

Religious Relativization through Anime in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract: *The anime phenomenon conquers the world through the wise philosophy and mesmerizing art style that it combines, gaining a growing number of fans from all over the world and of all ages. The effect of anime on the mentality of fans is becoming easier to notice. Religious truths are presented extremely relatively and diverse in anime, and this causes, over time, a change in the mentality of societies. This article discusses and exemplifies how religious relativization is influenced and sustained by anime in the post-truth era. To reinforce the ideas exposed, there are presented interviews with anime fans from several countries, whose answers are interpreted functionally and framed theoretically. How does such a media product affect religions, since its fandom has grown? Is there any way that this relativization sustained by anime helps religion and the world as a whole? (What) is the press reporting on these things?*

Keywords: *anime, religion, interviews, interreligious dialogue, media and religion, post-truth*

1. Anime and the post-truth era

Society is continuously evolving. It is continuously developing, metamorphosing, getting closer to the truth. We could even say that we have always lived in a pre-truth era, always progressing to get closer to the truth. But what we tend to notice is that we live in the post-truth, and it is visible both personally and generally. I live in the period 'post-' what I considered ten years

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ago to be true. This is normal when we talk about humanity, which is in a continuous transcendental process. That is what motivates us to create. And anime is a product of creation, so we could say, it is a product of the personal post-truth of the author, of his self-developing, his transcending of previous beliefs into creating a better philosophy of life. But it is also a product of the way the author is influenced by the society's post-truth, by how he perceives it.

Animes were created in the same period as Einstein's theory of relativity. Since then, many media products have become relativistic. Relativisation and hyper-emotionality are usually stated as being characteristics of the post-truth era. Anime phenomenon presents both these features. Therefore, we ask ourselves: are animes influenced by post-truth? Or do they rather create it?

Society is in a continuous process of becoming. Nowadays, anime is displayed on trains, planes, it is even used in political campaigns ('USR Tineret' Facebook page used a poll in anime fight style, in the campaign for the 2020 local elections in Bucharest), etc. Moreover, many people have declared on Facebook that their religious view is 'anime' or 'Haruhi', or other anime deities.

2. Non-religious, religious, relative, and prophetic anime. The press' approach

In the beginning, however, anime had nothing to do with religion. The first Japanese cartoons we recall are Katsudō Shashin (1907?), and, later, Osamu Tezuka's Astro Boy (1963). Not much is known about the first one, and, about the other, it cannot be said it has too much religious content, although at the end of the series a sacrifice to save the world, according to Christ's model, is, indeed, presented.

The press relates neutrally to Astro Boy, promoting its importance in history and its beautiful story, or other related events. The oldest articles in the universal press about the Astro Boy anime and its creator were found in an archive in L.A. Times (LAT, 2021) and it presents titles like "At the Asian Art Museum, see the work of Tezuka Osamu" (2007) "Osamu Tezuka, creator of Japanese cartoon Astro Boy" (1989). Nowadays, even the Christian press posts about it (Breimeier, 2009).

Astro Boy

began in 1951 as Captain Atom in Shonen Magazine. Renamed Mighty Atom a year later, it became the flagship title of the magazine and was made as a live-action TV show in 1959 – the opening sequence of which was the first appearance of Astro Boy in animation form. A combination of Pinocchio and Superman, it became the first of many animated adaptations by Tezuka of his

own work. First shown on Fuji TV on New Year's Day 1963 but eventually moving to the NHK network, it was the first anime to be broadcast abroad. Still known around the world as *Mighty Atom* – the U.S. name change was forced by the existence of a local comic character with a similar name – it was adapted for the English language market by Fred Ladd, and its success created the first wave of anime abroad. (Clements & McCarthy, 2015, p. 161)

Because *Astro Boy* was originally broadcast on Fuji TV, I was hoping to find information about it on the Fuji News Network, but without much success.

Various anime series were serialized later, and, in the 1990s animes such as “*Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Ram*” (1992) or “*In the Beginning: The Bible Stories*” (手塚治虫の旧約聖書物語) became popular. As we can see in the original Japanese version of the page Tezuka Osamu Official, RAI, an Italian television, requested this anime (T.O.O., 2018). However, in the official English version of the site, it is written that the anime “*In the Beginning: The Bible Stories*” was created at the request of the Vatican (T.O.O., 2021). Tezuka made several animes that show the truths of various religions and this is, probably, how he was noticed by Europeans.

