

# Using Graphic Novels for Religious Literacy

Tim Hall, Ph.D

Senior Fellow, Religious Freedom Institute  
Chief Academic Officer, Atlanta Country Day School

Many educators use graphic novels in the English and Social Studies classrooms to engage students in reading literacy. They also can be used very effectively to benefit student religious literacy. The powerful and eye-catching stories found in graphic novels appeal to students while also successfully demonstrating lived religious traditions. Below is a shortlist of graphic novels that can be used in the classroom to engage students in understanding lived religions. Also, below are some academic works on religion in graphic novels/comics and the graphic novel's pedagogy in the classroom. Finally, I have provided a simple graphic organizer based on the six-point framework for understanding religion developed by Benjamin Marcus.<sup>1</sup> Students can complete the organizer when reading graphic novels to help build a fuller understanding of lived religions. Please note that teachers should carefully read and review graphic novels before using in the classroom. Some graphic novels may not be appropriate for all students. For example, *Ms. Marvel* may be appropriate for most middle school classrooms while *Habibi* may only be appropriate for senior level high school or college classrooms.

## Graphic Novels

Delisle, Guy, and Lucie Firoud. *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City*. Montreal, ON: Drawn & Quarterly, 2012.

Delisle and Firoud explore the complexity of contemporary everyday Jerusalem from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian perspectives.

Satrapa, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2003.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Marcus, "Chapter 1: Teaching About Religion in Public Schools," in Haynes, Charles C., ed. *Teaching about Religion in the Social Studies Classroom*.

*Persepolis* is a coming of age story of Marjane Satrapi who was raised in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq War.

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2011.

*Maus* is a classic. The graphic novel focuses on a son's pursuit in understanding his father's experience of the Holocaust as a Polish Jew. What makes the graphic novel stand out is the author's use of animals in depicting Jews, Germans and Poles.

Thompson, Craig. *Habibi*. New York, NY: Random House, 2011.

*Habibi* details the story of refugee child slaves, Dodola and Zam while also contextualizing the culture of Christianity and Islam found in the modern Middle East.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Blankets: A Graphic Novel*. Montreal, ON: Drawn & Quarterly, 2016.

This semiautobiographical graphic novel explores the tensions in Christianity associated with new love relationships as a young adult.

Wilson, G. Willow, and Adrian Alphona. *Ms. Marvel*. New York, NY: Marvel, 2014.

Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old Muslim girl from New Jersey, is the new Ms. Marvel in this reboot of the classic Ms. Marvel character.

Yang, Gene Luen, and Lark Pien. *Saints Volume 2*. New York, NY: First Second, 2013.

*Saints* follows Vibiana who will have to decide on her loyalties – country or faith – in midst of the Boxer Rebellion in 1898 China. In this struggle, she eerily dialogues with the ghost of Joan of Arc.

## **Academic Works on Graphic Novels**

Bakis, Maureen. *The Graphic Novel Classroom: Powerful Teaching and Learning with Images*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2012.

Kraemer, Christine Hoff., and A. David Lewis. *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. London, England: Continuum, 2010.

Lewis, A. David. *American Comics, Literary Theory, and Religion: The Superhero Afterlife*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Monnin, Katie. *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom*. Gainesville, FL: Maupin House Pub., 2010.

# Lived Religion

## Applying a Framework for Understanding Religion

**Directions:** As you read, provide examples of the six-point framework for understanding religious traditions.(1)

Internal Diversity

Beliefs affect Behaviors

Dynamic and Changing

Behaviors affect Beliefs

Embedded in Culture

Belonging affects Behaviors and  
Beliefs