

Introduction

The Ethics of Representation

The attack on the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, was more than a vengeful murder for perceived blasphemous depictions of Islam and the prophet Muhammad. Even as the two brothers gunned down eleven employees, shouting in Arabic, according to some reports, “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad,”¹ their attack revealed to the world that comic representation is anything but comic. To be sure, *Charlie Hebdo* was no stranger to religious controversy, and the newspaper featured cartoons mocking religious practices and beliefs of all faiths. The weekly had taken to ridiculing religious traditions that appeared too comfortable with the sacred character of religious images. In these parodies, *Charlie Hebdo* presented more than a caricature of identity; the magazine sought to expose, and so open to critique, what religious persons take to be their most sacred beliefs and practices. Opening ourselves in this way requires a vulnerability and a willingness to reconsider our most revered convictions, and it cultivates a moral imagination that travels beyond the safety of our familiar truths. Being porous and open also means cultivating fragility as we negotiate unfamiliar modes of being in the world. The two gunmen on January 7 sought to impair

that world, and that moral imagination, in a violent act of destruction. This book voices a response to that repressive silence by expanding our moral imaginations through readings of graphic religious narratives. As *Charlie Hebdo* made clear, comics are a powerful medium of communication and iconic representation. The ethical import of these storied images is the subject of this book.

Drawing on Religion: Reading and the Moral Imagination in Comics and Graphic Novels is a work about visual representation and the ethical presentation of self, community, and religious practice. Throughout this work I appeal to the collective responsibility of all of us readers, practitioners, and creative thinkers—indeed all persons—to consider what it means to imagine both expansive and repressive moral lives. When I write “we” and “us,” I suggest we are all called on to do this kind of ethical work, and I invite you to join me in that struggle. This book develops a critical reading of comic religious narratives to engage moral sources that both expand and limit our ethical worlds. Representing religion is dangerous and powerful, and one need not even recall the *Charlie Hebdo* attack to understand this. Exodus 20 warns its readers not to carve or make images in any likeness of God, and though ambiguous in meaning, this text still generates interpretive concerns about iconic representation and idol worship. There remains a profound sense here that religious adepts *should not* represent God, much less idolize false deities. This is true as well for God’s chosen representatives on earth. Although not all Muslim communities refuse to depict Muhammad’s countenance, paintings exist in which his face is literally scraped away. In Hindu traditions, the significance of *darshan*—the very act of seeing, and being seen by, the gods—reveals the potency of the divine gaze.² Depicting gods or religious acts, to be sure, functions as a mode of world maintenance and religious order, as scholar David Morgan often describes this visual piety.³ But the comic texts discussed in this book show how ocular moments can also severely disrupt, engender, and create religious anxiety and ethical perplexity. *How* texts represent religion is an ethical issue, I argue in this book, because images, and especially comic images, provoke imaginative portrayals of the sacred, and in so doing they introduce but also blind us to new and unfamiliar possibilities of human existence. In the very act of representing divinity, comics also display oppressive images that value some identities more than others. In all this, comics open us to unexpected, provocative, and harmful states of being. One feature of the critical reading practices developed in this book is the recognition of how comics both cultivate and hinder our moral resources to imagine unfamiliar religious worlds.

In some sense, all religious iconography can do this kind of imaginative work. But graphic religious narratives face a particularly challenging problem in the ethics of representation: comics traffic in stereotypes.⁴ For the

influential Will Eisner, “the stereotype is a fact of life in the comics medium. It is an accursed necessity—a tool of communication that is an inescapable ingredient in most cartoons.”⁵ In many ways comic stereotyping is a function of what Scott McCloud calls “amplification through simplification,” where “we’re not so much **eliminating** details as we are **focusing on specific details.**”⁶ Yet as “an idea or character that is standardized in a conventional form,” the stereotype can cause harm or offense and, as Eisner admits, can even be used “as a weapon of propaganda or racism.” Comics appeal to our common perceptions of characters and experiences, and they deploy stereotypes to do this easily and quickly.⁷ Eisner believed we could critically distinguish “good” from “bad” stereotypes by addressing authorial intent and the artist’s recognition of social judgment.⁸ But as Jeremy Dauber makes clear in his fine article on Eisner’s life and work, Eisner’s intent—whatever that might have been—does not absolve him of the blatantly racist and sexist depictions of his characters.⁹ Neither does it absolve us, as readers, from critically engaging *how* religious representation works in the comic form. Recovering authorial intent, even if one could do so, can explain only why an author makes certain artistic choices; it does not relieve us of our own moral obligations to imagine new ways of being in the world.