Regarding *Ramayana*, some sources say that it would have created a small political conflict between Japan and India because India initially considered that the adaptation of Ram in a cartoon is a desecration and from other similar reasons (Beliefnet, 2022). But given that, at that time, the Hindus believed that instead of a mosque in Ayodhya, there should be a mandir (temple), because (probably) there is where Ram was born, the anime was very welcome. The condition that India put on Japan was that some Indians should also work on creating the anime. My Indian friends told me that although it is a highly regarded anime in India, which all children watch, and it is well rated on IMDB, it could not be shown in cinemas at that time due to the conflict mentioned above, and also described in an article from *Hinduism Today* (Himalayan Academy, 1993).

Meanwhile, world-famous animes like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* have been broadcast everywhere. Although *Evangelion* has religious elements, I think they are rather influenced by the political situation between Japan and the United States of America, so I decided not to address them. Apart from the Christian robots that are presented in that post-apocalyptic world of the series,

a special type of weapon called an N2 mine, which resembles an atomic bomb but emits no radiation, is often used to fight these monsters. These mines produce mushroom clouds, but the word ‘nuclear’ is never mentioned in the show even though the inspiration for the weapon is clear. The existence of nuclear weapons in the world of the show is not discussed either. The N2 mines used in the anime never successfully defeat a monster single-handedly;

the bombs are used only to halt its movement before the piloted robots finish the mission. It is somewhat ironic that N2 mines (and perhaps, by extension, nuclear weapons) fail to win battles despite their destructive power, while human-operated machines are the technology that saves the day. One interpretation is that human might is more powerful than nuclear weaponry, an uplifting idea in light of the helplessness felt in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the War. (Islam, 2015)

So, even if it is a very good anime, since its content is highly related to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we will not approach it in this study. Akira excels at this chapter (atomic bomb influences) too. On the other hand, animes like Dragon Ball or Naruto, which are not negatively influenced by any political events, could be discussed a lot, but it goes beyond the scope of this study.

This millennium, more and more animes present fascinating religious relativisms. Here I discuss ‘The Promised Neverland’ (2019-2021), which had great success in the first season, in particular. In the second season, many fans posted on social media that they were dissatisfied because the action was too compressed at the end. However, in this second season, Emma and Mujika work together to save the children from the plantations where they were raised, so that their brains can be eaten by monsters. Emma manages to make a new covenant with the monsters, who, after drinking Mujika's blood, can live without eating humans. Thus, through the actions of the two characters, we can see a metaphor of Christ's soteriological work, personified here by two women: Emma – the human and Mujika – the superior being, who unite their wills in that work of salvation of mankind.

Between 2006-2020, the anime ‘Code Geass’ ran in several seasons and many films. In the 21st episode of the last season, these three books are displayed side by side for a second: Ragnarøk, Akasha, and Kollektives Unbewusstes. These three books are the basis of anime's religious philosophy. However, we can consider it mind-blowing to see together the eschatology of northern European shamanism, the ether of Hindu philosophy, and the collective unconscious of Jung in an anime about a prince of Great Britain, which is a Christian country. The discussion about the compatibility between these four great philosophies can go on forever, but now I will only say that it exists, and I will explain it in a further study.

These things are not exposed in the press, even on Anime News Network we have neutral articles about ‘Code Geass’. Those articles are about the releases of the new seasons/movies/video games related to the series (Anime News Network, 2021).

Regarding other successful animes such as ‘Fruits Basket’, which features a jealous goddess, the press has the same neutral way to approach it.

For example, Aniradioplus posts articles about adapting the anime into a stage play (Beltrano, 2021).

Fuji News Network publishes slightly different anime-related articles. It often posts about when the new New Year Anime Cards will be released and, in particular, about products with anime characters on them, sold without copyright. It seems that even for a simple cake with characters from Demon Slayer you can get a fine in Japan (FNN, 2021).

Japan Today writes or collects from various other sites, the most serious articles about anime and society, as there you can find about scholarships for anime schools or other such information (Baseel, 2021). Still, nothing about religion.

Therefore, as we can see, the press has remained roughly the same in the post-truth era, in the case of anime, although the mangas are published in magazines with all their wonderful, exciting, and diverse content. Today's manga stories could become tomorrow's myths, contributing to the perpetuation of the post-truth and relativization of religion, society, humanity, and the world as a whole.

