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Developments in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture: The Case of Japan

Desenvolvimentos no estudo da religião e da cultura popular: o caso do Japão

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Abstract: The popularity of Japanese cultural products such as anime and manga has piqued students' interest in learning more about Japanese culture. Recent hits such as *Your Name* or *Demon Slayer* to classics from Studio Ghibli such as *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Spirited Away* contain a plethora of themes and imageries with references to religion and the supernatural. While words such as Shinto might have become familiar for fans of anime, those who are interested in looking deeper at the connections between religion and popular culture would need to consult secondary sources. Scholarly interests in the topic have grown year by year, and yet with such diverse materials, students might be confronted with the question of how to study this topic. This article will provide an overview of some of the approaches, methods, and frameworks that scholars have adopted in religion and popular culture, with a focus on Japan. This article will also suggest new directions for the field, discuss areas yet to be explored, and consider possible challenges upon researching the topic. As a student of religion myself, most of my interests lie in this phenomenon we call religion and how we can better understand it, and as such most of the scholarship that will be discussed in this article are works by

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scholars of religious studies. The topic itself is inherently disciplinary and researchers interested in literature or anthropology would formulate a very different set of questions and lead to very different approaches.

Keywords: Japan, religion, popular culture, approaches, contemporary

Resumo: A popularidade dos produtos culturais japoneses, como anime e mangá, despertou o interesse de alunos em aprender mais sobre a cultura japonesa. Sucessos recentes, como *Kimi ni na wa* ou *Demon Slayer*, e clássicos do Studio Ghibli, como *Tonari no Totoro* e *A viagem de Chihiro*, contêm uma infinidade de temas e imagens com referências à religião e ao sobrenatural. Embora palavras como *shintō* possam ter se tornado familiares para fãs de anime, aqueles que estão interessados em olhar mais a fundo para as conexões entre religião e cultura popular precisam consultar fontes secundárias. O interesse acadêmico no tópico tem crescido ano a ano e, ainda assim, com materiais tão diversos, os alunos podem se deparar com a questão de como estudar este tópico. Este artigo fornecerá uma visão geral de algumas das abordagens, métodos e estruturas que os estudiosos adotaram na religião e na cultura popular, com foco no Japão. Este artigo também irá sugerir novos rumos para o campo, discutir áreas ainda a serem exploradas e considerar possíveis desafios ao pesquisar o tema. Como um estudante de religião, a maior parte de meus interesses reside neste fenômeno que chamamos de religião e como podemos entendê-lo melhor, e como tal, a maioria dos estudos que serão discutidos neste artigo são trabalhos de especialistas em estudos religiosos. O tópico em si é inerentemente disciplinar e pesquisadores interessados em literatura ou antropologia formulariam um conjunto muito diferente de questões e levariam a abordagens muito diferentes.

Palavras-chave: Japão, religião, cultura popular, abordagens, contemporâneo

Religion remains a challenging concept even for scholars of religion. As a phenomenon that continues to develop and adapt to changes in society, scholars of religion would also need to adapt their approaches and methods to fit their main object of inquiry. As a field that developed with a focus on texts, most scholarships in religion had emphasized examining written materials. However, scholars working on contemporary topics have shifted their focus from doctrines and teachings to living practices. Material culture, cultural heritage, and relationship with nature are only some of the recent avenues taken by scholars to examine this phenomenon we call religion. Popular culture is one such avenue. The early 2000s saw a rise in scholarly interest in popular culture and similarly, scholars of religion started taking an interest in examining the relationship between religion and popular culture. As a new form of inquiry, however, there was no consensus on the methods and approaches to defining this emerging field.

An edited volume by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, is the first book to address many of the questions faced by the field. Forbes and Mahan devised four types of relationships to show how religion and popular culture relate to one another, but these relationships can also be considered as some of the ways scholars have approached this topic. Religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion and, religion and popular culture in dialogue. As mentioned by Forbes and Mahan, these four relationships are not exclusive categories, rather they interact with each other (Forbes and Mahan, 2003). While not many scholars working on religion and popular culture have specifically adopted this frame, these four relationships will help us conceptualize what has been done on the topic, especially by scholars of Japan.

