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ANIME, MANGA AND CHRISTIANITY: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: In this paper Barkman begins by arguing that anime and manga are important windows into the worldviews of many people and as such should be taken seriously by religious experts and philosophers interested in cultural criticism. With particular focus on how Christianity is represented in anime and manga, Barkman first identifies major themes in anime and manga having to do with Christianity (such as pluralism, gender and so on) and second critiques this from a traditional Christian perspective.

Key Words: Anime, Manga, Christianity, Philosophy, Japanese, Pluralism, Gender, Protestant, Catholic, Angel

Legend has it that back in 1945, shortly after American troops occupied Japan during World War II, a famous Japanese department store – no doubt eager to capitalize on western traditions during the holiday season – set up a display of a life-size Santa Claus hanging from a cross. Whether this event actually happened or not we don't know, but for those who have spent any time in the Land of the Rising Sun this legend certainly has a ring of truth about it. While all cultures practice to some degree what Stuart Hall calls “encoding” (that is, a given culture putting its cultural values into its cultural products) and “decoding” (that is, the same culture reading its own values into foreign cultural products), the modern Japanese are especially famous for embracing anything and everything foreign – religion not the least of which – and transforming it into something . . . well, unique, to say the least.

One of the most interesting platforms where the Japanese engage in this type of religious transformation or coding-decoding is in anime and manga. Consequently, herein I would like to explore a variety of different anime and manga series which, to be specific now, utilize Christian imagery or themes. This I would like to do first by elucidating the philosophy or theology that is being forwarded by Japanese anime and manga artists and second by comparing and contrasting this philosophy or theology with orthodox beliefs.

Do Angels Practice Voodoo? The Pluralism-Exclusivism-Inclusivism Debate

As I said, the Japanese celebrate Christmas. Yet in Japan it's not a day to celebrate Jesus's birth, as it is in the West; rather, Christmas is a time for lovers – a time for first sexual encounters and engagement rings. Consequently, in Japanese anime, such as *Always My Santa*, *The Big O* and *Suzumiya Haruhi*, the fact that Christmas is Jesus's birthday is often shown to be interesting trivia, much like Buddha's birthday, common knowledge in Asia, would be to western audiences.

Yet Christmas isn't the only Christian tradition that the Japanese have appropriated: most couples celebrate Valentine's Day and many also opt for so-called Christian weddings – weddings in Christian churches – when they get married; hence the expression the Japanese “are born Shintō, marry Christian and die Buddhist.”

And this leads to a question central to both this paper and the philosophy of religion as a whole: how should we understand religious diversity? There are three basic answers to this question.

The first answer comes from the pluralist, who, in the manner of Immanuel Kant and John Hick, thinks that there is an absolute distinction between Ultimate Reality (the Noumena) and Ultimate Reality as humanly and culturally perceived (the Phenomena).¹

Because of this absolute distinction, the pluralist typically maintains that we can't *univocally* describe Ultimate Reality (where "univocity" means that the words applied to Ultimate Reality mean the same things that they do when applied to us). The best we can do is *equivocally* describe Ultimate Reality (where "equivocity" means that the words applied to Ultimate Reality mean something different than when applied to us). Thus, the important thing for the pluralist isn't propositional truths or doctrines about Ultimate Reality; rather, the important thing is perceived personal salvation or transformation. Accordingly, the pluralist typically accuses those who make much of religious doctrines of intolerance.

The second answer comes from the exclusivist, who thinks one religion, such as Christianity, is propositionally truer than all other religions and this one religion is ontologically necessary (the objective conditions for salvation or enlightenment must really be in place, such as Christ really dying and rising again) and epistemologically necessary (those seeking salvation or enlightenment must know about the conditions, for instance, they must hear about Christ's death and resurrection) in order for salvation even to be possible.

The third and final answer comes from the inclusivist, who agrees with the exclusivist, and disagrees with the pluralist, that one religion is propositionally truer than all other religions. However, while this one religion – again, take Christianity – is truer because it's where the ontologically necessary salvific event occurred, it's not, as the exclusivist claims, epistemologically necessary for all people to have heard of this salvific event (for instance, while Christ's death is the *only* way for people to be saved, not all people have to *hear* of Christ's death in order to be saved by it).

Although I'll delve deeper into the religious history of Japan in the next section, for our purposes here we can say that the modern Japanese are generally pluralistic in regard to religion. This pluralism is largely made possible by not merely skepticism about attaining any knowledge of Ultimate Reality (the Taoist element in Japanese thought) but the outright denial that there is an Ultimate Reality at all (the Shintō and Buddhist elements in Japanese thought).

Given the Japanese skepticism, and indeed, often outright denial, of Ultimate Reality, it shouldn't surprise us that most Japanese anime artists feel no qualms about encoding their religious anime, particularly their anime pertaining to Christianity, with a general pluralistic understanding. Thus, particular doctrines are seen as largely unimportant, whereas a general spiritual mood – a mood often created by blending many different religions together – is all-important. For instance, in *Saint Tail*, the Catholic heroine, Meimi Haneoka, goes to a fortune-teller for advice about her love-life, even though in the Bible God condemns such people;² in *Pita-Ten*, Misha, an angel-in-training, washes a voodoo doll of the hero, Kotarou Higuchi, in order to "cleanse the soul" of the real Kotarou; in *The*

