5

Drawn into Krishna: Autobiography and Lived Religion in the Comics of Kaisa and Christoffer Leka

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Autobiography in any genre is a form of "presentation of self," a construction of the author's identity. In our study of four comics by Kaisa and Christoffer Leka from Finland, we focus on how religion, in their case the Gaudiya Vashnavism tradition within Hinduism, is integrated in self-representation. As religion is a recurring topic in their comics, which are set in the mundane milieux of the protagonists, we approach these as narratives of lived religion (Ammerman 2014). Our purpose is to analyze the manifold ways in which life and religion are intermingled in the comics. Two of the comics that we focus on follow a conventional pattern of autobiography as they narrate how religion is meaningful and important in the lives of the protagonists. In one case, the autobiographical travel narration not only thematizes the travel as religious practice but the narrative is also structured according to an important religious text. In the final case, a religious text is adapted in the framework of the lives of the two protagonists. Our research question is: What is the role of the autobiographical approach in the depiction and promotion of this minority religion in a secularized Nordic context?

A discussion on religion in autobiographical comics follows next, after which we look at the Finnish religious context. Before moving on to the empirical analyses, the comics production of the Leka couple and self-representation in them are discussed.

Graphic Life Writing and Religion

Graphic life writing, or comics auto/biographies and other personal narratives, has turned out to be a vibrant comics genre in the last half-century (Beaty 2007, 140–1; Kunka 2018, 3). Research has outlined a number of themes central to the genre: childhood, the comics artist's work (Groensteen 1996), the quotidian and the antiheroic (Hatfield 2005), women and trauma (Chute 2010), gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and graphic medicine (Kunka 2018). Comics autobiographies and self-representation have become an important means for people, both artists and readers, to negotiate their identities and make themselves visible in culture. Autobiography also offers marginalized groups a means to be acknowledged among social majorities (see Beaty 2007, 143–4; Køhlert 2019, 10).

However, while religion is a crucial theme in a work that often is deemed a starting point for comics autobiographies, that is, Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972), on the author's struggles with his Catholic upbringing, religion seems marginal to the genre in general. When religion is addressed in comics autobiographies, it often is depicted as a negative force that stymies the protagonist's life. In perhaps the most well-known example, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–3), religion is predominantly present as the Islamic revolution in Iran, setting off radical changes in the protagonist's and her family's lives. In Green's narrative as well as in Carlos Gimenez's *Paracuellos* (published since 1977) and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* ([2003] 2015), religion as a part of upbringing and the surrounding culture is the basis for traumatic experiences.

Religious Context

As in the other Nordic countries, the religious situation in Finland is characterized by two contrasting facts: the presence of a large national Lutheran church, and a high degree of secularization (Furseth 2018). Finland officially has two national churches, the other being the Orthodox Church with circa 1 percent of the population. There has been a Muslim presence since the nineteenth century. Despite this, it is fair to say that Finland is religiously quite monolithic. Hindus in Finland are a very small minority. There are four registered Hindu communities, with a total membership (in 2018) of just over two hundred and fifty people, but there are around thirty different groups altogether (Uskonnot Suomessa n.d.).

The Lekas belong to a very small group called Sri Caitanya Sangha, with about a dozen members in Finland (Dialogikasvatus 2021). The leader of Sri Caitanya Sangha and the guru of the Lekas is B. V. Swami Tripurari, based in California, to whom some of the Leka publications are dedicated. This group is part of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition within Hinduism. This is a strand of Vaishnavism—religious devotion to Vishnu—with its roots in the teachings of the sixteenth century Western Bengali guru and Saint Caitanya, believed to be an avatar of both Krishna and his wife Radha (Klostermeier 1998, 82). The internationally most well-known group within this tradition is ISKCON, or the Hare Krishna Movement. The fact that the Lekas belong to a small minority religion and that this, from a Finnish perspective, "exotic" religion is the subject of their comics is relevant to their impact as comics artists. Thus, they are not considered a threat to the secular order, as artists identifying with and depicting, for example, revivalist Protestantism would be.

We approach religion in the material through the concept of "lived religion." A popular concept in the first decades of this millennium (Ammerman 2016), it sums up a perspective that focuses on practices rather than dogma, on body rather than mind, and on how religion is lived rather than on how it is prescribed. Applying the concept of "lived religion" to media material can seem counterintuitive. However, "lived religion" seems apt in relation to autobiographical narratives. Ammerman (2014) studies lived religion in a life history material and the autobiographical comics studied here are a form of life histories focusing on the personal experience of religion (see Edgell 2012, 253). While the comics can be read as expressions of "lived religion," they may also provide their readers with scripts for lived religion.

Kaisa and Christoffer Leka and Self-Representation

Kaisa (b. 1978) and Christoffer Leka (b. 1972) have, starting in 2010 with *Tour d'Europe*, coauthored six books published through their own Absolute Truth Press. Both have authored comics on their own before. Kaisa Leka is still probably best known for her autobiography, *I Am Not These Feet* (2003), which focuses on the amputation of her legs and her receiving prostheses. In Finland, the Lekas have received several accolades. Their potential readership, however, is transnational, as most of their works are published in English.

In our analysis we focus on the following four works: *Your Name is Krishangi* (Leka 2004), *On the Outside Looking In* (Leka 2006), *Tour d'Europe* (Leka and

Leka 2010), and *Time after Time* (Leka and Leka 2014; hereafter we refer to the comics as *Krishangi*, *Outside*, *Tour*, and *Time*). In addition to a few non-autobiographical comics (Leka, C. 1997, 2003; Leka 2007, 2009), these are the ones in which religion is the most articulated. The four books present the lives of the protagonists—"Kaisa" and "Leka" (Christoffer is referred to by the couple's surname)—in different genre traditions, and with religion intermingled in their lives in varying ways.

