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Horrific “Cults” and Comic Religion

Manga after Aum

After the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 sarin gas attacks, influential commentators suggested that enthralling apocalyptic narratives characteristic of manga (illustrated serial novels) made Aum members prone to extremism and violence. This article inverts this interpretation, showing that popular manga published after 1995 have exhibited—and reflected—morbid fascination with the sensational fodder provided by the Aum incident itself. Early manga responses advanced variations on a horrific “evil cult” trope in which marginal religions modeled on Aum were graphically depicted as hotbeds of sexual depravity, fraud, and violence. Over time, equally chilling—if less sensational—psychological thrillers appeared that interrogated the aspects of human nature that allow for “cult-like” behavior. Finally, one very recent manga has sublimated the formerly popular “evil cult” trope by divorcing “religion” from “cults” and rehabilitating the former through mildly irreverent comedy.

KEYWORDS: Aum Shinrikyō—manga—“evil cult” trope—*Believers*—*Death Note*—*Saint Young Men*—*Twentieth Century Boys*

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IN THE immediate aftermath of the 1995 subway gas attacks, a number of theories proliferated about Aum Shinrikyō's オウム真理教 attractiveness to its generally youthful and intelligent members. Such theories included speculation about the pernicious effects of popular media, claims of a general weakening of social mores among Japan's youth, and—less frequently but significantly—cautious acknowledgment of Aum's allure (MORIOKA 1996; ŌSAWA 1996; MIYADAI 1998; METRAUX 1999). One hypothesis that emerged at the time was that the fictional worlds of manga and anime somehow contributed to Aum members' inability to distinguish fiction from reality (ŌSAWA 1996).¹ It must be acknowledged that the influence of manga and anime on Aum's world view is evident. Leader Asahara Shōkō 麻原彰晃 (b. Matsumoto Chizuo 松本智津夫, 1955–) was notoriously an avid reader of manga, and the group borrowed terminology from famous anime series (HARDACRE 2007, 201–202; SCHODT 1996, 46–47). However, it would be excessively simplistic—not to mention a slight to Asahara's theological creativity—to say that Aum Shinrikyō's doctrine was directly derived from manga (MIYADAI 1998). While Aum's world view was certainly fantastic (READER 2000, 185–87), reducing Aum's violent activities to the negative influence of manga is problematic (GARDNER 2008).² Moreover, while

*The author would like to thank University of Hawai'i Press for permission to reproduce, in modified form, material from his book *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (in press). He would also like to thank discussant Mark Rowe, fellow panelists Michihiro Ama, Kimberly Beek, and Melissa Anne-Marie Curley, and audience members for their helpful feedback on a penultimate draft of this paper delivered in November 2011 at the American Academy of Religion meeting (Japanese Religions Group, Session A20–272).

1. Manga are illustrated serial novels; anime are animated films that are often based on manga. Helpful introductions to the manga medium include SCHODT 1996 and MACWILLIAMS 2008. Most manga are serialized in weekly or monthly magazines. Episodes are then compiled and sold in a bound volume (*tankōbon* 単行本); a completed series of volumes may run from hundreds to thousands of pages. Below, I indicate the years of serialization in the magazine, but citations will be from *tankōbon* (for example, URASAWA 2000–2007, 1: 1). Titles originally in English have not been transliterated (for example, *Death Note*); authors' chosen translations have been used where appropriate (for example, Saint Young Men for *Seinto oniisan*). The synopses contain plot spoilers.

2. The association of manga with violence and sexual perversion was cemented in the popular imagination in 1989 with the infamous Miyazaki Tsutomu incident, in which a manga aficionado of that name kidnapped and killed three preschool girls (SCHODT 1996, 45–46). A raft of apologetic literature appeared in response to that incident, and lingering apologetic tendencies still characterize some scholarship on manga today. The response of the manga industry itself has been diverse, with certain publishers censoring sexually explicit and violent material and

some writers have described Aum's own promotional works as a perversion of the manga medium (SCHODT 1996, 230; OKADA 1997), Aum was hardly unique among Japan's religions in its production of propagandistic manga. Although Aum manga did include Asahara's prophecies about the impending end of the world, for the most part the manga reproduced common tropes seen in other religious propaganda: conversion stories, attestations of miracles, and praise for the leader (for example, ASAHARA and DABIDE NO HOSHI 1989; ASAHARA and AUM MAT STUDIO 1992).

Rather than tying Aum's violence to the pernicious influence of manga or critically analyzing Aum's own propagandistic products, here I focus first on the ways in which Aum itself became a template for fictional depictions of stereotyped "evil cults" in several post-1995 "thriller" manga.³ These products both represent and respond to the obvious increase in interest in "cults" (*karuto*) evident in the mass media frenzy that immediately followed the sarin gas attacks (INOUE 1999; 2003, 19–21; HARDACRE 2007, 177–78).⁴ Through sensationalist portrayals of the nefarious activities of fictional religious groups clearly modeled on Aum, such manga have invited their readers to confirm suspicions about the pernicious effects of marginal religions on individuals, families, and society.

Many manga that were published during the period of high alert that followed the Aum affair exhibited fascination with marginal religious groups as "evil cults" populated by gullible followers and headed by fiendish charlatans.⁵ They showed such fictional groups—clearly modeled on Aum and other targets of sensational reportage such as the Peoples Temple—to be captive to extremist

others embracing it. Manga such as *Believers* (discussed below) strike a middle ground between apology and insouciance by targeting reader concupiscence while critiquing the potential for obsessive fandom to degenerate into delusion and violence.

3. By focusing on fictional series, I am omitting the nonfiction works of some manga artists who dealt with Aum in the aftermath of the sarin attacks. One example is manga artist KOBAYASHI Yoshinori, who published a short book called *Oumu teki!* (*Aum-ish*, 1995) with Takeuchi Yoshikazu. (Takeuchi is the author of the novel *Perfect Blue*, which was made into a memorable 1998 anime by auteur Kon Satoshi. The anime explores the deleterious effects of obsessive fandom, a theme not wholly unrelated to some of the manga that are explored below.) *Aum-ish* opens with a short chapter of Kobayashi's distinctively satirical manga. Kobayashi mocks Aum by depicting himself in an unflattering caricature of Asahara Shōkō, leading his gullible followers in a sophomoric Socratic dialogue in which they ask leading questions that allow him to pontificate nonsensically. Kobayashi seems to intentionally replicate Aum's own manga such as *Metsubō no hi* (ASAHARA and DABIDE NO HOSHI 1989).

4. I am not suggesting that "cult" is an appropriate analytic category. See the comments on the use of the term *karuto* カルト by Baffelli and Reader in the Introduction to this volume.

