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## Christianity in Anime and Manga

Since the first contact between Europeans and the Japanese in the 1540's, each culture has influenced the other. Europeans have reinterpreted Japanese art in their own way, such as with the Japonism style in the 1800's. Japan has its own cartoon and comic industry known as anime and manga, respectively, which differ in that they tend to embrace narrative structures over serialization.<sup>1</sup> These industries show a wide range of cultural influence from the West, much of which isn't merely ported over. Instead this influence, including Christianity, is reinterpreted through Japan's cultural lens, resulting in a highly unorthodox portrayal. Understanding how Japan depicts Western culture is key to correctly interpreting Christianity in the anime medium. Christianity takes its present form in anime due to the religion's "foreignness" in Japan, as well as Japan's pluralist cultural ethos; it is a form that values the aesthetic, symbolic and literary value over the ecclesiastical and orthodox.

The most prominent reason so much of anime seems to transform Western culture into something different is because of Japan's pluralist mindset. In his paper "Anime, Manga and Christianity: a Comprehensive Analysis", professor Adam Barkman writes that a pluralist view is less about a "Universal Truth," and more about a "general spiritual mood". He contrasts this with the Christian view which is exclusivist, stating that an exclusivist is someone "who thinks one religion, such as Christianity, is propositionally truer than all other religions" (Barkman). This focus on general atmosphere over strict adherence to realism takes many different forms besides Christianity, ranging from the non-quite Western comic book heroes of *My Hero Academia* to the anthropomorphic dragons in *Miss Kobayashi's Dragon Maid*. Japanese

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity, anime and manga will just be referred to as anime unless manga is explicitly mentioned, since anime and manga share much of the same content and style

characters frequently have non-naturally occurring hair colors in Japan, and even hair colors that no one has without dye. The narrative benefit of abandoning this rigid conformity is that anime can approach subjects from unexpected and unique angles.

Christianity has a long history in Japan. The first evangelizing began in 1549 shortly after European contact, but resistance soon started to grow. Christianity was banned in 1607, which resulted in a revolt in 1637, also marking the beginning of the nation's period of isolation (Barkman). Japan did not become open to the outside world until the mid-1800's, but proselytizing soon resumed. Tensions reached a high point during World War II, as Japan was at war with most of the countries that Christian missionaries came from (Christianity in Japan). Following World War II, Japan became a more open and tolerant country, which continues today. Despite this, Christians remain a small minority. Barkman argues that since Christianity's introduction to Japan, it has frequently been viewed as a potential threat to the emperor's authority. Christian beliefs are antithetical to the syncretic views that allow other religions such as Buddhism to flourish in Japan, because of the exclusivist/pluralist divide. Christianity today remains familiar enough to be noticed, but foreign enough to be mysterious.

To understand how Japan changes Christianity through its own cultural lens, it might help to first view the similarities between Japan and the West. Japan's history has had an interesting parallel with the West, from their similar feudal systems, knights vs samurai, chivalry vs. bushido, even up through colonization. Japan was one of the few countries never colonized by the West, and even managed to defeat a Western country (the Russian Empire) in a war post-industrial revolution. Upon reopening its borders to foreigners in the mid-1800's, Japan quickly adopted Western practices in numerous areas, from clothing to industry. In many ways from climate to history, Japan is like a blurred reflection of the West.

A few other common themes besides the prevalence of pluralism appear in studying how Western culture and Christianity are depicted in anime. John Griffith of the National Taipei University of Technology describes the first in his paper ““Integration and Inversion: Western Medieval Knights in Japanese Manga and Anime.” He explains how in Arthurian legends and Western culture in general, there is an emphasis on individuality and self reliance. In Japan however, these legends and the characters within them (such as knights) place value in social harmony and society. In her essay “The Afterlives of New Testament Apocrypha”, Annette Reed mentions how anime frequently makes use of Apocrypha, that is to say, non canonical biblical stories (Reed). This makes sense considering the prevalence of pluralism: the fact that these stories are related to Christianity is enough, even if they aren’t canon. Dr. Mio Bryce details the third important theme, the white versus black wing dichotomy. Anime frequently inverts good and evil representing white and black respectively, or even questions if there is a difference between the two (Bryce). Feathered wings frequently symbolize an angelic being, while bat-like wings are reserved for more demonic characters. Manga is especially conducive to this dichotomy, because it is published in black and white. Many Christ Figures inhabit the genre, though this isn’t unique to anime. In the majority of works related to Christianity or a wider Western culture, one of these themes are present.