Virgin Mary Is Watching, Shimako Tōdō, the daughter of a Buddhist priest and a student at Lilian Catholic School, feels she has to hide her Buddhism from her classmates but later is shown to be fully accepted by all her Christian friends, who seem to think that doctrinal matters are peripheral to pluralistic tolerance; in *Demon Lord Dante*, Beelzebub, a demon mentioned in the Bible,³ is reincarnated (a doctrine that is Hindu-Platonic-Buddhist and is incompatible with the Christian teaching about the nature of the soul and bodily resurrection); in *Devil May Cry*, *Chrno Crusade*, *Trinity Blood*, *Hellsing* and *Devilman*, good devils are the leading figures (a concept which directly contradicts Christianity, which teaches that a devil is a *fallen* or *evil* angel); and in *Ghost in the Shell*, its theme is intimately related to 1 Corinthians 13:11-12, which reads, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put off childish ways. For now we see through a glass darkly; then we shall see face to face;” however, this quotation isn’t used to forward a Christian view of personal identity, which would be essentialistic or one which declares people to be created by God yet distinct from Him and each other by virtue of possessing a unique soul or essence; rather, *Ghost in the Shell* gives 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 a Buddhist interpretation; thus, the Puppet-Master says that “all things change” and it’s time for Kusanagi, the heroine, “to become a part of all things;” in other words, Kusanagi is like a “child” when she thought she had an unchanging essence or soul, but she became “a man” when she realized that no one has an unchanging soul: that all things are changing and are one with change.

Moreover, as is typical of pluralists, Japanese anime artists tend to view exclusivists and inclusivists – Christians or others – as intolerant fanatics. Hence, the Shimabara Christians in *Ninja Resurrection* and the “Crusaders” in *Chrno Crusade* are drawn in a rather unflattering light, and in *Big Wars*, an alien race called “the gods” (who are linked to the Christian God via the destruction of Sodom) use brainwashing techniques to “subvert” humans into following them, thus almost certainly implying that exclusivists or inclusivists are irrational, dangerous followers.

However, according to Christianity (that which encompasses the core doctrines of the faith), exclusivism or inclusivism are the rational, tolerant choices and pluralism is the irrational, intolerant one. Why? Two things.

First, pluralism confuses epistemological and ethical considerations. It’s a mistake to affirm both that being judgmental about truth-claims necessitates maltreating people of different beliefs and that being tolerant implies not rationally assessing but merely accepting diverse truth-claims as they all equivocally describe Ultimate Reality.

Second, although not identical to relativism, which denies Ultimate Reality all together, pluralism ends in agnosticism, one of the results of which is that all talk about tolerance being grounded in the nature of Ultimate Reality is subsequently futile. The reason for this is simple. We must be able to describe Ultimate Reality univocally and metaphorically

(wherein metaphors entail some basic univocal concepts, such as “life-sustaining” or “powerful” when we say “God is like the Sun”); if we can’t speak about Ultimate Reality or God as such, we can’t know what Ultimate Reality or God is like, meaning that the pluralist’s very belief that exclusivism and inclusivism entail an *unfair* or *unloving* God is itself a groundless accusation since the pluralist seems (contradictorily) to think that he *knows* that God or Ultimate Reality is *fair* and *loving*.

As a result, while the pluralism found in most Japanese anime is aesthetically rich, it is, from a Christian perspective, rationally poor since it fails to appreciate proper, rational distinctions about God; moreover, its apparent tolerance is itself intolerant of anything but a pluralistic view of religion.

Angel Invasion; or, What *Eva*’s Angels Have to Do with the History of Christianity in Japan

As I mentioned in the previous section, a proper understanding of Christianity in Japanese anime requires a deeper understanding of Japanese religious history, particularly as this history encapsulates Japan’s first encounter with Christianity. So here we go.

Although over the past hundred and fifty years the Japanese have been eager to accept and assimilate anything foreign, this eagerness wasn’t always characteristic of the Japanese. Of course, the first Japanese brought with them many of the same cultural and religious values shared by other Asian nations; indeed, Japan’s own variety of shamanism, called Shintō, is remarkably similar to the shamanism found in nations as close as Korea and as far away as Mesopotamia and Peru. Nevertheless, as a nation of islanders, the Japanese found it easy to develop myths making themselves the center of the world, the ultimate result of which was a certain distrust of, and snobbery toward, anything foreign or alien. For instance, when Buddhism was first introduced to Japan from Korea, the Japanese, being a nation of Shintōists, were initially hostile to this foreign religion (not so much because of doctrinal differences but because Buddhism was foreign). Although the conflict between Buddhism and Shintō continued for hundreds of years, non-Japanese, in particular westerners, may find this surprising since the religious milieu of modern Japan is very much pluralistic and synchronistic in that it promotes the harmony and blending of Shintō, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian beliefs – none of which, we must keep in mind, are particularly opposed to such a blending or, more importantly, to pluralism itself.

Now when Christianity was first introduced to the Japanese by Dutch Protestants and Portuguese Catholics in the sixteenth century, the new religion initially appeared as though it would go the way of Buddhism in Japan – at first feared and then, centuries later, accepted in one form or

another. In fact, Christianity even looked more promising than Buddhism since the Catholics quickly succeeded in winning the friendship of Oda Nobunaga, who was the most powerful man in Japan at the time.

