

MARCIN JAWORSKI



## RELIGIOUS THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY COMICS: BETWEEN INDOCTRINATION AND CREATIVE INTERPRETATION

ABSTRACT. Marcin Jaworski, *Religious themes in contemporary comics: between indoctrination and creative interpretation*, edited by Z. Drozdowicz and S. Sztajer, "Człowiek i Społeczeństwo" vol. XLI, Poznań 2016, pp. 255-269, Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 0239-3271.

In today's world, popular culture is an identity-building experience, a powerful driver of social belonging and a domain of emotional involvement. It is a mirror of sorts that reflects human needs and desires – including religious ones. This paper discusses a number of pop cultural texts (comic books) that explore religious themes, and attempts to examine the nature and "quality" of these explorations. In other words, this paper seeks to determine which of these comic books propose a superficial or trivial treatment of religious traditions, and which graphic novels deserve to be considered as culturally relevant, even if perhaps not entirely orthodox, pieces of artwork. A broad methodological approach was applied, with a wide variety of proposals being discussed: on the one hand it examines comic books used as a mere tool for "ideological" persuasion, whilst on the other it looks into comic books that explore religious themes while treating them as a resonant cultural resource.

Marcin Jaworski, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Institute for Arts, Department of Artistic Education, ul. Sienkiewicza 4, 87-110 Toruń, Poland, e-mail: mjawor@umk.pl

Discussing religion within the context of comics may seem surprising, if not controversial. While it is not a goal of this paper to show how this belief may sometimes be superficial and misguided,<sup>1</sup> it must be said that it is not unpopular to consider comics as a lowbrow entertainment for children and

---

<sup>1</sup> See also J. Szyłak, *Komiks*, Znak, Kraków 2000, J. Szyłak, *Komiks: świat przerysowany*, Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 1998, J. Szyłak, *Poetyka komiksu. Warstwa ikoniczna i językowa*, Wydawnictwo słowo/ obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2000.

youngsters, a view that some scientists and scholars still espouse. Answering to these reservations, let us just say that over more than one hundred years the medium in question has been maturing in terms of its form and substance, and much like any other art form, it offers various levels of perception: from rather simple realizations to more refined artistic accomplishments which have rightfully earned their place in contemporary museums and art collections. Comics are very much embedded in our modern life, eagerly engaging with contemporary culture, society, and politics. It should therefore come as no surprise that graphic novels offer more than pure entertainment, and have a history of exploring a wide variety of themes, including religious ones. Popular culture, this to include comics, is the “main narrative of our times,” an identity-building experience, a powerful driver of social belonging and a domain of emotional involvement – a mirror of sorts reflecting human needs and desires, including religious ones. If we do agree that religion, taken broadly and explored in various contexts, importantly features in our contemporary culture, we will only find it “natural” that comic book artists show great interest in these sorts of themes. It may be therefore instructive to explore these religious references and discuss their “quality,” determining which of them propose a superficial or trivial treatment of religious traditions, and which graphic novels deserve to be considered as culturally relevant, even if perhaps not entirely orthodox, pieces of artwork. This paper offers a modest discussion of how religion has been represented in popular culture and – what is highly interesting – how this cultural resource is being put to use. In short, it has been represented in a wide variety of proposals: on the one hand there are comic books used as a mere tool for “ideological” persuasion, while on the other there are realizations that explore religious themes while treating them as a resonant cultural resource.

Let us first note one particular pattern which may not necessarily appear self-evident right away. The most interesting, that is, the most culturally relevant, are those comic treatments of religious themes where the authors not only offer a fresh view on religious ideas, but also respect the nature of the medium that they chose for their creative expression. This means that not only do they approach religious traditions in an imaginative way, but also show an understanding of the traditions that govern storytelling in such a medium as comics, this to include its internal autonomy as an art form. Meanwhile, those authors whose primary goal was to simply present religious ideas while caring less for the demands of the medium were not able to transcend the narrow confines of a fairly schematic “religious instruction.” In other words, the first approach respects the autonomy and

nature of the medium, introducing entertainment quality and aesthetic value to its essentially religious substance. The other approach essentially treats the medium as a means to an end – a mere vehicle to convey a particular message, leaving little room for anything else other than ideological correctness and effective communication.

