Religious Frames of Mind

The 20 March 1995 poisonous gas attack on the Tokyo subway system perpetrated by the religious group Aum Shinrikyō irrevocably changed the Japanese religious landscape. Armed with plastic bags of liquid sarin (a deadly nerve agent) wrapped in newspaper, members of the group's inner elite boarded multiple trains that were converging on Kasumigaseki Station in central Tokyo. In the midst of the rapidly crowding trains, the Aum members punctured the bags with sharpened umbrellas, quickly debarked, and hastened to their rendezvous destination. The liquid evaporated and spread through the train cars, killing twelve, injuring hundreds, and mildly affecting thousands. Already under suspicion for other crimes, the reclusive religious group became the primary terror suspect, and a raid on Aum compounds throughout the country yielded evidence that the group had been amassing an arsenal of weaponry in anticipation of imminent apocalypse. Guilt for the atrocity had been established, but the underlying reasons for Aum's actions remained unclear.

The attack sent shockwaves through Japanese society that continue to be felt to this day.[1] In its immediate aftermath, various attempts at explanation appeared in journalism, fiction, documentary film, and academic literature.[2] Some journalists and scholars blamed the fictional media of manga (illustrated serial novels) and anime (animated films and television series that are often based on manga) for the Aum membership's alleged inability to distinguish between fiction and reality.[3] Replete with science fiction and fantasy, manga and anime became scapegoats, the sources of the putative delusion of the young intellectuals who formed the group's inner circle.

Aum doctrine certainly had the potential to appear fantastic and bizarre to the uninitiated. Its teachings were an eclectic amalgamation of doctrines

from many different religious traditions, its visions for the future seemingly were derived directly from science fiction, and its strict asceticism seemed foreign and extreme. Furthermore, observers noted that the membership was generally youthful and intelligent. Many of the prominent members were well-educated individuals who were graduates or students of the top-level universities that routinely produce Japan's technocratic elites. Through their membership in Aum, these promising individuals had chosen to remove themselves from slow but steady promotion in Japan's mainstream hierarchy, preferring instead to count themselves among the membership of the posta-pocalyptic elect. This stance was an overt and discomfiting condemnation of the mores and social norms of contemporary Japanese society.

As I demonstrate in Chapter 4 in a discussion on the complicated relationship between media, millenarianism, and religious violence, the assertion that manga and anime deluded Aum members is overly simplistic. They did affect Aum, but they were only some of the many factors that contributed to Aum's doctrinal development through the 1980s and early 1990s.[4] Nevertheless, it is clear that after the Aum incident manga and anime came to the fore in discussions of religion and public life, briefly and negatively. Although manga and anime content did not change significantly as a result, the powerful image of these media as potentially deleterious persisted in critical commentary even as it was resisted in fan apologia.[5]

This book seeks to recast these highly influential media, which are popular domestically and internationally, as vehicles for the dissemination and adulteration of existing religious vocabulary and imagery, as inspirations for the creation of innovative ritual practices, and as stimuli for the formation of novel religious movements.[6] These significant and often positive relationships between manga, anime, and religion not only predated the Aum incident, but also have continued in various forms since. Furthermore, as I show in Chapter 4, manga and anime have become important venues for artists and their fans to reflect on Aum, religious violence, and the social implications of the incident.

A prodigious and increasingly sophisticated body of scholarship on manga and anime exists across a range of disciplines such as media studies, anthropology, and sociology; this book deals exclusively with the religious aspects of manga and anime culture, however. Making explicit reference to the technical aspects of manga and anime production alongside discussions of narrative content and visual composition, this book illustrates how these elements play important and hitherto largely unexamined roles in eliciting

reverent and ritualized reception among some fans. It shows not only that religious content can be found in manga and anime (something that a few others have indicated), but also that some practices of rendition and reception can be accurately described as religious.[7] Furthermore, although it serves as a corrective for the problematic assumption that religion is an endangered species in contemporary Japan, this book avoids appraising the continued vitality of religion through a strictly denominational lens.

Manga and Anime

Manga are a specific type of comics. They are illustrated serial novels that comprise juxtaposed panels that combine artwork and text. These panels are read sequentially from right to left and top to bottom, although artists occasionally mobilize other modes of composition and sequencing, such as superimposing one panel above another or breaking the frame of a single panel to emphasize dynamic movement. Manga are usually initially published in episodic form in large weekly or monthly magazines of several hundred pages, with a single episode by a particular author occupying only a fraction of an issue. These episodes (about twenty pages apiece) are then collected into paperback (usually) or hardback books and republished in several volumes, each volume consisting of several episodes over a total of about two hundred pages. Publishers thus maximize their profits by selling manga in serialization in bulky magazines printed on cheap paper, and then again in bound compilations on slightly higher quality paper.

As of the mid-1990s, manga sales made up roughly 40 percent of the print publishing market in Japan. Although sales have declined slightly in the past decade due to the advent of entertainment media available through mobile phones, manga still occupy a large share of the print industry today.[8] A number of subsidiary businesses further reap the benefits of this lucrative market. Popular secondhand bookstores resell used copies for tremendous profit, and manga cafes (*manga kissaten*) keep large libraries of manga on hand for customers who pay a nominal hourly fee to sip cheap drinks while reading their favorite series in private booths, interspersing their browsing with Internet surfing.

When a specific manga sells particularly well or otherwise shows narrative promise, publishers profit again by animating the story for television or for the movie theater. While some anime are originally produced for the

Figure I.1. A page from the manga *Butsu-zone*, which features a bodhisattva, Senju, as the protagonist. Note the changes in perspective between each panel; the switch to a black background on the left (second) page indicates a flashback scene. The second (left) panel on the right-hand page includes onomatopoetic renditions of the action of the girl throwing the bowl and the sound of it hitting Senju's head. © Hiroyuki Takei/Shūeisha.

movie theater or for television, most (some scholars say up to 90 percent) derive from manga series.[9] However, anime directors often simplify manga storylines due to time and budget limitations.[10] Some manga plots such as the popular series *Death Note* and *20th Century Boys* (*Nijū seiki shōnen*) are also turned into screenplays for live-action films featuring human actors rather than animated characters.[11] The reverse is also sometimes the case: the popular anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (*Shin seiki ebuangerion*), for example, was turned into a manga series after its serialization on televi-

Figure I.2. Kaonashi (No Face) rampages through the bathhouse in Miyazaki Hayao's anime *Spirited Away*. © Hayao Miyazaki/Nibariki TGNDDTM

sion.[12] In general, the business model is to extract as much profit from a story and the marketing potential of its characters as possible.

Although publishers outside of Japan were slow to pick up on the booming industry of manga publication, the translation and distribution of manga and anime internationally has proven itself to be remunerative. Growing numbers of international publishers release officially authorized translated, subtitled, or overdubbed versions of popular series, although they occasionally choose to redact scenes or terminology that is deemed unsuitable for their intended (non-Japanese) audiences. A vigorous Internet-based community revolving around the creation and exchange of pirated or quasi-legal "fansubs" (anime that are given subtitles by devoted fans) and "scanlations" (scanned manga that have been given English text) also exists, although these unofficially distributed translations sometimes lack quality control. They are also increasingly subject to litigation for copyright infringement.[13] As a general trend, until around the turn of this century audiences outside East Asia tended to be exposed to anime first and to manga second, meaning that they generally encountered redacted and simplified anime storylines more frequently than they read the relatively complex manga from which most anime derive.