The two oldest books—*Krishangi* and *Outside*—represent autobiography in a conventional sense. In line with "the autobiographical contract" (Lejeune 1989), the narrator and protagonist are equaled with the single author–artist Kaisa Leka, and the narratives convey stories of the personal development of the protagonist. They also present religion as a crucial aspect of personal life and change. *Tour* is a travel narrative, where the story suggests a comparison between road cycling and spiritual life and practices. The comic also integrates religious teachings with the structure of the travelogue. Finally, *Time* can be described as an adaptation of Hindu mythology in comics form. The mediation of mythology, however, is interwoven with the lives of the two protagonists, and therefore this comic is also representative of autobiographical narration.

Comics scholars have raised the question about autobiographies having multiple creators (El Refaie 2012, 52). The autobiographical self of the four books changes, from first being Kaisa's self and religious development (*Krishangi*), to one where Leka's developing self becomes a part of Kaisa's developmental story (*Outside*), to a collective of the two selves in many ways equally present in the stories (*Tour* and *Time*). In all four books, however, Kaisa and Leka are the ever-present protagonists, in dialogue with each other, providing a constant exchange and change of perspectives between the two.

El Refaie (2012, 19) notes that contemporary autobiographies often are dialogic. According to her, "This dialogism, in which each voice and each perspective exists in relation to others equally valid, creates a sense of ironic ambivalence, where 'truth' can never be established once and for all, since it is always being simultaneously avowed and dismantled." In line with this, the works of the Lekas can be described as dialogic autobiography. Crucially, dialogism is also significant for understanding the position of religion in the narratives. Religious beliefs, dogmas, and practices are continually reviewed and positioned in the lives of the protagonists in their dialogues. Religion constitutes a third voice in the comics, sometimes in a very concrete fashion as, for example, in the words of a guru or in the retelling of myths, but it is also integrated in the protagonists' verbal exchanges.

Self-representation in autobiographical comics has a very concrete dimension: in them, artists repeatedly depict themselves in series of visual self-portraits. This forces the artist to engage with the embodiment of identity and conventions of body image (El Refaie 2012). In the Lekas's comics, drawn in a simplified style of line drawings with scant background detail, the author-protagonists' selves and most other characters take animal form. Kaisa and most other characters are mice, and Leka along with his family are ducks (Figure 5.1). As the different characters of the slightly Disney-esque species look alike, their individuality is marked by an initial on the shirt: Kaisa with "K," Leka with "L," and so on.

The depiction of characters in a non-elaborate visual form can be interpreted in different ways. In an analysis of *I Am Not These Feet*, Romu (2016, 206) suggests that the simple figure and its lack of cultural, gendered, and other attributes, foregrounds "the shared human experience," which grants the reader interpretative freedom to project their own visions of embodiment onto the character. Equally viably, Quesenberry (2017, 418, 423) claims that

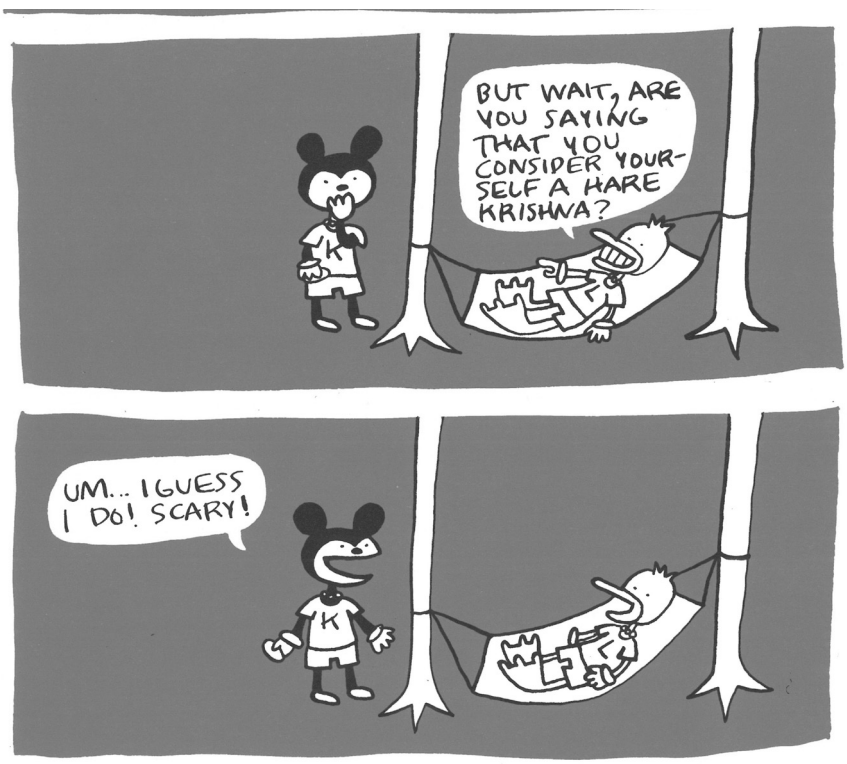

Figure 5.1 Kaisa Leka, *On the Outside Looking In*, Absolute Truth Press, 2006, n.p.

the non-human self-representation allows for the accentuation of a specific characteristic in a figure, for example, disability in Kaisa's mouse character. Furthermore, the non-human characterization reduces the "inference or 'noise' in the representation of a specific experience" (418), by downplaying visible differences of, for example, gender or ethnicity. In relation to the representation of religion, the simplified characters, with their association to well-known popular cultural icons, may be read as offering an object of readerly identification that is not limited by specific characteristics. The simplified characters may also be seen as a means to reduce distractions and direct attention to what is important, for example, the representation and discussion of religious ideas.