But in order to grasp fully the difference between these two approaches to comics let us first take a closer look at the cultural traditions that made it possible for them to emerge as a distinct art form, because by creating and reading comic books one participates in a particular cultural tradition. What kind of traditions are we speaking about?

First, storytelling runs deep in human culture. The tradition of the selfless desire for yarn-spinning is the cornerstone of human creativity. This longing was well articulated by Paweł Huelle: “Experiencing a story is something primal and fundamentally important to our culture, stretching all the way back to Homer and the Bible. Storytelling is a way of connecting between the storyteller and the listener. I believe it was Stanisław Vincez who beautifully likened storytelling to a communion between human beings.”<sup>2</sup> As we can see, this overwhelming urge to indulge in story-telling and story-listening precedes comics, or, for that matter, any other narrative art form. This longing is universal, never-changing, and perennial. Whilst the ways in which stories are told constantly shift and change, this age-old desire always remains the same. As much as the desire is selfless, it is also difficult to explain. Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk had the following words to describe his overwhelming inclination to tell stories: “And all days are difficult. Days are especially difficult when you don’t do any writing. When you cannot do any writing.”<sup>3</sup> Let us stress here that comics belongs to a variety of storytelling art forms that emerged around the world over the course of centuries. Cartoonists are drawing from this cultural tradition to narrate in their own way their very own or other peoples’ stories.

Another tradition that made it possible for comics to emerge over the course of history was graphic storytelling, or, to be more precise, storytelling through sequences of images. It is an ancient tradition, and despite all the different cultural, historical, and societal circumstances in which these visual narratives were conceived, their creators were unmistakably answering to the same desire of arranging images into stories, the most prominent exam-

<sup>2</sup> K. Janowska, P. Mucharski (eds), *Rozmowy na nowy wiek*, vol. 2, Znak, Kraków 2002, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> O. Pamuk, *Implied Writer*, in idem (ed.), *Other Colours. Essays and a Story*, transl. Maureen Freely, Faber and Faber, London 2007, p. 5.

ples of which are such visual narratives as Trajan's Column or the Bayeux Tapestry. The market for engravings that was growing in Europe from the 17<sup>th</sup> century created an increasingly egalitarian public, very much interested in coming into possession of these cultural artefacts. Over the following centuries, and most notably with the birth of daily newspapers, stories in illustrations became widely available to the general public, eventually evolving into comic strips proper.

Third, comics hail from a ludic tradition. Indeed, comic books are very much a product of a culture of frivolity, and became increasingly popular at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as daily newspapers started shaping the popular imagination on an unprecedented scale. These newspapers and magazines for the wider public were publishing caricatures, gag cartoons, and the first stories in illustrations, making serious narratives in sequenced images surrender to graphic stories that were jocular and playful. In Great Britain these humorous engravings and brochures eventually came to be known as the "comicals," or, in short, the "comics."<sup>4</sup> By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these mostly humorous stories formally matured into the comics we know from today.

What we have said so far indicates that comics was born into a universal tradition, namely the tradition of storytelling, that continues to inspire a wide variety of art forms. We have also said that comics are structured into sequenced images and have an inherently ludic nature. As we will have the opportunity to see, some of those who commissioned comic artwork exploring religious themes were not aware of these traditions or chose to blatantly ignore them.