Stereotyping is a risk for those artists who work within the comic medium because readers could always get it wrong: one might read racial profiling, unconsciously accept ethnic slurs, or absorb gendered hierarchies when authors never intended such readings. Tahneer Oksman’s thoughtful book on Jewish female graphic memoirs, “*How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?*”¹⁰ brings these challenges to the fore, even if she ultimately does not resolve the ethical dilemma posed by them. In her chapter on Aline Kominsky Crumb, Oksman contends that readers can reconstruct how an author uses stereotypes to undermine common perceptions of self: “By favoring a seemingly unself-conscious portrayal of how conventional notions of the self and of communal identities continue to define the way she depicts herself and others, Kominsky Crumb risks being misread as an amateur artist confirming these stereotypes even as she distorts and dislodges them. Her postwar autobiographical comics present the potential of stereotype as a means of representation that, through dynamic reconstruction, can lead to new ways of seeing and understanding the self, although these new ways of seeing are also always connected to a limiting and destructive past.”¹¹ What might seem like an unselfconscious use of stereotypes (the word “seemingly” suggests that Kominsky Crumb only appears to dabble in the practice) is actually a move to undermine them (she distorts and dislodges them). But only “through dynamic reconstruction” can such “new ways of seeing and understanding the self” be found, and here Oksman appeals to her own expertise to uncover Kominsky Crumb’s authorial intent. But neither Kominsky Crumb

nor Oksman takes responsibility for those who “misread [Kominsky Crumb] as an amateur artist confirming these stereotypes.” Only if we understand Kominsky Crumb’s intent and the way she employs stereotypes can we see how she reimagines identity.¹²

Oksman shares this appeal to interpretive reconstruction with many other readers of graphic narratives. Jared Gardner’s thoughtful piece on stereotypes in comics argues that “sequential comics” can destabilize stereotypes and caricatures we often find in single-panel cartoons. He believes the work that readers do in the “gutter” between those panels becomes a “more complicated and unruly enterprise” that “disables stereotype and the easy readings of the hegemonic gaze.”¹³ But the ethical quandary of visual representation does not disappear with authorial intent or reading it right, in the gutters or elsewhere. Trafficking in stereotypes is always a visual risk because readers, especially comic readers, invest their own imaginations, as Gardner suggests, in the creation of the narrative story. Indeed, some scholars believe that this readerly investment defines what is unique about the comic book genre.¹⁴ Yet comics cannot “force” their readers to do the progressive work that Gardner hopes they will do. Even if Kominsky Crumb wishes to undermine those stereotypical fantasies, readers might very well decide to live by them. Misreading authorial intent, even in sequential comics, is what we do as readers, and comic stereotypes enable misreadings because they traffic in misrepresentation.

So if comics work in caricature and stereotype, how do they enable reflective, ethical critique of their artistic medium? Although I do not know whether Art Spiegelman ever intended such a reading, his magisterial *Maus* at one point engages this ethical concern. Upon entering his father’s house to interview Vladek, Artie confronts a crying Mala complaining about her husband (who is also Artie’s father). “**Pragmatic? Cheap!!**” she screams in bold script to Artie. “**It causes him physical pain to part with even a nickel.**” A pensive, somewhat depressed Artie responds, “It’s something that worries me about the book I’m doing about him . . . In some ways he’s just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew.” Rather than sympathize with Artie’s anxiety, Mala confirms the caricature as true representation. “**Hah!**” she bellows. “You can say **that** again!”¹⁵ Now, one could read this interaction in a number of compelling ways: (1) perhaps Artie comes to understand, finally, something true about his father; or (2) Artie cares more for his artistic craft than he does for his father’s cheap habits; but conceivably (3) Artie now accepts that he works in stereotypes and so is responsible for those images before his readers. I imagine these and other readings could produce vibrant accounts of this image-text. But in the context of my own concerns with ethical representation—and here I self-consciously swerve my misreading from any authorial intent—Mala and Artie raise the stereotype as an ethical problem for comic

images. Not just the belief in but the very use of stereotype becomes a suspect form of *doing* comics.

Here in this precarious zone of ambivalence, ethical reflection can be most productive and powerful. How *should* stereotypes function in comics? How might we begin to see differently through them? The point here is that we can access new, imaginative possibilities of being in the world when we encounter the stereotype as problematic image. Eisner might be right that comics necessarily traffic in stereotypes, but our ethical work begins rather than ends there. We want to understand what stereotypes do and how particularly religious stereotypes function in comics in ways that might expand or diminish our imaginative worlds.