A new generation of Anglophone scholarship has accompanied the recent popularity of manga and anime outside Japan, however. Early and somewhat

apologetic treatments of manga and anime strove to overcome perceived biases in the popular imagination that associated illustrated fiction with frivolity or that generally disparaged comics and cartoons as puerile (or manga and anime as particularly prurient).[14] Now an increasingly sophisticated body of research approaches these media from a variety of methodological angles and critical viewpoints, the result of the development of an academic infrastructure related specifically to the study of manga and anime. The annual journal *Mechademia* is devoted to the study of manga and anime, many recent academic conferences have featured papers and panels on them, and lately there has been a wave of theses, dissertations, academic monographs, and edited volumes that deal with them in some way. Very recent publications have included significant articulations of methodology coupled with reflexive overviews of the state of the field.[15] Notable recent developments include a diminution of apologetic rhetoric, a willingness to examine the ways in which industrial dispositions affect production and consumption, and a move to supplement narratology with ethnography and examinations of aesthetics.[16]

Nevertheless, several problems remain in this nascent area of study. Many studies have focused on the most prominent artists and directors at the expense of studies of the equally stimulating oeuvres of their less famous peers. Tezuka Osamu, for example, has been given excessive credit for his influence on the development of postwar manga, and internationally acclaimed directors such as Miyazaki Hayao have received the lion's share of accolades for their anime.[17] This means that some very intriguing work by less famous artists such as Matsumoto Taiyou, Koike Keiichi, and Furuya Usamaru (all discussed in later chapters) has gone unexamined. The influential genre of girls' (*shōjo*) manga has also been understudied, although some recent publications have rectified this state of affairs.[18]

Additionally, some studies have problematically treated manga and anime as keys to understanding a quintessential—if nebulous—"Japaneseness."[19] However, even a cursory review of manga and anime history reveals the marked influence of Western comic art and films on their development. In this sense, manga and anime were never exclusively "Japanese" media, although certain facets of the Japanese industry have contributed to the creation of unique aesthetic styles that have since been exported and appropriated abroad. Like other media, manga and anime reveal mimetic qualities, simultaneously mirroring and influencing other media forms. With the progressive globalization of manga and anime production and consumption, it is

becoming increasingly difficult to describe these media as specifically "Japanese" or as embodying or transmitting "Japanese culture." Many Japanese studios ship their storyboards overseas to reduce production costs for time-consuming "in-between" animation, for example, and growing numbers of artists outside Japan describe their work as manga. Furthermore, manga and anime are targeted to specific demographics and as such are rarely representative of Japan as a whole.[20]

A number of scholars have argued that manga and anime differ drastically from other forms of illustrated fiction as a way of garnering legitimacy for their studies of "pop culture."[21] This stance has now served its purpose, and with the maturation of the field such apologetic rationalization is no longer necessary. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that certain industrial dispositions and associated stylistic conventions do distinguish manga and anime from other combinations of image and text. Some of these techniques and dispositions are especially efficient in the representation of religious ideas and ideals, and some of them particularly contribute to religious reception among audiences.

I explore these characteristics in more detail throughout the book, but two points deserve mention here. It is true that the target demographics for manga and anime are generally more diverse than those of comic books and cartoons in the United States and Europe, which have historically been primarily marketed to and consumed by children and teens. The range of manga and anime subject matter is accordingly more varied. Alongside rather jejune stories aimed at children, manga and anime include how-to manuals, explications of economics and politics, erotic literature targeting the concupiscence of various demographics, and a large share of science fiction and fantasy.

Industrial trends also affect aesthetics. The use of inexpensive media in the production of manga encourages the creation of drawn-out narratives that can have tremendously convoluted plots. Conversely, the time- and labor-intensive practice of drawing numerous cels for anime has resulted in directors' use of simplified "banks" of cels that can be reused, creating a unique aesthetic that both mimics and distorts live motion.[22] I draw attention to these unique methods of depiction and composition because I will show later in this chapter and in Chapter 1 that some of them—when conjoined with careful analysis of audience reception—can serve as convenient analogical tools for envisioning how manga and anime influence audiences' religious lives.

Framing Religious Subjects

My emphasis on rendition and reception is designed to compensate for an excessive emphasis on narrative content that has not only characterized most studies of manga and anime to date, but also has characterized many foregoing studies on media and religion.[23] Overemphasizing narrative content can problematically lead to a similar overemphasis on formal religious doctrine, thereby downplaying the fact that religious activity is often provisional or playful and that religious content is malleable. Additionally, such an approach can place undue emphasis on denominational distinctions, which may not be important or interesting for the people involved in the production or consumption of a specific story. This focus on recognizable and venerable religions (Buddhism, Shintō) occurs at the expense of understanding religious innovation, which may include the proactive poaching of religious imagery or content, the fusion of previously discrete doctrines, and parodic or irreverent portrayals of saints and saviors.

The negative effects of these problems have manifested themselves according to the ideological commitments of the person performing the reading. Some conservative scholars, for example, pessimistically view manga and anime as incorporating bastardizations of "authentic" religion or otherwise adulterating pure religious content.[24] Conservatives that are more optimistic see these media as preserving religious information in a secular age in which most people have unfortunately lost touch with religious traditions.[25] Conversely, scholars who are less concerned with the integrity of specific religions have argued that anime directors offer modified forms of traditional religions that are more suited to a secular social environment.[26]

The thread that ties these various approaches together is a tacit but palpable presupposition that contemporary Japan is religiously deficient. This idea is paired with a concomitant assumption that manga and anime producers preserve—with varying degrees of fidelity and awareness—otherwise moribund religious traditions by smuggling traditional religious ideas and imagery into audience consciousness. Such an approach to manga and anime content does not allow for proactive audience reception, and furthermore reduces religion to a tidy collection of static doctrines and inert deities that can be catalogued according to their apparent denominational origins. The irony of this focus on the preservation of ossified religious specimens and the one-way transmission of immutable religious doctrines in a field concerned with *animated* films and *moving* pictures and stories is considerable.

Using a sufficiently nonreductive understanding of religion fructifies attempts to apprehend, sensitively and accurately, how religion may not only form part of manga and anime content, but also may be an important part of the culture of producing and consuming these media. Specifically, investigating the ways in which authors, directors, and audiences act or speak may be more illustrative of the relationship between these media and religion than simply tracing certain content and imagery onto the blueprints provided by venerable religious traditions. This means that careful delineation of the overarching category of religion and its relationship to specific religions and particular religious attitudes is indispensable.

I proceed in the next two sections by providing a brief overview of contemporary Japanese attitudes towards religion and then defining religion for the purposes of this book. By doing so, I intend to responsibly address the dilemma that poses itself to a scholar who is predisposed by his training to see the religious aspects of culture in a society that generally does not place high importance on distinguishing religion from other aspects of cultural life. I therefore explicitly acknowledge important differences in the interpretations of religion and its relationship to media favored by scholars, clerics, media producers, and audiences. For example, whereas scholars (myself included) may be primarily interested in religion and media on a historical or sociological level, clerics may be interested in transmitting religious truth, producers may be interested in the capacity of religious concepts and imagery to enhance narrative content, and audiences may just want an exciting or meaningful story. The variegated and complex picture of religion that emerges from superimposing these diverse and often incommensurable attitudes on one another is the focus of this book.

Characterizing Japanese Attitudes towards Religion

Statistically speaking, Japanese people's professions of religious belief and affiliation are exceptionally low, hovering at around 30 percent of the population for the past thirty years.[27] Although Buddhism, Shintō, and Confucianism have informed Japanese conceptions of life and death, morality, and cosmology, these ideas are often described as "common sense" (*jōshiki*) or "Japaneseness" rather than as anything explicitly religious.[28] Religious affiliation is also generally seen as familial rather than personal. Many people will acknowledge that their family has had a traditional connection to one sect

or another of Buddhism, for example, although they may not be certain as to which sect it is. The disposition of religion in contemporary Japan thus cannot be apprehended through statistical accounts of institutional participation or affiliation, especially since religious organizations regularly inflate their numbers and individuals regularly downplay their actual involvement.[29] Because of discrepancies between academic and lay definitions of religion and religiosity, the state of religion in contemporary Japanese society cannot be described solely through respondents' answers to survey questions.[30]

It would seem that this situation presents a hermeneutical impasse, but ethnographic studies of sacred sites, ritual, and associated visual and material culture have provided significant insights into the role of religion in contemporary Japanese society. When scholars examine what Japanese people do (rather than what they say they believe), it becomes clear that many people participate in rituals in a manner that can reasonably be described as religious, even if that is not the terminology most Japanese people would use. For example, trips to historic temples and shrines—including package tours that are marketed as pilgrimages—form a large part of domestic tourism, and people make seemingly casual trips to local and regional shrines and temples to petition the deities for worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*) such as academic success, luck in marriage, help in securing divorces, healing, and so forth.[31] People also may perform acts of obeisance before small domestic altars that enshrine ancestors or other deities, or may purchase sacerdotal ritual services such as having apotropaic incantations recited to ward off misfortune during inauspicious years.