We now turn to the analysis of the different comics. Our methodological approach can be described as inductive, giving precedence to the material. When analyzing how religion is treated in these comics, we pay heed to the comics' narration as both verbal and visual as well as sequential. The four comics in our material represent different takes on autobiographical representation and on the depiction of religion in the authors' and protagonists' lives.

Life, Religion, and Personal Development

While the earlier *Your Name Is Krishangi* focuses on one particular and especially significant religious event in the lives of the Lekas, *On the Outside Looking In* is a more encompassing coming-of-age story, where religious matters play a crucial role. The latter depicts how Kaisa and Leka find Hinduism and Krishna, and learn about, discuss, and criticize the teachings and practices, while the former focuses on their initiation by Swami Tripurari. In this section, we show how religion is interwoven in the life narratives and the development of the protagonists. The narratives provide a particular, personal, and lived take on Hinduism, which is both serious and humoristic and both embraces the religion and maintains a critical distance to certain aspects of it. This double approach suggests an invitation to the reader to identify with and embrace the religious message, while providing the space for dissociation as well.

Taking a broad retrospective look at the two protagonists' lives, *Outside* is divided into three parts. In the first two, Kaisa and Leka, respectively, reminisce about growing up. In the third part, they jointly remember their life together.

The first two parts present coming-of-age stories that accommodate the meaning of religious development in the lives of the two protagonists. Kaisa's story focuses on childhood insecurities concerning being oneself, suffering

from disability, being bullied, and making friends. In terms of religion, Kaisa develops from a person angry with an unfair god responsible for her disability and an inclination toward atheism to someone who shows an interest in the Hare Krishna movement. The high-school-aged Kaisa wonders,

> If there is a God and he's good, then why does he let me suffer like this? / Isn't it kind of unfair of him to make some people disabled while others are healthy? / And if God loves people, how can he send them to hell for eternity without giving them a second chance? / You know what, God? If you're out there, I'd just like to say this: I hate you! (Leka 2006, n.p.)

In this context, Hinduism starts to make sense to her. Kaisa's road to Hare Krishna goes through food and her vegetarianism. Her first encounters with the movement are depicted in a humorous way. At first, Kaisa is not that interested in or convinced by the religious tradition, but "the food's great," she notes when she comes in contact with it (Leka 2006, n.p.). The interest in the tradition is not described as a sublime epiphany; quite the contrary, it is rather mundane and even based on materialistic indulgence.

While Kaisa's interest in religion is approached with humoristic distance, it is connected to the personal problem of disability and to the ethical choice of vegetarianism. Leka's introduction to the Hindu tradition, again, is part of a slaphappy childhood and development into adulthood. His interest is presented as a continuation of his involvement in punk and straight edge cultures, and the coincidental reading of a religious book found on his parents' bookshelf. This leads to further study and Leka finding "Krishna consciousness" (Leka 2006, n.p.). This takes him to the Krishna temple in Helsinki, and the narrative depicts him as an active participant in the movement. However, critique of the Hare Krishna temple and movement is central to the narrative. The local temple's "atmosphere became authoritarian and anti-intellectual" (n.p.), Leka tells Kaisa in the frame narrative.

The first part of *Outside* ends with Kaisa taking her matriculation exam and deciding that she needs to move forward in life. The second part ends with Leka voicing his dissatisfaction with the Krishna temple. Both endings show the respective protagonist thinking, "I really need to get out of here!" The third part shows how the two—together—"get out" or at least onward from their previous life phases. It is also a romance story, as it recounts Kaisa and Leka's life together from the moment that they first met. Their studies and work, as well as Kaisa's disability and operation, are constituents of the story, but the final part is heavily dedicated to the couple's ongoing reflection on religion.

When the two protagonists' dialogue on religion starts, Kaisa states that "I personally don't believe in anything" (Leka 2006, n.p). Consequently, in the beginning, the conversation has the pattern of teacher and student, with Kaisa raising questions and Leka replying, evoking the *satsang* institution within Hinduism. Later, Kaisa recognizes herself as "a Hare Krishna," an epiphany approached with humor in the comic (Figure 5.1). As a sign of belonging, this is the first retrospective scene in which both Leka and Kaisa have necklaces of beads, a simple but clear marker for Krishna devotion in the comics. As a sign of distance, however, the protagonists' dialogue starts to scrutinize the Hare Krishna Movement's and specifically the Helsinki temple's ideas on gender. In this question, the roles of teacher and student are downplayed, as Kaisa's views on the issue are forcefully voiced. The issue of gender equality is also crucial with regard to the protagonists' enthusiasm over Swami Tripurari's teachings.

At the end of the third part of the memoir is a dialogue that echoes the ends of the first two. Here, Kaisa reflects on her practice of having her prosthetic feet visible instead of hiding them with prosthetic covers. She notes that "there's a huge difference between being pushed outside and choosing to stay outside social norms." The ending suggests that the protagonists have managed to "get out" of their former surroundings and lives. While the dialogue focuses on disability, the ample reflection on religion in the comic as well as the story ending with Swami Tripurari's visit suggest that the discussion also refers to the choice of a life in a religious minority position outside the normative standards of society.