5. This "evil cult" trope—popular among journalists and some academics—dates back at least to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (SAWADA 2004, 236–58; GARON 1997, 60–87).

narratives riddled with outlandish ideals of apocalypse and asceticism and operating contrary to common sense.⁶ Such manga became more nuanced in their analyses of marginal religions as the Aum incident grew historically distant, and the “evil cult” trope became increasingly sophisticated as author-artists acknowledged that Aum represented general human tendencies rather than aberrant psychotic behavior. However, while the strategies used to present it have grown more sophisticated, the trope itself has been tenacious.

In what follows I trace the historical development of this “evil cult” trope through brief analyses of several manga that can be seen as representative, if not exhaustive, of the subgenre. Early examples—for example, YAMAMOTO Naoki’s 1999 manga *Believers* (2000) and a 2004–2006 manga rendition of SHINDŌ Fuyuki’s 2001 thriller novel *Charisma*—modeled fictional “cults” on sensational religions such as Aum and the Peoples Temple, mobilizing stereotyped images of marginal religions as hotbeds of sexual perversion, of members as hopelessly “brainwashed,” and of leaders as fraudulent. Such portrayals relied on reductive theories treating affiliation as a byproduct of deprivation, emphasizing “mind control,” and associating leaders of “cults” with avarice and sexual depravity (READER 2000, 33–39).⁷

URASAWA Naoki’s *Honkaku kagaku bōken manga nijusseiki shōnen* (*Genuine Science Adventure Manga: 20th Century Boys*) initially reproduced some of these tropes, but over its eight years of serialization (1999–2007, published as *tankōbon* 2000–2007) it introduced greater nuance by inviting readers to confront the possibility that their own ideals may not be dissimilar to those of “evil cults.” This impulse to relativize good and evil was also apparent in the popular manga *Death Note* (serialized 2003–2006, published as *tankōbon* 2004–2006) by author ŌBA Tsugumi and illustrator ŌBATA Takeshi. That manga featured a protagonist who, suddenly endowed with the power to kill people at will, becomes apotheosized by people who admire his unilateral capital punishment of evildoers.

Finally, *Seinto oniisan* (*Saint Young Men*, serialized 2006–present, published as *tankōbon* since 2008) appears to reject both the impulse to castigate “evil cults” and the impulse to explain “cult” activity by focusing on the dark side of human nature. Instead, author-artist NAKAMURA Hikaru critiques religion by making light of it, leaving the discussion of “cults” tacit in favor of spoofing the

6. The Peoples Temple, headed by Jim Jones, infamously ended in a mass suicide in Guyana in 1978; see CHIDESTER 2003.

7. In the manga rendition of Shindō’s *Charisma*, illustrator Nishizaki Taisei portrays the “cult” leader as suspiciously similar to Asahara Shōkō in build (if bald). The leader engages in nefarious activities such as swindling gullible devotees, raping brainwashed female disciples, ordering the murder of deserters, and feeding the corpse of his former lover to his pet snake.

hagiographies of venerable religious founders through a story of Jesus and Buddha living as roommates in contemporary Japan. Whereas the other artists fret in their different ways about “cults” being out of control, Nakamura rehabilitates religion through humor, tracing whimsical variations on the hypothetical question: What would Jesus (and Buddha) do?

Fanatic Delusion: Believers

Believers was serialized in the major manga publication *Big Comics Spirits* in 1999 and was published in two paperback volumes the following year. *Mangaka* 漫画家 (author-artist) Yamamoto Naoki is known for his explorations of human desire and the herd mentality.⁸ Although his backgrounds are often crisp and photorealistic, his artwork has a slightly messy quality that is uniquely suited to his chosen subject matter. Lines are squiggly rather than sharp, and characters’ faces (regularly depicted as sweaty, unshaven, or dirty) easily become hauntingly vacuous or eerily deranged. Yamamoto often manipulates his text so that a character’s nonsensical rant will overflow a speech bubble (YAMAMOTO 2000, 2: 65); elsewhere the speech bubble will overtake the entire frame, crowding out everything but the character’s face to indicate a rambling monologue (YAMAMOTO 2000, 1: 116).

In *Believers*, Yamamoto thrusts his readers into the world view of a fictional religious movement from page one, providing hints as the story progresses about the group’s doctrine, its antagonistic relationship with secular society, and members’ motivations for joining. Although Yamamoto claims in a footnote at the beginning that his work of fiction has no relationship to actual people or events, the references to Aum Shinrikyō, the Peoples Temple, and Rengō Sekigun 連合赤軍 (United Red Army, the subject of his later manga, *Red*) are obvious.⁹

The story takes place on a small island off the mainland of Japan, where three members of the *Niko Niko Jinsei Sentā* ニコニコ人生センター (Smiley Life Center)—

8. Yamamoto’s 1991 manga, *Blue*, was censored as “injurious” by the Tokyo prefectural government for its sexual content in 1992 (KINSELLA 2000, 149–50).

9. The Rengō Sekigun was an amalgamation of two radical leftist groups active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A February 1972 standoff with police that took place in the Japanese Alps concluded with the revelation that the group had murdered twelve of its own members over the previous three months through an extreme confessional practice called *sōkatsu* 総括 (collective examination). *Sōkatsu* was intended to initiate the total “communization” (*kyōsanshugika* 共産主義化) of the group by targeting those members whose commitment to the cause was weak. Members who failed to exhibit proper revolutionary attitudes were exposed to the elements, beaten, and (in some cases) stabbed to death with knives and ice picks. Leader Mori Tsuneo 森恒夫 rationalized these deaths, declaring that the deceased members suffered “death by defeatism” (*haibokushi* 敗北死; STEINHOFF 1992). Yamamoto’s *Red*, serialized in *Evening* イブニング magazine since 2006, won an Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō 文化庁) Award for Excellence (*yūshūshō* 優秀賞) in the manga category in 2010.

Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Operator—are engaged in the group’s “Solitary Island Program” (*kotō puroguramu* 孤島プログラム).¹⁰ The believers (two young men and a young woman) share an ascetic suspicion of the materialism of secular society, and at the beginning of the narrative they assiduously follow directives emailed to them from center headquarters by engaging in daily meditation, confessional dream analysis, and attempts to develop their latent supernatural powers. They recite along with recordings of their guru’s voice, use idiosyncratic euphemistic jargon, and regularly encourage each other with the mantra “let’s work for ‘everyone’s’ sake” (“*minna*” *no tame ni ganbarimashō* 『みんな』のためにがんばりましょう).¹¹

Differences in the levels of commitment and conviction among the believers gradually emerge as the pressures of isolation and asceticism mount. Night-time shipments of supplies from the mainland grow sporadic, forcing the three to forage for food. They carefully monitor themselves and each other, critically examining both dreams and waking life for evidence of lingering concupiscence and consumerism.¹² The small community begins to disintegrate as the believers confront their latent libidinal urges, their desires for the comforts of mainland civilization, and their growing confusion regarding the intentions of their “Teacher.”