However, Christianity in Japan faced one problem that Buddhism never did: conflict, brought on by Christianity's exclusivist claims, between religion and politics. That is, despite their desire for western guns and technology, the Japanese began to see that European expeditions into Asia were resulting in western colonization and so the Japanese got it into their heads – rightly and wrongly – that Christianity was the means by which European powers softened up countries they intended to conquer; in their own case, the Japanese thought that when the European Christians discouraged people from acknowledging the divinity of the Japanese emperor (among other Christian prohibitions), the Europeans were promoting complete disobedience to the Japanese government:

The Christian band has come to Japan, not only sending their merchant vessels to exchange commodities, but also longing to disseminate an evil law, to overthrow true doctrine [such as the Shintō doctrine that the emperor is the son of a god], so that they may change the government of the country and obtain possession of the land. This is the germ of great disaster, and must be crushed.⁴

The ultimate result of this Japanese fear was that Christianity was declared illegal in 1606. Shortly after this, in 1637, Christians in the Shimabara region of Kyūshū revolted when they were asked by the intolerant Japanese pluralists to renounce their beliefs: this revolt resulted in the massacre of some 37,000 Christian peasants, and, a few years later, the Japanese government in Edo (Tokyo) established the Office of Inquisition for Christian Affairs, which gave Buddhist temples, among others, the power to sniff out any hint of Christianity and other “evil,” subversive religions.

Below: Christianity, the dangerous, evil religion, in *Ninja Resurrection*.



It's commonly known that anime and manga generally avoid discussion of real-world religions (*shūkyō*), and this is certainly true of Christianity, particularly as it pertains to Japan's first encounter with it. Nonetheless, there are a few exceptions. For instance, *Nemuri Kyoshiro* tells the tale of a blue-eyed swordsman whose Japanese mother was raped by a devil-worshipping Portuguese priest; *Ninja Resurrection* follows the story of a young Christian named Shiro, who is prophesied to become the messiah who will lead the Shimabara Christians to victory, but who instead becomes the incarnation of Satan; and *Samurai Champloo* is largely about a sword-for-hire living around the time of the Shimabara Rebellion, who, among other things, refuses to step on a *fumie* or a picture of Jesus or Mary, not because he is a closet Christian but rather because he "hates being told what to do." What one can gather from these three series is the common theme that when Christianity was first introduced to Japan, it was largely seen as something alien and either ludicrous, as in *Samurai Champloo*, where the grandson of Francisco Xavier, the first missionary to Japan, is an unhinged megalomaniac, or dangerous, as in *Ninja Resurrection*, where the Christian revolt leads to massive bloodshed as a result of "Christian sorcery."⁵

While I will return to a number of series set in the present or future encoding certain aspects of Christianity in a more positive light, such as *Ode to Kirihito's* dog-nun, Sister Helen Friese, for the moment I want to concentrate on the theme of Christianity as primarily a dangerous, alien religion – a theme which is, at least from a Christian point of view, heretical. Having to be selective, I will bypass *Angel Sanctuary*, *Roots Search*

and *Chrno Crusade*, all of which depict God as either apathetic or downright evil, and *Sins of the Sisters*, which makes the Pope the equivalent of a child murderer, and I will move on to an anime series which I think deals with Christianity as a dangerous, alien religion in an interesting manner: *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Neon Genesis Evangelion (or *Eva* for short) alludes to the Bible in its very name, which means something like “the gospel of a new beginning.” The series makes explicit use of Christianity (the book of Revelation), but also Jewish mysticism and heretical or Gnostic Christianity, such as the names of the angels who attack the Earth (for instance, Samchel, the angel who allegedly guarded the Garden of Eden), Lilith (Adam’s alleged first wife, who refused to submit to her husband – though in *Eva* is one of the angels), and the tree of the *sefirot* (the tree that is related to creation and engenderment and, in *Eva*, a picture of which decorates the ceiling of Gendō Ikari’s office).

In keeping with Christianity, *Eva* focuses on the angels who are sent to the Earth to smite it and who will eventually herald the way for the creation of the New Earth.⁶ However, whereas *Eva* never mentions any divine hand behind the angels’ attack on the Earth, the Bible puts Jesus front and center. Or again, while *Eva* depicts the destruction and rebirth of the Earth in monistic terms (that is, where all things are mere appearances of a single reality), the Bible shows the judgement of the Old Earth to be a matter of justice and the creation of the New Earth to be a place where the just can find sanctuary. Consequently, it’s clear that *Eva* wasn’t intended to be a serious engagement with Christian theology despite what some may think. Indeed, Kazuya Tsurumaki, the producer of *Eva*, said Christian themes were employed in *Eva* “because Christianity is an uncommon religion in Japan [and I] thought it would be mysterious.”⁷ As a result, one possible reading of *Eva* is to see the angels’ attack on Tokyo-3 (the primary place on the Earth attacked) as an allegory of the alien, hostile religion, Christianity’s, impact on Japan. Of course, this reading is simplistic and ignores many factors; however, I think the general sense of *dangerous* and *alien*, which the Japanese were taught to associate with western powers and Christianity, can be found in *Eva*.

And this leads to another, closely related issue: how Japanese anime artists have appropriated three key biblical narratives – those of the flood, the Tower of Babel and Armageddon – and have related these, though particularly, Armageddon, with the atomic bombs the Americans dropped on Japan during World War II, which, according to Takashi Murakami, is the “engine that drove the great manga and anime [in the past].”⁸

Introducing the End of the World

According to the Bible, when the first humans lived in the Garden of Eden, they lived in perfect harmony with God, each other and the natural

world. This idea, needless to say, has influenced many different anime and manga series, such as *Eden*, which is a post-apocalyptic survival story about man's place in the natural world. However, for anime and manga, the theme of the original harmony between God, man and nature isn't as important as that of longevity.