The early 2000s also mark the dawn of scholarly publications on manga and anime, where scholars like Susan Napier and Anne Allison started publishing scholarly writings on anime, manga and Japanese pop culture. Particularly, Napier's book *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese animation* delivered a critical analysis of some of the most well-known anime titles, turning her into the "pioneer" of anime and manga studies. Napier continues to work on anime and manga, publishing 3 books on Japanese pop culture, with the last one, *Miyazakiworld*, released in 2018. Napier's approach is mainly literary with particular interests in themes of cultural identity and existence. In 2006, *Mechademia*, a scholarly journal focused on critical works on anime, manga, and fan culture by the University of Minnesota Press was launched. The launch of the journal further pushed the development of the field with more

publications from scholars such as Christopher Bolton and Deborah Shamoan. Now, *Mechademia* is arguably the largest academic journal dealing with Japanese popular culture with publications twice a year and contributions from various disciplinary backgrounds.

Religion in Popular Culture

This is the most common approach taken by scholars working on religion and popular culture. As discussed by Forbes and Mahan, works that fall in this category examine the various portrayals of religious themes, motives, imagery, and language, both implicitly and explicitly (Forbes and Mahan, 2003:17). Scholars with this approach would analyse how the characters, plot structures, or even settings can tell us about religion. Hirafuji Kikuko, a scholar of Shintō has published several articles regarding anime and religion. In one of her articles released in 2015, Hirafuji examines three anime titles featuring young female protagonists that for one reason or another encounter *kami* or becomes one. Hirafuji argues that such transformation can be interpreted in a similar way when one becomes a *miko* 巫女, female or male shamans that serve as a messenger of the gods. She explains this similarity by arguing that after being possessed by the deity *miko* would need to undergo a certain training *shūgyō* 修行 that can also be observed in the young female characters who have become *kami* (Hirafuji, 2015). Hirafuji's research contributes to the understanding of how *kami* is being portrayed in popular culture and, to a certain extent, the role of said Japanese deities in contemporary Japan. Katherine Buljan and Carole M. Cusack's monograph, *Anime, Religion Spirituality: Sacred and Profane Worlds in Contemporary Japan* also adopts a similar approach. Buljan and Cusack's discussion includes the Shintō elements of Hayao Miyazaki's movies to Christian themes in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Trinity Blood* (Buljan and Cusack, 2017). A section of the book is also dedicated to the examination of fan activities such as cosplays and anime tourism and the religio-spiritual aspects of many of these activities (Buljan and Cusack, 2017).

In 2012, the first monograph that specifically discusses religion and anime was published by Jolyon Baraka Thomas, titled *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime and Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Thomas's focus in this book is on the various ways producers of anime employ imageries to convey religious ideas and how the audiences receive those ideas, which would fall under the same category of approach as Hirafuji and Buljan and Cusack. Thomas argues how "the production and reception of these influential media provide provocative examples of how fictional settings can influence, absorb and create religious worlds, and how fictional characters and fanciful ideas can inspire audiences and influence their worldviews"

(Thomas, 2012). Thomas's research demonstrates how religious ideas can exist outside the boundaries of formal religious institutions and doctrines. Authors and directors utilize a combination of images, narrative, and symbols, imbued with religious concepts for a variety of reasons including profit and moral lessons. The audience reciprocates with varying degrees of reception ranging from ritualized reading or viewing and developing a devotional relationship with fictional characters (Thomas, 2012). Thomas's intent is not only to note the existence of religious motifs in anime but also to examine how creators and consumers interpret and interact with narrative and visual contents.