The story spirals out of control when a group of inebriated young men drifts ashore, polluting the solitary island with (what the believers see as) their depraved behavior. The partygoers cannot understand the asceticism of the believers (nor their nonsensical jargon); the believers in turn are appalled when one of the drunks makes sexual advances towards the sole female member (Vice Chairperson) of their small community.¹³ With no peaceful way to send off the obstinate drunks, the two men murder them, dumping their bodies in the sea and sinking their boat.

10. The group’s use of computer terminology such as “program” (here and again below) is reminiscent of the Aum doctrine that the corrupt “data” of secular society needed to be erased and replaced with the “good data” of the guru’s teaching (SHIMAZONO 1997, 28–40, 94; READER 2000, 80; GARDNER 2008, 206–207).

11. This phrase and others that are rendered in the text in block quotes (『』, in scare quotes in the translation and transliteration) represent the Smiley Life Center’s unique jargon. In a footnote at the beginning of the volume Yamamoto suggests that these phrases should actually be rendered as nonsensical gibberish, but for the sake of the narrative he has “translated” them for his readers (YAMAMOTO 2000, 1: 6). Aum was also known to use euphemistic language and to ritually use recordings of guru Asahara’s voice (SHIMAZONO 1997, 93–94).

12. This is reminiscent of the mutual surveillance seen in Rengō Sekigun (STEINHOFF 1992).

13. Members’ titles are also rendered in block quotes and are supposed to be nonsensical. Yamamoto’s chosen titles are *Gichō* 議長, *Fukugichō* 副議長, and *Operētā* オペレーター. Here I have rendered them as both names and titles to reproduce the characters’ own usage. Yamamoto seems to be alluding to Aum’s use of initiation names.

Shortly afterward, perhaps spurred by the intensity of this harrowing experience (or with death acting as a powerful aphrodisiac), Vice Chairperson and Operator succumb to their libidos despite their vows of celibacy. Burdened with a vow of absolute honesty, the two guiltily confess part of their deed to Chairperson. His jealousy and righteous anger lead to the disintegration of their small community, and it soon becomes apparent that none of them can resist sexual temptation. The initial couple makes increasingly frequent trysts in hidden spots on the island, and Chairperson, suspicious that the two may not be confessing their sinful behavior, decides that he can only be cured of his own sexual desire by confronting it directly. He repeatedly forces the Vice Chairperson to fellate him in front of Operator while concocting increasingly elaborate reasons to punish the other man by leaving him buried up to the neck for days on end. This state of affairs comes to a head when Vice Chairperson tires of Chairperson's selfishness and takes matters into her own hands, biting off the tip of his penis before tying him up and sending him back to headquarters as a "person under deep suspicion."

Now alone, Vice Chairperson and Operator relax into a subsistence lifestyle punctuated by passionate sex. This dream-like existence is hardly sustainable, and the two lovers struggle to reconcile the ascetic teachings of their group with their very human desires. As the story hurtles toward its climax, Chairperson's replacement arrives and surreptitiously confesses his own love for Vice Chairperson (they had been acquainted before), urging her to escape with him before the Smiley Life Center's antagonistic relationship with secular society devolves into violence. Before she can properly respond to this unexpected and awkward invitation, a large group of believers arrives from the mainland seeking refuge from secular antagonists. In a scene presumably intentionally reminiscent of the 1978 Peoples Temple mass suicide, the leader distributes glasses of a mysterious liquid to his seated followers, telling them that drinking the liquid is a "program" that will enable them to leave the present polluted world and travel to the "the land of peace (*anjū no chi* 安住の地)."¹⁴ Vigilant guards armed with automatic weapons announce that anybody who moves will be shot on suspicion of sedition. Just as a few believers do attempt to resist, military teams arrive in helicopters from the mainland, the leader is shot, Vice Chairperson disappears, and Operator is captured.

Imprisoned at the end of the story, Operator escapes into a daydream world where his missing lover still waits for him. Meanwhile, authorities investigating the group trace its origins back to a computer game called *Nyū men* にゅうめん (*New Men*).¹⁵ The believers, drawn together through a shared critique of secu-

14. Yamamoto published a manga with this title (*Anjū no chi*) immediately after *Believers*.

15. The title can be read both as a transliteration of the English "new men" and as the *kanji* 入面 (*nyūmen*), alluding to the player "entering" the screen (*gamen* 画面) at the end of the game.

lar society and a strong desire to escape the consumer lifestyle, had originally banded together through the electronic media they held in common, taking the game's designer as their religious leader. With this conclusion, Yamamoto's manga reproduces the common post-Aum trope that fictive media worlds contributed to Aum members' delusion.

A Terrorist Plot: 20th Century Boys

Urasawa Naoki is one of the most lauded manga artists in contemporary Japan. His oeuvre has received considerable critical attention due to its commercial success, narrative complexity, and visual composition (MORI 2005; YOSHIDA 2005; and an NHK TV program [*Purofessionaru shigoto no ryūgi 38: Urasawa Naoki* プロフェッショナル仕事の流儀—浦沢直樹], aired on 18 January 2007). Urasawa's manga has a filmic quality due to its combination of kinetic storytelling and painstakingly drawn artwork; while his stories often skip back and forth from past to future and from one location to another, a remarkable knack for pacing sustains reader attention (MOTOHIRO 2007, 38–39).

The manga *20th Century Boys* was serialized in the widely-read magazine *Big Comics Spirits* from 1999 until 2007. Upon completion, the series totaled nearly five thousand pages in twenty-four *tankōbon* volumes (the last two volumes were published under the title *21st Century Boys*). It was immensely popular throughout Japan during its run, winning numerous prestigious awards and serving as the basis for a three-part live-action film.¹⁶ The series boasts a convoluted and intriguing plot, an element of foreboding associated with a mysterious evil genius, and irrepressibly likable protagonists who offer a compelling blend of altruistic heroism and reassuringly realistic human foibles.

Urasawa's story begins in 1997 with his chief protagonist, Kenji, depicted as a washed-up rock musician who manages a convenience store. With his dreams of superstardom dead, the corporate franchise manager breathing down his neck, and the unexpected burden of taking responsibility for his infant niece after her mother's abrupt and mysterious departure, Kenji struggles to make sense of impending middle age. To make things worse, as the story opens a regular neighborhood client (a professor of robotics) goes missing and a childhood friend dies in an apparent, if uncharacteristic, suicide.