Japanese laypeople, including many of my survey respondents and interviewees, generally prefer to describe these practices as customary, not religious. Custom (*dentō*) is also the term they often use to describe annual observances that take place at formal religious sites, such as New Year's shrine visits (*hatsumōde*), equinoctial visits to ancestral graves (*ohigan*), and the Obon summer festival (which is also for ancestral spirits). In addition to these overt ritual practices, in recent decades there has been a demonstrable popular intellectual interest in topics related to religion, including publications on Buddhism written for lay audiences and popular television programs on supernatural phenomena and divination.[32] Japanese people—especially the young—are more likely to admit to belief in spirits, the afterlife, or deities than they are to admit to allegiance to one tradition or another.[33]

In sum, even if attestations of religious affiliation are low, scholars still attempt to account for individuals' evident (and sometimes fervent) belief

in empirically unverifiable realities. Both Japanese and foreign scholars have generally mobilized the term "religion" (*shūkyō*) to do so.[34] This use of the term "religion" does not wholly escape the scholar's conceit that academic categories can accurately describe people's activities and what they say or think about them. Nevertheless, careful situational definition and conscientious application of the category to aspects of the lives of people who are not necessarily vocationally religious or exceptionally pious helps scholars ascertain sites, situations, and practices in contemporary Japanese society that can be fruitfully described as religious, even if they are not associated with formal religious lineages or institutions, or their clergies.[35] This is not to discount the ways that people describe their own attitudes and activities, but to interpret them with one of the best heuristic tools we have at our disposal—namely, the concept of religion.[36]

Rendering Religion

This stance reflects some basic assumptions regarding religious form and function that inform this book. I argue that fidelity to tradition, sedulity in ritual practice, and formal allegiance to a specific doctrinal lineage are not prerequisites for producing or consuming religious content. Audiences need not recognize a narrative as formally religious for it to serve an inspirational or instructive function akin to that found in conventional religious hagiographies and myths, and narrative need not be characterized as doctrine to have a hortatory or edifying effect akin to that of orthodox religious homilies and parables. Moreover, ritual activity and textual exegesis are not necessarily conducted under the auspices of formal religious institutions or through the mediation of clergies.

For the specific purposes of this study, religion is defined as a particular imaginative mode with an inherently social disposition that can be observed in overt ritual practices or in public statements of belief. It is a willing suspension of disbelief that is dependent on communicated descriptions and shared ideations of otherwise empirically unverifiable realities or personalities. These descriptions are communally deemed veridical, either temporarily or in perpetuity, by groups that may meet regularly or intermittently and may comprise individuals who never meet in person (e.g., online communities) or who are primarily aware of each other's existence as members of the same audience—as mutual recipients of specific messages. While the content

of religion is empirically unverifiable, it is still communicable. Communal interpretations of that content reinforce consensus and commitment, and rituals (which may be equally directed to supernatural or mundane ends) are reproducible and exportable to new contexts. The emphasis here on the inherently imaginative aspect of religion quite naturally points to belief as an integral part of it, but this does not mean that all belief is expressed overtly and verbally or even formally cognized.[37] Belief may be evident in embodied activity. It may also be temporary or situational.

When used with an indefinite article or in the plural ("a religion," "religions") the word refers to social groups that coalesce around shared commitments to (or belief in) empirically unverifiable realities. These groups may have articulated doctrines, canonical texts, prerequisites for membership, or requirements for advancement within established internal hierarchies. They may be (but are not necessarily) legally designated as religious juridical persons based on their provision of magic or salvation through ritual or instruction. These services can vary in the degree to which they are formalized or require special training or credentials. Alternatively, groups may be designated as religions due to their association with a particular site or edifice that is legally or popularly distinguished as sacred; they may also gather in recreational or explicitly commercial settings.

"SPIRITUALITY"

In recent decades, some scholars have used the category of "spirituality" and similar terminology to describe individuals' elective or nondenominational commitments to empirically unverifiable realities. Within this larger global academic trend, Japanese scholars have mobilized categories such as "individualized religion," "spirituality," and "new spirituality movements and culture" to describe groups and movements characterized by loose commitments to vaguely religious content and practices that lack the strictures of formal or compulsory affiliation.[38] Such practices can include various types of divination, energy healing such as Reiki, physical exercise and meditative regimes like yoga, tourism to sacred sites and "power spots," and attendance at "spirituality conventions" featuring various purveyors of magical services and goods. Many of these groups and movements provide access to their content through media and for profit, and scholars argue that practitioners prefer these relatively individualized activities precisely because they do not require allegiance or clearly articulated faith.[39] Claims to "spirituality" over and against "religion" rhetorically allow people and groups to assert the non-

coercive and elective nature of their empirically unverifiable beliefs and associated activities.

Although participants in these movements might rhetorically disavow the religious nature of their practices, I treat spirituality as a subset of religion for several reasons. First, like religions, spiritualities are usually based on perceptions of common membership in an audience or similar community.[40] It is also significant that historians and sociologists specializing in religion have conducted most studies of spirituality to date. Although some foregoing scholarly distinctions between spirituality and religion have been predicated on the perception that spirituality can be personal or individualized whereas religion as such cannot, people almost necessarily draw on concepts from existing religious traditions in the creation of their individualized spiritualities.[41] Individuals modify and amalgamate existing religious concepts and practices as they form loose affiliations of like-minded members with minimal prerequisites for membership. In my usage, the category of religion thus includes shared attitudes that may not be found within the teachings or practices of any specific group that is legally incorporated or otherwise formally designated as a religion.

Meanwhile, formalized religious groups occasionally take advantage of the tax benefits and legal protection offered to religious juridical persons while doctrinally distinguishing themselves from the category of religion as such, usually to emphasize their innovative nature or suitability for a postreligious age.[42] (In Chapter 2, I describe one such group, founded by former manga artist Kuroda Minoru.) "Spirituality" is also increasingly used in public dialogue worldwide to refer to people's commitments to empirically unverifiable phenomena (or practices based on such commitments) in a politically correct fashion, and functions as a euphemistic substitute for the term "religion." In this book, religion is therefore understood to be an imaginative and social endeavor that encompasses the category of spirituality while accounting for practices and commitments that exist both within and outside the formal confines of traditional religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Shintō, and their associated canons and liturgies.

VERNACULAR RELIGION

Within this broader field of religion, this book is primarily concerned with what Keller Kimbrough and Hank Glassman have recently described as "vernacular religion."[43] As they indicate, "vernacular" is an improvement over the terms "popular religion" and "folk religion," both of which problemati-

cally imply hierarchies of authenticity predicated on varying degrees of proximity to the centers of doctrinal creation and interpretation. "Vernacular," in contrast, refers specifically to the acts of interpreting and translating a given concept or practice into local languages and worldviews (which may be erudite or unschooled) or the export of formal religious ideas to quotidian (but not necessarily plebeian) contexts. "Vernacular" therefore indicates the translation of concepts into categories that the constituents of a given stratum or subculture of a society would find intelligible and meaningful.