To a certain extent, the very idea of using visual media and narration to help the audience understand religious concepts is not something new. The *etoki*² practitioners of pre-modern Japan had employed a similar method of conveying religious ideas. It is not a surprise to see that contemporary producers would be doing something similar. Thomas's monograph serves as a foundational work for the field, providing an overview of some of the main discourses within religious studies and also giving his take on understanding how religious ideas are being produced and transmitted within the realm of the popular. However, as the first monograph of its kind, various unexplored areas are not discussed at length in the book. For example, discussions on fan culture such as cosplay or fan art are very limited in Thomas's book.

In Japan, and to a certain extent, other countries as well, such practices are closely connected to actual anime or manga themselves. Every summer an enormous event called *komike* コミケ which is short for comic market コミックマーケット is held, where fans would produce and sell their versions of their favorite manga. These are called *dōjinshi* 同人誌, which is to put simply, fan-art. The popularity of *dōjinshi*, however, is not to be underestimated. Official shops that cater to fans of manga and anime would have a special section on *dōjinshi* and these fan-made works, at times, can be even more popular than the original work themselves. These *dōjinshi* not only can function as new research subjects to further understand how fans themselves absorb and re-create religious ideas but the very practice of creating these fan-art can almost certainly be examined as something ritualistic, if not "religious." Approaching religion and popular culture from this angle can be considered under the third relationship, Religion as Popular Culture, and scholars adopting this approach are perhaps the rarest compared to

² Etoki 絵解き refers to the act of explaining Buddhist principles using images in pre-modern Japan. Refer to Ikumi Kaminishi's *Explaining Picture: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan* for details.

the other two. However, Forbes and Mahan were not the only ones who tried to conceptualize and theorize the relationship between popular culture and religion.

In his 2007 article, Jolyon Baraka Thomas discusses the space between religion and popular entertainment and how in Japan these two seemingly opposing ideas can blend by offering his term of *shūkyō asobi* (Thomas, 2007). Thomas points out that in contemporary Japan there is a movement away from traditional religions, usually with a focus on a certain community, to a more individualized religion and spirituality (Thomas, 2007). Thomas's term explores the intricate bond between play or entertainment *asobu* and religion or religious *shūkyō* by using popular culture, specifically Miyazaki Hayao's anime, as a particular case study. George Tanabe published an article where he adds another element of discussion by expanding on Thomas's idea of *shūkyō asobi*. Tanabe argues that both religion and entertainment allow the audiences to escape their mundane life by entering an idealized world or fantasies. Entertainment ends when that fantasy is simply accepted as fiction, but when that fantasy is accepted as a new reality, that is when it becomes religion (Tanabe, 2007). Both Thomas and Tanabe have noticed the similarities shared between religion and entertainment in the ability to transport audiences to an imaginary world; an experience that when marked with the tremendous transformation of oneself might be called "religious."

Popular Culture in Religion

The publications discussed are mainly concerned with understanding religious elements in popular culture. However, scholarship under this second category is more interested in how religious organizations appropriate elements of popular culture for their cause. While Forbes and Mahan pointed out the lack of examination in this particular type of relationship, scholars in Japan have noticed how quickly religious organizations, particularly Buddhist priests, adapt to contemporary times. Elisabetta Porcu's book chapter published in 2013, *Sacred Spaces Reloaded*, is one such example. Porcu's research, heavily based on her fieldwork, explores the intricate connections between religious spaces, religious institutions, and pop culture. Porcu points out that one of the ways religious institutions are adapting to contemporary society by being more involved in marketing and branding (Porcu, 2013). Porcu examines this phenomenon by using a case study of two shrines in the Kantō region; Ashikaga Orihime Shrine and Kadota Inari Shrine. The shrines collaborate with the municipality of Ashikaga to revitalize their region through pop culture. The city created two characters, namely Hime and Tama, as representative deities of the two shrines. The effort did not stop there as a four-panel manga was also released and the shrines would hold events

where they would sell merchandises of the deities in *moe* style illustrations (Porcu, 2013). Porcu's research reveals another aspect of how popular culture is influencing religion, specifically sacred spaces such as shrines. The example provided by Porcu demonstrates two main things: (1) How specific sacred sites are changing and adapting to conform to a secularized society and (2) how popular culture is influencing those changes.