16. The series won the Kōdansha Manga Award in 2001, the Agency for Cultural Affairs' Arts Festival Award for Excellence in the manga category in 2002, the Shōgakukan Manga Award in 2002, the Highest Award for Excellence in the long-format category at the Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême in 2004, the Japanese Manga Artists' Association (Nihon Mangaka Kyōkai 日本漫画家協会) Grand Prize in 2008, the Seiun (science fiction) Prize in the manga category in 2009, and an Eisner Award for Best US Edition of International Material–Asia in 2011. The films were directed by TSUTSUMI Yukihiro and released in 2008 and 2009.

Kenji begins to realize that these seemingly random occurrences are connected. As he pursues the mystery of his friend's death and attempts to figure out what has happened to the professor, Kenji traces their disappearances to an eerily familiar (and suddenly seemingly ubiquitous) logo—a hand with a raised index finger inside an eye, with another eye drawn on the back of the hand. Kenji discovers that the logo represents a clandestine religious organization called the “Friends” or “Friends’ Society” (Tomodachi ともだち; Tomodachi Kai ともだち会). The secretive leader of this group, known simply as “Friend” (Tomodachi ともだち), is apparently acquainted with Kenji and his family, and seems to know details about Kenji's childhood that no one could or should know.

Kenji eventually recalls that the group's logo is an artifact of his own childhood, and the vaguely ominous group actually a product of his own imagination. Inspired by the alluring threats of nuclear war, alien invasion, and natural disasters found in their beloved manga, in the summer of 1969 Kenji and his friends had created the logo as the emblem of an imaginary secret society of heroes who would fight for peace and justice in the face of such dire threats (URASAWA 2000–2007, 1: 61–65). The Friends’ Society of the late twentieth century has expropriated the logo, but rather than fighting for peace and justice, the Friends seem to be engaged in the very sorts of nefarious activities Kenji and his childhood peers had gleefully (if naively) imagined in a notebook chillingly titled “The Book of Prophecy” (*Yogen no sho* 予言の書). Giant robots would attack Tokyo; biological weapons would wipe out huge swaths of the global population; flying saucers would inspire panic.

Whereas Kenji and his friends had imagined these catastrophic threats as opportunities for their fictive heroic organization to fight for peace and justice, Tomodachi vows to realize them in order to enact a plan of world domination. The identity of this twisted antagonist—who always appears masked—remains ambiguous for most of the story (Urasawa deftly points reader attention to first one character, then another).¹⁷ This evil mastermind ropes the adult group of childhood friends into his grandiose scheme. Once they realize that he intends to attack Tokyo with a giant robot (designed, under duress, by the kidnapped professor of robotics), the friends band together, amass weapons, and take a stand to stop it.

By this point, however, Tomodachi's group has infiltrated the police and the media, meaning that the “Kenji Sect” (Kenji Ippa ケンヂー派) is treated as a terrorist organization threatening society rather than trying to save it. Police sur-

17. During serialization (and also afterwards), fans writing on message boards like those found on the social networking site MIXI would speculate about the identity of this villain. See the threads on the MIXI Urasawa Naoki community entitled “Tomotachi” トモタチ [sic]: http://mixi.jp/view_bbs.pl?id=34603831&comm_id=233, and “Nijusseiki shōnen saishūkai kansō” 20世紀少年最終回感想: http://mixi.jp/view_bbs.pl?id=20704789&comm_id=233 (accessed 29 September 2011).

veillance forces the protagonists to adopt clandestine lives in abandoned subway tunnels, and to the average citizen the name “Kenji” becomes synonymous with terrorism. Despite this undeserved persecution, when the giant robot appears in Tokyo spreading an instantly deadly Ebola-like virus on 31 December 2000, Kenji and the others heroically intervene to save the society that spurns them. They successfully stop the marauding robot, but Tomodachi pins the attack on Kenji through skillful manipulation of the media, securing his own position as heroic savior of Japan by offering a vaccine for the threatening virus. Since Kenji is missing and presumed dead, the other men and women in his small resistance community retreat to their lives underground. They alone know the truth that the “hero” who ostensibly saved the world from the deadly virus—Tomodachi—was actually the one responsible for spreading it in the first place. Tomodachi’s seemingly benevolent provision of the vaccine, carefully orchestrated in conjunction with some clandestine political machinations, allows him to take formal control of the Japanese government as head of the “Friends’ Party” (Yūmintō 友民党)—a group derived, of course, from the Friends faithful.¹⁸

The story recounted thus far comprises only the first quarter of Urasawa’s narrative; the fifth volume in which the confrontation with the giant robot takes place was published in 2001. Over the next several years, Urasawa added layers of complexity to his account, particularly in terms of how he portrayed the relationship between fiction, sanity, and participation in “cults.” On the one hand, in the remainder of the series he depicts the dystopian world a “cult” might create given the financial and political resources to do so, complicating common portrayals of “cults” as parasites preying on secular society by depicting the transition of such a group from the margin to the mainstream. On the other hand, Urasawa deftly inverts the traditional evil cult/righteous hero paradigm by making his protagonists into terrorists. While Urasawa rarely describes the protagonists in explicitly religious terms, the miracle-working and unwaveringly principled heroes are sharply contrasted with the fraudulent villain and his “evil cult.” Bereft of its leader Kenji but ever convinced of the righteousness of its mission, the group of freedom fighters increasingly takes on the character of a religious organization.

This transition is largely due to a narrative shift in which the primary protagonist becomes not Kenji but his niece, Kanna. As an infant under Kenji’s care, Kanna had already displayed an uncanny precocity and preternatural luck. As a

18. This critical representation of the (presumably inappropriate) affiliation between a political party and a religious organization seems to be a thinly veiled reference to Aum’s creation of a political party—the Shinritō 真理党—in 1990, and to the relationship between Sōka Gakkai 創価学会 and the political party Kōmeitō 公明党 (READER 2000, 153–56). On politics and religion after Aum, see Klein (this issue); on Soka Gakkai’s response to the Aum incident, see McLaughlin (this issue).

teenager, the beautiful young woman exhibits a charisma that exceeds her years. She dodges bullets, commands the respect of local mafia bosses, and—as the mysterious “Ice Queen”—leads a group of incredibly devoted followers drawn from the ranks of Tokyo’s underworld population of criminals and the indigent. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Kanna has telekinetic abilities and that her considerable charisma derives in part from a superhuman empathy. Kanna is the object of fierce protection and devotion on the part of her “uncles” (Kenji’s childhood friends) and together they struggle to resist Tomodachi even as the world falls increasingly under his control. Their devotion to the cause is largely fueled by their fond memories of Kenji, whom they venerate as a valiant martyr. Their organization features Kanna’s charismatic, miracle-working leadership as well as the clairvoyant abilities of a homeless man named Kamisama (神様, from the Japanese word for deities). Moreover, Kenji’s return late in the narrative functions as a sort of “resurrection” that galvanizes the group and leads to a final confrontation with the Friends.