The more limited autobiography *Krishangi* tells the story of how Kaisa and Leka receive initiation by Swami Tripurari during their honeymoon trip to California. Here, the autobiographical perspective coincides with the travelogue and with the diary format as the narrative segments are dated (cf. El Refaie 2012, 44). Although the story includes some typical depictions of air travel and tourist activities, it centers on religious life. Interspersed with common tourist experiences, the narrative focuses on experiences that are less ordinary, both from the perspective of the general tourist and the protagonists. Early in the narrative, they attend a Ratha Yatra, a religious procession. It is Kaisa's first experience of this ritual, and she greets it with great eagerness: "This is the coolest thing I've ever seen!" (Leka 2004, 13). One third of the story takes place at Swami Tripurari's Audarya monastery, described as "a spiritual community in the redwood forest" (23). Here, the story's climactic moment occurs: the initiation of Kaisa and Leka.

The guru's suggestion of Kaisa and Leka's initiation comes as a surprise to them. It is both pleasant and a reason for unease. A key discussion in the comic

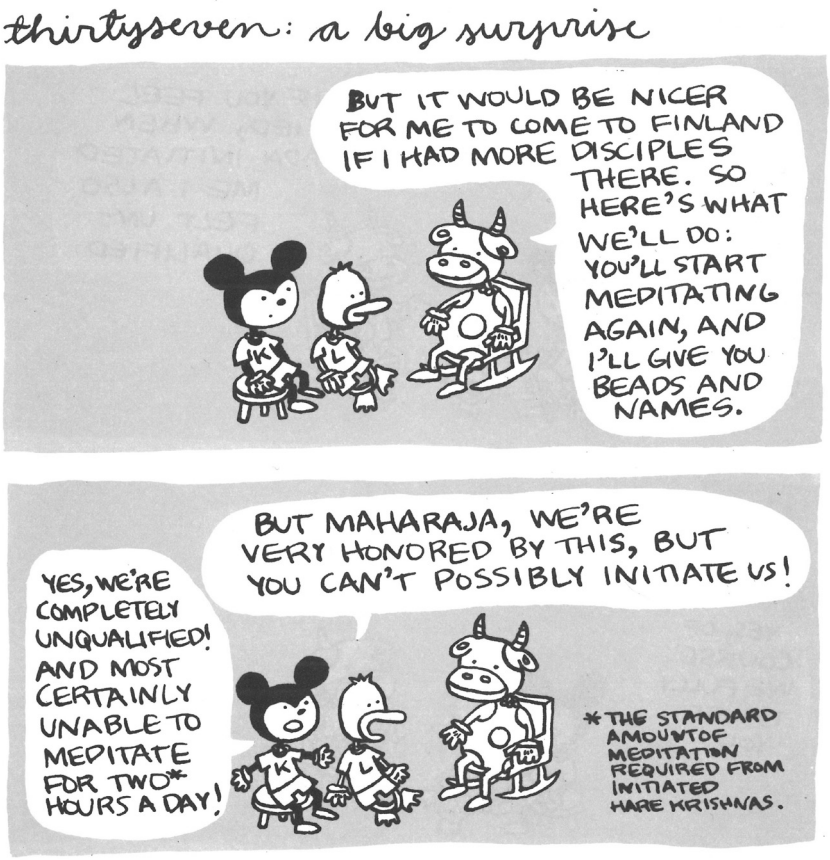

Figure 5.2 Kaisa Leka, *Your Name Is Krishangi*, Absolute Truth Press, 2004, p. 37.

concerns the readiness of the protagonists to be initiated (see Figure 5.2). In a self-ironic way, they discuss their unpreparedness for the much valued step in their spiritual development. As Kaisa dramatically states, "We're completely unqualified! And most certainly unable to meditate for two hours a day!"

The ambivalence between the joy of being initiated and the responsibility that it implies is discussed repeatedly. While the protagonists are affected by the words of the guru and see the seriousness of initiation, their attitude is a source of humor. For example, in one installment in the comic, after having been initiated, Kaisa and Leka are watching TV, and Kaisa points out that they "should go out and meditate now!" They agree to stay in after Leka's retort, "Yeah, but the Simpsons are on next" (Leka 2004, 57). This discussion not only plays on the protagonists' ambivalence in regard to religious commitment, but also shows

how religion is incorporated in their lives, as one part that shares space with other cultural interests like the Simpsons. Religion, although the comic's central theme, is intermingled with other aspects of the protagonists' lives and identities.

The self-ironic, humorous stance toward the protagonists' relationship to religion does not imply ridicule of religious teachings or practices. Quite the contrary, it can, as the following example illustrates, be read as humility, and thus reverence, of the tradition. This reverence is also visible in how the guru's words are presented. Speaking of initiation, his word-filled speech balloons occupy three full pages with only his character in the corner of the page indicating the source. Only the titles of the pages frame the guru's words from the narrator-Kaisa's perspective, "Swami speaks about initiation / I'm a bad listener … / … but the words touch me" (Leka 2004, 26–8), again suggesting the valuation of the religious message and the simultaneous unassuming perspective of the narrator–protagonist, opening up a space for the reader where both the reception of the religious message and a distance to it are possible.

The Travelogue as Religious Text

Tour d'Europe (2010) is one of several travelogues in the Leka oeuvre. It depicts a bicycle trip from Finland to France. The comic is in black and white. To add to the austere look, the drawings are almost exclusively line drawings, with no nuances or shades. As the main theme is a bicycle trip, a large proportion of the pages are dominated by a road consisting of a few lines, with the two main characters on bicycles.