Ecclesiastical authorities and lay entertainers all participate in the creation and use of media written in accessible language (and frequently augmented with images) to encourage familiarity with religious vocabulary, imagery, and concepts. Vernacular religion is thus simultaneously reflective of and formative for Japanese culture, providing a "storehouse" of religious concepts on which various entertainers have drawn throughout history in the process of creating compelling stories.[44] The term therefore can indicate the deployment of religious terms and iconography on the part of lay authors and artists to capture and entertain audiences as much as it can indicate clerics' use of vernacular language to translate doctrine.

"RECREATING RELIGION"

In this deployment of religious themes for diversion and the mobilization of entertainment media for religious instruction and inspiration, we find vivid examples of how religion is "re-created" while people recreate.[45] The phrase "recreating religion" forms a recurring motif in this book, referring simultaneously to producers' use of religious content in the service of creating entertaining media products and to the alteration of religious content that occurs through mediation. Throughout the text, "recreation" can and should be read both ways (recreation as entertainment and re-creation as reconstitution), but for clarity I will include the hyphen (re-create) when using the word specifically with the meaning "to create again."

When proselytizers make use of various media to present their formal doctrines, the media in question ineluctably shape the messages that are transmitted. Similarly, when authors, artists, and directors borrow from the "storehouse of religious concepts" in the service of creating an entertaining story, the primary interests of the producer (making art, making money, entertaining an audience, educating) filter the religious information involved. Unless commissioned by a specific religious group, creators of vernacular

religious media are not required to follow any specific doctrine, and they may liberally pick and mix images, concepts, and vocabulary from a variety of religions.[46]

The resulting products may be irreverent, but they are rarely iconoclastic. Storytellers would doubtless find it inconvenient to obliterate the powerful imagery and narrative tropes that religious traditions offer. Rather, vernacular religious media are "iconoplastic." They mold existing religious information and imagery to suit their narrative needs. For example, Nakamura Hikaru's manga *Saint Young Men* (*Seinto oniisan*) humorously portrays Jesus and the Buddha as roommates in modern-day Tachikawa, eliciting comedy from the incongruous juxtaposition of these venerable saintly figures with contemporary urban life.[47]

Although the plasticity of doctrine forms one crucial aspect of my discussion of the re-creation of religion that focuses on the side of production, there is an equally important aspect on the side of reception. This is a crucial difference between two aspects of entertainment—namely, a discrepancy between the apparently synonymous terms "diversion" and "recreation." In my usage, diversion refers to a temporary flight from quotidian concerns after which people return to daily life relatively unchanged. Recreation, though, refers to the process whereby viewers re-create themselves and their worldviews through mediated experience. In the case of anime, for example, viewers may watch a particular film as a way to distract themselves for ninety minutes without taking any particular messages away from it and without using the film as an impetus for changes in their behavior or lifestyle. They are temporarily diverted from their daily lives—amused, to be sure, but not changed in any significant fashion.

In other instances, however, audiences suppress their awareness of the gap between the fictional world of the film and empirical reality, reading the story as having a particular message about ideal lifestyles, viewing a character as a model to emulate, seeing a particular filmic site as a representation of a real, meaningful, and sometimes sacred place, and perceiving a filmic ritual as an activity to be reproduced in reality. The same, of course, applies to the reception of manga, and in both cases, audience members re-create their worldviews. Any religious content in such moving stories may also be re-created through the process of interpretation. Whatever the interests of the director and whatever the actual connection with formal doctrine, audiences can interpret the content in various and unexpected ways that may be more cavalier or more pious than the producer intended.

ENTERTAINING RELIGIOUS IDEAS

Media producers may mobilize entertaining religious content and audiences may entertain religious ideas through (or because of) media, but neither necessarily influences the other. Nevertheless, there are many instances when a given media product may be interpreted as both entertaining and religious, or when competing interest groups describe the same product as one or the other. As a way of theoretically highlighting this simultaneous continuity and contradiction, in an earlier publication I juxtaposed the words *shūkyō* (religion) and *asobi* (play) in the neologism *shūkyō asobi*.[48] This term elaborates on the aforementioned concept of "recreating religion" by etymologically drawing attention to the long tradition of entertainment as an integral aspect of religion in Japan through the semantically fecund verb *asobu* (to play) and its derivatives. *Shūkyō asobi* also highlights the similarly imaginative aspects of religion and recreation, helping to elucidate the ways in which a given media product can be perceived as simultaneously facetious and pious on the side of production, or as both frivolous and poignant on the side of reception. Here I will briefly recapitulate the gist of my earlier argument as a way of summarizing the approach to religion that informs this book before moving to a specific discussion of how I will address the media in question.

The verb *asobu* in modern Japanese carries connotations of play, diversion, pleasure, enjoyment, transformation, and adulteration.[49] In classical Japanese, the verb has additional connotations related to performance, including musical performance, oratory, and ritual.[50] While frequently translated into English as "to play" and accordingly associated with the activities of children or with games, the word *asobu* is more diverse in usage, covering a wider variety of activities associated with entertainment and leisure. Some examples include playing music and dancing (including *kagura*, a sacred dance), diversion, outdoor activities, hunting, strolling, gamboling (what children or animals might do), traveling, loitering, being let loose or set free (as in land lying fallow, money accumulating interest, or a tool left unused or unattended), gambling, teasing, or being teased.[51] *Asobu* is also commonly used euphemistically to refer to sex (especially of the casual variety) or related activities such as prostitution. Etymologically, *asobu* ("to play") originated in references to the entertainment that accompanied religious ritual such as music and dance.[52] To play (*asobu*) is "to liberate one's mind and body from daily life, and to entrust one's self to another reality."[53]

Asobi, the nominal form of the verb *asobu*, can be glossed as "play." *Asobi* (play) changes the form or shape of something commonplace in order to

amuse and to delight. People submit to novel rules and acknowledge imagined strictures during play. They also necessarily—albeit often temporarily—accept pretense at face value.

While at times educational or edifying, the activity of play suggests a relaxing or escapist flight from mundane concerns. Yet the experience of play often reflects those concerns by challenging and critiquing them through the artifices of pretense, humor, and manipulation. This mercurial activity therefore offers both respite from and reconciliation with the serious elements of daily life.[54] Adulteration (to play with, to play upon) takes a starring role within the broader play of diversion and recreation.

Some religious activity can be characterized by the verb *asobu* because it is instantiated in nominally entertaining activities, while some play can be described as *shūkyō* because it reveals sincere and shared belief in empirically unverifiable realities. The phrase "*shūkyō asobi*" therefore refers to religious entertainment and playful religion, pointing to instances where modifications of religious behavior and outlook occur within spaces equally devoted to entertainment or, alternatively, where religious practice and pedagogy simultaneously behave as entertainment experiences. In the sense of play as manipulation or adulteration, the term also can indicate the process of drawing on existing religious schemata while modifying them, emphasizing the plastic nature of religious doctrines and ideas (authors, artists, and directors playing with religious content).[55]

As Chapters 2 and 3 will show, there is an embodied component to *shūkyō asobi* as well, since audience members may play at being religious through role-playing and ritual. Entertainment may therefore affect how people view or practice religion, but these effects are not necessarily indicated by overt changes in religious affiliation (conversion) or increased knowledge of doctrine (religious education). *Shūkyō asobi* allows for oscillations between perceptions of an activity or media product as either religious or entertaining while emphasizing continuity between the similarly imaginative aspects of religion and recreation.

The aforementioned phrase "recreating religion" encapsulates these recursive relationships between religion and entertainment. This unifying phrase should be read with the aforementioned Japanese etymology in mind. That is, the very notion of recreation derives from (and is mutually imbricated with) religion. Play—like religion—often relies on the ideation of other worlds, frequently involves submission to imagined strictures and rules, and furthermore often features imputations of particular potency to certain agents and attributions of unique significance to specific events.