I understand comics as a kind of cultural and ethical practice; I am interested in what they do—how they enact, enable, or hinder moral reflection—and how they deploy images and texts to provoke this kind of ethical reasoning. I find it far less fruitful to define comics or to present robust theories of graphic narratives within the field of visual studies. Scott McCloud is perhaps the most influential of those theorists who believe that we must define the field before engaging in it. But his thoughtful account of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” encounters two immediate problems: (1) a focus on sequence leads McCloud to emphasize a unity of comic grammar, such that the sequential images present an “overriding identity,” thereby “forcing” a reader to consider the images “as a whole,” and (2) by attending to the “aesthetic response in the viewer,” McCloud sidesteps the ethical and religious dimensions (among others) that are critical features of the comics discussed in this study.¹⁶ To be sure, viewers do things to comics, as McCloud makes clear in his account of closure, in which readers stitch together visual and textual unity in the empty spaces between and among images. The gutter—this empty space of readerly involvement and creativity—invites that kind of participation but neither forces it nor always enables a wholistic or singular reading and viewing.

Comics and their readers do many different kinds of interpretive acts, and we will see in this book how divergent and often subversive those acts can be. Images do not arrive clean, as it were, as though they are transparent in meaning. So it is simply not true that pictures are, according to McCloud, “**received** information” in which “the message is *instantaneous*.” As I hope this book reveals quite clearly, images do not work that way, in comics or in other visual media. David Freedberg notes, in the very title of his work *The Power of Images*, that pictures themselves leverage a certain kind of authority: “We must consider not only beholders’ symptoms and behavior, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do.”¹⁷ Images work on us as we

work on them. There is labor involved, but much of what viewers do with images is learned from their surroundings. Indeed, stereotypes work precisely because they draw on recognizable cultural and religious codes, and comic authors expect familiarity with those codes. If McCloud is right that “we need no formal education to ‘get the message,’”¹⁸ then this means only we have not done enough imaginative work to unpack the labor involved in the ethics of representation.

To engage in what images do, comics entail more than “a system of signification.”¹⁹ They certainly do signify and point to meanings, but they are also more than “a collection of codes”²⁰ or a language game that can be addressed only “through the lens of semiotics theory.”²¹ Graphic narratives conjure up imaginative worlds, they play with emotions and bodily responses, they suggest absence of meaning, and they are in many important ways material objects that traffic in economic and cultural zones. Jean-Paul Gabilliet’s material history of comics focuses on cultural production, and so his definition offers something very different from McCloud’s. Rather than examining the conceptual understanding of comics (as McCloud does) through ancient engravings, or the Bayeux Tapestry’s depiction of the 1066 Norman invasion of England, or even William Hogarth’s eighteenth-century caricatures, Gabilliet turns to the Swiss storyteller Rudolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) and his “picture stories” because he “adapted them to the era of mass publishing.” For Gabilliet, “comic art is the form taken by stories in images in an age of mass publishing that started in the nineteenth century.”²² The material features of comics as pulp magazines produced on cheap paper²³ enabled their mass publishing, but those features also highlighted their “visual narrative form,” as Thierry Groensteen labels this graphic labor,²⁴ and these “stories in images” tethered meaning to what images do.²⁵ That visual leverage also invites a reader to construct graphic tempo because a comic, “in displaying intervals . . . rhythmically distributes the tale that is entrusted to it” and motivates a “cadenced reading” as a kind of “breathing aroused.”²⁶ Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda even describe the power of comics “to derive movement from stillness.”²⁷ These concerns with rhythm, bodily comportment, readerly motivation, the material features of production, and visual materiality all work against “reading” comics as a system of meaningful codes. It is not only about “getting the message,” as McCloud has it, but also about stimulating a reflective aesthetics of the moral imagination.

Instead of decoding hidden meanings in comics, I think we should imagine them as visual stimuli for judging, expanding, and critically assessing our ethical and religious borders. Judgment in religious ethics begins, in my view, with a porous imagination in which alternative modes of being in the world become real possibilities for a good life. This can sometimes mean exposure and openness to radically new configurations of living, even if those

new configurations are not ones we would choose for ourselves or for those we love. It is something close to what Robert Orsi calls a “suspensive” ethic, in which we should all honor our “commitment to examining the variety of human experience and to making contact across boundaries—cultural, psychological, spiritual, existential.”²⁸ This is what the two brothers wanted to prevent in their attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, and this is what this book seeks to accomplish by exposing graphic narratives to our ethical imaginations.