The subtitle of the album reads: "The Yoga of Road Cycling." The strenuous trips depicted in several Leka comics are often connected to yoga, exemplifying how lived religion comes across in these comics, but never more so than in *Tour*. In this section, we look at how the parallels between cycling and yoga play out in this comic. We point out four ways in which yoga and cycling are paralleled in *Tour*: the formal connection between the comic and Bhagavad Gita; explicit mentions of cycling as yoga; renunciation and asceticism as part of a long cycling trip; and the road as a metaphor for Krishna.

The connection between yoga and cycling in *Tour* is taken to the extent of shaping the narrative after the Bhagavad Gita (hereafter *BhG*), one of the central texts in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The comic has eighteen chapters, just as *BhG*, and each chapter borrows its title from the corresponding chapter in the original, from chapter 1, "The Yoga of Despair," to chapter 18, "The Yoga of Freedom."

There are also many themes borrowed from *BhG*, often recurring in the exact corresponding chapter, including direct quoting.

The comics of the Lekas are often dialogue-driven, and a recurring theme of discussion concerns their reflections and "philosophizing" over life, faith, and the efforts of bicycling. These reflections are sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly tied to their religion. Yoga is referred to repeatedly in the short prose introductions to each chapter of *Tour* but also occasionally in the dialogue of the comic. One example is from a discussion in chapter 5 on the constant companion of the road cyclist, the wind. Leka says, "Everything seems to change when you have a tail wind," to which Kaisa adds: "Well, you'd have to be quite the yogi to see both head wind and tail wind as equal" (Leka and Leka 2010, 122–3; Figure 5.3). The wind turbine dominating the image illustrates the idea that all wind directions are equal. The discussion is a reference to a passage in the corresponding chapter in *BhG* (5.18): "The truly learned, with the eyes of divine knowledge, see with equal vision a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a dog-eater."

The physical demands of the journey, being at the mercy of the weather, and the sometimes ascetic conditions of living can be summed up under the concept of renunciation, which is a central theme in *BhG*. These renunciations, being part of the journey and of the life of a yogi, exemplify how the protagonists' lived religion is depicted in the comic. On one occasion (Leka and Leka 2010, 64–5), Leka ascertains that "whenever we do something of consequence, there's an element of sacrifice involved." Kaisa agrees, saying "It's a mistake to think that we could avoid discomfort in this world"—and adds a comic twist to the serious discussion, questioning her husband's sanity, as he had conceived of this trip.

Their reaction to these sacrifices during the journey varies. Kaisa complains about the hardships of the journey: "So this is it then … headwind, rain, second-rate accommodation, no rest, no proper meals … and my butt is killing me" (Leka and Leka 2010, 56). This quote describes the difficulties of traveling by bike and on a budget. But it is also an example of a less "yogi-like" attitude toward the inevitable difficulties of such a journey. Thus, the sentiments expressed are examples of how the narrators present themselves as inferior yogis, as in the discussion of whether they are worthy of initiation, the central theme in *Krishangi*. One concrete example of the cycling couple being quite content with the less than luxurious circumstances is when old bread and olive oil become a "delicious sandwich" (235).

Food, both in terms of renunciation and indulgence, is a common theme in this comic, as in other Leka comics, and a central aspect of how lived, embodied,