Despite her youth, Kanna takes on her leadership position when she uncovers a Tomodachi plot to assassinate the Pope during a visit to Tokyo. She and the other protagonists rush to stop the catastrophe, but Tomodachi’s devious mind has concocted an even more chilling scenario than the protagonists could imagine. In the days just before the papal visit, Tomodachi is apparently killed, causing the world to mourn the loss of the powerful and popular *de facto* leader. The Pope’s visit therefore becomes incorporated into the lavish memorial services that are drawing teeming crowds. As the Catholic leader eulogizes the decorated corpse of the deceased religious-leader-turned-politician, Tomodachi rises from the dead. In a masterful bit of stagecraft, the mastermind steps from his bed of flowers just in time to intercept a bullet (fired, of course, by one of the Tomodachi faithful) that would have killed the Pope. Although it is not clear until much later how Tomodachi manages this miraculous resurrection (he survives with a minor flesh wound), with it his role as religious and political leader of the world is secured. The day marks the end of the Western calendar and the beginning of the “Tomodachi Era.”

At this point one might think that Tomodachi would relax into enjoying the adulation of the masses worldwide. Yet with a pathological desire to create and participate in dramatic narratives, Tomodachi must find increasingly elaborate ways to threaten the world with crises. Returning to a previous stratagem, he disperses an even more virulent infectious disease than the one previously spread by the giant robot, this time spreading it throughout the entire world. By shrewdly offering select individuals access to a vaccine, Tomodachi manages to weed out undesirables while ensuring allegiance to his sprawling and increasingly totalitarian organization.

Tomodachi now controls the entire world through propaganda and surveillance. Cowed in the face of the overzealous vigilance of the Shinyūtai 親友隊

special police and living in a culture of fear in which the media concocts all sorts of threats such as alien invasion, people living under Tomodachi's rule are downtrodden and miserable. Meanwhile, Tomodachi's manga-fueled fanatical obsession with futuristic technology leads him to expend considerable energy on developing laser guns, flying saucers, and photon bombs. His active imagination, chillingly supported by his obsequious followers, allows him to concoct ever-fanciful doomsday scenarios—a pattern that scholars have also observed in Aum (READER 2000, 185–87).

The manga *20th Century Boys* maintains the “evil cult” theme by presenting a religion as the cause of apocalyptic catastrophe and personal anguish; it also reproduces the common (if reductive) explanation of “cults” as the products of evil masterminds who trick people into believing their lies. Although Tomodachi does seem to display supernatural powers, time and again his abilities are revealed as a sham. As one example, in a flashback scene depicting a ruse to promote faith among credulous followers early in Tomodachi's career, one character describes helping another follower winch the leader up so that it appears that he is floating. The character realizes the true power of Tomodachi's illusion when the other assistant, holding the rope that suspends the floating man, looks up and says: “He really *is* floating!” (URASAWA 2000–2007, 18: 190–96). This scene alludes to one of the practices that initially attracted media attention to Aum: Asahara's practice of levitation while seated in the lotus position (READER 2000, 72–75).

The levitation scene exemplifies Urasawa's criticism of “cults” as manipulative organizations, but it also shows that he is at least as concerned with the supporters who suspend their disbelief as he is with the leaders who trick them. Yet Urasawa's critique of religion is not limited to “cults” or even to “new religions”: groups boasting historic longevity and social clout are also subject to ridicule. For example, in an early scene Kenji is disgusted with a gluttonous Buddhist priest who gorges himself after performing a funeral service (URASAWA 2000–2007, 1: 102).

In a less pejorative (but equally powerful) rhetorical maneuver, although Kanna joins forces with two Catholic priests as part of her effort to resist Tomodachi's impending assassination attempt on the Pope, the priests are ultimately dependent on Kanna's charismatic leadership. In fact, the speech that launches Kanna's marshaling of her righteous army takes place in a church: one of the aforementioned priests stands in the wings and passively observes while Kanna addresses her potential recruits from the pulpit, co-opting the symbolic power of religion by performing a miraculous display of her telekinetic powers beneath a crucifix (URASAWA 2000–2007, 9: 134–210, esp. 145–51). Kanna and her mission supersede all other religious authority.

Considering the fact that its members are persecuted and reviled by the wider society in the post-apocalyptic world managed by the Friends, and considering the fact that it does resort to violence for the sake of peace and justice, the pro-

tagonists' organization can be considered a marginal religious group devoted to Kenji's memory and headed by Kanna. The epic story of Kenji's valiant heroism and the power of Kanna's charisma, the reliance on Kamisama's prophecies, and the fervent commitment to the cause displayed by the members act as markers of the group's religiosity. Yet because these characters are the protagonists of the story (and thus necessarily righteous), the audience perceives them not as shady "cult" members nor as dangerous terrorists, but rather as unjustly persecuted heroes. The veneration (cult?) of Kanna and Kenji is thus not immediately nor explicitly equated with the violent and aberrant "cult" (the Friends) that serves as a foil for their heroism.

Urasawa's story therefore harbors intriguing implications regarding the human attraction to religion that nuance the simplistic image of the delusional "evil cult" and its sane, secular victims. His protagonists, desperate to save the world as they see fit, are turned into terrorists by the forces arrayed against them. They are treated as radical villains who represent the outer fringes of society—they collect weapons, organize subversive movements, and resort to violent tactics such as suicide bombing. However, their cause is one with which the audience necessarily identifies. Urasawa therefore draws his readers into the potentially disturbing recognition that their own attraction to Kenji, Kanna, and their fictional "just war" may be frighteningly similar to the dramatic narratives characterized by miracles, apocalypse, and redemption that form and sustain groups like Aum Shinrikyō (BROMLEY 2002; READER 2002).¹⁹

Judgment, Day after Day: Death Note

At around the same time that Urasawa began resisting Manichaeian portrayals of "cults" as evil and secular society as necessarily good, another popular work presented a morally ambiguous tale in which the protagonist, rather than the villain, fashions himself as a divine superhuman who can bend the world to his will. *Death Note* is a manga serialized from 2003 to 2006 that enjoyed high sales during its run and that was immediately turned into both a televised anime and a two-part live-action film (KANeko Shūsuke, dir. 2006a; 2006b). The protagonist is a brilliant teenager named Yagami Light 夜神月 who discovers a magical notebook that allows him to murder anyone he wishes simply by writing the person's name therein. This "Death Note" belongs to a "god of death" (*shinigami* 死神) who, out of a combination of ennui and schadenfreude, drops the powerful tool in the human world to see what will happen. Light decides to fashion