But such ethical exposure of one’s own worlds in communicative openness can also bear witness to fundamentally mundane, everyday occurrences that too often go unnoticed—as if their very commonality blinds us to their revelatory potential. Part of what I find so important about Michael Taussig’s account of drawing in his *I Swear I Saw This* is his appeal to the everyday sacred. As an extended meditation on his fieldwork drawing of two people near a freeway tunnel in Medellín, Colombia, in 2006, *I Swear I Saw This* poses this extraordinary account of bearing witness: “The real shock—if that is the word—now seems to me to be that we so easily accept scenes like the one of the people by the tunnel. In the blink of an eye they pass into oblivion. The real shock is their passing from horror to banality. The real shock is that fleeting moment of awareness as to the normality of the abnormal, which, as with a wound, soon covers itself over with scar tissue. . . . To witness, therefore, is that which refuses, if only for an instant, to blink an eye.”²⁹ Taussig believes that drawing is a kind of “shadow text” to the diary entry as it captures the fleeting sense of the extraordinary—a moment of the everyday sacred that linguistic script too often misses. The “terror of writing” is “this sinking feeling that the reality depicted recedes, that the writing is actually pushing reality off the page.” The drawing, though, pays “homage to the marvelous” in which “a little bit of everyday hell is given its due.” This is Taussig’s point about his drawing of the people by the tunnel, that it “emits power as image because it suggests secrets and, on occasion, unusual insights into the human condition.”³⁰ Bearing witness means, in this sense, to recognize an everyday event as wonder and as tragic beauty. To witness is to reveal sublime modes of being human in the world.

Drawing does not get at the really real, even though Taussig does suggest that it touches on something distinctly human. Instead, drawing opens up imaginative possibilities, and Taussig’s meditative writing mimics well this sense of playful but serious openness. In revealing these subtler modes of human expression, drawing demands a physical interaction with the drawn object: “To draw is to move my hand in keeping with what I am drawing, and as the hand moves, so does the body, which tenses and keeps changing the angle of vision.” Taussig compares this movement to dance and to a form of sympathetic magic. It is a kind of engaged corporeality “in which an image of something provides the image-maker bodily access to its being.”³¹ This

equivocal sense of “its being” (for whose “being” is referenced here?) witnesses to a refusal of distance: the image-maker and the material object, like sympathetic magic, traverse the boundaries of subject and object *through* the image. For Taussig, drawing opens up the revelatory potential of the other to transform one’s very self.

Assaf Gamzou and I have tried to get at this extraordinary potential of the everyday to enliven moral resources in our coedited volume, *Comics and Sacred Texts* (2018). We devoted an entire section of that book to “The Everyday Sacred in Comics,” for we believe that graphic narratives expose “holy presence in the mundane, common, and often overlooked features of familiar existence.” This is a new visual learning, much like Taussig’s form of witnessing, in which “the pedestrian and local can become windows to revelational encounter.”³² One sees this clearly in Shiamin Kwa’s beautiful reading of Kevin Huizenga’s *Walkin’*, where she argues that “this comic continuously reminds readers of the strangeness of the common, a strangeness that should give them pause.”³³ I will take up this notion of pausing in the conclusion to this work when I explore the pleasures of lingering in comic spaces. But here I want to point out Kwa’s focus on moments of the inexplicable and encounters of oddity that Taussig marks as revelatory for understanding the human condition. We must learn to see comics as iconic windows into new moral worlds that demand imaginative responses from their readers.

This is how Taussig wishes us to bear witness through drawing, and this too is how I seek ethical reflection through religious representation in North American graphic narratives.³⁴ The comics discussed in this book bear witness to the ethical imagination and to the possibilities of traversing religious landscapes but also to the problematic status of racial, classed, and gendered stereotypes of religious persons. I want to see drawing in comics as opportunities for ethical reflection and discernment about what religion looks like, about how one comes to recognize the religious *as* religious, about how stereotypes often limit ethical boundaries, and about how we might expand our ethical horizons to see other modes of living well in the world. This is less a comparative project than a concentrated, belabored one in the American comic tradition, and this explains why most of the comics in this book focus on popular American religious traditions. The labor involves an acute focus on image-texts that bear witness to the religious imagination in all its revelatory beauty and horror. Some of the image-texts discussed in this book are remarkably closed to the kind of imaginative ethics I call for here; others, as we shall see, divulge a keen sensitivity to the visionary. *Drawing on Religion* is really a work about the graphic imagination and about how seeing is a form of visual judgment. Bearing witness to the unfamiliar familiar is not exotic travel. One should not see the other only to discern something true about where one stands. Religious graphic narratives open us to the kaleidoscopic

possibilities of being in the world and move us to expand our ethical imaginations. We may decide not to live in those other worlds, but they can transform our own world when we recognize them as good ways of living. In this sense, although I might continue to stand right here, the place where I stand is no longer the same place. That is the risk and beauty of the moral imagination and the ethics of representation.