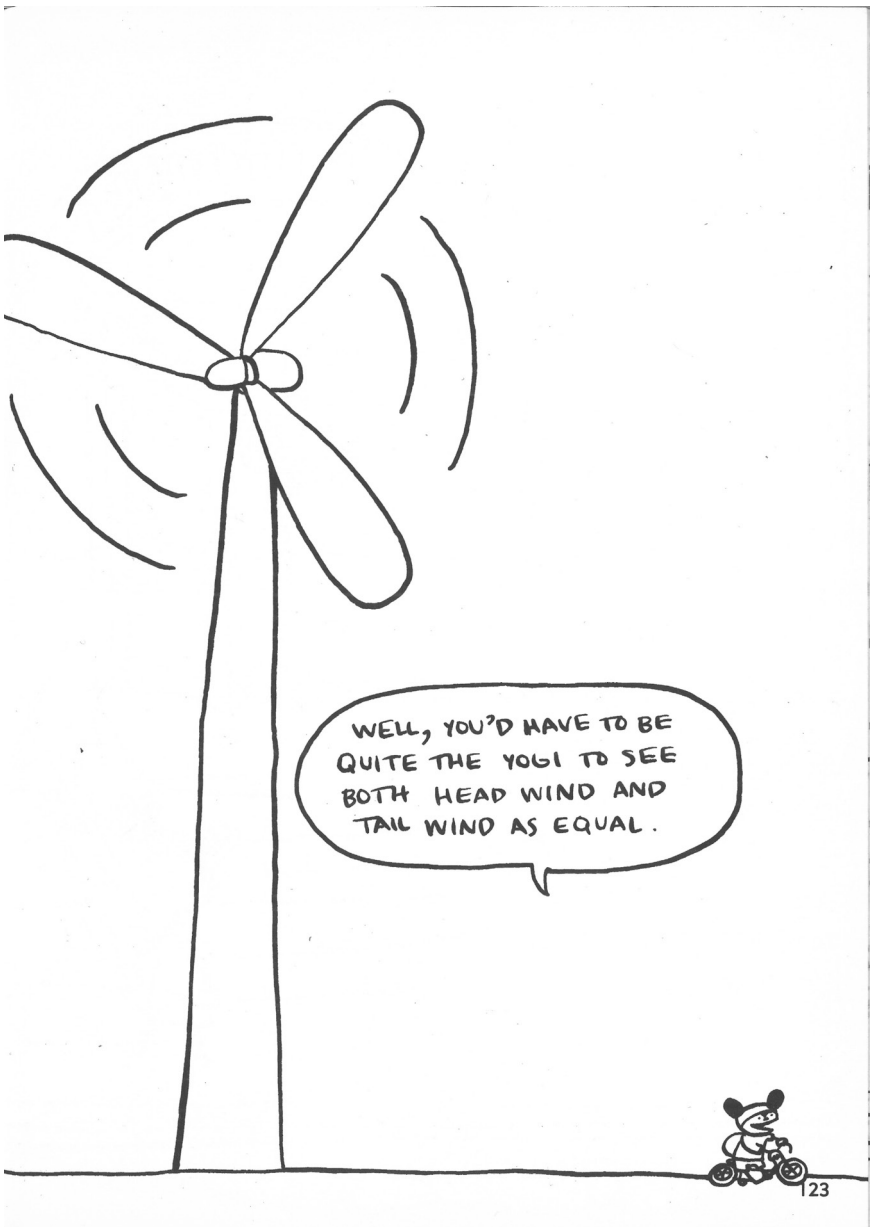

Figure 5.3 Kaisa and Christoffer Leka, *Tour d'Europe,* Absolute Truth Press, 2010, p. 123.

religion is present throughout this and other Leka albums. They are vegetarians, following *ahimsa*, and are often looking for vegetarian shops or restaurants (Leka and Leka 2010, 424–5). The tension between asceticism and pleasure is always present in their relation to food, as when they enjoy their french fries, first making sure they are fried in vegetable oil: "Munch munch" (85).

One feature that is repeated on several occasions in the album is the special way of talking about the road. "Our fate really lies in the hands of the road, whether we choose to accept it or not," Leka says (Leka and Leka 2010, 209). In the final chapter, after arriving, Leka muses about the journey being the destination, adding that "we should forget everything else and just give up our separate interest and try to understand the way of the road" (464). This suggests to us that the road here is a metaphor for Krishna, in line with the parallel between cycling and yoga central to the album. In the final example, Kaisa again brings comic relief in cheering as she crosses the finish line first.

The connection between yoga and cycling is, to sum up, twofold. On one hand, the road cycling in the story becomes a metaphor for yoga, a way to explain yoga to the uninitiated. This aspect is explicit in the supporting prose passages. On the other hand, cycling is also a form of yoga, and especially this type of long and very strenuous cycling, as it entails renunciation from their normal level of comfort as well as brings the cyclist into a different, meditative state of mind (Leka and Leka 2010, 374–7). Seeing cycling as yoga or a form of meditation strongly evokes the embodied aspect of lived religion: the central religious practice of the tradition is carried out through a bodily practice.

Lived Mythology

Time after Time (Leka and Leka 2014) stands out in the work of the Lekas due to its theme and particular structure. There is a frame narrative with the main characters working, arguing, and eating, but above all, reading and discussing *Dasavatara*, the tales of ten avatars of Vishnu/Krishna, and the myths act as the main narrative of the album. The different parts of the long, colorful album are represented in distinct styles.

In the frame narrative, set in the Leka home in Finland, the couple is again portrayed as a mouse and a duck, although in more colors and inhabiting a much more colorful milieux than in the other comics. The Hindu myths are represented in a more elaborate and even more richly colored style, where line drawings are not as imperative, and colors are less clearly separated; the style

evokes associations of traditional Hindu iconography. The mythological parts are framed to look like an old book with yellowing paper and the edges of an open book.

In this section, we look at how the ancient myths turn into an aspect of the lived religion of the protagonists, and at how the depiction of the myths in the comic, through narrative and image, become both a part of and a contrast to their daily lives.

The tales of the avatars are told in different Hindu texts, but most prominently in the *Bhagavata Purana*, also known as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the main holy text of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (Broo 2006, 185). They are retold in many different popular versions, previously also in comic form (e.g., Pai 1978); as a full-length animated film (*Dashavatar* 2008); and in contemporary prose (Vaswani 2018).

The narrative solution of frame and adaptation in *Time* is illustrated by the book's cover (Figure 5.4). The lavishly framed image shows a view from the Leka home with Kaisa, Leka, and four different avatars of Krishna sharing the space. As Leka is reading aloud (his mouth is open) a book called *Time after Time*, the cover metatextually depicts the commixture of the frame narrative and the adaptation narratives. The image suggests that the reading brings alive the stories about Krishna, but it also implies the importance or reality of the religious tradition in the lives of the protagonists. Reading and discussing the texts is a part of lived religion in this case.

As indicated earlier, the source of the avatars is somewhat ambiguous: are they incarnations of Vishnu or, as is the tradition within Gaudiya Vaishnavism, of Krishna? And if the latter, how can Krishna be one of the incarnations? This conundrum is also discussed in a dialogue between Leka and Kaisa in *Time*; they conclude that:

L: "There's no need to fight over this. Both are right in a sense"
K: "Ah? Kind of like water and ice?"
L: "Vishnu's like the majestic face of God and Krishna is the friendly, more easily approachable face"
K: "Ok, I get it … Do go on!" (Leka and Leka 2014, n.p.)

This dialogue is a typical example of how the protagonists discuss theological issues arising from the reading, and how they attempt to provide accessible answers.