19. This interpretation derives in part from Urasawa's thinly veiled self-referential statements near the conclusion of the narrative regarding his internal debates (or perhaps debates with his editors) about how to bring the sprawling narrative to a close (URASAWA 2007, 2: 86–87). See THOMAS in press, Chapter 4.

himself the “god of a new world” by using the Death Note to murder criminals and evildoers and thereby force the world to recognize his impeccable moral authority (ŌBA and OBATA 2004–2006, 1: 49). While Light’s scheme initially proceeds according to plan, as a price for maintaining his position as the seemingly omniscient and omnipotent “Killer” (Kira キラ), he is forced to murder even innocent people who stand in his way. As the story progresses, the collateral damage mounts.

Author Ōba Tsugumi’s somber narrative is given an equally dark cast by illustrator Obata Takeshi, who renders *Death Note* in stark strokes characterized—fittingly—by a complex interplay of light and shadow. Although his peers recognize him as intelligent, athletic, and extremely attractive by all standards, Light’s face seems haunted and can easily become eerily twisted. Ōba and Obata do a masterful job of inviting readers to imaginatively identify with Light even if they recognize that his vision of justice is impure and that his supercilious attempt to save society from itself is both self-aggrandizing and cruel.

Much of the appeal of *Death Note* derives from the cat-and-mouse game played by the brilliant Killer and his nemesis, an equally perspicacious teenaged detective who is known only as “L.” However, the aspect of the plot germane to the present discussion is the emergence of a “cult” devoted to Killer. Although Light must keep his real identity secret so that he can murder people with impunity, the seemingly omniscient Killer creates a new society in which law and order are maintained through fear of immediate murderous reprisal for wrongdoing. Incurable criminals are gradually weeded out, and average law-abiding citizens rest assured that evildoers will be brutally and swiftly punished for their misdeeds. As a result, Light’s wish to become “the god of a new world” slowly comes to fruition. The world bends to the Killer’s will, and Light comes tantalizingly close to proclaiming his divinity. However, no amount of planning can prepare Light for all eventualities, and even the Killer has an Achilles’ heel. The unsustainable moral order that shapes the “Killer society” comes to its inevitable end, but the last few pages of the series depict the survival of the “Killer cult” even after the Killer himself has been stopped.

Macabre throughout, *Death Note* darkly suggests that the will to security can come at the expense of conventional morality, and that people will perpetually find ways to sanctify and legitimize horrific acts of violence. Like Urasawa’s story, the manga invites readers into the disturbing recognition that laudable moral ideals easily become warped. Rather than reducing “cult” membership to delusion, *Death Note* instead attributes the cultic adulation of Killer to people’s interest in the creation of an impossibly perfect world. The price of peace is death.

Comic Relief: Saint Young Men

If the series described above apprehensively discusses “cults” through suspenseful thrillers punctuated by “dramatic denouements” (BROMLEY 2002), Nakamura Hikaru’s popular manga *Saint Young Men* depicts a defanged religion in short vignettes peppered with punch lines (NAKAMURA 2008–2010).²⁰ The manga, which is driven by wordplay and visual gags, depicts the characters Jesus and Buddha as two young men vacationing in Japan after successfully making it through the turn of the millennium. Rather than depicting “evil cults,” Nakamura has portrayed religion as benign—even cute—through the humorously incongruous juxtaposition of unambiguously religious figures with contemporary quotidian situations. Each chapter features an episode in the daily lives of the two as they share an apartment in Tachikawa (an urban center in the greater Tokyo metropolis).

Nakamura uses a clean visual style that couples some common techniques found in girls’ manga (patterned backgrounds to indicate mood, for example; see TAKAHASHI 2008) with pacing that revolves around puns and visual gags. Her punch lines are most frequently delivered in the rectilinear boxes that manga artists use to indicate third-person omniscient commentary, a rhetorical flourish that effectively keeps the story’s explicitly religious narrative content at a “safe” distance from the reader. It seems that Nakamura’s intent is not that readers use *Saint Young Men* for spiritual edification (although some might), but rather for whimsical diversion. On receipt of the Tezuka Osamu Cultural Award (Short Story Section) in 2009, for example, Nakamura commented: “I like divine characters, so I tried drawing Jesus and he was really cool. The two make an ideal human image that I think is really lovely. [Although the religious themes that appear here and there throughout the work are popular], I’m drawing it so as to not invite craziness [*maniakku ni naranai yō*], but merely [to offer] a vague impression [*uro oboe*].”²¹

Rather than inexorably hurtling towards a climactic confrontation, Nakamura’s chapters are only loosely tied together, and each episode stands alone as a snapshot of the quotidian activities of the saintly protagonists. They live much

20. Mark W. MacWilliams recently analyzed this manga as a representative of the “healing boom” (*iyashi būmu* 癒しブーム) in a paper entitled “Healing Humor: Nakamura Hikaru’s *Seinto oniisan* (*Saint Young Men*)” given at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (Session 32, 31 March 2011). As of December 2011, seven *tankōbon* have been published. This article makes use of volumes 1–6, published between 2008 and 2010 (the manga began serialization in 2006). Nakamura won the coveted Tezuka Osamu Bunka Tanpen Shō 手塚治虫文化短編賞 (Tezuka Osamu Cultural Award, Short Story Section) for the work in 2009.

21. The original quote is as follows:「神様系のキャラが好きでイエスを画いてみたらかっこよかった。二人は素敵だなどという理想の人間像」と話す。随所にちりばめられた宗教ネタも人気だが「マニアックにならないよう、うろ覚えくらいで描いています」。http://www.asahi.com/shimbun/award/tezuka/09d.htm (accessed 21 October 2011).

as any other twenty-first century young men might—blogging, playing online video games, and visiting the local public bath (*sentō* 銭湯). While they assiduously attempt to blend into Japanese society, like most tourists they stick out like sore thumbs. Jesus attracts the attention of swooning high school girls because of his superficial resemblance to Johnny Depp; Buddha is teased by neighborhood schoolboys for the auspicious tuft of hair on his forehead. Each of them also inadvertently performs miracles in public.