Religious Manga and Anime Culture

I use the foregoing understanding of religion, media, and entertainment to describe a subset of the culture of manga and anime production and consumption that I call "religious manga and anime culture." By "culture," I simply mean a collection of attitudes, behavior, materials, and media associated with a particular group; in this case the group comprises the producers and end users of manga and anime. Although some producers and consumers of manga and anime might have reservations about the use of the word "religious" to describe their relationship with these products, I maintain that it is an accurate descriptor of some emotional, intellectual, and recreational aspects of manga and anime culture. Similarly, although the leaders of some religious institutions or other religious individuals may have reservations about modifying the phrase "manga and anime culture" with the adjective "religious," I argue that the use of apparently religious themes (deities and apocalypse, for example) by producers of these products and the canonization and ritual usage of some of these works by audiences suggests that "religious" is an adequate and appropriate descriptive word for describing the processes of imagination, production, and consumption that characterize some aspects of manga and anime culture.

With the foregoing definitions in mind, I argue that, whereas we can think of religious edification and fictional entertainment separately, manga and anime sometimes provide cases—both in content and in consumption—where they are functionally conflated. These cases are important not only because they reveal the popularity of apparently religious themes in a society where many people exhibit antipathy or apathy towards religion, but also because they sometimes prove to be the origins of doctrinal and ritual innovation, including the development of novel religious groups. This is not to say, however, that a causal connection exists between authors' inclusion of apparently religious narrative content and imagery and fans' apparently religious interactions with fictional worlds. Some products will elicit seemingly religious responses despite having little content that is explicitly or even evidently religious, and some products will be greeted with apathy in spite or because of their overtly religious content.

With these caveats in mind, there are observable behaviors in manga and anime culture that can be reasonably and accurately described as religious. Clerics sometimes use stories to edify their audiences, and authors sometimes use religious concepts to captivate their readers. Both make expedient use of illustration and animation to augment their narratives. At the same

time, audiences of ostensibly secular entertainment media sometimes engage in apparently religious practices. To foreshadow some examples that appear in later chapters, audiences may interpret texts and apply lessons found therein to daily life (visiting the Yasukuni war memorial shrine after reading Kobayashi Yoshinori's manga), may canonize texts and films that they find particularly instructive (supplementing passages from Tezuka Osamu's *Buddha* [*Budda*, 1992–1993] with expository text about the manga's lessons for life), or ritually reproduce actions that they have learned through media (playfully emulating anime characters' interactions with fictional deities).

Taken together, these practices of production and consumption in manga and anime culture form a viewfinder through which we can take a snapshot of contemporary vernacular religious content and practice. Such a snapshot illustrates the ways in which the portrayals and practices of religion in manga and anime culture reflect producers' visions of religion and how these in turn affect local and international audiences. Furthermore, to take a page from the media under consideration here, this synchronic snapshot can be placed on a diachronic timeline to illustrate continuities in vernacular religious practices and media across history.

Outlines

The dearth of studies on the religious aspects of manga and anime culture derives in part from the immaturity of the field. More importantly, it reflects significant methodological dilemmas that have not been systematically addressed until very recently.[56] In the following sections I discuss ways to apprehend the narrative, visual, and filmic aspects of these media in conjunction with the exegetical, ritual, and pedagogical aspects of religion. I furthermore sketch ways for understanding manga and anime in light of authorial intent and audience reception while acknowledging that these media are targeted to specific demographics.

AUTHORS AND DIRECTORS

It is now common sense that authorial intent does not always match audience reception. However, the study of manga and anime has hitherto given undue preference to authors and auteur theory, emphasizing the creative genius of a particular individual while downplaying the proactive roles that audiences play in the reception and interpretation of content. Although this

tendency is problematic, it is clear that the imprimatur of a specific author or director does contribute significantly to the reception of a work. Her specific interests and intentions can influence the ways in which a particular manga or anime fulfills a religious function, be it at the stage of production (an inspired work) or consumption (liturgical use or inclusion in the canon of a religious group). For many authors, the deployment of religious vocabulary and imagery is merely an expedient means for attracting audience attention, and most authors seem quite casual in their use of religious themes. Nevertheless, a small number of authors and directors are explicit about the religious motivations behind their work.

In this book I try to balance examples of both cavalier and pious authorship. While it is impossible to determine authorial intent prior to production and publication, interviews provide a way of understanding how authors retrospectively interpret their own work. Although I experienced less success in securing interviews than I would have liked during my years of fieldwork, in the case of prominent directors such as Miyazaki Hayao and manga artists (*mangaka*) such as Kobayashi Yoshinori I was able to draw on a large body of prior conversations, both journalistic and academic. I also was able to use the memoirs of artists such as the "god of manga" (*manga no kamisama*) Tezuka Osamu. In addition, Chapter 2 includes an extended discussion of three interviews I conducted with Kuroda Minoru, a *mangaka* who founded a religion. Artists will only rarely acknowledge religious dimensions in their work, however, and even when they use apparently religious language it does not necessarily indicate firmly held beliefs. Famed *mangaka* Urasawa Naoki refers to moments of artistic inspiration as a feeling of having the "god of manga" (*manga no kamisama*) enter his right hand, for example, but there is no indication that he is an ardent devotee of this muse.[57]

AUTHORIAL AND ACTUAL AUDIENCES

Jaqueline Berndt has persuasively argued that scholars have frequently and mistakenly interpreted the fact that most Japanese people have significant exposure to manga or anime as an indication that they all read or watch them the same way.[58] As she indicates, manga and anime are usually targeted to specific demographics, and even within a target audience the reception of a particular work can vary considerably. Ethnographic methods thus become indispensable for apprehending how audiences perceive various works. This is not to discount the value of narrative analysis (a technique that I also use),

but rather to say that such readings are most persuasive when conjoined with ethnographic, sociological, or historical data.

Ethnography is not without its own difficulties.[59] The insularity of manga and anime fan culture has made it difficult for scholars to approach its end users in a way that guarantees the candor or veracity of their responses to survey questions. Furthermore, informants will generally downplay the religious nature of manga and anime content or use other adjectives to describe it. Participants in rituals based on manga or anime narratives may also be loath to describe their behavior as religious. I have compensated for these difficulties by carefully examining the religious functions that manga and anime play in people's lives while avoiding excessively mechanistic interpretations that render complex audience interactions with media as simplistic cases of narrative cause and personal or social effect. In particular, I have tried to faithfully indicate my informants' resistance to the adjective "religious" as a descriptive term for their consumption or production of manga and anime.

In addition to reporting the results of interviews with Kuroda Minoru (the aforementioned *mangaka* who founded a religion), later chapters include results of a survey of nearly one hundred college students and several interviews of young adult consumers (ages twenty to forty) of manga and anime. Portions of the work use the more anonymous but also informative realm of Internet message boards, fan sites, and blogs to capture audience reactions to religious content found in popular media. I also draw on the work of scholars who have made passing references to the observable ritual behavior of manga and anime enthusiasts in scholarship on media and religion.[60] Extending the provocative work of scholar of religion Yamanaka Hiroshi, I situate religious manga and anime on a typological continuum, supplementing his organizing criteria regarding the rendition of religious content with additional categories related to authorial intent and audience response.[61] Finally, aware of the fact that my own interpretations and experiences will undoubtedly affect my analysis of the works in question, I occasionally insert myself into the text. Anecdotes of my casual conversations with Japanese friends and acquaintances add an informal ethnographic component that supplements the formal interviews and surveys.

TELLING STORIES

The aforementioned emphasis on ethnography informs my approach to narratives. Narratology sometimes elucidates the proclivities and interests of the

scholar performing the reading while obfuscating the ways in which non-academic audiences receive a particular text. Although stories can indicate a great deal about the interests of authors and their intended audiences, excessive focus on narrative content can result in abstract portrayals of unrealistically monolithic audiences. The tales that audiences and authors tell about their relationships with texts and films provide important supplements and correctives to these caricatures. Parts of this study necessarily recapitulate manga and anime plots, but to the extent possible I have tried to provide an expert reading as a scholar of religion while making that reading consistent with the surface meaning of the stories I examine. Some of my interpretations are necessarily speculative, extrapolating authorial or audience motives and attitudes from storylines, but I have supplemented such speculation with ethnography wherever possible.