However, one may feel inclined to ask whether the dismissal of these traditions was in any way justifiable? If ludic qualities traditionally play a vital role in comics, how can one use this "structurally" jocular medium to give voice to serious material like religious themes? And is it at all possible for comic narratives to handle serious matter without trivializing it? The answer is that it is indeed possible, but not when the author violates storytelling traditions and the inherently ludic nature of the medium, instead of respecting and working from within those traditions.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus*<sup>5</sup> serves as a good example that this inherently ludic medium is capable of carrying serious stories. As we know, in his Pulitzer-winning work, Spiegelman approaches the difficult matter of the

---

<sup>4</sup> R. Sabin, *Comics, Comix&Graphic Novels*, Phaidon, London 1996, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> A. Spiegelman, *Maus*, Pantheon, New York 1993.

Holocaust, choosing underground comics to narrate the story of his father, who was a Shoah survivor. It was not an obvious choice of medium because of its general perception as an anti-aesthetic form most frequently used to radically protest about the societal and political realities of the day. In other words, because it was employed to articulate controversial matter, it was considered not only to be a ludic, but also a controversial art form. Naturally, Spiegelman's purpose was not to trivialize serious subject matter or plot a crude provocation, but to find a way of expression through graphic form and proper symbolism that would best serve to illustrate what his family had to go through during the war. How did he manage to steer clear of the risk of making the horrendousness of the Holocaust appear trivial? First and foremost, he did this by framing his narrative into a proper scale. In short, Spiegelman departed from an account of a grand historical event (where his family would be among millions of victims) in favour of a story (with his family members as the main protagonists). Precisely this shift from a macro-history to a micro-history allowed the artist to dramatize the tragedy of the Shoah because it focused not on persecuted millions (an abstract figure difficult to grasp with imagination), but on the suffering of highly particular individuals. Spiegelman transformed the historical narrative into a familiar family story to which anyone could relate. At the same time, Spiegelman like other accomplished artists, took his highly personal family account, in particular his father Vladek, a prisoner of Auschwitz, and crafted it into a larger story about the historical oppression that the entire Jewish community had to endure during World War II. "Trying to fathom what it was that made the Holocaust possible, Spiegelman thought of the dehumanization with which any regime initially chooses to oppress its victims. In the Nazi propaganda Jews were represented as rats, and so the idea of struggle between cats and mice was born."<sup>6</sup> In short, Spiegelman took a personal story about his father and his own life as a child of the survivor of the Shoah and made it into a universal story about tragic human destiny. Let us note that this serious comic book about the Holocaust managed to be just that – it remains a serious artwork not without ludic qualities, and it was precisely thanks to comic techniques that Spiegelman successfully, if maybe controversially, made his narrative into a convincing story. What we have said here concerning *Maus* indicated that the ludic qualities of the graphic novel did not necessarily trivialize its subject matter. The medium was so

---

<sup>6</sup> W. Orliński, *Art Spiegelman: potrzebuję katastrofy*, "Książki. Magazyn do Czytania" 4/2012, p. 52.

accommodating in terms of form and substance that it was able to carry even the ultimate narrative of the Holocaust. It therefore serves as a reminder of what we have already learned, namely, that while creating comic book artwork it is important to respect rather than go against its ludic traditions, or – more broadly – the idea of the comic medium itself. Keeping this in mind, let us now turn to other comic books that explore religious themes.

In this part of this paper we will discuss comic books conceived as narratives that treat religious matter in a serious way. These artworks were commissioned by official religious institutions, and feature prominent, respected, and influential figures of the Catholic Church. More often than not they were conceived as graphic biographies, highlighting the exemplary morals and ethics of those personalities, their outstanding contributions to various religious institutions, as well as the wider historical and societal implications of their lives. It was also an ideal opportunity to show those very institutions in a favourable light. It comes therefore as no surprise that most of them turned out to be “ideologically sterile,” purged of doubts, ambivalence, or ruptures, all of which ultimately contributed to the fact that the characters were not necessarily portrayed in a true-to-life fashion. It seems that what these narratives wish to convey is that these personalities have always known their vocation and strived relentlessly to accomplish it, suggesting an exemplary life that the young readership was supposed to emulate. If some character flaws were revealed in those biographies, as it was the case with anti-Semitism of father Maksymilian Kolbe,<sup>7</sup> their behaviour was excused or covered up by other more commendable personal traits. In short, comic books openly taking up religious themes were often structured as, figuratively and literally, hagiographies. This was the case of the comic book about John Paul II,<sup>8</sup> sister Faustyna Kowalska,<sup>9</sup> father Maksymilian Kolbe, and many others. Naturally, they were conceived as instructive tales, the message they were to give must have been unambiguously uplifting and the motives of the characters could leave no doubt in the mind of the reader. As already noted, comic books were used here as a mere vehicle for conveying religious substance. What, then, were the implications for their