The fantastic tale of the second avatar, the tortoise Kurma, can serve as an example of the narrative dynamic of the comic. It tells of the churning of the milk ocean, which produces a number of substances, objects, and

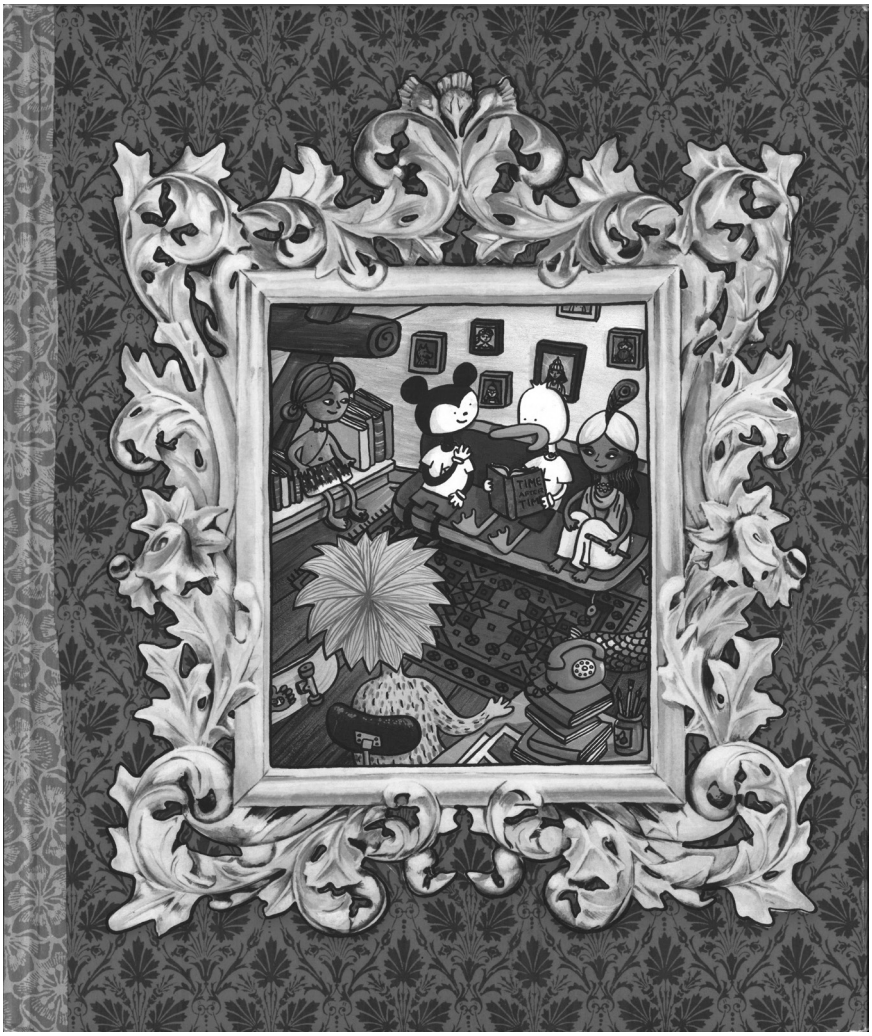

Figure 5.4 Kaisa and Christoffer Leka, *Time after Time*, Absolute Truth Press, 2014, front cover.

beings—including a cow—and finally the nectar of immortality. Kaisa comments by exclaiming: "Stop right there! That's just too crazy!," and continues, "The previous one made at least a bit of sense, but this is just too much! I mean, flying cows? For real?" (Leka and Leka 2014, n.p.). The same humorous distance as in the other comics, serious discussion followed with a sarcastic comment, is central to *Time*. It is combined with the sometimes-sharp questioning of myths, which also takes ambiguous form: "For real?," the question suggesting the potential reality of myth.

In addition to the protagonists' discussions about the myths, the myth retellings themselves suggest a distanced and humoristic narrative perspective on the mythological stories. The dialogue and visual representations are at times incongruous with the stories told. For example, when one of the Asuras is decapitated, he exclaims, as his immortal head flies off, "So long, suckers!" (Leka and Leka 2014, n.p.). Such an exclamation, or the drowning child Prahlada depicted as being pulled down by a concrete block with the text "1 ton," provide for humor based on the incongruence between the sacral text and the prosaic formulations. However, this stylistic technique can also be read as a means to make sense of stories assumedly obsolete and unbelievable in a contemporary context.

The tale of the final avatar, to appear in end times, is represented in a more realistic style, placing the myth in our time. The apocalypse is illustrated by skyscrapers advertising "Steakhouse" and "Girls," and by an abandoned oil field. These images propose that contemporary, modern life represents "end times," and that selling sex, eating meat, and exploiting natural resources are signs of this. This is coupled with the traditional depiction of the Kalki avatar on his winged horse with his attributes (Leka and Leka 2014, n.p.). Other visual accounts of Dasavatara, like those mentioned earlier, also represent the end times with contemporary images of industry and violence, sharing the same view of the imminent apocalypse with the Lekas. The similarity indicates how *Time* may be inspired by other popular, visual accounts of the myths.

The main inspiration for *Time* is, however, the mythological tales; this is evident both in text and image. The original narratives are complex, and many aspects have been left out (cf. Vaswani 2018). On the other hand, lines in *Time* can be quite faithful quotes from Bhagavata Purana, as in the tale of the boar avatar Varaha, when Brahma says, "Who is this extraordinary creature that emerged from my nose?" (Leka and Leka 2014: n.p.; cf. *Bhagavata Purana* 3.13.21). The imagery also closely follows tradition, for example, in the depiction of the gods. Vishnu, Krishna, and Rama have blue skin; Vishnu has four arms and sits on his snake throne holding his traditional attributes; three-headed Brahma is riding his white swan; and so on. The depiction not only helps identify the characters but also shows adherence to the tradition.