MOVING IMAGES

One tendency that has characterized foregoing scholarship on manga and anime is to read these art forms as if they are any other text, overlooking the important roles that images, frames, composition, and animation play in conveying the narrative and educing intellectual and emotional responses.[62] I compensate for this tendency by carefully describing the visual and aesthetic aspects of these media alongside my close readings of texts. I also emphasize the visual aspects of the media under consideration by mobilizing visual metaphors throughout the book. I resist the urge to grant modern manga and anime an estimable art historical pedigree by tracing them directly back to venerable premodern media such as picture scrolls (*emaki*), but I do examine the history of visual-verbal entertainment in Japanese religious contexts to set a backdrop for the study, emphasizing continuities in vernacular religious media and associated practices of production and consumption.[63]

My interpretation of the relationship between religion and images draws on David Morgan's seminal work on religious visual culture and what he describes as "the sacred gaze," although I resist the connotations of overt piety that his phrase evokes.[64] The creation of art representative of religious ideas or ideals is not necessarily reverent or devout. Deities, saints, and pilgrimage sites are convenient characters and settings to be deployed in the service of entertainment and edification, and, while they may serve as awe-inspiring figures in a given image, they may just as frequently be portrayed in satirical fashion or as mere backdrops or scenery. This does not mean, however, that they have no religious significance, nor does it mean that they are immune

to reinterpretation. Audiences sometimes appropriate images that are produced in secular settings for rituals with religious significance, and artists who are not religiously motivated may borrow, emulate, or distort images generally used for ritual veneration for the purpose of entertainment. Sacred images are often expropriated and reproduced in mundane contexts (tattoos, jewelry, television), and plebeian images sometimes become objects of religious veneration. The apparent distinctions between manifest divinity, sacred iconography, and quotidian image therefore lie in differences in rendition and intentionality. That is, they lie in the manner in which a concept or entity is depicted and the attitude presupposed or evident in its production and consumption.

Recent scholarship on religion and images has corrected for museological tendencies in earlier scholarship by situating images according to their ritual use and taking their perceived vitality seriously.[65] For example, recent studies have examined the biographies of images and statues, the pedagogical power of illustrated scrolls (*emaki*), the ritual usage of *maṇḍala* and other images, and the recursive relationships between ritual and performance in dramatic presentations of religious activity (which include not only dramatic action, but also facets of illustration, sculpture, puppetry, and so forth).[66]

Many Japanese Buddhist statues, for example, boast complex hagiographies replete with origin stories and miracle tales, and devotees frequently interact with the images as if the latter were alive. For those who produce, maintain, and worship them, religious images often serve as living entities that demand ministrations including changes of clothing, offerings of food, and privacy (seclusion when not participating in ritual performance, for example).[67] Images are thus considered ontologically indistinct from the deities or cosmologies they represent.[68] In the absence of belief—that imaginative mode in which something empirically unverifiable is treated as reality—an image is merely an inert representation.[69] However, when the imagination is exercised in an attitude of belief, casual or otherwise (what Morgan calls the sacred gaze), then a religious image ceases to be purely representative, becoming the character, deity, or cosmos itself.

In formal religious contexts such as Buddhist temples, images (e.g., statues) are brought to life through rituals such as eye-opening ceremonies (*kaigen shiki*). However, even in the absence of such ceremonial inauguration, a given image can take on a life of its own for some viewers. This cognitive process whereby inert images become imaginatively vivified can be expediently described as animation. Animating an object or an image brings it to life, literally or figuratively; of course, it is in the latter sense that the term for

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the illustrative technology of juxtaposing and compositing static images to create the illusion of movement exists in modern English. For the purposes of this book, animation refers to the imaginative construal of inert images as living or otherwise real; it simultaneously refers to the technical process whereby static images are given the illusion of motion through sequencing and variation.

The imaginative animation of images is not necessarily limited to formal religious contexts. Audiences may animate renditions of fictional characters found in popular media just as easily as they may animate artistic renditions of religious characters found in scripture. Fictional characters may thus come to be perceived as "real" in the eyes of their viewers. Furthermore, audience members' exposure to illustrated depictions of a particular deity, event, or concept can greatly influence their subsequent visualization or interpretation of the figure or concept in question. Finally, moving images can animate audiences, prompting intellectual reflection, conversion, and ritual activity such as role-playing.

BUILDING CHARACTER

Literature and drama have proven their capacity to inspire and exhort (as well as to entertain) for millennia; the power of stories derives in part from audiences' imaginative identification with fictive characters and the intense verisimilitude of vicarious experience. Humans can display marked commitment to obviously fictional characters or worlds; occasionally, aspects of these worlds are made manifest and characters incarnated through ritual activity, mimicry, and material culture.[70] The bride and groom dressed as Leia and Han Solo at a Star Wars wedding, the Harry Potter fan who straddles a broomstick to play Quidditch on his college campus, and the Church of All Worlds that takes science fiction author Robert Heinlein's fictional messiah Valentine Michael Smith as its founder all demonstrate the human capacity for intense and committed (if sometimes temporary) imaginative interaction with the fictive world of a film or a novel and its similarly fictive characters and concepts.[71]

These imaginative interactions may balance play and piety in equal measure, and the aforementioned examples from the modern West are matched by examples from Asia, both premodern and modern, some of which are explicitly related to religion. For example, Meir Shahar has demonstrated that vernacular drama contributed to the dissemination of deity worship throughout areas of China, showing that purely fictional characters came to

be worshipped as deities thanks to the inspiring performances of peripatetic theater troupes.[72] Anthropologist Philip Lutgendorf has documented a similar case in India in which a devotional film dedicated to the goddess known as Santoshi Ma contributed to the spread of rituals associated with viewing the film and revitalized interest in this previously obscure deity.[73]

Japanese examples also abound. Keller Kimbrough has persuasively demonstrated that famous female novelists, poets, and diarists of the Heian period (794–1185) were transformed into fictional characters themselves in a variety of Buddhist literature and imagery in later centuries.[74] Buddhist clergies used these women as exemplars of the base nature of literature in contradistinction to the salvific power of scripture. Stories of putative *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) novelist Murasaki Shikibu suffering in hell for the licentiousness of her text, for example, served as motivators for audiences to abandon the titillating pleasures of fiction in favor of the more abstemious edification of Buddhism. The irony of using obviously fabricated stories to denigrate fictional entertainment notwithstanding, the cultural cachet of these women—charismatic figures in the proliferating Buddhist literature on sin and salvation—seems to have served as an expedient device in Buddhist proselytizers' attempts to appeal to and capture new audiences. Kimbrough's work helpfully shows how premodern Buddhist vernacular fiction built character through these stories of figures who ostensibly deserved censure (for their sensuality) or veneration and emulation (for their eventual repentance).

In the case of manga and anime, this study will show examples of individuals developing affective relationships with certain characters and taking certain obviously fictive characters as role models. Additionally, collusion between the producers of manga and anime and the makers of toys and video games means that manga and anime provide a particularly rich context for audiences to interact with their favorite characters and fictive worlds through material culture and virtual realities.[75] Audience members get in touch with their favorite characters through the imaginative mimicry known as cosplay (costume play) and through dolls, toys, and models.