---

<sup>7</sup> Ł. Poller (illustration), M. Gałek (story), *Epizody z Auschwitz. Ofiara*, K&L Press, Oświęcim 2010.

<sup>8</sup> R. Szłapa (illustration), W. Tkaczyk (story), *Jan Paweł II. Pielgrzymka do Polski 1979*, Zin Zin Press 2009 (Bezpłatny dodatek do „Małego Gościa Niedzielnego” 6/2009).

<sup>9</sup> T. Wiącek, J. Przybylski (illustration), T. Wiącek (story), *Faustyna. Niezwykła opowieść o małej dziewczynce, która została wielką świętą*, Wydawnictwo Zin Zin Press, 2010 (Bezpłatny dodatek do „Małego Gościa Niedzielnego” 5/2010).

quality and the implied seriousness of their religious subject matter? One has to say they were negative.

First, putting religious substance and persuasive tactics front and centre while disregarding formal qualities of the medium makes both the story in general and its ideological value less attractive to the reader. Even without going further into the details of these narratives, one should note that their purely persuasive aims coupled with their disregard for the formal characteristics and artistic traditions of the medium could not generate the appeal that would capture the attention of the readers. Those commissioning the artwork perhaps took it for granted that the sheer gravity of the subject matter would hold enough of a convincing power for the readership. It was therefore ultimately an “accidental” choice of the medium, a nod to the young and “ideologically” unrefined reader in an effort to make a particular subject matter easier to absorb. But how could one hope to spark interest in the stories, not to mention make the reader embrace the ideology, if the creators of these narratives disregarded the formal requirements of the art form used to convey the stories? If the authors were not interested in the formal qualities of the comics, its vibrant traditions? It had therefore more to do with writing “rightful” poetry while disregarding the principles of poetics, or penning uplifting lyrics without caring much for it to have a catchy tune. These graphic narratives were therefore comics in name only. Some other examples, however, show that comic books can be much more interesting for the readers, provided the cartoonists are able to successfully balance the form and substance, ensuring that the formal language of the comic book supports the religious narrative. This was, for example, the case of *Epizody z Auschwitz. Ofiara* [The Auschwitz Episodes. Sacrifice] Here, an effort to transcend a simple illustrated biography of a monk, coupled with the designing of an adequate graphic language to recount his tragic fortunes in a concentration camp, created both a visual appeal, and a capable form to carry the ideological dimension of the narrative. Mostly, however, this was not the case. For young comic audiences such artwork was simply not engaging enough, and at the end of the day the phrase “religious comic book” would only evoke negative responses. These creative strategies would preach to the choir at best.

However, from our perspective, it is not the most important thing that the authors took great care in putting the religious message across. What made these narratives overwhelmingly trivial was their excessive didacticism, overly idealistic portrayal of the characters, and disregard for the formal requirements of the medium. Serious religious matter was effectively wa-

