

Christianity in Anime:

How Japan's History with the Christian Faith Has Influenced Its Depictions in Anime

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project will be to study the influence of Christianity on Japanese media in order to understand why Christian themes and imagery are so prevalent in anime, despite the fact that such a small portion of Japan's population identifies as Christian. To do this, I will study the history of Christianity in Japan through primary and secondary sources, placing particular emphases on the ant-Christian policies of the Tokugawa shogunate as well as Western countries' influence on Japan post-World War II. I will also research the history of Japanese animation and view some well-known anime series, analyzing them for Christian-influenced themes and images. This deep analysis combined with the preceding research will provide a more nuanced, informed understanding of where these themes come from and why they are so often depicted in anime.

Introduction

Christianity was first popularized in Japan mid sixteenth century, most notably by Japanese author and former Zen monk Fukansai Habian who converted to Christianity and refuted Buddhism in his famous Jesuit text *Myōtei Mondō*.¹ Japanese Christian discourse continued to flourish until around 1613 when the Tokugawa shogunate's persecution of Christians and ban on Catholicism which caused various Japanese Christian public figures, including Habian, to apostatize.

This persecution continued to some extent up until 1871 when Emperor Meiji introduced freedom of religion, giving Christians the right to legally congregate for the first time in over two and a half centuries. However, this did not change the fact that many Japanese citizens continued to view Christianity as a foreign, invasive entity. In the years leading up to World War II, there was a total of approximately three hundred thousand Christians living in Japan (about one half of a percent of Japan's population). And while the Religious Bodies Law of 1940 officially recognized Christianity one of Japan's three religions, propaganda during the war "helped fan this flame of suspicion and even hatred through posters, newspapers, radio, and the schools."² Even though the passing of this law may have increased Japan's tolerance for Christianity, the actual population of Japanese Christians remained relatively small.

This hesitance to adopt the new faith was largely influenced by a historical reliance on Shinto and Buddhism. The Christian reliance on a personal God and the emphasized duality between good and evil caused many Japanese people of the time to feel alienated by the religion and led them to view it as a strange, foreign force.³ Despite the huge amount of American

¹ Fukansai Habian, *Myōtei Mondō* (1605).

² Russell L. Durgin, "Christianity in Postwar Japan," *Far Eastern Survey* 22, no. 2 (1953): 13.

³ Patrick Drazen, *Holy Anime! Japan's View of Christianity*. (Hamilton Books, 2017), 47-9.

influence on Japan post World War II, this general skepticism toward Christianity persisted, and while many Japanese people have now adopted some Western traditions, such as the idea of having Christian weddings, only about one percent of Japan's current population is made up of practicing Christians.

Related Work

Part of the reason I'm interested in doing this research is due to the fact that there is currently an extremely small amount of academic writing on anime as it relates to Christianity. Many of the articles I found while conducting the preliminary research for this project were nonacademic sources published for general audiences without any peer review. One of the few academic sources I found that connected these two concepts was the article "Anime, Manga and Christianity: A Comprehensive Analysis" by Adam Barkman. Barkman argues that anime should be more widely viewed as a valid topic to study in order to piece together some of Japan's worldviews, including those on religion. He specifically focuses on how Japanese society's views of Christianity are represented in manga and anime. He goes on to claim that many interpretations of Christianity in anime are not viewed as Christian because Japanese artists often portray the religion through a pluralist lens, and this is something that many Christians see as heretical.

In addition to taking notice of just how little academic writing there is on this topic, I was also inspired to do this project because of a research paper I wrote in Dr. Amir Hussain's Comparative Theology course. In that paper, I compared the Buddhist and Christian themes and imagery in the 1998 anime series *Cowboy Bebop*. While doing research for that paper, I first noticed just how prevalent Christian themes were in anime as a whole and just how little academic writing had been published in order to analyze and interpret these themes. This led me

to ask the question: why are the Christian themes and imagery so popular in anime, and how can we use Japan's history with the Christianity to understand how we interpret its representation in this artform?

Methods

Historical Context

My research will begin with a comprehensive examination into the origins of Christian and anti-Christian thought in Japan. In order to carry out this study, I will read primary sources that are generally considered essential texts in the history of Christianity within Japan. These sources include James Baskind and Richard Bowring's English translation of Fukansai Habian's *Myōtei Mondō, The Myōtei Dialogues*; excerpts from the Toyotomi Hideyoshi's 1587 Limit on the Propagation of Christianity, an edict that limited Christian missionaries' actions in Kyūshū; excerpts from Expulsion of Missionaries, an edict by Hideyoshi which banned Christian missionaries from Kyūshū;⁴ excerpts from the Sakoku Edict of 1635, a decree by the Tokugawa shogunate intended to eliminate the influence of foreign countries on Japan;⁵ and "Christianity in Postwar Japan," a 1953 article published by the American Institute of Pacific Relations as an overview of the pro-Christian movements in Japan immediately following World War II.⁶

There are other primary sources that I am considering using for my research which have not yet been translated to English. Part of this project may include hiring someone to serve as a translator and researcher to help deal with these sources. This will ensure that the information

⁴ David J. Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History: The Dawn of History to the Late Eighteenth Century: A Documentary History*. (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996), 196-7.

⁵ Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History*, 221-2.

⁶ Durgin, "Christianity," 13-18.

collected in this project is not skewed or biased in any way to favor ideas from Western sources or ones that Western scholars deemed worthy of English translations.