Genesis records that those who lived after man was expelled from the Garden of Eden and before the time of the flood lived extremely long lives – up to a thousand years. This remarkable longevity likely had to do with the lingering effects of the immortality that man lost as a result of the Fall (which was instigated by the serpent – a.k.a. Satan, Lucifer or sometimes even Leviathan – all of whom appear in various anime and manga series, such as *Leviathan* or *Devilman*). As to be expected, this account of immortal life and the loss thereof has provided Japanese anime and manga artists with rich material for their narratives. Consider the figure of Methuselah, who is thought to have been the oldest man who ever lived⁹ and who appears in one form or another in at least four different anime or manga series: (1) in *Immortal Rain*, two of the main characters, both of whom are immortal, have names referring to Methuselah; (2) in *RahXephon*, the leader of the Babhem Foundation is referred to as a modern Methuselah; (3) in *Witch Hunter Robin*, the Methuselah Witches are the immortal witches who have the ability to control weaker witches; and (4) in *Trinity Blood*, the immortal vampires are known as Methuselchs. The connection between Methuselah, longevity and vampires is especially ingenious. However, what is important is that the extraordinary longevity of the superhumans (that is, the pre-deluvians, vampires or witches) is contrasted with the short lifespan of mere (post-diluvian) humans: in other words, the flood story, where God destroyed the Earth with a global deluge as a result of human wickedness, lingers in the background of all these references to Methuselah.

The flood story itself appears in many different anime and manga series, such as *Ulysses 31*, *D-Grayman* and *Spriggan*. Setting aside *Ulysses 31*'s interesting science-fiction blending of Incan mythology and Judeo-Christianity in regard to the flood, *D-Grayman* and *Spriggan* both deal more explicitly with the biblical flood, yet both share the unusual premise that Noah himself *caused* the flood! For instance, in *D-Grayman*, the gray-skinned, superhuman Clan of Noah – that is, the thirteen descendents of Noah (the Bible lists three) – want to wreak divine havoc on the world as their father Noah had done. Or again, in *Spriggan*, Noah's Ark (which is named "Noah") is found on Mt. Ararat (the resting place according to the Bible); yet, according to *Spriggan*, Noah is an alien spaceship that landed on the Earth and, due to its power to control weather, was the cause of the flood and the subsequent ice age. In both of these series, the flood story, which, to the Japanese, is a western, Christian story, is reinterpreted in anime and manga but still carries with it the epic scope originally foreign

to the Japanese prior to their contact with the West: worldwide destruction.

And this theme of worldwide or epic destruction, which, as I said, was a concept introduced to the Japanese from the Christian West, is present in other anime series like *Ulysses 31*, *Gilgamesh* and *Babel II*. In particular, the Tower of Babel, the symbol of God-defying unity and cause of the fragmentation of the brotherhood of man as a result of inordinate pride, is alluded to, or mentioned in, *Ulysses 31* (where Circe wants to build a literal tower of knowledge so that she can rival the power of the Olympian gods), *Metropolis* (where the Red Duke's ziggurat eventually crumbles under human arrogance) and *Gilgamesh* (where the institution at Delphys is referenced to as "the Tower of Babel" since it's not only a tower in ancient Mesopotamia but also the site where people discovered the demigod Gilgamesh's body and were attempting to discover the secret of immortality through his DNA and subsequent cloning). Nevertheless, the Tower of Babel as a symbol of destruction is the most prominent in *Babel II*, whose creator, Mitsuteru Yokoyama, simply took the name Babel and made it the name of a powerful alien entity which awakes in a young boy named Koichi to allow him to fight world-threatening disaster. Consequently, while the biblical account of the Tower of Babel certainly conjures up the idea of the destruction of human unity, the anime *Babel II* is largely about the destruction of the physical world and hence is more closely linked with the gods' judgement of Achilles's Spring in *Big Wars* (a take on God's judgement of Sodom in Genesis 19) or with one of the most important biblical themes in anime and manga: Armageddon, which, though a place, is often understood simply as the global war between the forces of good and evil.¹⁰

As I have already argued, *Eva*, which is based on a loose interpretation of the Christian apocalypse as is found in the book of Revelation, can (though it doesn't have to) be seen as an allegory for the hostile, alien, Christian West invading Japan. Moreover, since the whole concept of global destruction is an idea that Japan got from the Christian West, it makes sense that when the Americans dropped the two atomic bombs on Japan during the Second World War, a number of Japanese understood this in apocalyptic terms. Of course, since most Japanese weren't Christians, they didn't literally see World War II as Armageddon, but certainly the biblical ethos was in the air and acted as a source of dark inspiration for many future anime and manga artists (not to mention a few "Harmagedon" cults, such as Aum Shinrikyō).

Take *Chrno Crusade*, for example, which is set just prior to World War II. It deals with the spiritual – specifically, Christian – events that foreshadow the Second World War and its greater association with cosmic warfare (hence, Revelation 6:12-14 and 18:10 are quoted at different times throughout). Of course, as to be expected, the theology in this series is unorthodox, for it largely centers around a three-way war between God

and his followers, the devils who are satisfied with the status quo between Heaven and Pandemonium, and the devils who want to overturn the balance of good and evil in order to achieve “freedom.”