Another article by Porcu published in 2014, similarly discusses how Hello Kitty, a humanoid female cat mascot, is featured in amulets and cell phone straps of some major Buddhist denominations (Porcu, 2014). Furthermore, Porcu also mentions how Ryōhōji, a Buddhist temple of the Nichiren sect located in Tokyo, collaborates with a for-profit company, Hachifuku to create and distribute products featuring the temple's main deity, *benzaiten*, in a *moe* style illustration. The example of Ryōhōji demonstrates how religious products and religious spaces can transcend the boundaries of traditional religious institutions and enter the realm of secular space through connections with popular culture. Porcu's works display how religious sites themselves are starting to change and adapt to current socioeconomic conditions, something that religious institutions have been doing for such a long time. Finally, Porcu argues that such efforts are a result of the relatively marginal place that religion occupies in contemporary Japan (Porcu, 2014). This leads to some questions surrounding religion and pop culture in Japan. What do we gather from all these collaborations between religious institutions and pop icons? What do they reveal about the state of "religion" and religious institutions in contemporary Japan?

Thomas provides his response to such questions through his 2015 article where he also discusses Ryōhōji. The case of Ryōhōji and other similar temples that are resorting to unconventional methods of promoting their temples or shrines naturally lead to some statements that religion is in decline in Japan. That these new methods are desperate measures proving that religious institutions in Japan are scraping to survive. In Thomas's view, scholars typically make one of two moves when faced with the decline narrative. The first is to take the narrative at face value and argue that Buddhism and religion are in a state of crisis. The second one is to suggest that Buddhism has engaged in new modes of outreach to adjust to the shifts in society to stay connected with the laity (Thomas, 2015). Nonetheless, both moves directly or indirectly admit that religion is in varying levels of decline. Thomas's standpoint is the exact opposite. In his conclusion, Thomas argues "It is true that each millennium, century, and decade has presented Buddhists with political headwinds, demographic change, and variations in levels of donative

support. But it is not the case that Buddhism is endangered, and the language of conservation that characterizes some scholarship on Japanese Buddhism runs the risk of advancing a tried and true Buddhist talking point without paying due attention to the basic fact that the very tradition that has been bemoaning a state of crisis for a millennia is still with us” (Thomas, 2015). While it is not necessary to take a stance within the said debate, future works that concern pop culture in religion in Japan will also need to address the decline narrative.

Popular Culture as Religion

A certain phenomenon that has been occurring recently in Japan with connections to pop culture is anime pilgrimage. Anime pilgrimage is where fans of certain anime would visit sites that are featured in the anime. Examples of these sites include famous landmarks like bridges and train stations but also religious spaces such as temples and shrines. Local sites would collaborate with local governments to promote their spots as anime pilgrimage sites and invite tourists and fans to visit. Travel companies and animation companies collaborated and created the Anime Tourism Association in 2016, in which they would designate 88 spots throughout the country every year as part of anime pilgrimage sites. Clearly, the number 88 alludes to the famous Shikoku 88 Temple Pilgrimage and is an attempt to mimic the famous pilgrimage route. The fact that such activity is called “pilgrimage” *seichi junrei* 聖地巡礼 and not just visit or travel, however, reveals a deeper connection to how pilgrimage has been understood in Japan.³

Research on anime pilgrimage within religious studies is scarce. Works that do mention anime pilgrimage are usually concerned with “contents tourism” and tend to be more interested in analyzing its economic dimensions. However, pilgrimages in Japan have always been something more than just a “religious” retreat and at the same time, it is also something more than just entertainment and leisure. Scholars like Ian Reader have demonstrated how closely intertwined pilgrimages are with the economy and tourism.⁴ While scholars like Okamoto Ryosuke have questioned the supposed boundaries between pilgrimages and tourism, the religious and the secular (Okamoto, 2015: 24). A closer look at these pilgrimages will reveal how popular culture plays a part in the dynamics between the local economy, religious institutions, and pilgrims but also how the activity itself can be understood as a form of religious action. Barbara Greene has looked at the town of Sakaiminato and how the town has revitalized itself through connections with Shigeru Mizuki, a popular manga artist. (Greene, 2016) Sakaiminato employs

³ Refer to Yoshitani Hiroya and Satō Kikuichiro’s monograph on the topic.