Analyzing the Anime

In order to analyze the effects that these historical events have had on anime as a whole, I have selected some anime series that are known for their Christian imagery or themes. These series are Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, Shinichirō Watanabe's *Cowboy Bebop*, Watanabe's *Samurai Champloo*, Yū Kō's *Chrono Crusade*, Noriko Takao's *Saint Young Men*, and Tomokazu Tokoro's *Haibane Renmei*. While many of these series do not actually feature Christianity in the form of a religion within their stories, they all contain themes and images that can be tied to Christianity, either literally or via symbolism.

Title	Total Number of Episodes	Average Episode Runtime	Platform to View Anime
Chrono Crusade	27	24 minutes	Funimation
Cowboy Bebop	26	24 minutes	Netflix
Haibane Renmei	13	25 minutes	Amazon
Neon Genesis Evangelion	26	24 minutes	Netflix
Saint Young Men	2	26 minutes	DVD
Samurai Champloo	26	24 minutes	Funimation

Total runtime of all series: 2,897 minutes (48 hours and 17 minutes)

I will have a team composed of myself and five research assistants who will be viewing these anime series. There will be three groups of two, and each group will be assigned two series to watch and analyze. The first group will be assigned *Chrono Crusade* and *Saint Young Men*, the second group will be assigned *Cowboy Bebop* and *Haibane Renmei*, and the third group will be assigned *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Samurai Champloo*.

Each group will watch twelve episodes of their assigned anime per week. (This means that the first and second groups will finish collecting their data before the third group.) Each of the research assistants will have lists of both Christian themes and images to take note of if they appear in the anime they are watching. At the end of each week, I will compile and analyze these notes within the context of Japan's history with Christianity.

Expected Results

While previous analyses and articles have identified Christian images and themes in anime, my aim is to analyze these concepts and directly trace them back to the historical events that influenced them. While some of these events may have occurred multiple centuries, their lingering effects continue to impact Japanese society's attitude toward and understanding of foreign countries and religions. Japanese sentiments of Christianity, positive or negative, have no doubt bled over into the art produced in the country, and this includes anime.

By the time I have completed this research, I expect to have made connections from Christian concepts within anime to the greater events and ideas that inspired them. I will be able to use this data to identify common themes across all of the series analyzed that can then be used to identify and categorize themes in another anime in order to form a general idea of how Japanese Christian and anti-Christian ideas have influenced the artform.

Conclusion

There is currently a strange lack of academic writing on how Christianity is depicted within the context of anime—despite huge amount of Christian imagery in anime that many people outside of the world of academia have taken note of—and even less on how these depictions of Christianity have been influenced by Japan's turbulent and violent history with the religion. However, this topic deserves much more academic attention than it has received due to the insight it could give on how historical Christian and anti-Christian discourse has continued in Japan through the lens of popular culture.

In order to identify and analyze said discourse, myself and a team of researchers will view six anime series that have been noted for their heavy use of Christian themes and imagery. After identifying where and how these concepts appear in the series, I will use the research I have done on the history of Christianity in Japan in order to identify similarities and differences between Japanese discourse on Christianity in anime and the events in Japanese history that have led Japanese Christianity to be in the state it is today. This analysis will allow me to write a research paper that identifies and categorizes the different ways in which Christianity is portrayed in anime and how this has been influenced by historical events.

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Samurai Champloo. Directed by Shinichirō Watanabe. Written by Shinji Obara. Fuji TV, 2004-2005.

Cowboy Bebop. Directed by Shinichirō Watanabe. Written by Keiko Nobumoto. TV Tokyo, 1998.

Budget

Total Budget Period: June 5, 2022 – August 6, 2022

Week 1

Resource	Cost	Description
Funimation Subscription	\$11.98	Platform on which to view <i>Samurai Champloo</i> and <i>Chrono Crusade</i> (2-month subscription)
Netflix Subscription	\$27.98	Platform on which to view <i>Cowboy Bebop</i> and <i>Neon Genesis Evangelion</i> (2-month subscription)
Haibane Renmei Digital Copy	\$17.99	Cost of a digital copy on Amazon
Saint Young Men Blu-Ray	\$9.48	Cost of physical copy on Amazon, since no digital copy is available
Research Head Wages	\$255	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis plus 8 hours of compiling and analysis
Research Assistant 1 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 2 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 3 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 4 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 5 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Total	\$997.43	

Week 2

Resource	Cost	Description
Research Head Wages	\$255	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis plus 8 hours of compiling and analysis
Research Assistant 1 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 2 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 3 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 4 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 5 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Total	\$930	

Week 3

Resource	Cost	Description
Research Head Wages	\$255	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis plus 8 hours of compiling and analyzing notes
Research Assistant 1 Wages	\$60	Minimum wage for 4 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 2 Wages	\$60	Minimum wage for 4 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 3 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 4 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 5 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Total	\$780	

Week 4

Resource	Cost	Description
Research Head Wages	\$255	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis plus 8 hours of compiling and analyzing notes
Research Assistant 3 Wages	\$37.50	Minimum wage for 2.5 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 4 Wages	\$37.50	Minimum wage for 2.5 hours of viewing and analysis
Research Assistant 5 Wages	\$135	Minimum wage for 9 hours of viewing and analysis
Total	\$465	

Week 5

Resource	Cost	Description
Research Head Wages	\$165	Minimum wage for 3 hours of viewing and analysis plus 8 hours of compiling and analyzing notes
Research Assistant 5 Wages	\$45	Minimum wage for 3 hours of viewing and analysis
Total	\$210	

Weeks 6-9

Resource	Cost	Description
Research Head Wages	\$1,200	Minimum wage for 80 hours of analyzing notes and synthesizing a research paper
Total	\$1,200	

Grand Total: \$4,582.43