

AN INTRODUCTION TO WHAT MUSLIM MANGA IS

AND DOES

This is a paper on a manga project that was started a few years ago called “Muslim-Manga.” Now one may wonder why there would be a need for manga oriented towards Muslims.

Why Muslim Manga?

These days in America and other Western countries, the mass media often portray Muslims and people with a Middle Eastern complexion as violent or dangerous. They throw out keywords like Jihad and Sharia law to get the attention of the audience who feel anxious about such issues. Jihad does not mean Holy War. Jihad means struggle, and the greatest Jihad is to be able to control oneself or one’s desires. Allah Akbar is not a war cry. It simply means that God is greater than anyone or anything one can imagine. The fear of Sharia law, or laws based upon the Qur’an, being implemented in Western countries is also unfounded since Sharia laws cannot be forced upon a nation that is not Muslim. Unfortunately, when a few people who say they follow Islamic teachings perform violent actions, it is the religion of Islam that is portrayed as teaching violence. However, that is not the case. In fact, the word Islam itself means peace and a Muslim is someone who submits himself to the will of God. Suicide and the killing of innocent people are both forbidden in Islam. There are violent people in every group or religion, but the religions are not to blame. The ones at fault are those who misunderstand its teachings or attempt to corrupt it by performing heinous acts or encourage others to do the same.

Because of the repercussions of such misunderstandings, it has become even more important for people to understand each others’ cultures. The more we understand and respect

each other, the less likely we will be misled by propaganda and lies that are mostly fabricated for political agendas, and the more chance there will be for a peaceful and just world.

The Muslim Manga project uses manga to help enlighten people on what Islam really teaches by creating manga style comics that address current issues. The project also uses manga for the purpose of creating messages of hope, love, peace, and positive thinking. As a result of the Muslim Manga project, the medium of manga has been very effective in changing incorrect views of average people concerning the religion of Islam.

Success of Japanese Manga

In the past, the medium of manga has been very successful in introducing many aspects of the Japanese culture to the rest of the world, particularly Western countries, including America, whose people have been very unaware of Japanese culture prior to the introduction of manga. Americans are not by any means experts on Japanese culture after the introduction of manga; however, the number of Americans who are now interested in the Japanese culture has risen quite dramatically; and as a result, their understanding of Japan, the Japanese people, their beliefs, and the Japanese culture has also increased.

Using Japanese art forms successfully in new and unique ways is nothing new. For example, the Japanese style of calligraphy has been used in writing the Arabic verses of the Holy Qur'an. One such Japanese Muslim calligrapher is Fuad Koichi Honda. He has received many awards for his work. He combines the Japanese beauty of empty space with Arabic letter forms. Through his work, he has found a way to bring the Japanese and Islamic cultures together in a beautiful way.

The Muslim Manga project also desires to bring the work of artists and writers together in a collaborative work in order to make manga style comics for the purpose of eliminating

misunderstandings about the Islamic culture, which hopefully one day would lead to a more peaceful and just world.

Goals of the Muslim Manga Project

Muslim Manga is a project that uses the positive aspects of the medium of manga, to give peaceful and moral messages to people of various beliefs as well as creating a positive image of the religion of Islam, since there is a current lack of material which presents it in a positive light. The more that material is written about Muslims in an accurate fashion, the more chance there is for a better understanding of what Islam teaches.

The intended audience for Muslim Manga includes people who want to have an unbiased view of Islam, as well as Muslims of multiple sects. In order to create unity among the various sects of Islam, the focus is not for one particular sect. Therefore, material deemed to create argument rather than peace among Muslims is not allowed on the website and related social networking sites.

The platform of Muslim Manga encourages the production of various types of stories. One mangaka (that is, a manga artist or writer) may wish to focus on a story that would enlighten Muslims on religious duties. Another mangaka may choose to make stories for a broader audience – not just Muslims – in order to teach general moral stories about being positive and not giving up even when life becomes difficult. Another mangaka may focus on placing Muslim characters in interesting situations to show how a believing Muslim would react. For example, some stories show Muslims to be people who are not wrong doers or ill-mannered or even show them to be heroes or super heroes.

“Saviour” is an example of an action manga that was created for one of Muslim Manga’s contests. It is about a Muslim brother and sister who fight off demons to protect their village.