LAYERS OF FILM

Like the field of manga and anime studies, the field of film and religion studies is immature. The academic infrastructure for crossing the boundaries between the academic study of religion and film studies has begun to coalesce only in the past two decades, with the establishment of the online *Journal of Religion and Film* and the publication of a few seminal texts on the subject

since the late 1990s.[76] Recent reflexive overviews of the field have indicated that scholars are increasingly aware of the problems with "reading" films as if they were any other religious text.[77] However, opinions have diverged as to how these problems can be solved. Some scholars have advocated greater engagement with the theoretical insights of film studies, while others have advocated a cultural studies approach. Furthermore, studies of film and religion have been divided between scholars who prefer the relatively artistic work of auteurs and those who use popular film to assess how lay audiences might be exposed to religious content.[78] Theological or mythological readings characteristic of both have generally emphasized the messages imparted by a certain film without questioning whether those messages have been received as such by actual audiences.[79] Furthermore, the emphasis on transmission of content leads to a concomitant deemphasis on the ritual of watching film or the rituals that ardent viewers create in conjunction with (or based on) film.[80]

My own method for approaching film is based on three interconnected presuppositions. First, the experience of watching a film is significantly different from reading a text, and film should be assessed accordingly. Soundtracks and sound effects affect the emotional register of a given scene, camera angles focus attention on specific details and obscure others, and individuals' affective relationships with specific characters in film may be based on their prior attraction to the charismatic actors who portray them (including voice actors). Second, films are tremendously fecund as sites for ritual performance. They may be watched repetitively or used in interactive call and response; in addition, filmic actions and gestures may be imitated in the real world. Filmic sites may become pilgrimage destinations, and directors and actors may become the objects of veneration. Third, film—even when viewed in relatively private formats (DVDs, clips streamed on the Internet)—contributes to the sense of being part of an audience in a manner that is different from texts' ability to do the same. As a medium frequently experienced as part of a theater or broadcast audience, film may contribute more than print does to consumers' sense of belonging to a community with shared experiences and similarly shared ideals. While the aforementioned characteristics of film generally apply to anime, animated films are qualitatively different from live-action films in significant ways that derive from the technologies used in their production and differences in format.[81] Some of the anime to which I refer in this book, for example, are not theater films but are rather serialized television programs or direct-to-video releases. I discuss the significance of these differences between anime and live-action film more in Chapter 1.

Religious Frames of Mind

As illustrated above, approaching the religiosity of manga and anime culture solely through a denominational lens generally overlooks the fact that religions comprise multiple interest groups that include clergy and laity representing various sectarian commitments and competing visions of religious authority and authenticity. It also obfuscates the inherent diversity of authorial, directorial, artistic, and audience interpretations of content. Producers may be antipathetic to formal religions and their doctrines but open to transmitting religious ideas in an entertaining format, whereas audiences may harbor similar skepticism regarding formal religious institutions while exhibiting fervent responses to certain characters and concepts, including those derived from religions. Scrutiny of media for traces of traditional doctrines and images also occurs at the expense of acknowledging emergent ritual and exegetical practices in fandom that do not necessarily or solely derive from venerable traditions like Buddhism. My corrective for this problem is generally ethnographic, but ethnography still requires interpretation. The concept of religious frames of mind will serve as a critical apparatus for apprehending the various ways in which manga and anime mediate the re-creation of religion.

I have already highlighted the importance of the imagination in religion. The reception of religion, fiction, art, and film is characterized by the willing suspension of disbelief, which can be described as the willful suppression of awareness of the gap between the imagination and empirical reality. I suggest that the same noetic process that allows individuals to view individual synchronic frames of manga and anime as meaningful parts of a diachronic story also allows viewers to frame certain events, characters, and settings with religious significance. Here I will focus on two technical aspects of manga and anime production known as closure and compositing that lend themselves to the rendition and reception of religious content by inviting and demanding the aforementioned suppression of awareness regarding the interstices between fictive and empirical worlds.

CLOSURE

Closure is the process whereby readers imaginatively fill in the space between two juxtaposed panels in a manga. *Mangaka* cannot depict the myriad minutiae of movements in real time, nor is it expedient to draw all of the little moments between significant parts of a story in the manner of a flipbook.

Artists compensate for this inability with an economy of image. By carefully choosing and juxtaposing specific moments, artists demand that viewers imaginatively do the hard work of contextualizing the intervening space between panels. I explain this in more detail in Chapter 1, but, as one example, an artist might draw a soccer player's foot cocked back to kick a ball, and in the next frame show the ball swishing into the net. The intervening time—during which the foot connects with the ball, a defender shouts a warning, the goalkeeper exhibits a surprised reaction, the crowd gasps in anticipation, and the ball travels rapidly through space—is omitted.

COMPOSITING

Similarly, in a technique known as compositing, artists draw on the viewer's ability to suppress her awareness of multiple layers of signification occurring within a single frame. In Figure I.3, for example, the onomatopoetic sound of a character chuckling, "*ku ku*," is written into blank space within the frame of the panel on the far right while dialogue between two characters is written in quotation bubbles. Different panels also show different aspects of the same scene; see, for instance, the panel in the bottom left of the page on the right, which focuses on the protagonist's clenched fist. One character's internal thoughts are shown by thought bubbles on the bottom left, while the top left emphasizes the intensity of the character's assertion with a close-up shot and lines angling outward from his face. These panels, which are read right to left and top to bottom, would be read by a native speaker in just a few seconds. In the process, the viewer stitches the panels together into a coherent narrative, even if they actually demand impressive imaginative leaps between characters' internal monologues and shared dialogue, onomatopoeia, and so forth.

In the production of anime, compositing is used to make what Thomas Lamarre describes as the "multiplanar image," and "closed" and "open" compositing vary the audience's awareness of the existence of these multiple layers.[82] By adjusting the space between transparent cels through the use of an animation stand, artists and directors create the illusion of depth in a single frame of anime. In addition to panning the camera across a composite image forming one frame, they can move single layers within it to create the illusion of movement within and across individual frames. In both instances, skillful use of the apparatus allows directors to suppress or manipulate the audience's awareness of the existence of multiple layers within a single composite image; it also suppresses awareness of the rapid transitions between frames.[83]

Figure I.3. Light decides to make himself the god of a new world in *Death Note*. © Tsugumi Ohba, Takeshi Obata/Shūeisha

Detailed analysis of the techniques of closure and compositing is largely beyond the scope of this book, and there is little point in reproducing others' stimulating and expert work. Here I mention these techniques specifically to highlight the cognitive operations on which both rely. That is, they are not merely artifices for rendition and representation, but also can be conceived as particular ways of viewing manga and anime that compress multiplanar images into composite ones and that interpret the juxtaposition of such composite images as a reasonable approximation of empirical reality. Closure and compositing are therefore inherently imaginative, demanding that audiences suppress their awareness of the interstices between frames and layers within frames. Similarly, these techniques draw audiences into stories, contributing to the creation of religious frames of mind by inviting audiences to suppress their awareness of the gaps between fictive worlds and

empirical reality. I am not suggesting, however, that this suppression is uni-form—these techniques can be executed with varying degrees of skill and persuasiveness, eliciting differing degrees of audience absorption. Personal predilection also will affect interpretation and intellectual and emotional investment.

As I will show throughout this book, closure and compositing can also be used metaphorically. Some authors and directors use a relatively "open" form of compositing that invites audiences to view certain narratives as equally being of religious import and recreational promise. Tezuka Osamu's *Buddha*, for example, is obviously about religious content (the life story of the Buddha) but is marketed as an adventure story.[84] Conversely, many au-thors and directors use "closed" compositing to suppress awareness of the religious strata of their works. Anime director Miyazaki Hayao often has been described as incorporating "Shintō" into his films, but he strongly re-sists this idea even though he mobilizes concepts like deities or spirits (*kami*) in his narratives. Miyazaki prefers to depict deities rather than religious cler-gies or institutions, and when he does depict the latter they are inert (deities' statues in *My Neighbor Totoro* [*Tonari no Totoro*, 1988]) or corrupt (the venal monk in *Princess Mononoke* [*Mononoke Hime*], 1997), while his deities are vivacious and active. He thus bypasses formal religion by tapping directly into an imagined spiritual world. Furthermore, just as *mangaka* occasionally rupture the hermetic seal of the individual panel so that characters leap out of the frame and across the page, and just as anime directors occasionally drastically switch to open compositing to elicit a sense of disorientation or movement, prosaic stories with no overt religious messages may suddenly reveal registers of religious significance, as has been the case with the works of *mangaka* such as Yamamoto Sumika and Miuchi Suzue (described in Chapter 2).