tered down, resulting in an indoctrination that was not necessarily designed to shape religious sensitivity or nurture spiritual growth, but rather to feed certain pre-structured “knowledge” about particular figures and institutions. More often than not, instead of religious narratives, these commissions delivered instructive and persuasive “reading exercises” in religious themes designed to have a formative effect on their young readership. Serious substance of these vital stories was watered down, trivializing the religious subject matter while portraying the characters in an unsophisticated way. Readers would be offered “knowledge” about prominent figures of the Polish Catholic Church, but there was no way one would “get to know” who these personalities really were: “ideological sterility” purged the narrative of any ludic qualities, which always introduce an ambivalence that elevates any culturally relevant artwork. Even such interesting and complex personalities like John Paul II or father Kolbe turned out to have less in common with serious religious figures than the ideologically one-dimensional characters known from so-called realistic narratives. With didactic purpose put front and centre, serious religious matter could not come to the fore. One should note that these failures did not result from the ludic nature of the comic books or the form’s alleged “organic” inferiority, but rather from the misconceptions of those who commissioned the artwork and others who created it. One may conceive of religious tradition as a beautiful and inspiring exercise in human imagination, but it seems fair to say that these comic books did not measure up to this creative challenge.

In conclusion, one may feel compelled to note that the banality of the outcome in the discussed realizations ironically came as an unintended consequence of the efforts undertaken by the religious institutions that commissioned the artwork. This resulted in prioritizing the religious substance while giving little thought to or disregarding the art form employed to convey the religious matter. It was further exacerbated by a tendency to put more effort into the indoctrinating qualities of the narratives, which ultimately could not become *bona fide* religious stories. What they turned out to be was instructive brochures with little visual appeal. This artistic strategy is perhaps not entirely new, but it continues to surprise. Putting pragmatic efficiency first while trying to put across religious experience or other beliefs must inevitably end at some point in compromising the substance itself.

The difficulties resulting from attempting to introduce instructive or formative material to the ludic comic medium were not the only challenges faced while depicting religious themes in comic books. In some cases, efforts to introduce ludic qualities to the narratives made it more difficult for these

graphic novels to become serious religious stories. One edition of a comic book Bible<sup>10</sup> was advertised in the following way: “Comics are the domain of superheroes making great things happen. And rightly so because this is the reason why comics came into being in the first place – Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, or Hellboy, were all born out of cartoonist imagination. This stylishly illustrated book is also a story about a Superhero and His followers who put their trust in Him. Faith – argue creators of this comic book – is a daring adventure full of surprising plot twists that does not shy away from danger.”<sup>11</sup> In this case, religious ideas were trivialized by comparing biblical characters to some pop cultural heroes such as Superman, a well-intentioned if overly enthusiastic effort of those who commissioned the artwork in a bid to make the Old and New Testament more accessible to the general public. In this egalitarian advertising concept, Jesus Christ is likened to a Superhero. It comes therefore as no surprise that also visually this comic book for both young and adult readers stylistically resembles superhero narratives. One may argue that with this particular comic book version of the Bible the pendulum is in full swing the other way, so to say. With this particular realization we see this seriousness or pathos disappearing completely, in stark contrast to other previously discussed comic books which perhaps suffer from its excess. As a result, it seems that the comic book might have appeared as overly ludic even to those minds that are not particularly conservative. In other words, the creators of the comic book in question failed to find a proper graphic form to illustrate the biblical stories.

Keeping the above considerations in mind, it would be intriguing to discuss another comic book adaptation of the Old Testament<sup>12</sup> that seeks to balance serious and ludic overtones through its own distinct aesthetics. Interestingly, it came from a reputed American underground cartoonist – Robert Crumb. How did Crumb approach the challenge of adapting the Old Testament into a graphic novel? Quite simply, Crumb concentrated on an accurate depiction of biblical stories. One must note, however, that his adaptation not only stayed true to biblical ideals or took care to ensure that his illustrations were historically accurate. In a deeper sense, Crumb remained true to the fact that the Bible remains first and foremost one of the grand narratives in human history. In other words, he succeeded in recount-

<sup>10</sup> S. Cariello, *The Action Bible*, David C. Cook, Colorado 2010.

<sup>11</sup> <http://wydawnictwom.pl/pismo-swiete/1459-biblia-komks-9788380210431.html> [access: 27.12.2015].