One of the best examples demonstrating how Christianity appears in anime is *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Known as one of the most influential anime of all time, *Evangelion* makes frequent use of religious symbolism. When “angels” (which look like giant, alien monsters) attack Tokyo-3, they fire laser beams that, after coming into contact with something, rise up into the sky and turn into a cross (Anno). The character Misato wears a cross necklace, and the “Lance of Longinus” (the spear that pierced Christ’s side) is a weapon that can be thrown by a

giant robot into outer space and can turn into the “Tree of Life.” There’s also an alien-looking being named Lilith (Adam’s wife in myths before Eve was used instead) that is pierced to a cross, and even the title means “new creation story”. Barkman also comments on *Evangelion* and its (orthodox defying) Christian motifs, writing that:

The series makes explicit use of Christianity (the book of Revelation), but also Jewish mysticism and heretical or Gnostic Christianity... 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.

*Evangelion* is drawing from many different, loosely connected wells for inspiration. Like in many other anime, a one “true” God is never shown, remaining obscured in mystery. Reed also references *Evangelion* as containing Apocrypha; there are even the dead sea scrolls, which play an important role in the canon of real life Christianity. Even more Christian symbolism exists throughout, the vast majority of which is used in an aesthetic/literary purpose (or, as Barkman quotes *Evangelion*'s producer, “because Christianity is an uncommon religion in Japan [and I] thought it would be mysterious”).

The main character of *Evangelion*, Shinji Ikari, essentially causes Armageddon (a theme, Barkman notes, likely inspired by the atomic bombs in WWII), not out of divine righteousness, but because he feels isolated and cannot connect with society. Shinji wishes to not exist anymore, thus causing the barriers between people’s souls to dissolve. He comes to the conclusion, however, that being alive and connecting is better, even if it means getting hurt by others, thus reversing Armageddon. Bryce mentions *Evangelion* as well, when he writes

Similarly, yet not feathery, the clone Ayamani Rei in Anno Hideaki's *The End of Evangelion* (1997) grows into an awesome gigantic white winged creature who eradicates the AT field – an individual's mental and spiritual barriers – and lets them die. This winged Rei, glowing white, is an awesome image of a goddess of Death who brings wholesale slaughter yet has a bizarre sense of beauty, calmness and comfort (300).

Rei is supposed to be a white winged goddess, but she terrifies Shinji, just as she terrified him earlier in the show when in human form. The white wing stereotypes are being broken down here, what appears holy is in the same instance unholy. The underlying theme of *Evangelion*, despite all of the religious references, actually reinforces Griffith's point: being hurt by others is an inevitable part of living, so rather than retreating from society, people should embrace their connections because they are overall more beneficial than detrimental.

The anime *Fate/Zero* is centered around famous heroes of history, largely from a Western mythos, who are resurrected as servants and must fight for their masters in what's called the "Holy Grail War." Being heavily influenced by Western lore, it provides an excellent look into how Christianity is changed by anime. One of the servants is King Arthur, but not the King Arthur we are accustomed to. Instead, King Arthur is a woman, but retains the character's original sense of pride, righteousness, and title (Iwakami). The gender of King Arthur isn't as important under a pluralistic view as is King Arthur's general attitude and atmosphere, his honor and chivalry. There are also two characters who represent the white wing and black wing dichotomy - Kirei Kotomine and Kiritsugu Emiya. Kotomine, representing white, is a priest who ends up realizing that only the suffering of others brings him happiness. Kiritsugu, represented by black, is a father killer (a common trope of the Antichrist) who always strives to put the lives of the many before the few, no matter the cost. His hand bears an inverted cross, another symbol

of the Antichrist. Despite Kotomine appearing to be holy and Kiritsugu unholy, Kiritsugu is clearly the better of the two, being at least an antihero, while Kotomine is more of a fallen priest than a true servant of God. Kotomine's true self is a hollow one, while Kiritsugu selflessly saves as many people as he can, even if it requires killing people close to him such as his own father in the process. There is another entry in the *Fate* series titled *Fate/Apocrypha*, directly referring the fact that it is non-canon to the original myths used.