The manga illustrates how Muslims are not villains and fight off evil just like other heroic characters would do.

There are also plenty of real-life examples; therefore, both fiction and non-fiction manga can be created with Muslim heroes to demonstrate that Muslims do indeed do good deeds. Other methods may include dialogue which indirectly tells the reader or some other character in the story about a particular positive attitude; however, the *direct* method (that is, demonstrating through action) is the most effective.

Preservation of Positive Aspects of Manga Artwork to Attract Youth

Japanese manga is indeed very popular around the world for multiple reasons, including good storylines and stylized art forms. However, for the Muslim audiences there have been some negative aspects as well, including the amount of sexual content that is present in some manga. One of the reasons that Muslim Manga was started is to make more permissible entertainment in order to provide Muslim individuals with entertaining yet appropriate manga. This project uses the positive aspects of manga in an attempt to assist parents and other concerned individuals to help their children get closer to God. For that reason, in order to attract the attention of youth, many of Muslim Manga's manga also try to convey Islamic or moral stories in this already popular format.

The Manga art form provides a more enjoyable format than the alternative of reading a book. In this day and age, more images are necessary to deliver such messages to the younger generation of Muslims. A book may be the best source to truly understand a subject matter, but it is a lot easier to achieve a similar or basic understanding of the same information through manga. It may also be less intimidating to a person who is not Muslim to read information about Muslims through manga.

Muslim Manga and Sub-Genres

Manga has many sub-genres including shoujo, school life, slice of life, sports, action, etc. These sub-genres can be adapted for use with Muslim stories as well. For example, there can be shoujo stories that would appeal to a young female audience, but would include Muslim characters. The sports sub-genre can also be used to show how a Muslim character deals with other characters, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, while playing various sports. There is an entire world of stories that can be made using Muslim characters. In fact, these are characters and perspectives that are not written about often, so for many people, these stories may be very fresh and entertaining. It is the hope of Muslim Manga that many more people will be encouraged to make such stories through the creation of contests and other special events.

There are two main aspects, story and art, in making manga for Muslim Manga. For the story, the goal is either to show Muslim characters in a positive light or to deliver a moral message. As for the art, it should be void of any of the elements that are present in some Japanese manga that might be considered sexually suggestive or distastefully violent. Those elements are not appropriate for a Muslim audience, which is one of the main target audiences for this project.

For original manga artwork, just as for manga style comics, artists try to use the manga style to show Muslims in a positive light. Even though original manga drawing submissions are without stories, they still depict Muslims more accurately than the mass media does.

One particular submission titled “Muslims Portrayed” conveys that the Western media only covers Muslims who fall into the category of being violent, crazy, or ill-mannered. At the same time, the submission illustrates many of the types of Muslims not covered by the Western media, such as kind Muslim fathers, tender Muslim mothers, joyful Muslim children, hard-

working Muslim girls, learned Muslim scholars, kind-hearted elderly Muslims, and nature-loving Muslim children. So even though the artwork had no plot, the artwork itself was able to provide a powerful message.

The more that positive drawings of Muslims are available online and offline, the more the likelihood that someone would see one of those drawings and come to the realization of the truth. Another example of this is the “Pray for Boston” manga art contest that was held. The message of the submissions for that contest is that Muslims are praying for the victims of the recent Boston bombing incident. One of the interesting comments that was received was “I’m glad not every Muslim is a bad person. It’s just a religion; it shouldn’t be used to judge a person.” (Stewart) Comments like these are little signs that say that what Muslim Manga has done so far has been at least partially effective.

Muslim Manga Contests and Basic Requirements for Submissions

As was previously mentioned, Muslim Manga makes use of contests and prizes to attract artists to be involved with the project. These include manga contests, manga art contests, fan art contests, etc. One of the goals in providing prizes is to give potential participants an incentive to create interesting and useful stories to accompany their artwork. One of the basic requirements for each manga submission is the inclusion of an Islamic message or the showing of Muslims in a positive light. Some of the contests that have been held involved given topics such as the importance of reading the Holy Qur’an, the importance of wearing the “hijab” or head covering, and so on.