Nakamura's juxtaposition of venerable religious founders with familiar aspects of contemporary life is not a novel narrative device. Humanizing founders of religion is a venerable tradition that can be seen both in academic quests for the "historical Jesus" or the "historical Buddha" and in modern fictionalized accounts of religious founders' hagiographies.²² However, in contrast to TEZUKA Osamu's famous fictionalized manga hagiography of the Buddha, *Buddha* (1992), for example, Nakamura does not make the Buddha's original historical and cultural milieu seem familiar through scattered references to modern society (MACWILLIAMS 2000). Instead, she makes familiar aspects of contemporary Japanese society seem new through the adventures of her curious saintly protagonists.

Along the way, Nakamura humorously reconfigures phrases that have religious origins or that could be misconstrued as religious. For example, after turning the water at the local *sentō* into wine, Jesus mutters to himself that he wishes he could "wash his [disciples'] feet" (*ashi o araitai* 足を洗いたい). Already convinced that Jesus is the second-in-command of a crime syndicate due to a previous misunderstanding (Jesus' crucifixion scars contribute to the impression), a local gangster mistakes the hot liquid for blood. He misinterprets Jesus' statement as the colloquial Japanese expression *ashi o arau* 足を洗う (literally, "to wash one's feet"), which is used figuratively to indicate a fresh start after committing a misdeed or engaging in a life of crime (NAKAMURA 2008–2010, 2: 122–26).

The manga medium also allows Nakamura to make visual allusions to traditional religious iconography. The scene that opens the series depicts Buddha lying on his side bathed in sunlight. As he dozes, a number of small animals gather around in a manner reminiscent of classic artistic renditions of the Bud-

22. James Dobbins describes one example in his brief recapitulation of Kurata Hyakuzō's 倉田百三 modernist account of Shinran 親鸞 entitled *Shukke to sono deshi* 出家とその弟子 (DOBBINS 2004, 113–15). *Shinran*, a more recent modernist manga hagiography, was authored by Yamaori Tetsuo and drawn by Baron Yoshimoto (YAMAORI and BARON 2005). A famous modernist manga hagiography of the Buddha is TEZUKA Osamu's *Budda* (Buddha, 1992), which has been the subject of some academic attention (MACWILLIAMS 2000; SWANSON 2004). A similar portrayal of two religious founders living together can be found in the four-panel web strip *Jesus and Mo* (<http://www.jesusandmo.net>), although the thematic resemblance should not be mistaken for narrative or stylistic equivalence.

dha's deathbed scene. Suddenly coming to, the Buddha leaps up and shoos the animals away, shouting "Scram!" (*Hottoke!* ほととけ!). Just then his roommate Jesus steps into the apartment, cracking a quasi-homophonic joke at Buddha's expense: "Especially because you're the Buddha?" (*Hotoke na dake ni?* 仏なだけに?; NAKAMURA 2008–2010, 1: 1).²³

In *Saint Young Men* Nakamura bends the venerable founders of well-known religious movements to her comic will. Jesus and Buddha speak in colloquial Japanese and enjoy quintessentially "Japanese" activities such as visiting hot springs (*onsen* 温泉), eating Japanese cuisine, and participating in the year-round cycle of festivities (*nenchū gyōji* 年中行事). The majority of the episodes take place in the domestic space of their Tachikawa apartment or in the surrounding neighborhood, and most of their depicted activities are quotidian rather than exceptional. The protagonists are not part of any ongoing conflict. If anything, they worry about inadvertently starting the end of the world rather than actively bringing it about. Through her third-person omniscient punch lines, Nakamura winks at her readers, reminding them that religion is, in the end, humorous and therefore safe. There is no crisis. The end of the world is the butt of a running joke rather than the fantasy of a deranged "cult" leader. Indeed, the only overt reference to the "evil cult" trope occurs when Buddha worries that the landlord might mistake him for a member of a "strange religion" (*hen na shūkyō dantai* 変な宗教団体, NAKAMURA 2008–2010, 1: 74) upon seeing the life-size Buddhist statue—lovingly named "Jr." and doubling as a coat rack in a corner of their small apartment—that he won in a lottery on the local shopping street (he complains in an aside that he should have forbidden idol worship; NAKAMURA 2008–2010, 1: 54).

Inserting unambiguously religious protagonists into an everyday lifestyle in which danger does not exist, Nakamura has domesticated the formerly threatening image of religions running amok (in other words, "cults"). In the context of the post-Aum trends in manga described above, Nakamura's work has not rejected the "evil cult" trope so much as rehabilitated religion, divorcing it from any lingering

23. The verbal joke derives from the resemblance between the words *Hottoke!* [Scram!] and *hotoke* [a buddha]. Visual gags and allusions are not limited to classic artistic representations of the Buddha's life—Nakamura pays homage to Tezuka's seminal hagiographic manga *Buddha* on several occasions. Buddha (her protagonist) fervently reads the entirety of Tezuka's masterpiece (*Buddha*) one evening when he is forced to spend the night in a manga cafe after missing the last train home (NAKAMURA 2008–2010, 1: 24). Inspired by Tezuka's work, Buddha takes up a career as a *mangaka* himself, authoring a gag manga called *Satore!! Ananda!!* 悟れ!!アナンダ!! (Ānanda, Awake!!) that enjoys a devoted readership in heaven (*tenkai* 天界). In a humorous intertextual twist, when Buddha enters a meditative trance so that he can find the inspiration to meet a deadline set by his pushy publisher Bonten 梵天 (Brahmā), Nakamura visually reproduces a memorable scene from *Buddha* in which the young Siddhārtha enters a trance while trying to heal the village girl Sujāta (NAKAMURA 2008–2010, 6: 101 [my pagination], alluding to TEZUKA 1992, 6: 87–99).

association with “cults” and drawing it back into an acceptable position in society through her mildly irreverent depiction of the quirky yet benign “boys next door.” Marginal “cults” do not mar her pages, and the religious content that she presents is tame and cute. Moreover, each episode is capped with a reassuring punch line that reminds the reader—in case the lighthearted tone did not make it obvious enough—that all the religious talk is simply a big joke. The potential for recidivism still exists—Nakamura does not want her work to invite “craziness” and the “evil cult” trope briefly rears its head—but the humor softens the threat. *Saint Young Men* scoffs at the gravity of it all—both that religions would take themselves so seriously as to necessitate violence and that society would, in turn, be so concerned with religions as potential threats. The comic banishes the horrific to the margins.

Framing Post-Aum Manga

The readings of manga I have provided in the foregoing are not definitive. Other scholars less concerned with religious history might offer alternative readings that place less emphasis on the influence of the Aum incident, or that examine other salient themes such as the progressive atomization of society or post-bubble ennui. No doubt some readers might complain that *mangaka* merely draw what interests them without having any particular message to transmit about the role of religion in society. Some may also say that even if *mangaka* intend such messages there is no guarantee that audiences receive them.