As in the case of the composite image, a given viewer may pay a greater or lesser degree of attention to the existence of the interstices between illustra-tion and empirical reality. Yet, just as he may be able to distinguish between layers of a composite image found in a given frame, his ability to distinguish between layers of fiction and reality is not compromised by his willingness—temporary or perpetual—to interpret these layers as collectively forming a meaningful world.[85] In this sense, the artificial line between the imagina-tion and empirical reality—a line that I have been drawing here for heuristic purposes—ceases to be significant or even intelligible. What remains is the frame through which audience members make sense of the world.

Audience members exhibit religious frames of mind when they interact with the characters and cosmologies of manga and anime in ways that reflect an imaginative mode of compositing in which illustrated worlds are superimposed on empirical reality. A religious frame of mind is present when a given narrative animates the audience, inspiring devotional or ritual activity such as composing devotional tablets (*ema*) at shrines addressed to favorite characters rather than to deities. It is visible when a given character becomes animate in an audience's shared imaginary as a model to emulate, as in the case of the women I describe in Chapter 3 who take the fictional character Nausicaä as a role model. We can trace religious frames of mind when audience members project an illustrated place onto physical topography as a pilgrimage destination (such as *Sailor Moon* fans patronizing Hikawa Shrine in the Azabu Jūban district of Tokyo). We can visualize them when a specific geographic location takes on sacred significance in fan discussions as the alleged inspiration for an animated world—a place that is simultaneously fictional and real, inspired and inspiring (the island of Yakushima as the putative model for the sacred forest featured in *Princess Mononoke*).[86]

Focus

The basic stance that ties the aforementioned approaches together is my insistence that manga and anime not be treated as museums preserving ossified specimens of assorted denominational species. They are vehicles for religious creation and re-creation, for the imaginative animation of fictive characters.[87] Authors and directors proactively mobilize religious concepts, characters, and images for a variety of reasons ranging from piety to profit. Lay artists may attempt to inculcate moral lessons in their audiences while criticizing formal religious institutions, and leaders of religious institutions may make executive decisions to proselytize through manga and anime, but in neither case are these media mere containers for the smuggling of cloaked religious content into the minds of unsuspecting audiences. This is because audiences play a similarly proactive role in interpreting manga and anime content in ways that often diverge from authorial and directorial intentions. Audience reception may include the canonization of certain works (treating them as sacred literature), ritual reading or viewing, and the associated development of affective and devotional relationships with fictional characters.

In short, this book is not about the incidence of Buddhism, Shintō, or Christianity in manga and anime as much as it is about the creative and

sundry ways in which the constituents of manga and anime culture deploy, receive, interpret, and mentally and physically interact with narrative and visual content. Moreover, it is explicitly about how they do so in ways that reflect religious frames of mind. In addition to the stories and images that compose its direct objects of study, authorial and directorial analysis, fan message board discussions, personal interviews, surveys, exegetical commentaries, critical reviews, and observable ritual practices devoted to fictive sites and characters serve as its subject matter. The frames of mind evident in these sources of data can be juxtaposed with one another; although they may not always be perfectly contiguous or complementary, through the imaginative process of closure we can suture them together to visualize the endlessly changing subset of contemporary Japanese vernacular religion that I call religious manga and anime culture.

The case studies in the following chapters strike a balance between examples derived from manga and from anime, but they demonstrate a slight bias towards manga for pragmatic reasons. Manga are easier than films to review, and in most cases manga are produced prior to anime and therefore have a narrative richness that anime sometimes lack. Nevertheless, anime have their own strengths and I have accordingly included many salient examples from anime, including those in Chapter 3 that focus in particular on the reception of acclaimed director Miyazaki Hayao's oeuvre. To the extent possible, I have indicated whether a particular story exists in both formats, and I have tried to include detailed discussions of anime such as those of directors Miyazaki and Kon Satoshi that are not based on manga.

Many of the works to which I refer are now available in translation and can be found in large bookstores or through online retailers. Some of them, unfortunately, have not yet been translated and may never be. Readers who are concerned about plot spoilers should beware that portions of the book necessarily provide synopses of their subject matter. I have tried to write these so as not to detract from the richness of their storylines, and have left some surprising plot twists unspoiled. For readers who are unfamiliar with them, no amount of description and discussion can compare with the actual experience of reading manga or watching anime. I leave it to the reader to decide which products among those discussed seem appealing.

Although I hope to provide a somewhat comprehensive overview of religious manga and anime culture in this book, there are works that I have necessarily omitted. The heavy emphasis on young adult (*seinen*) and boys' (*shōnen*) manga and associated anime reflects personal predilection more than a programmatic delineation of research parameters. This accidental em-

phasis is both unintentional and unfortunate, and is only partially redeemed by the fact that these categories of manga and anime are more widely consumed than girls' manga or ladies' comics. (While girls are likely to read and be familiar with boys' manga and anime, the reverse is less common.)

My neglect of girls' and women's manga and anime is inexcusable, but I hope that readers will supplement this study with further examinations of other types of manga and anime in coming years. Although I refer to a few works that fall into the girls' manga category, with considerable chagrin I leave the study of religion in the culture surrounding girls' manga and ladies' comics to others, hoping that this book provides helpful groundwork and research methodology that fructifies these future endeavors. Furthermore, although there are obvious connections between manga, anime, and video games, I happily relinquish study of the latter to those with greater affinity for them. Finally, while I do discuss the international reception of these media (including academic reception) in passing, for the most part my study focuses on their creation and consumption in Japan. This reflects my training in Japanese studies, the emphasis on Japanese-language sources in my work, and my years of fieldwork in that country (2005–2007). Hopefully future studies on this subject will take a more international and interactional perspective than I have taken.

Chapter 1 briefly traces the history of vernacular religious media and explores the stylistic conventions specific to manga and anime that make them amenable to conveying religious content. Chapter 2 plots manga and anime along a continuum ranging from casual diversion to explicitly religious recreation. One the one hand, I provide a typology of religious manga and anime based on criteria related to the attitudes that characterize their production, allowing for differences in intentionality while examining the rhetorical techniques ranging from satire to sententiousness that manga artists and anime directors use in the service of amusing, educating, and persuading their audiences. On the other hand, I examine the side of reception, highlighting the different ways in which audiences interpret products with apparently religious content and plotting those responses on a continuum from apathy to reverence. I examine the exegetical commentary of fan groups, ritualized activity derived from fictive manga and anime worlds, and the emergence of formal religions (groups that are legally incorporated as religious juridical persons, with clearly delineated hierarchies and doctrines) out of fan groups. This chapter includes the majority of the results of my interviews and surveys, including references to an informant who underwent Buddhist

initiation due to the influence of manga, a casual reader who recalled distraught fans holding an actual funeral for a fictional character of a favorite manga, and a lengthy section on former manga artist Kuroda Minoru, who founded the religious corporation known as Subikari Kōha Sekai Shindan. Chapter 3 examines the production and reception of famed director Miyazaki Hayao's animated films while conducting a critique of foregoing academic interpretations that have treated Miyazaki's work as essentially or inherently religious. Chapter 4 addresses the complicated issue of manga (and, to a lesser extent, anime) narratives' role in the story of Aum Shinrikyō, and provides close readings of three manga that were published in the aftermath of the gas attack and how they reflect authors' and audiences' perceptions of marginal religious movements. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments of the book and offers suggestions for future study. As a whole, this book demonstrates that the verisimilitude of fictive and illustrated worlds can influence audiences' perceptions of empirical reality, contributing to the concomitant development of convictions and practices that can be fruitfully described as religious.