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Genesis*, illustrated by R. Crumb, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 2009.

ing both a biblical story and a comic book story. His work would remain a serious religious chronicle, without compromising both its narrative and comic book qualities. The artwork turned out to be the more interesting considering that the author of *The Book of Mr Natural* was notorious for his countercultural work, widely considered to be morally controversial, if not downright iconoclastic. Perhaps it was precisely the intellectual distance to religious narratives kept by the self-declared atheist Crumb throughout his life that, ironically, enabled him to adopt a clear-sighted perspective on these matters. In the Introduction to the comic book, published in a monumental volume, Crumb explains his artistic strategy premised on abandoning the idea of a “God-inspired” chronicle in favour of an epic narrative:

Every other comic book version of the Bible that I’ve seen contains passages of completely made-up narrative and dialogue, in an attempt to streamline and “modernize” the old scriptures, and still, these various comic book Bibles all claim to adhere to the belief that the Bible is “the word of God,” or “inspired by God,” whereas I, ironically, do not believe the Bible is “the word of God.” I believe it is the words of men. It is, nonetheless, a powerful text with layers of meaning that reach deep into our collective consciousness, our historical consciousness, if you will. It seems indeed to be an inspired work, but I believe that its power derives from its having been a collective endeavour that evolved and condensed over many generations before reaching its final, fixed form as we know it [...]<sup>13</sup>.

One may argue that, while working on his comic book adaptation of the Old Testament, Crumb, not necessarily a person of faith, to say the least, was fascinated with the Bible as a narrative, approaching it as a powerful cultural resource that laid foundations for the culture of the west. His comic book was thus built on an indispensable narrative of the west.

This was not the only time when religious tradition has appeared as a vital cultural resource capable of inspiring various comic book narratives. Let us now detail a few of these commendable examples.

It would be interesting to bring into this discussion comic books whose authors draw on Jewish traditions. *The Rabbi’s Cat* authored by Joann Sfar is precisely one of those realizations.<sup>14</sup> This monumental work, taking up a considerable number of volumes, was inspired by Jewish narratives traditionally conceived to comment on holy scriptures, and interpret religious principles and the ways of daily conduct as prescribed by the Law. This

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, Introduction.

<sup>14</sup> J. Sfar, *The Rabbi’s Cat*, Pantheon Books, New York 2007.

Midrash of sorts follows a rabbi who converses with his talking cat, equally versed in the demands of the Jewish religion, using this narrative to introduce the readers to the world of the Jewish religion and cultural practices. It should be noted that despite these sometimes jocular dialogues, or rabbi's monologues, because the gift of speech was not bestowed on his feline companion for all eternity, the Jewish faith was by no means trivialized by the narrative. What is important, a distinguished illustrator, Sfar was able to find an appropriate form of visual expression for this "light-hearted" treatment of serious religious matters. His characteristic illustrations, filled with the lively colours brought to the artwork by Brigitte Findakly, imaginatively visualized two realities: First, the ecstatic universe of the religious imagination of the rabbi and other characters populating the narrative; and second, the Algeria of the first half of the last century, with its intermingling of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the culture of North Africa, and European, if predominantly French, influences. Viewed from this perspective, *The Rabbi's Cat* may be read as a treaty on the, uneasy at times, coexistence of religions and cultures – which is why it cannot be viewed as a religious comic book whose exclusive purpose is to offer a simple instruction in dogmas and articles of faith. It belonged rather to that brand of religious comics whose authors felt inspired by a particular religious tradition and imaginatively reworked its narratives. And so, brimming with excitement, trust, and joy, *The Rabbi's Cat* is a story about the bright side of faith, celebrating the Creator and the world. Its vivid comic panels serve to represent the beauty of both the surreal and real worlds, highlighting that, in fact, they are part of one and the same world.