The premise of the series is that if the balance between good and evil is disrupted, then either good or evil will be destroyed or at least will lose their meaningfulness. Of course, the idea that there is a balance between good and evil is *I Ching* philosophy (which predates both Taoism and Confucianism) and not Christianity since the *I Ching* seems to endorse metaphysical dualism or the belief that good and evil are both *positive*, co-eternal substances, whereas Christianity maintains that God, who is Goodness itself, only made good things, and so evil must simply be the *absence or privation of a good that should be present* (for instance, when a person steals something, there is a lack of proper self-control in the will).

Or again, the solution to universal religious warfare as it's presented in *Chrno Crusade* is that since such a warfare is based on “simplistic” conceptions of good and evil (*I Ching*, Christian, and so on), Armageddon can be thwarted or at least creatures can recover from its ill-effects by recognizing that good and evil, especially in their bare metaphysical forms, aren't what they seem: hence, God appears somewhat apathetic, the only angel in the series, Ewan Remington, hangs up his wings, and the devil Chrno, à la *Hellboy*, isn't diabolical at all. However, according to Christianity, the end of conflict cannot be achieved by seeing through good and evil, as Buddhism teaches when it says everything is *anātman* or “no-self,” meaning that there is no substantial Reality behind appearances; rather, Christianity teaches that conflict can only be averted when all submit to the established order that the perfectly Good God has made since if God, who is the perfectly Good, truly Existent Creator, created everything and knows what will make everything happy – which is to say, obedience to the moral law within, which is a reflection of God's own Goodness – then creatures can only achieve true freedom and happiness by conforming to the Good, not by pretending it's an illusion (Buddhism) or that there is a positively existing alternative to it (*I Ching*).

Finally, the ethos of Armageddon, which took root in Japan during World War II, is especially strong in many futuristic anime and manga series, such as *Harmagedon*, *Apocalypse Zero*, *Demon-Beast Phalanx*, *Tokyo Revelations*, *Appleseed*, *Earthian*, *Trinity Blood* and *Akira*, to name only a few. While *Harmagedon*, *Apocalypse Zero*, *Tokyo Revelations* and *Akira* aren't directly related to the Christian apocalypse and *Earthian* seems to lose its focus on this early on, *Demon-Beast Phalanx* was inspired by the book of Revelation, *Appleseed* quotes Revelation 12:4 in its introduction and *Trinity Blood* is set just after Armageddon, when the world is divided into two groups: the humans, led by the Pope in Rome, and the vampires, led by the vampire empress in Byzantium. Yet once again, none of these anime series are very orthodox in regard to Armageddon.

Trinity Blood, in particular, has difficulty. For instance, according to Revelation, Armageddon is supposed to pave the way for the establishment of the New Earth, which is to be peopled by the righteous; but in *Trinity Blood*, the post-apocalyptic world only breeds new divisions between humans and vampires. And, to make matters more confusing, the humans in *Trinity Blood* aren't identified with the righteous (even though they are led by the Pope) nor are the vampires identified with the unrighteous (as would traditionally have been the case in western vampire lore). Certainly Christians are able to appreciate that the visible church isn't identical with what St. Augustine inclusively calls "the City of God" or the totality of the righteous; that is, Christians can appreciate that names and physical makeup mean little when it comes to righteousness – that the City of God can be composed of Catholics from Rome and Eastern Orthodox Christians from Byzantium, humans and vampires from Earth and angels from Heaven. And if this is what *Trinity Blood* is really saying, entailing, of course, that conflict between good and evil can only be resolved by submission to the Good, then I think *Trinity Blood* is one of the most Christian anime series around. However, I suspect that by equating humans and Christianity and vampires and non-Christianity (implying we don't make much of the Byzantine-vampire connection) and then by showing how some humans can be evil and some vampires can be good, the overarching theme in *Trinity Blood* quickly becomes that of pluralism (all views about Ultimate Reality are equivocal) and Shintō-Buddhist relativism (good and evil, and all categories for that matter, are merely conventions and conflict can only be overcome by seeing past these).

Why Catholicism Is Better than Protestantism (for Anime and Manga)

After reading the previous section, some might feel that it misses the point: that while Japanese pluralism itself is philosophical, Japanese pluralism as it manifests itself in anime and manga is more literary or symbolic. Although I think that all cultural products, including anime and manga, are inextricably linked to some philosophy, I do admit that when the Japanese deal with Christianity in their anime and manga, it's more for literary effect than for philosophical debate: symbols, more than syllogisms, are what most Japanese anime and manga artists are concerned with. For instance, in *Golgo 13*, the protagonist is an assassin known as "Golgo 13," which refers to Golgotha, the hill on which Jesus was crucified, and the alleged day – Friday the thirteenth – when Jesus was executed; but beyond the common feelings of death, sorrow and loneliness which both Jesus and Golgo 13 felt or feel, there is nothing else in common between these two. Or again, in *Rave Master*, Shiba's sword is called the "Ten Commandments," which shares the idea of judgement with the biblical commandments but nothing else. And the emphasis on symbolism

not doctrine is true in many other series, such as *The Big O*'s 666 imagery, Judas's "Eden" (basically the Buddhist *nirvana*), *Gundam 00*'s names "Hallelujah (Haptism)" and "(Nena) Trinity," Eva's three MAGI, *Pilgrim Jäger*'s Spear of Longinus (the supposed name of the spear that pierced Christ's side), *Bastard!*'s crucifixes (inspired by Heavy Metal fashion), *Gilgamesh*'s use of the Christian hymn "Shall We Gather at the River?" and *Tetragrammaton Labyrinth*'s use of the name of God (the four letters in YHWH is known as the "Tetragrammaton").