Earlier, Vishnu and Brahma are referred to as "characters" in the comic, but they are obviously more than that; they are gods. This difference can be further elaborated by reference to a distinction between two types of religious images within Hinduism: mythological, as in retelling myths, and devotional (Cooksey 2016, 8). This distinction is evident in *Time*. The images serve the

narration of the stories of the avatars, but some images also serve another purpose. There are a few full-page frontal images of the principal deities, such as Vishnu on his throne and similar images of Brahma and Krishna. One central feature of these splash pages is that the gaze of the deity is directed at the reader. This relates to a particular form of devotion within Hinduism, *darśan* (Elgood 1998; Klostermeier 2008), to see the god and to be seen. The image—a statue in a temple or a page in a comic book (McLain 2011)—is both a depiction of the god and the god themselves (Klostermeier 2008, 79). The visually elaborate and colorful full-frontal images in *Time* can be read as invitations to darśan. It is essential that such devotional pictures are well crafted and beautiful for the god to enter (Elgood 1998, 14, 30–1). Furthermore, the often very ambitious crafting, in binding and graphics, of *Time* and other Leka publications, can be viewed in light of this: their beauty is a devotion on the part of the craftsmen and invites the reader to join in this devotion.

The Dasavatara tales become part of the lived religion of the protagonists through reading, discussing, and even ridiculing them. Furthermore, the retelling of these myths in the form of this beautiful comic can be considered part of the lived religion of the Lekas. The reverent, even devotional, artwork becomes a way to make the sacred myths come alive. The contrast between the mythological elements and the scenes from the couple's home accentuates the importance of religion, its otherness, while the reading and related practices make this otherness a part of their—and our—lives.

Conclusion

The perspective encapsulated by the concept of lived religion focuses on everyday religiosity. The autobiographical comics of Kaisa and Christoffer Leka offer the reader life writing that is based in the everyday but also directs attention to that which is exceptional. The narratives filter the everyday and emphasize certain aspects of life. The works we have studied crucially place religion as a part of the lives of the two narrator-protagonists. The comics achieve this in different ways: while *On the Outside Looking In* and *Your Name Is Krishangi* situate religion and religious practices in the developmental narratives of the protagonists, *Tour d'Europe* foremost establishes a structural resemblance between, on the one hand, travel and cycling and, on the other hand, religion and yoga. Finally, *Time after Time* primarily adapts a religious text or myth but

frames it within the everyday of the two artists. The comics provide insight into lived religion, in the ways in which religion is interwoven in the lives of the protagonists and, by extension, the artists. As narratives, the comics, of course, do not provide a direct view into everyday religiosity; as textual practice they represent different aspects of lived religion, such as the personal, embodied, and lay practices of religion.

The embodiment of religion is a theme of *Tour*, in which the bodily practice of road cycling is compared to yoga. The comic manifests how religion is central to a practice that usually has worldly connotations. Food and diet are another occurring theme in the Lekas' comics, from Kaisa's first meetings with the Hare Krishna movement to the discussions about restraint and indulgence, and to the religiously motivated vegetarianism. Religion is thus presented as an aspect of the mundane practices of eating and grocery shopping.

The Lekas' comics, although anchored in the everyday, also are representations of the textual traditions, commentary, and learned discourse on religion. The comics assert that the disparity between doctrine and life, between the prescribed and lived, or between religious elite and lay practitioner, is blurred.

Humor plays an important role in the representation of religion in the comics. Firstly, the ironic self-representation implies reverence for the religious tradition, by contrasting religion with the unworthy or unknowing protagonist. Secondly, the juxtaposition of serious discussion and recitation of religious wisdom with humorous commentary and skeptical wisecracks suggests a narrative distanciation from the religious tradition. It is a sign of a skeptical position with regard to uncompelling, for example, too fantastic, elements of religion, which, however, may make these elements more palatable to the protagonists and to the reader. The humorous distance and skepticism is also a narrative force that drives the discussion further, toward more satisfying explanations.

The dialogic dynamic of serious discussion and a humorous point of view is quintessential for how the Lekas' comics invite readers to approach religious themes. The dual address opens up for different approaches, both a contemplation of the religious message and a critical position of disbelief, and even a reading that completely ignores religion. The dialogues between Kaisa and Leka offer moments of education both for themselves and for the reader. In *Outside*, for example, Kaisa asks questions and Leka gives replies about religious matters, and in *Time*, Leka reads the religious text, Kaisa expresses her wonder about it, and the continuing discussions try to find solutions to the pending issues. In addition to the protagonists' own discussions, educational authority

also belongs to the third voice of religion, as personified by their guru (present both as a speaking character in the comics and through a letter in *Time*) or represented through the religious texts. Regardless, the narrative educational setup invites the reader to join the protagonists in their learning process. In a secular context, like Finland, the personal perspective of autobiography is perhaps more palatable to the reader than a more institutionally based representation of a minority religion.

The aesthetic, pedagogical, and theological mediation of religion in the autobiographical comics of Kaisa and Christoffer Leka integrates religion in the lives of the protagonists, narrators, and authors. The comics describe a lived minority religion in a personalized, learned, and informative manner, intermingling religion with the lives and identities of the protagonists.

Note

1 The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for helpful comments and Sofia Blomqvist for her thorough language revision (Go Minutemen!).

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