Drawing on Religion explores how comic graphic representations expand and contract ethical worlds, ethical possibilities, and moral imaginations. Each chapter focuses on a particular feature of graphic narratives and its capacity to develop and narrow the moral religious imagination. Chapter 1, “Stereotypes and the Moral Challenges of Aesthetic Narration,” appropriates Leela Prasad’s evocative account of aesthetics and morality to query how comic narratives present stereotypes and style as moral provocations. Here I want to explore how stereotypical depictions of others through line, font, color, and graphic calligraphy offer modes of ethical engagement and deflection. Comic styles yield moral claims to foundations—a sense of moral certainty and order—as well as ethical modes of instability and flow. The very lines on a page can even expose negotiations between order and flow, opening an inviting hybridity and boundary crossing. One can see this in Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) and his appeal to moral order (through Hebrew calligraphy) even as he points beyond moral certitude to divine capriciousness (through strategic use of lightning bolts and the absence of comic frames). This doubleness returns in Craig Thompson’s *Habibi* (2011) but in ways that channel Eisner’s tragic world into a fantastical orientalist image of exotic others. This static other, as a mere projection of the orientalist frame, undermines Thompson’s ethical desire for religious reconciliation. Yet both Eisner and Thompson employ stereotypes to represent moral positions within their ethical frames, thereby erasing a stylistic flow that could lead to a broader, more imaginative ethics of representation. By including the Vakil brothers’ *40 Sufi Comics* (2011) and J. T. Waldman’s *Megillat Esther* (2005) in this discussion of aesthetic moral representation, we see how style evokes certain modes of ethical reflection and containment.

The second chapter analyzes comic translations of sacred literature and uncovers the moral force of scriptural works for graphic narratives. In “The Ethics of Scriptural Play: Gender, Race, and Moral Sources,” I ask how comics open scripture to ethical play and possibility and how they sensationalize, racialize, and sexualize those texts in new visual modes of representation. There are a number of recent comics that turn to sacred texts as compelling testimonies and resources for visual representation, and I will focus on three of them: Robert Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* (2009), Mike Allred’s *The Golden Plates* (2004), and Steve Ross’s *Marked* (2005). Literary scholars such as Robert Alter tend to find these visual renditions far too constricting,

especially when they are compared to the openness of the written word. Alter's critique of Crumb articulates this view quite well: for biblical texts, "these ancient Hebrew stories use the resonance and the reticence of well-chosen words to proliferate possibilities of meaning," whereas graphic representations too easily pin down and reify those meanings.³⁵ Certainly images can work in the ways Alter criticizes here, but they can also function like "well-chosen words" and so open the text to imaginative, ethical reflection. I want to trace how graphic translations of sacred texts work in both registers, with a special eye to the racial and gendered depictions of religious selves.

Comic artists often depict those religious selves as superheroes. Indeed, students of graphic narratives such as Greg Garrett visualize superheroes, erroneously in my view, as modern-day representatives of religious figures.³⁶ But the popular appeal of comics and their superheroes, and perhaps the equally moving portrait of religious figures as superheroes in their own right, still do ethical work for our sense of justice—and in this regard I think Garrett's work is quite compelling. The third chapter of this book, "Imagining (Superhero) Identity," looks at non-Western superheroes and the ethical representation of model selves. I delve into two revelatory texts—A. David Lewis's *Lone and Level Sands* and the *Ms. Marvel* series—to better assess how artists frame the West, the others that surround the superhero, and the American superhero tradition. These comics offer alternative visions of the superhero but tend to work within a politics that limits identification to those who look much like their superheroes. In presenting the ethnic body as superhero, these comics move readers to consider what superheroes *should* look like and how visual performance enacts moral goods. Here too I wish to engage how these non-Western texts lean heavily on classical superhero motifs; still, they construct alternative models of religious selves—persons who challenge familiar narratives of the heroic, revealing unfamiliar stories about the superhuman.