One of the things that follows from all of this is that agreeing with C. S. Lewis that Catholicism is a "jungle" of symbols and Protestantism is often a "desert" of bare platitudes,¹¹ when Japanese anime and manga deal with Christianity, they tend to gravitate toward Catholicism over and against Protestantism (or Eastern Orthodoxy, which has had next to no impact on Japan). For instance, setting aside the myriad of anime and manga series featuring crucifixes, angels and demons, all of which are common to both Catholicism and Protestantism, many Japanese anime and manga series make mention of five things that either are uniquely Catholic or Catholics put unique emphasis on: (1) priests and / or exorcists, such as in *Ghost Sweeper Mikami* or *Puri Puri*; (2) nuns, such as in *One-Pound Gospel* or *Holy Virgins*; (3) Catholic schools, such as in *St. Lunatic High School* or *La Esperança*; (4) angelic hierarchies, such as in *Soul Rescue* or *Angel / Dust Neo*, whose android emulates are loosely categorized according to Pseudo-Dionysius's hierarchy of angels (for instance, Musia is a mere "angel," whereas Leia is a "virtue"); and (5) the Virgin Mary, such as in *The Virgin Mary Is Watching* or *Wicked City*.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to give the impression that Protestantism has had no impact on anime and manga. *Hellsing* and *Pilgrim Jäger* both deal with the historical tension between Protestants and Catholics and both show the independent-minded Protestants in a more sympathetic light than their Catholic brothers. Or again, *Trigun*'s Nicholas Wolfwood is a *bokushi* (usually a Protestant minister) not a *shinpu* (a Catholic priest), and despite its Catholic mood, *Chrno Crusade* borrows heavily from John Milton's Protestant epic *Paradise Lost* (for instance, "Pandemonium" is Milton's word for the capital of Hell).

Yet this aside, part of the reason that Japanese anime and manga are more likely to feature Catholic imagery and themes than Protestant ones is that many of the western, biblically-inspired stories that the Japanese have appropriated in their anime and manga were set in Europe at a time when there was no Catholic-Protestant divide and so have typically (rightly or wrongly) been thought of as Catholic. Consider three examples: (1) Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* influenced *Devilman*'s portrayal of Satan being frozen in ice and the name Dante, with all its medieval overtones, is the hero of *Devil May Cry*; (2) the Arthurian legends influenced *Fate / Stay Night*'s use of the Holy Grail (but in the legends it's the blood of Christ, whereas in the anime it's more a generic term for a powerful object that

grants wishes); and (3) the story of Joan of Arc has been extremely popular in Japan and has inspired many anime and manga, such as *Jeane, the Kamikaze Thief* (in which Joan is a reincarnated Christian hero).

Moreover, the entire Gothic genre itself, with its sympathetic vampires and the like, was largely a product of the Romantic Movement, which, though it began in Protestant countries, combined the Protestant emphasis on freedom with Catholic imagery, and this Romanticism, in turn, influenced countless anime and manga, such as *Vampire Hunter D* and *Dark Edge*. Indeed, when Japanese anime and manga forward unorthodox Christian views, these views aren't always the product of Japanese pluralism but are sometimes Japanese appropriations of Romanticism's unique conceptualization of Christianity; hence, Milton's Satan (though a villain in *Paradise Lost*) became a hero to many Romantics and this Satanic heroism, wherein Satan and his minions are seen as passionate freedom-fighters, consequently inspired the countless antiheroes that we find in anime and manga, such as Alucard in *Hellsing*, Akira in *Devilman* and Setsuna / Alexia in *Angel Sanctuary*. In fact, in *The Virgin Mary Is Watching*, when a lesbian schoolgirl asks the object of her affection, a potential nun, "Are you choosing God over me?" we can see, even here, the typically unorthodox sentiments of Romanticism.

Gay Angels, Female Cardinals and *Bishōnen* Popes

Now the topic of lesbians raises another important matter in regard to Christianity and Japanese anime and manga: gender issues. But first a little history.

Whatever the pre-Japanese thought of gender before they arrived on the island of Japan, by the time they did arrive, their religion of choice was Shintō, which shared with world shamanism the common belief in goddesses and the importance of priestesses to serve them. However, with the advent of Confucianism, the position of women in society and religion diminished to some degree. Nevertheless, because Confucianism is fundamentally a socio-political philosophy with little or no metaphysical foundation, it was never able to ground its views of gender and sex. Consequently, any deep metaphysical speculation about gender and sex were ultimately rendered meaningless by the antirealist metaphysics of Shintō, Buddhism and Taoism, all of which claim that as with everything, gender and sex aren't intrinsically stable concepts, but are as illusionary and changing as everything else.

Consequently, it's little surprise that when we look at Japanese anime and manga, we are bombarded by many different presentations of gender and sex, including those having to do with major Christian players, such as angels, demons, priests, cardinals, nuns and popes. For instance, in *Earthian*, the two protagonist angels, Chahiya and Kagetsuya, are not only partners in evaluating the pros and cons of humanity, but are also shown

to be gay lovers since both are in male form when they have sex. Or again, in *Trinity Blood*, the head of the Catholic Church is a *bishōnen* (“beautiful boy”) pope, who is flanked by a female cardinal.