*Berserk* also heavily borrows from Western culture, being set in a European-styled fantasy land. The story revolves around the main character Guts, and his struggle against everything from demons to isolation (Miura). Guts starts off as a traveling mercenary, and eventually he joins a mercenary group where he fits in and finds a degree of happiness. This happiness is shattered when the leader, Griffith, sacrifices most of this group to attain Godhood (which is essentially being a demigod, not the omnipotent Christian one). In destroying social harmony, Griffith is portrayed as an evil character. However, an important theme of the story is struggling against fate and trying to reach a level of individuality. Griffith sacrifices his comrades because his dream is all that drives him. Before the sacrifice, Guts had left this group because he couldn't accept being an inferior, even if for the benefit of the group. Guts receives a magical "brand", which signals him out, making him always stand apart from others. There are more explicit references to Christianity than just the existence of demigods: there is a Catholic-like organization called the Holy See. As an aside, Catholicism seems to be the most commonly portrayed Christian sect, though there are other notable examples such as the Protestants in *Hellsing Ultimate*. The Holy See is portrayed similar to the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages: focused on power and converting or removing non believers. Prominent church members are shown as being extremist in some way, with the character Farnese being a masochist, and the

inquisitor Mozgus being a demon. This last character being a demon portrays the Church as corrupt, another common theme in anime, including the gun-wielding nuns in *Black Lagoon* and Kotomine the fallen priest. Portraying the Church as corrupt also fits *Berserk's* Gothic influences, where organized religion is often shown as being tainted.

Griffith and Guts embody the white wing and black wing dichotomy especially well. Griffith almost always maintains a serene, stately, and imperturbable demeanor, while Guts oscillates between stoicism and rage. Griffith has long white hair, is a natural leader, and upon ascending to Godhood, is viewed as being the “Falcon of Light”. Guts on the other hand is clad in black armor, has black hair, and embodies many anti-hero qualities, even going so far as killing a child, although he deeply regrets doing so. There is a legend from the Holy See that a “Falcon of Darkness” would come and plunge the world into a dark age. Visually, Guts would represent the Falcon of Darkness and Griffith the Falcon of Light, but Griffith has become, and sides with, demons, while Guts is trying to kill Griffith, thereby making their effective roles switched. This is in line with what Bryce writes, “When the black and the white wings are contrasted, the genuine, sympathetic soul often belongs to the black whereas righteousness, intolerance and lack of sympathy are associated with white wings”. Guts is a grounded, down to earth fighter for himself and humanity while Griffith is somewhere in the clouds, peering down at all those beneath him. Guts’ theme in the 1997 anime portrays this well; it might make sense for Guts to have a violent, angry theme, but it is actually a somber, ethereal and peaceful song echoing his true emotional and human nature (*Berserk*).

The anime *Devilman: Crybaby* is similar to *Berserk* in the parallel between the white and black winged characters (Choi). Satan is similar to Griffith: White hair, unsympathetic attitude, and a regal but remote persona. Akira can be compared to Guts, because even though Akira takes

on the form of a demon named Aamon (more apocrypha), he cries whenever someone dies, and gives his life for humanity while fighting Satan. God is a distant being who is never directly shown, but sends celestial bombardments to Earth, killing Satan.

*Haibane Renmei*, also detailed by Bryce, is a show about fallen angels who live in a special human settlement, trying to move on into the next life (Ueda) (Bryce 297). This plays with the black/white dichotomy as well: angels with black feathers are assumed to be full of sin, while those with white feathers are pure and will have no issue moving on. The angels, or Haibane, grow their wings shortly after being reborn from cocoons in the town. Their wings as they are first emerging are reminiscent of bat wings, which blurs the line between being holy or unholy. The haibane are a pluralistic depiction because they seem less like angels and more like people that happen to possess halos and wings. There is an idea of Christianity present, with little solid follow up: God is never shown, and the afterlife is mysterious and unknowable, left up for the audience to imagine.