In another comic book, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*,<sup>15</sup> James Sturm explores a strong bond between the identity of his characters and the Jewish religion and culture. Set in the United States of the 1920s, it tells the story of a Jewish baseball team – *The Stars of David* – travelling from town to town, living off matches with local squads. It is most notably a story about a painful experience of otherness, or perhaps alienation, represented by the Jewish identity of the players and their attachment to their heritage. As the Jewish sportsmen tour the United States, they are confronted with a loathing, or even hostility, from other Americans. The eponymous *Golem* turns out to be the idea of the team's manager, who, trying to save the team from ever deepening financial troubles, decides to disguise one of his players as the legendary figure of Golem. The show with Golem on the playbill starts

---

<sup>15</sup> J. Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, Drawn & Quarterly, Montreal 2001.

attracting huge crowds of intrigued spectators, but at the same time represents their otherness and dignity in an environment that is hostile to Jews. Golem becomes their symbolic protector and guardian. One of the matches with Golem's appearance erupts into anti-Semitic riots, but it is precisely his presence that allows the players to escape to the locker room and save themselves from the infuriated rabble. "We survived our game in Putnam. Survival. Perhaps that is a victory unto itself,"<sup>16</sup> says the team manager following the experience, summing up perfectly this graphic tale of resilience and perseverance displayed by the Jewish identity and religious tradition. In order to properly illustrate its poignant mood, Sturm employed a style vastly different from the artistic measures taken by Sfar. *The Golem's Mighty Swing* is illustrated in a very simple, almost ascetic way, with a variety of shades of grey dominating the narrative in terms of the meaning and visual effects.

Religious themes are approached somewhat differently in Marc-Antoine Mathieu's *Dieu en Personne* [*God In Person*]<sup>17</sup> which explores the philosophical and sociological implications of God suddenly descending upon contemporary society. The Creator comes at a time of a general census, and his sudden appearance initially meets with joyous disbelief, before turning into a global media frenzy. Soon enough, however, humanity, like a self-entitled, insatiable consumer, decides to put God on trial as a "Maker of Everything." Ultimately – as the sociological premises of the graphic novel suggest – the narrative reveals more about contemporary consumerism and the society of spectacle rather than God himself. In other words, Marc-Antoine Mathieu examines the figure of God as a mirror that reflects the resentment, apathy, and entitlements of postmodern society. Marc-Antoine Mathieu's work could be well illustrated by a quote from Edmond Jabès: "Are we not the ones who gave God His Name?" However, what he follows this with would be less to the point, as he goes on to confess: To believe is to love. God is an excuse for an endless love of a human being. Man was brought to life out of immoderation – an excess of love"<sup>18</sup>. Perhaps Marc-Antoine Mathieu could paraphrase Jabès' words to say: "To believe is to anticipate profits. God is an excuse for maximizing and satisfying the demands of a human being. Man was brought to life out of immoderation – an excess of possessive desires and use that sees no restraint."

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.

<sup>17</sup> M.-A. Mathieu, *Dieu en personne*, Delcourt, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> E. Jabès, *Z pustyni do Księgi. Rozmowy z Marcelem Cohenem*, Austeria, Kraków 2005, p. 161.