The “Importance of Hijab” manga contest received multiple submissions including “Hijabee’s Blues,” which deals with Muslim women who wear the head covering versus those who do not, and how having faith is just as important as wearing the hijab. The “Importance of

the Holy Qur'an" contest also received many wonderful submissions including "A Change to Fisabilillah," which means "Change to the Path of God." This manga is about a woman who used to be a sinner, but by the end of the story after hearing a recitation of the Quran, she starts following the path of God.

One of the important and continuing requirements for manga and original manga art submissions is to avoid any sacrilegious comments or immorality, but instead to try to raise people's faith and level of worship. It is obvious that no one (including the manga artists themselves), is free from sin; however, it would be inappropriate for the artist or writer to say that a particular sinful action is acceptable. In other words, Muslim Manga does not allow artists to present excuses for anyone to perform what Islam considers sinful actions. Islam also forbids forcing people into being religious. That is not what Muslim Manga is about. Instead, Muslim Manga only encourages the readers to try to raise themselves to higher levels of morality and humanity.

Participation from Around the World and New Goals

Muslim Manga receives manga from users from many countries, including Canada, America, Indonesia, Malaysia, Germany, and others. Since most of the submissions are not from English speaking countries, often the English used in the manga is filled with grammatical errors. One of the new goals of the Muslim Manga project is to correct those mistakes in order to have errorless English manga.

Another recent goal for Muslim Manga is to translate the existing and all new manga submissions into as many languages as possible, including Spanish, French, German, Korean, Japanese, Malay, among other languages. It is important to translate into languages that do not have the correct understanding of Islam. It is equally important to translate into languages

spoken by large numbers of Muslims, such as Arabic, Farsi, and Malay. The reason is that in Islamic countries, there is a lack of Islamic theological material available in the form of manga or any other image medium for that matter. What *is* available is aimed only at young children, and because the quality of the material is not good, it is not sufficient to attract serious attention. If good quality material cannot be provided, Muslim children and young adults may revert to what would be considered inappropriate entertainment. That is why Muslim Manga takes many initiatives to have professional results. In general, in order for a submission to win a particular contest, the storyline has to be well thought out and creative. Muslim Manga has received numerous manga that are in fact very professional looking and have amazing stories.

There are other new aspects to the project as well, such as voice acting. The idea is to give voices to the characters and make some sort of video story board animation. By giving voice to the characters, the manga could be introduced to a new audience on video sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, or other video sharing sites.

Anime 4 Muslims

Because Muslim Manga also seeks to assist parents and other concerned individuals, a subsection called Anime 4 Muslims was created. Anime 4 Muslims focuses on critiquing popular anime and manga from Japan for a Muslim audience. Each critique reviews the particular anime or manga title for violence, vulgar language, sexual content, and/or other material that may be offensive to the particular viewer. These reviews are either in written, audio, or video format.

Not all anime and manga are appropriate for Muslims, but there are plenty of anime that *are*. However, finding those titles can be difficult. Studio Ghibli's movies are good examples of anime movies that Muslims may appreciate, but other than Studio Ghibli, which is known for making more family-oriented movies, it is fairly hard to find the rest. The genres of sports and

history also have good choices; however, even within those genres, there are titles that are very inappropriate. Therefore through the Anime 4Muslims reviews, the concerned individuals can learn whether or not they want to view a particular title.

Closing Remarks

In summary, manga can be a powerful teaching tool for understanding cultures. Muslim Manga's particular goal is to spread the truth about Islam. We have witnessed Japanese manga's power to introduce Japanese culture, history, ideas, language, etc. to young Japanese people, while at the same time showing those same themes to people who never knew anything about Japanese culture prior to watching anime or reading manga. Similarly, Muslim Manga's goal is to introduce Islamic terms and beliefs to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. By using the medium of manga, this project seeks to create an alternative medium for people to learn the truth about Islam. The idea is not to force people to become Muslims, but simply to introduce and educate people about Islamic ideas and issues related to Muslims. In this way it is the hope that it will provide a more accurate understanding of Islam for non-Muslims and assist Muslims to better understand their own beliefs, as well as creating moral messages for everyone.

Manga has become very popular around the world, and I believe it will be even more popular among the next generation of young people, including Muslims. We invite anyone who is interested to help us in this project so that perhaps we can make some contribution to making the world a place where people will be more tolerant and accepting of each other's differences.

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