sees the superhero story as an alternative to closed and linear Judeo-Christian narratives. In contrast to these, Superman 'is always "to be continued", the supreme open text' (p. 181). Several essays in this section draw on other ways that the comics medium can challenge traditional religious ideas and reveal the hypocrisy of certain implementations of religious thought. For instance, Kerr Houston traces the breakdown of 'absolute dichotomies' in both the visual and textual senses in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004). Similarly, Clay Kinchen Smith writes about Jack Jackson's (1988) parodic depiction of god – a 'robed, bespectacled, bearded older man who wears a crown with three balls on top' (p. 205) – as a figure who invites readers to question more conventional, iconographic images of the divine.

The last part, 'Postmodern Religiosity', looks at unexpected ways of exploring religion – and possible, variable definitions of the religious – in comics. As Steve Jungkeit explains in his essay on Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), the medium of comics 'allows for a different kind of erotic and theological performance' (p. 326). The characters in *Blankets*, for instance, discover the sacred 'within and through the energy of ... erotic passion' (p. 326). Other comics similarly situate the religious in the everyday. As Emily Ronald writes in her essay, 'Present Gods, Absent Believers in *Sandman*', '[t]he potential is always there for the ordinary person to be caught up in the extraordinary' (p. 318). Many of the comics and graphic narratives examined in this last section of the book, including Grant Morrison's *Invisibles* (2002) and Alan Moore's *Promethea* (2000), link the very act of comic book creation, of imagination and communication, to religious practice.

The editors of *Graven Images* have put together an anthology of essays that is broad in scope and, in this way, works well as a starting point for further explorations of religion and comics. In contrast to B.J. Oropeza's *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture* (2006), another academic anthology exploring the link between comics and religious and mythical ideologies, *Graven Images* includes superhero comics alongside pedagogical comics, graphic novels, and graphic memoirs. In this way, the text argues for the importance of breaking down pre-determined notions of which texts should be considered sacred or profane in the world of sequential art. This book will appeal to readers in a wide range of disciplines, but especially to lovers of comics, who will recognize that the authors of this anthology are, above all else, 'preaching the gospel of comics reading' (p. 4).

## References

- Albanese, C.L., 1999. *America: religions and religion*, 3rd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 8–11.
- Houston, K., 2010. Narrative and pictorial dualism in *Persepolis* and the emergence of complexity. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 230–246.
- Jackson, J., 1988. *Underground classics: Jaxon Vol. 1: god nose*. Auburn, CA: Rip Off Press.
- Jungkeit, S., 2010. Tell-tale visions: the erotic theology of Craig Thompson's *Blankets*. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 323–344.
- Lewis, A.D., 2010. Superman graveside: superhero salvation beyond Jesus. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 166–187.
- Lewis, A.D. and Kraemer, C.H., 2010. Introduction. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1–14.
- Moore, A. (w), Williams, J.H. (p), and Mick Gray (i), 2000. *Promethea Books 1–5*. La Jolla, CA: America's Best Comics.
- Morrison, G., 2002. *The invisibles: the invisible kingdom*. New York: DC Comics.
- Oropeza, B.J., ed., 2006. *The gospel according to superheroes: religion and popular culture*. New York: Peter Lang Press.
- Ronald, E., 2010. Present gods, absent believers in *Sandman*. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 309–322.
- Roth, L., 2010. 'Drawing contracts: Will Eisner's legacy'. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 44–62.
- Satrapi, M., 2004. *The complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon.
- Smith, C.K., 2010. From *God nose* to *God's bosom*, or how God (and Jack Jackson) began underground comics. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 203–217.
- Stott, G.S.J., 2010. Gold plates, inked pages: the authority of the graphic novel. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 78–92.
- Thompson, C., 2003. *Blankets*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.
- Tripp, A., 2010. Killing the graven god: visual representations of the divine in comics. In: A. David Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, eds. *Graven images: religion in comic books and graphic novels*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 107–120.

Tahneer Oksman  
New York, CUNY Graduate Center  
toksman@gc.cuny.edu  
© 2011, Tahneer Oksman

**The great women superheroes**, by Trina Robbins, Northampton, Kitchen Sink Press, 1996, 207 pp., out of print, ISBN 978-0-878164-8-20

Women superheroes have gotten a bad reputation. After the 1990s, most female superheroes became known primarily for having breasts the size of their heads, and the current generation of comics readers may expect female superheroes to be as much sexual object as crimefighter. Comics critic Douglas Wolk (2007, p. 72) comments, 'The stereotype of the top-heavy bombshell being the only body type superhero artists know how to draw is frighteningly close to being true.' However, female superheroes are more