However, *mangaka* respond to market pressures as much as they follow their internal muses, and the popularity of the aforementioned series suggests that skeptical treatments of “cults” have performed incredibly well after Aum.²⁴ While there are significant differences in the rendition of their chosen subject matter that derive from the artists’ unique visual and narrative styles, the commercial success of the series examined above (seen both in total sales and in industry accolades and awards) is sufficient reason to—cautiously—use these works as barometers for general attitudes towards “cults” and religion since 1995. Furthermore, while *mangaka* speak through their work more often than they speak about it, author-artists’ public statements do provide clues about their motivations and inspirations. Taking these statements at face value can be problematic, but when Urasawa complains about audiences focusing excessively on the mys-

24. Manga that mobilize decontextualized religious vocabulary and imagery have been consistently popular for the past several decades. One factor that distinguishes the manga discussed here from these more cavalier deployments of religious content is the explicit focus on religious groups, the role of religion in society, and—in Nakamura’s case—the explicit and systematic mobilization of religious hagiography and doctrine (THOMAS in press, Chapter 2).

tery of Tomodachi's identity and therefore missing the broader point of his story, the implication is that he does indeed have a message he intends to transmit.²⁵

Likewise, when Nakamura states that she is trying to avoid "maniacal" interest in religion, we can read this as a reassurance to her readers that she is not out to convert, but is interested instead in recuperating the "human side" of religion (*Asahi Shinbun* n.d.). This statement suggests that Nakamura's primary interest in her saintly characters is aesthetic (humorously depicting cute characters) rather than didactic (converting her audience). Importantly, however, the humor in the series only works by drawing on audience members' prior knowledge of famous hagiographies, and the amusing rewards for such knowledge arguably encourage audience members to increase and reinforce their familiarity with religious doctrine in order to better understand the jokes. Despite her reassurance that she is not proselytizing, Nakamura's manga functions as an expedient device that promotes and rewards religious literacy. This propaedeutic function of Nakamura's manga can be profitably contrasted with the pedagogical functions of earlier post-Aum manga like *Believers* and *Charisma*, which warned people to shy away from anything even vaguely reminiscent of religion.²⁶

Another question that might arise in light of the foregoing is whether the "evil cult" trope is limited to post-Aum manga. The answer, simply, is no—for example, bloodthirsty "cults" performing gruesome rituals in order to harness the powers of evil appear in some manga published prior to 1995. In a 1985 episode of *Kujakuoh* (Ogino Makoto's manga about a Shingon priest who heroically battles demonic forces), the protagonist confronts the powerful "Dākinī-shū" 荼吉尼衆, a group hell-bent on reviving a mummy to make an "Evil Emperor Buddha" (*Kyōōbutsu* 凶皇仏). The scene that introduces this group depicts a roomful of "evil monks" chanting *dhāraṇī* around a mummified corpse while engaging in ritual sexual intercourse with nubile young women (OGINO 1997, 1: 195–200; the women are later gruesomely disemboweled as the revived mummy satisfies its hankering for human flesh). While this scene shows continuity with later manga depictions of "cultish" sexual depravity and violence, there are two crucial differences. First, the hero of the story is unambiguously associated with "real" religion (Shingon Buddhism, in this case, albeit a highly fictionalized version of it) rather than with secular society. Second, and crucially, for roughly the first decade after the Aum incident, manga deploying the "evil cult" trope made obligatory thematic or visual allusions to Aum itself. Since 1995, Aum has set the standard for stereotyped images of "cults."

25. See *Purofessionaru shigoto no ryūgi* 38: Urasawa Naoki (NHK).

26. Both can also be contrasted with the propagandistic manga produced by religious groups, which generally prioritize fidelity to doctrine over character development and exciting plots.

Conclusion: Horrific “Cults” and Comic Religion

The foregoing overview of post-Aum manga has shown that this preoccupation with Aum as a source of horrific thrills and chills gradually faded into the background as the 1995 sarin incident retreated from popular memory.²⁷ The task remaining is to determine how the narrative modes of humor and horror have been deployed to varying effect in post-Aum manga. These rhetorical techniques have parsed differences between “cults” and religion, and such categorization both reflects and influences popular interpretations of the public role of religion in post-Aum Japanese society.

Early works like *Believers* were unambiguous in their critique of “cults,” but they also conflated “cults” with religion in general. Although Yamamoto only focused on one fictional “cult,” his portrayal implied that any religious group could easily devolve into sexual depravity and violence. This interpretation seems consistent with Yamamoto’s career project of examining the dark side of group dynamics, and the work exhibits a vehement anti-religious stance.

Urasawa’s parsing of “cults” and “religions” was more complex. Although his series began in 1999 with stereotypical portrayals of the “evil cult” and its megalomaniacal leader as the source of violence, the manga began to address the responsibility of “cult” followers in or around 2004, de-emphasizing the antagonistic role of the villainous mastermind in favor of highlighting followers’ complicity in the perpetuation of twisted world views (see volume 18 and subsequent volumes). Paralleling—and roughly contemporaneous with—Urasawa’s shift from sociological analysis of pernicious groups to psychological analysis of personal responsibility, *Death Note* portrayed “cult” behavior obliquely, treating the “Killer cult” as a symptom of Light’s grandiose scheme rather than as an etiology of social malaise.

Because it is not rendered in a horrific or thriller mode, it is tempting to see *Saint Young Men* as a wholesale rejection of the “evil cult” trope. However, I argue that Nakamura’s manga sublimates the “evil cult” trope rather than dismissing it entirely. Humor, after all, can function both as homage and as critique. Rather than demonizing “cults,” Nakamura humanizes *religion*, recapitulating a narrative theme that has historically been just as indefatigable as the tenacious “evil cult” trope discussed above.

Throughout modern Japanese history, the horrific image of the “evil cult” has existed alongside “modernized founder” narratives featuring humanized saintly figures. In the aftermath of the Aum incident it was only natural that *mangaka* would focus on the former, disparagingly pushing anything reminiscent of Aum to the margins. Over time, however, the appearance of manga like *Saint Young*

27. Although the incident has faded from popular consciousness to a certain degree (see INOUE 2006), the victims’ experience is understandably still fresh (PENDLETON 2011, 359–60).

Men could provide closure by presenting *some* religion as essentially innocuous and intimately familiar through comedy. While these competing portrayals will doubtless continue to vie for audience attention for the foreseeable future, at present the debate over whether religions are best rendered in a horrific or a comic mode remains a draw. Audiences are clearly drawn to both.

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