One of the most popular Christian tropes in anime is the Christ Figure. This trope is somewhat similar to the white wing and black wing dichotomy, because it gives a lot of flexibility for subversion and introspection. Malone (qtd. in Kozlovic) explains that Christ Figures are when "... Jesus is not portrayed directly but is represented symbolically or at times allegorically" (Kozlovic). A plethora of characters exist who can be symbolically viewed as Christ-like, and in keeping in with anime's pluralistic outlook, this makes for some original and unusual Christ Figure portrayals. Robert Detweiler writes that "The novelist bears no direct responsibility to the church nor to his Christian heritage to present a figure sympathetic to the Christian dogma; the critic who attempts to interpret the figure in terms of faith and doctrine does so at his own risk" (Detweiler). Anime creators take liberal use of the term and have created



Christ Figures that are very different from traditional depictions. In episode nine of *Devilman: Crybaby*, the main character, in demon form, spreads out his arms in a crucifixion pose and bears attacks from people, while lamenting that everyone can't get along (Choi). Light Yagami from *Death Note* is more of an ironic Christ Figure, as he gains the ability to kill anyone whose name he writes in a special journal. This power goes to his head and he sees himself as a messiah, protecting the weak by killing off all criminals. Many characters such as Kenshin from *Rurouni Kenshin* refuse to kill, as they only want to protect their friends, or even humanity in general, often at the cost of their own health. This could also echo Japan's post-WWII pacifism as well.

Shogo Makishima from *Psycho Pass* is one of the more complex Christ Figures in anime. He resides in a society where an advanced network called the Sybil System analyzes every person's mental state, and can arrest or even kill people before they commit crimes, similar to *Minority Report*. Makishima serves as an antagonist to the main characters, who act as enforcers for the Sybil System (Wada). Most people are seemingly content with the system (or at least ignorant to any other possibility), but Makishima seeks to give people back their freedom. He is undetectable by the Sybil System, and uses this advantage to carry out terrorist attacks against said system. Like Satan tempting Adam and Eve, Makishima emphasizes the importance of books and knowledge. His white hair and enigmatic, impenetrable personality give Makishima a supernatural aura, an aura that exudes its own gravitational pull, drawing others toward him. Despite his white hair, Makishima is far from pure, as he is seemingly remorseless about killing people to further his goals. Makishima dies, but his killer abandons the Sybil System, so in this way Makishima has gained a disciple. Youtuber SparkyOnPC explains the symbolism when Makishima dies, "Makishima is injured in all the right places, chased down for his ideals in his white attire, and crucified atop a hill. The full moon and the crucifixion posture which is

followed by darkness and death completes the crucifixion” (Christ, Antichrist). In a scene before he dies, Makishima descends a spiral stairway in his first confrontation with his soon to be killer Kogami. The staircase is a common depiction in anime, representing Jacob’s Ladder. Is Makishima the Antichrist, trying to destroy society? Or is he striving to bring about salvation? Like much of what anime has to say about religion, it’s up to interpretation.

*Angel’s Egg* is both a rare serious contemplation on Christianity in anime, but also another example of the pluralistic viewpoint that predominates. Created by Mamoru Oshii, the same writer as the original *Devilman* manga, the film is an abstract piece with only sparse dialogue. While many anime contain Christian symbols or themes, *Angel’s Egg* directly engages theological ideas, albeit still in an unorthodox manner. In the film, a man with white hair carrying a cross constructed of metal meets a small girl (Oshii). The two travel alone through an abandoned city adorned with crumbling Gothic architecture. Ghostly fishermen run about, throwing their phantasmic spears fruitlessly against the shadows of giant fish (Christian symbol) swimming along the decaying walls. One way to view this is that the ghostly fishermen are religious followers who can’t leave their religion, and the shadow fish are showing that religion has no substance. The girl is very protective of an egg she carries with her everywhere, and at one point, the man takes his cross and shatters the egg, revealing it to be empty. This could be interpreted as science proving religion to be hollow. After this, the girl runs into the water and apparently drowns, but more eggs rise up, and she appears as a statue on a floating eye-like structure in the sky. The final shot zooms out on the planet, which is shaped like an upturned ark. Through these and other visual symbols, *Angel’s Egg* appears to be saying one of two possibilities: religion is a false promise, or the exact opposite. So although *Angel’s Egg* is in

many ways an example of anime using Christianity in a symbolic sense, it is also saying something thoughtful on the subject, without committing one way or the other.

There are thousands of anime in existence, so Christianity could be portrayed in a near infinite number of ways. Despite that, certain common themes occur throughout. Bearing in mind the history of Christianity in Japan as well as Japan's pluralist zeitgeist explains how many depictions come to be. Christ figures, apocrypha, and the black/white wing dichotomy resolve even more. It is also important to not separate Christianity from Western culture in general, as they are often modified in similar ways. Anime manages to transform Christianity into a unique blend of cross cultural phenomena that can be deftly used to confirm or subvert a myriad of expectations.

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