Needless to say, most of these Japanese presentations are unorthodox, for Christianity has typically claimed that while sex belongs to the body, gender belongs to the soul or spirit; and because the higher affects the lower, the soul or spirit determines the sex of the body. As a result, when Christians call God “He” and not “She,” they mean to say that God is *essentially* masculine, even though He, of course, has feminine attributes. Or again, female bodies point toward feminine souls and male bodies point toward masculine souls, and even though females should have some masculine attributes and males should have some feminine ones, neither sex should engage in any activity, such as cross-dressing or homosexual love, that would confuse or blur the essential differences between men and women. Moreover, while angels and demons don’t have bodies as we understand them and hence are sexless, it doesn’t follow that they don’t have genders since gender belongs to the soul or spirit. It’s based on a theory of gender such as this, coupled with the belief that God made all things to function in certain ways, that most Christians have held beliefs such as the masculinity of God,¹² male headship in marriage,¹³ the unnaturalness of homosexuality,¹⁴ the lack of sexual marriage in Heaven,¹⁵ the importance of gender for church office,¹⁶ and condemnation of cross-dressing.¹⁷ As a result, Christianity would take issue with *Earthian*’s gay angels and *Trinity Blood*’s female cardinal, and would, perhaps, see potential danger in anime and manga’s general tendency to over-feminize men; for instance, masculine, spiritual authority is poorly exemplified by *bishōnen* popes.

Crucify! . . . Her?!

Christian Censorship in Anime and Manga

And speaking of “taking issue with,” we are lead to the unavoidable topic of censorship in anime and manga, particularly when the anime and manga in question both portray Christianity in an unorthodox way and is translated into English for western, often Christian, audiences.

Although anime and manga are often considered to be on the fringes of society in the (predominantly Christian) United States, this isn’t exactly the case. According to Susan Napier, more than twenty-one percent of the anime and manga fans she interviewed claimed to be practising Christian.¹⁸ Consequently, when conservative politicians and anime and manga publishers advocate censoring certain themes in Japanese anime and manga, they aren’t just foolishly trying to censor liberal material for a liberal audience. In at least some cases, those who favour limited censorship are genuinely trying to protect people who would be offended, and perhaps corrupted, by some of the material found in Japanese anime

and manga. And while conservative politicians and anime and manga publishers aren't identical to Christians, traditional Christians – like most people – endorse some censorship (for instance, child pornography) even while appreciating diversity and freedom. The question, then, isn't so much *if* censorship is a good or a bad thing, but *when* and *how* it should be applied.

In the case of Japanese anime and manga, censorship has – at least from a Christian point of view – been rightly and wrongly applied. Let's consider four examples.

First, there is the infamous thirteenth episode of *Astro Boy*, called "Kirisuto no Me" ("The Eye of Christ"), which was censored for American audiences because censors felt that a statue of Jesus, on whose eye a criminal's identity was scratched by a priest, was too disrespectful for western, Christian audiences. While a Christian can appreciate that any image of Christ should be shown respect, clearly Osamu Tezuka, who was later commissioned by the Vatican to make an anime series based on the Bible,¹⁹ didn't intend to insult Christianity and it's hard to imagine many Christians taking offence from this episode, especially since the priest is shown in a heroic light.

Second, when *Saint Tail* was dubbed into English, all references to God were omitted since censors thought that God shouldn't be spoken of in a light or comic manner. Once again, although a Christian can appreciate this sensitivity – God isn't a laughing matter after all (even if He is the source of all Happiness and Laughter) – I think most Christians would feel that this really goes too far since without mention of God, the whole tension between Saint Tail, a Catholic schoolgirl, *stealing* in order to help others is lost.

Third, in the Japanese version of the *hentai* anime *Bible Black*, the "Black Magic Club" uses the name of "Jesus" as the subject of their vile sacrificial chants, but in the English dubbed version, "Jesus" is replaced with "Satan." I think all but a few would agree that this type of censorship is appropriate (and I myself would go even further argue that the entire *hentai* genre shouldn't just be censored but should be made illegal, though that's another issue altogether).

And fourth, there are countless anime and manga series – *Naruto*, *Vengeance of the Space Pirate*, *Macross Plus*, *Gundam Seed* and *Tenchi Muyo: The Mihoshi Special* – in which the hero or heroine is captured and stretched out on a cross-shaped object and in many cases these scenes have been cut for western audiences. For instance, in episode seventy-four of *Sailor Moon R*, four of the scouts are shown suspended from crystal crosses, slumped heads and all. Although St. Peter refused to be crucified right-side up since he thought he wasn't worthy to be crucified in the manner of his Lord, most Christians feel that it isn't so much the portrayal of people being crucified that is sacred so much as the motivation behind such portrayals. Thus, if the sailor scouts and others are shown being crucified in a way

that is in harmony with, or at least shows respect to, Christ's crucifixion (that is, as "a form of torture for someone who doesn't deserve it"²⁰), then most Christians would have little problem with this. Hence, *Sailor Moon R* probably shouldn't have been censored.

Below: Sailor Scouts hanging on crystal crosses in *Sailor Moon R*.



The Manga Bible

The discussion of Christianity and Japanese anime and manga in non-Japanese countries leads to the final topic that needs to be addressed: Christianity in non-Japanese – particularly American and Korean – anime and manga.

Like most successful cultural products, anime and manga not only established themselves in their native country, Japan, and managed to find fans all across the world – from Brazil to Hong Kong – but have also taken root in foreign lands to such an extent that they have inspired non-Japanese artists to produce their own anime and manga. And, as with Japan, the themes of these non-Japanese anime and manga series have been various, including some interesting depictions of Christianity. In particular, the two most Christian nations producing anime and manga – the United States and South Korea – are worth briefly examining in regard to Christianity and anime and manga, not only for their own sake, but also as a foil with which we can compare and contrast Japanese portrayals of Christianity in anime and manga.