Let us conclude this paper by discussing the work of a British novelist, Neil Gaiman. His notable comic book series, like “Sandman”, for example, are set in oneiric and awesome worlds inspired by a number religious traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. One may say that in writing his stories, Gaiman is drawing on a variety of religions, myths, legends, and tales, conjuring up new constellations of meanings, associations, and cultural references, sometimes to a wholly surprising effect, where a single story is populated by themes and characters representing not only the Bible, but also Greek or Scandinavian mythologies. In short, while writing his stories, Gaiman draws on many different cultures, religions, and traditions, and since his creative process is rather arbitrary, eventually his material somewhere along the way loses its original religious and authoritative meaning. But is he trivializing these traditions? Is his work a casual exercise in postmodern games of compilation and pastiche? Perhaps, to a degree. On the other hand, however, their high artistic quality truly is a redeeming feature of these stories, and works to impregnate them against trivialization. Their creator continues to be an exceptionally versed individual, creatively putting together seemingly ill-matched themes – not to shock the audiences with the sheer oddity of those juxtapositions, but to craft interesting stories. What one is able to read from Gaiman’s comic books, apart from a great variety of cross-cultural tropes, is his genuine respect for storytelling. This includes religious storytelling, and perhaps even religious storytelling in particular, since what the British writer seems to know so well, religious narratives have been an undying source of inspiration from times immemorial, with people embracing religious truths on the basis of faith, or – as it was the case with artists like Gaiman – using their imagination to make these themes resonant for contemporary audiences. It would be also interesting to note that – apart from the quality that made his graphic novels into serious pieces of work representing high literary quality, demanding a qualified reader with proper cultural competences – Gaiman has always been known for his careful selection of illustrators responsible for the visual appearance of his works. The literary quality and visual quality of Gaiman’s works are designed to closely interact, which impregnates them against any trivialization of these, after all, weighty religious themes. This is yet another reason for the readers to enjoy his well-rounded stories.

The graphic novels with religious themes that have been discussed here do not make for a definitive list of the works that could be explored in this paper. However, adding further titles to our study would not change the general tendency suggested at the beginning of our discussion. What we

have seen is that there is ample evidence that contemporary comics have approached religious subject matter in a variety of ways, ranging from indoctrination to creative inspiration, and that the most culturally relevant artwork turned out to be the least involved ideologically, as opposed to other realizations that focused on missionary and indoctrinating strategies. For this reason, the entire religious and, more broadly, cultural potential could not be imaginatively reworked and accordingly presented to the audiences. Furthermore, focusing on the missionary purpose of those comic books, represented by naive religious instruction, idealistic portrayal of the characters, and unsophisticated persuasive tactics, not only had a detrimental effect on the quality of the storytelling itself, but also took away the implied gravity from the religious ideas it was meant to convey. Their purely instrumental treatment of comics as a mere form transmitting a properly vetted message without understanding or caring much for its formal qualities further exacerbated this negative resonance. In a more general sense, it is further evidence that putting cultural creations in the service of ideology does them more harm than good as it diminishes their cultural significance. Employing the art form exclusively as a means of persuasion further trivializes the subject matter in question. And apart from anything else, these strategies only show that the creators of these narratives treated readers not as discriminating beings, but rather as clean slates waiting to be filled with meanings and ideas of their choice.

This paper has also made clear that the opposite is true, that is, cartoonists who were not conceiving of their artwork as a way to achieve missionary, indoctrinating, or ideological goals, ended up proposing works that were both more culturally relevant and formally intriguing.<sup>19</sup> They were variously drawing on religion interpreted as a vast cultural resource – first and foremost as a source of narratives for their plots, themes, and characters. Ironically, as their literary explorations moved increasingly away from their original religious sources, they were inching closer to what one may consider to be the essence of these narratives: that of an age-old reservoir of humanity. In this manner such comic books give this vital western tradition of storytelling a new lease of life. Thanks to their high formal quality, an entirely new readership has been able to draw inspiration from this longstanding and invaluable tradition – all the more so considering that they were put in

---

<sup>19</sup> Naturally there are many comic books which were not meant to indoctrinate, but still turned out to be of little cultural value. For the sake of precise reasoning, one may only speak of the possibilities or opportunities for these works to emerge.

a position of individuals capable of creatively engaging with these various ideas and meanings.

In conclusion, it may be interesting to note that despite being commissioned by official religious institutions, the examined comic books were spectacularly unsuccessful in their treatment of religious themes and ideas, which perhaps shows how difficult it is to present, not to mention visualise, religious beliefs and ideas in contemporary art and culture. Perhaps this utter powerlessness reveals the enduring and still-to-be-overcome crisis of the religious imagination in the culture of the west. The crisis has been persistent not only in the fine arts or modern sacral architecture, but also comics. But this is matter for a wholly different discussion.

