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REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

KEES DE GROOT (ED.), *COMICS, CULTURE AND RELIGION: FAITH IMAGINED*, LONDON: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2023.

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Kees De Groot is a Dutch sociologist and Professor at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Religion and Practice, best known for his work on the liquidation of religion in the public domain. Together with two colleagues, he co-founded the Centre for Religion in the Public Sphere, where research is guided by a cultural sociological approach and the liquidation theory. Among his diverse research interests is a sustained focus on the interplay between religion and popular culture, particularly in the realm of comics. This interest has been expressed in his study of *Tintin* comics and, most recently, in his role as editor of an anthology titled *Comics, Culture, and Religion: Faith Imagined*, which focuses on the intersection of religion and comics. The book offers a cultural sociological overview of the relations between comics and religion. It explores two crucial questions: how comics function within religious contexts, and how religion is represented in comics. In addition, it examines how graphic narratives reflect contemporary society and illuminate the evolving role of religion. The book brings together contributions from some of the most prominent researchers

in the field of religion and popular culture, with half of the chapters authored by Nordic researchers of religion, including Andreas Häger, Ralf Kauranen, Sofia Sjö, Evelina Lundmark, Sissel Undheim, Line Reichelt Føreland, and Irene Trysnes. Organised in four thematic parts, it includes both an introduction and a concluding part written by the editor. The volume is available as an open-access publication on the Bloomsbury Academic website, and the print edition is also available.

The volume has a conceptual openness. The authors do not adopt a fixed definition of religion. They avoid defining religion in essentialist terms and instead focus on how people live and label religion. Hence, concepts such as lived religion, liquid religion, implicit religion, and invented religion are used when tracing the sacred in the context of the secular. Similarly, meaning-making, sacralization, and ritualisation are used to explore aspects commonly associated with religion that also manifest beyond explicitly religious spheres. The term “comics” is used broadly, encompassing not only humorous content. Moreover, they are seen as visual narratives, a sequential form of visual storytelling

that typically combines images and text. Therefore, the volume focuses on a cluster of cultural formats, including comics, bandes dessinées, graphic novels, manga, webcomics, and hybrid editions, all of which appear in both print and digital media.

Another strength of the volume lies in its thematic and regional diversity. It encompasses a wide range of research across various religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Japanese religions, and Zoroastrianism) and geographic contexts (Europe, India, Japan, and the United States), despite many of its authors being based in Western institutions. It reflects an apparent effort to promote diversity; hence, themes such as nationalism, trauma, memorialization, and othering are addressed in several chapters. The volume also offers valuable overviews that contextualise a field before addressing specific case studies. Likewise, the editor's introduction and the final chapter provide essential background for understanding the study of comics and religion.

An example worth mentioning is a study by Andreas Häger and Ralf Kau-ranen from Finland, which examines how religion is woven into self-representation in the comics by Kaisa and Christoffer Leka, drawing on the Gaudiya Vashnavism tradition within Hinduism. At the heart of the analysis is the role of the autobiographical approach in portraying and promoting this minority religion within a secularised Nordic context. Another representative example has to do with the social consequences of reading comics presented in a study by Evelina Lundmark, a sociologist of religion from Sweden, which focuses on a comic about Jesus' second coming and the moral outrage as a manifestation of Christian nationalism in the USA.

As someone who has researched music audiences, fan cultures, and cultural consumption, I find it particularly

relevant to highlight Sofia Sjö's study, which examines the meaning of reading, collecting, and discussing comic books to people. Her research builds on the concept of lived religion and meaning-making in contemporary life, contributing to our understanding of how individuals engage with popular culture. Drawing on earlier studies by Botzakis, Axelson, and Blom, Sjö explores what adults derive from reading comic books, and the forms of meaning-making associated with this engagement. By interviewing avid comic book and graphic novel readers, Sjö identifies multiple motivations for reading these genres. While narrative content is central, reading also serves as a break from everyday life and a ritual that highlights the material and bodily aspects of the experience. It further connects to identity work and self-perception. The meaning processes involved in reading comics and graphic novels are thus closely tied to the study of lived religion, as readers' reflections on why and how they read emphasize the role of everyday practices in meaning-making; "what we do and what gives us pleasure, peace, and energy to live our lives to the best of our abilities are important aspects of contemporary meaning making and lived religion" (182).

Despite its many good sides, the volume contains several limitations worth noting. Although many textual analyses are meticulous, they often fall short in contextualising their material within broader social, institutional, or historical frameworks, limiting their explanatory power. Additionally, some chapters are rich in description and easy to read, but at times they lack critical distance and sociological framing. Finally, the collection tends to focus on minority religious traditions and niche genres, leaving mainstream religiosity under-represented.

As a sociologist of culture, I am impressed by the breadth and diversity of this book. I would warmly recommend

it to scholars and students in sociology and religious studies, as well as to those exploring minority religious traditions, fandom, and visual media. In

fact, this is a highly relevant and engaging resource for anyone with a critical interest in questions related to religion and popular culture.