⁴ For more, consult “Reader, Ian. *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*. NY:Routledge, 2016.”

the concept of *furusato*, which can simply mean hometown although in Japanese it comes with a spiritual sense of security and nostalgia, to draw tourists from the city through images of nostalgia and childhood memories of the countryside. Sakaiminato is able to neatly tie the city's notion of *furusato* to Shigeru's manga series that features *yōkai*, creating a harmony between nature, the countryside and nostalgia of the "ancient past." While not all anime pilgrimage sites are as successful as Sakaiminato, the trend is certainly there. Greene's research is more focused on the site itself; the methods they use to attract pilgrims or the ideas they came up with to promote themselves. The field can certainly benefit from further research on the pilgrims themselves. How are these pilgrims contributing or changing the sites they visit? Why do they leave material possessions such as *ema* 絵馬 or notes? Approaches mentioned above can be considered under the third category, popular culture as religion. This type of relationship considers popular culture as a form of religion or serves a religious function. The "Secular" Pilgrimages discussed by Ian Reader and Tony Walter in their edited volume, *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, fits nicely within this discussion.

The field of religion and popular culture is still young. With the release of journals such as *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* or *Mechademia*, more and more scholars have started to take an interest in the role of pop culture in religion. Scholarships working on western religions grow by the year with more and more monographs published on the topic. On the contrary, scholarship on religion and popular culture in Japanese religions remains scarce. The works discussed here are only some examples of a small but steadily growing body of scholarship. A section on religion and manga is also included in the *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions* edited by John Nelson and Inken Prohl. The inclusion of religion and popular culture in similar volumes in the future would certainly contribute to scholars of Japanese religions.

Scholarly approaches have also diversified, shifting from interpreting religious ideas in anime and manga, the first approach, to the second and even third approach. As discussed above, there is still a large number of materials and subjects that remain understudied, opening more possibilities for future researches. In May 2019 a book edited by Fabio Rambeli titled *Spirits and Animism in Contemporary Japan: The Invisible Empire* was published. The book includes essays by Jolyon Thomas and Andrea Castiglioni that discuss animation and contemporary pop culture such as Godzilla. Animism is a term that not many scholars of Japanese religions have used when they discuss pop culture, perhaps this term might provide a different perspective on contemporary Japanese religions. Anime and Manga

Studies in itself has become a large field with scholarly symposiums being held in popular events like Anime Expo. A new journal, the Journal of Anime and Manga Studies has launched a couple of months ago, seeking contributions from various disciplines. The field is slowly gaining momentum and it is the perfect time for young scholars interested in the topic to contribute.

Conclusion

The works mentioned above are only a few of the various possible approaches and methods to examine the relationship between religion and popular culture. More and more scholars are examining different materials with new and innovative approaches. To point out one weakness of the approaches discussed above is that apart from the third approach, most still considers religion and popular culture as two separate entities. As suggested by John C. Lyden and Eric M. Mazur in their edited volume by Routledge, the boundaries between the two are fluid. Individuals, communities, and a set of communities are likely to engage in a “process of negotiation between conflicting or combining interests and values” (Lyden and Mazur, 2017:17). Drawing from this Lyden and Mazur’s argument, I would further suggest that the key to this problem is to look at human experiences. How do consumers of popular culture view the religious elements in those media? How do religious practitioners utilize popular culture to promote their institutions? These are not clear-cut questions, and yet I argue that exploring them provides a deeper insight into the role of popular culture in religion and vice versa.

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