These are new stories: narratives about skin color and ethnic stereotypes, loneliness and the inner self. What kind of moral work do religious stories enable? The fourth chapter, "The Nativist Imagination in Religious Comic Stories," looks at Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003) and Joann Sfar's *The Rabbi's Cat* (2005)—two comics about religious maturity, the native self, and the religious other. Moral philosophers have already mined and still return to the narrative genre for ethical value but in comics readers see that moral imagination in visual play. And that play is a serious one for religious selves yearning to move beyond the confining structures of home to less secure but more open, hybrid, and creative expressions of religious practice. I begin this chapter with Kirin Narayan's sensitive account of the native anthropologist and her pursuit of more hybrid, complicated identities for informants and ethnographers.³⁷ Both Thompson and Sfar traffic in these narrative appeals to the native, but the one grows out of a rigid, evangelical Christianity to

expose more troubled, scarred accounts of identity (Thompson), while the other travels within a safe and ultimately insular pluralism, inevitably returning to a more comfortable, nativist framework (Sfar). Together, these comics expose the limits of religious seekers. Their more chastened visions of religious freedom, as I read these texts, reveal the limits and possibilities of the moral imagination and a more nuanced account of nativist identity, one that informs and continues to haunt their moral worlds.

Comics are haunted by more than a nativist logic; they have participated in a representational history of violence. The fifth and final chapter, “Graphic Violence and the Religious Self,” scrutinizes the role of spiritual violence in forming religious selves. The comic tradition has a long, rather tortuous history with graphic violence, at one point even creating a comics code of self-censorship to prevent American government interference in the 1950s. I draw from Cynthia Baker’s thoughtful account of the term *Jew* to explore how religious violence works to define the religious other, to establish mythical narratives of perpetual violence, and to embody violence as constitutive of the religious self. There are numerous comics that do this kind of work, but I focus my attention on the *Jack Chick* cartoon series of the past thirty years, Douglas Rushkoff’s *Testament: Akedah* (2006), and Grant Morrison’s “The Coyote Gospel” (1989). All three of these comics depict violence as critical features of religious expression, but they do so in distinct ways that bear on the moral imagination. *Jack Chick* tracts define the non-Christian other (or really, the nonevangelical Christian other) as essentially violent, and so they categorically distinguish those saved through faith from those damned to eternal violence in hell. *Chick*’s separation of those faithful who live in peace from the violent evil that inhabits religious others functions much like Jan Assmann’s “Mosaic Distinction,” in which no translation is possible between competing cultural frames. As Assmann astutely notes, “False gods cannot be translated.”³⁸ For Rushkoff and his modern adaptation of the biblical sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham, we are all unknowingly entrapped in a religious battle for authenticity. In *Akedah*, Rushkoff seeks to liberate us from this ever-recurring violence, but the battle for freedom never recedes, and neither does the savagery. This is true as well for Morrison’s “The Coyote Gospel” within his *Animal Man* series, although Morrison harbors little hope that we can free ourselves from divine and human violence. But Crafty, the Christlike and tragic coyote in this comic, glimpses a world outside these cyclical horrors, and it is this vision beyond vision—an imaginative sight beyond imagination—that opens our moral worlds to new, yet-to-be-seen lives beyond horrific violence. This is the comic challenge to the moral imagination.

I conclude *Drawing on Religion* with a meditation on what it means to imagine beyond imagination, and I do so through a review of Jonathan Lear’s

moving portrayal of Plenty Coups.³⁹ In significant ways, reading the religious in comics is akin to the radical hope that Lear traces in Plenty Coups's attempt to maintain his tribal culture. For like Plenty Coups, graphic narratives can expose worlds beyond our imaginative capacities, but they can also call into question our own framed cultures and so move us to reimagine and thus resituate moral boundaries, sometimes even pushing us to explore beyond the frame. But the ethical stakes before Plenty Coups are vitally different in at least one respect: very few readers encounter the cataclysmic challenges that this tribal leader did. He faced the extinction of his people and their way of life. Unlike Plenty Coups, readers of graphic novels have the luxury to endure in critical and reflective postures and to slowly absorb the moral quandaries before them. In this more welcoming temporality, graphic narratives portray worlds that engage the imagination in pleasurable and painful modes of reflective, pedagogical encounter. They are graphic reminders that the violence perpetrated by those who attacked *Charlie Hebdo* cannot silence our imaginative play with words and images. Comics show us those playful worlds in image, text, and image-text; the pedagogical challenge is to linger in that space and see those worlds well, both with ethical sensitivity and moral imagination.