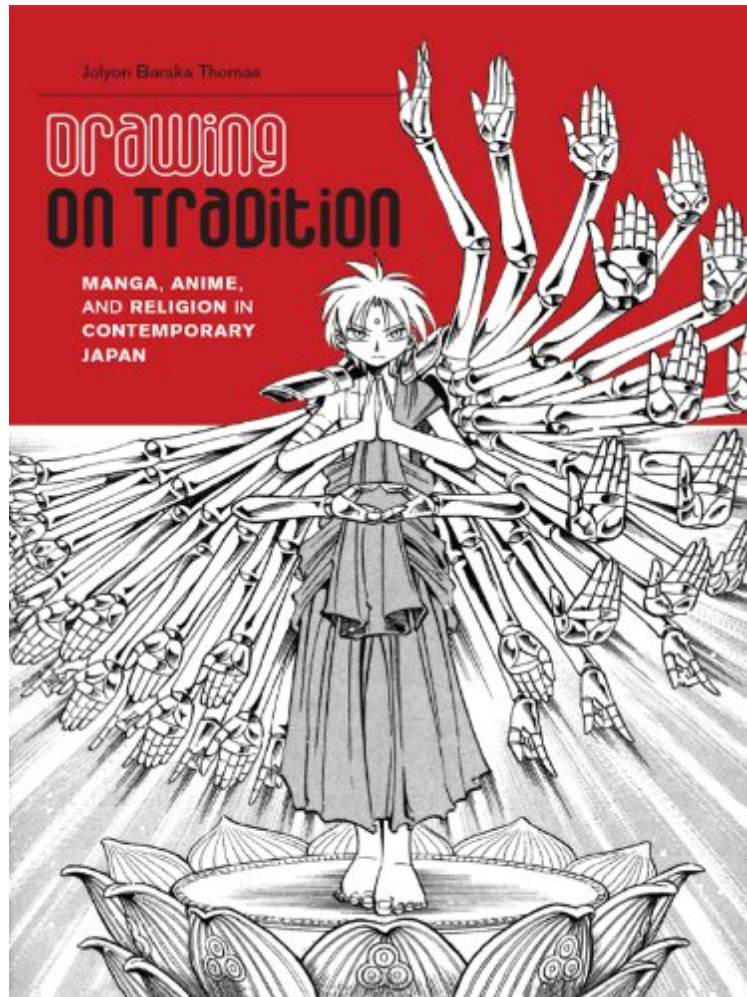


Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan

Jolyon Baraka Thomas

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Manga and anime (illustrated serial novels and animated films) are highly influential Japanese entertainment media that boast tremendous domestic consumption as well as worldwide distribution and an international audience. *Drawing on Tradition* examines religious aspects of the culture of manga and anime production and consumption through a methodological synthesis of narrative and visual analysis, history, and ethnography. Rather than merely describing the incidence of religions such as Buddhism or Shinto in these media, Jolyon Baraka Thomas shows that authors and audiences create and re-create "religious frames of mind" through their imaginative and ritualized interactions with illustrated worlds. Manga and anime therefore not only contribute to familiarity with traditional religious doctrines and imagery, but also allow authors, directors, and audiences to modify and elaborate upon such traditional tropes, sometimes creating hitherto unforeseen religious ideas and practices. The book takes play seriously by highlighting these recursive relationships between recreation and religion, emphasizing throughout the double sense of play as entertainment and play as adulteration (i.e., the whimsical or parodic representation of religious figures, doctrines, and imagery). Building on recent developments in academic studies of manga and anime—as well as on recent advances in the study of religion as related to art and film—Thomas demonstrates that the specific aesthetic qualities and industrial dispositions of manga and anime invite practices of rendition and reception that can and do influence the ways that religious institutions and lay authors have attempted to captivate new audiences. *Drawing on Tradition* will appeal to both the dilettante and the specialist: Fans and self-professed otaku will find an engaging academic perspective on often overlooked facets of the media and culture of manga and anime, while scholars and students of religion will discover a fresh approach to the complicated relationships between religion and visual media, religion and quotidian practice, and the putative differences between "traditional" and "new" religions.

Studies of religion in popular culture often treat contemporary artifacts as if they are created *ex nihilo*, objects unmoored from any previous media or cultural conditions. Jolyon Baraka Thomas here charts a new course for engaging religion and the media of popular culture by demonstrating the myriad ways manga and anime matter. Such popular media matter to the creation of culture, to religion and the study thereof, as well as to the sometimes violent expressions of the extremities of faith. Thomas's suggestive book ably proves that these comics are not the "funny papers" but deeply serious, just as they can be seriously playful. (S. Brent Plate, author of *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, and managing editor of *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*) Thomas has produced an excellent book that draws attention to prevalent popular culture forms (manga and anime) in Japan, showing how they may contain religious themes and how they can be read as a means of gauging issues related to contemporary Japanese religion. He makes subtle points about imagination and fiction in the context of religion and about religion as a form of fiction/imaginative process. In so doing he enhances our awareness of religion in Japan and presents a fascinating insight into manga/anime cultures and to those who are immersed in them. (Ian Reader, Lancaster University, U.K.) *Drawing on Tradition* is not only an entertaining look at religion and Japanese society, easily accessible to non-specialists, but is also informative and thought-provoking for academics, with a nuanced analysis of religion and popular culture in Japan today. The author skillfully "plays" with his subject matter—anime, manga, religion, tradition—to weave an insightful narrative on Japan and beyond. (Paul L. Swanson, editor, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*) About the Author Jolyon Baraka Thomas is currently pursuing a doctorate in religion at Princeton University.