South Korea, half of whose population claim to be practicing Christians, only started to allow Japanese anime and manga into their

country in 1998 (because of hostilities going back to World War II); however, in less than ten years, Koreans have developed their own version of manga, called *manwha*. Because far more Koreans than Japanese are Christian, *manwha* is also typically more orthodox. For instance, few Christians would find fault with Jae Hwan Kim's *War Angels* (not to be confused with the American anime *Angel Wars*), and, despite sometimes trivializing serious issues (such as Eve giving the peace sign and saying "Girls can make guys do anything" when she succeeds in convincing Adam to eat the apple), *The Manhwa Bible*, published in the United States as *MangaBible* by Zondervan, is on the whole an orthodox, though definitely Korean approach to Christianity (for example, one of Pharaoh's magicians wears the clothes of a Confucian scholar and the Israelites who went on the Exodus are sometimes shown as typical Korean street protestors – banners, headbands and all). Nevertheless, probably about half of the *manwha* dealing with Christianity is still much in the vein of pluralism; for example, Sang Sun Park's *Ark Angels* tells the story of three sisters, Hamu, Shem and Japheth (based on the three sons of Noah), who, in Buddhist fashion, think animals are equal to humans and so attempt to preserve endangered species from being wiped out by putting them on an inter-dimensional Ark. And the same pluralistic tendencies are true of more famous series, such as Min Woo Hyung's *Priest* or Hyun Se Lee's *Armageddon*.

In the United States, home-grown anime and manga also touch on various issues, including, of course, Christianity. And though most of this anime and manga would appeal to Christians, a lot of it is intended for evangelical or outreach purposes. For instance, *Superbook* (which tells the stories of the Old Testament) and *Flying House* (which tells the stories of the New Testament) were designed by Tatsunoko Productions and were the brainchildren of the Christian Broadcasting Network, which wanted to find a way to introduce Christianity to the Japanese. And this evangelical trend continued – though in recent years it has aimed at evangelizing American children – with manga such as *Serenity*, a *shōjo* manga that is Christian without being overly preachy (it even got an endorsement from Marvel's Stan Lee), and *Manga Messiah*, which returns Yeshuah / Jesus's *numinous* splendor. In fact, the most ambitious ventures in regard to evangelizing or instructing children are *Manga Bible*, which is the New Living Translation of the Bible with manga sections, and *The Manga Bible*, which brilliantly starts *in medias res* with a Gandolf-ish Moses telling the story of Genesis and then, through different characters, continues to tell the entire biblical story in manga format (including Super Deformed inserts of Jesus's parables). For most people, these Christian anime and manga will seem a bit odd, yet even then, the majority will probably agree that these stories succeed – not only through manga pictures but also through the use of uncommon, more ancient, spelling of character's

names – in challenging their preconceptions and misconceptions of Christianity as a dull, judgemental, Ned Flanders-ish religion.

Thus, while Christianity has had a substantial cultural impact on Japanese anime and manga, Japanese anime and manga, including those which deal with Christianity, have also had an impact on “Christian” nations and have, interestingly, even gone a ways in shaping, for better and for worse, some non-Japanese views of Christianity.

Below: Jesus and His twelve disciples in *The Manga Bible*.



God Bless Anime and Manga

Throughout this paper, I have argued that Japanese pluralism has penetrated deep into the minds of Japanese anime and manga artists. The ultimate result of this is that when these artists produce anime and manga, they encode their pluralistic interpretations of Christianity into their works. And because pluralism has little use for propositional truths or religious doctrines, Japanese anime and manga is almost always, from a Christian perspective, heretical. Nevertheless, this isn't to say that such anime and manga are valueless to the Christian (or anyone else for that matter). If the Christian can appreciate the general spiritual mood of the heretical anime, he can often afford himself a pleasant enough experience. Moreover, when the anime and manga style is successfully appropriated by talented Christian artists (usually Americans or Koreans), then the end product has the potential to be a unique and wonderful thing.

Notes

- ¹ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 80.
- ² Deuteronomy 18:10-11.
- ³ Luke 11:15.
- ⁴ Quoted in C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: n.p., 1967), 318.
- ⁵ Incidentally, the idea of prayer as magic or the manipulation of an impersonal force, and not a conversation with another person, is a common Japanese pagan misunderstanding of Christian prayer.
- ⁶ Revelation 8-9, 16, 21.
- ⁷ Kazuya Tsurumaki, quoted in *Anime Intersections: Tradition and Innovation in Theme and Technique* by Dani Cavallaro (London: McFarland, 2007), 59.
- ⁸ Takashi Murakami, quoted in *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U. S.* by Rolland Kelts (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 175.
- ⁹ Genesis 5:27.
- ¹⁰ Revelation 16:16.
- ¹¹ C. S. Lewis, "Christian Reunion: An Anglican Speaks to Roman Catholics," in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection & Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 396.
- ¹² John 3:35.
- ¹³ Ephesians 5:32.
- ¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:9.
- ¹⁵ Matthew 22:30.
- ¹⁶ 1 Timothy 2:12.
- ¹⁷ Deuteronomy 22:5.
- ¹⁸ Susan Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 199.
- ¹⁹ Fred Patten, *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge, 2004), 197.
- ²⁰ Patrick Drazen, *Anime Explosion! The What? Why? & Wow! of Japanese Animation* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge, 2003), 143.

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