There is, however, a category of anime with a religious function that is widely discussed in the press, namely, that of 'prophetic animes'. We can see on various press sites (DayDayNews, 2020) that 33 years ago, the anime Akira predicted the pandemic we are living in at this moment and the fact that the Olympics will take place in Tokyo in 2020. Also, other animes like Black Bullet, which was broadcast in 2014, based on a manga from 2011, prophesied the pandemic from this period. In this anime, action is placed in 2021 and it is related to saving the world from the pandemic, The whole anime is about fighting a parasitic virus that turns humans into monsters in 2021. We certainly can't say that the pandemic was known beforehand, but these authors probably received the grace of prophecy, an important ability to access the will of the transcendent.

3. The Transcendent in anime

In anime, the Transcendent is exposed in various forms, among which we mention:

A. The personal Transcendent:

- As it is exposed in the sacred books: Ramayana, Saint Onii-san, ShamanKing;
- As King: Seven Deadly Sins;
- As Woman: FruitsBasket, Madoka, Naruto;

- Human as Deity: Kami-Sama Hajimemashite, Noragami, or those with God-Complex: DeathNote, PlatinumEnd;
- Personified animal: FairyTail(cat).

B. The impersonal Transcendent:

- As the forces of nature: Totoro;
- As Divine Attributes: DeathNote, TanyatheEvil;
- As the Collective Unconscious: Code Geass, ShamanKing.

Usually, many of these concepts are merging when it is created the religious philosophy of an anime.

4. What do the anime aficionados say? How does it affect them?

To see how these relativisms affect fans, I chose a few people to ask them. This was more of a case study than an interview or questionnaire. The following questions were answered by the approached fans:

- How do you relate to the way the divine is presented in anime?
- Do you think that animes have influenced your relationship with the sacred?
- Do you think that anime can be a starting point for interreligious dialogue?

At the first question from above, the subjects unanimously confessed that when they were young they related to the sacred as their parents taught them and that now their relationship with the sacred has changed. The atheists said that they do not relate to the images of the transcendent that can be seen in animes, except as a cultural vision. For those interested in spirituality, those theophanies in animes were like a kind of icons that abet meditation.

To the second question, I had the most diverse answers, some of the subjects saying yes, others no, but then clearly telling me their transformations and later realizing that they were influenced by anime at least unconsciously when it comes to spirituality.

To the last question, all the subjects answered unanimously that yes, anime can serve as a track for interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

To these questions, in some cases, various ancillary questions were added, which I considered appropriate in that context. Subjects were free to answer as many or few words as they felt appropriate, so some answers are very long (over 10 pages) and others barely add up to one paragraph.

I mention the fact that all the 11 researched subjects are people I have known for at least 3 years and whose relationship with the sacred I have been following all this time.

Excerpts from fan responses, which I consider relevant:

- A. N., 30 years old, philosopher, Romania, atheist:

Asking in the interview if he would prefer a woman savior, the subject replied: “I am an atheist, I do not want any savior, but now that you say, I think Madoka is easier to accept because she is cute and aesthetic. In anime, I saw for the first time many diverse characters together. It promotes tolerance and interculturalism”. The subject is a fan of “Madoka Magica” and “Haruhi”, both female deity characters.

If Haruhi is a proclaimed deity, Madoka only takes over the soteriological function by offering heaven to the magical girls. He told me that he wished Madoka had made her transfiguring wish in such a way that there would be no need for magical girls, but that he was glad she saved them.

That person, although he proclaims himself an atheist since he watched these animes tattooed Madoka's heart on his arm and wrote himself a manga with magical little girls. I definitely see a sacred approach in his case. I identify at least the desire to be able to feel the transcendent in his life. I have known this person for 25 years.

- S. D. age: 27, biologist, India, atheist:

“Of course, anime helps people to turn over a new leaf and become a better person. They give us the chance to interact with people from all over the world and know what to talk about”.

- A. D. 23 years old programmer, India, Hindu:

“I think that animes can make us being more interested in searching for the common good together with people from other cultures and religions. I think we all (religious, atheists, from a country or other) should be able to find common paths to the supreme good and I think anime can somehow help with this opening”.

- O. A. 29 years old workman, Netherlands, Christian:

“Naruto is an important part of my life, He is my link to God. All that is good exists in it. It helped me relate better to life and friendship no matter the differences”.

- E. B. age: 27, programmer, Romania, areligious:

“Indeed, in Dragon Ball and Naruto were exposed many religious things: God, universes and spheres and quotes... Seeing so many different ideas, I think, unconsciously helped me to be able to break away from the family church and find my own spiritual path.”

- S. T. 22 years old, psychopedagogue, Romania, orthodox, former practitioner, passionate about witchcraft and Buddhism:

“Many times in anime, the supreme god is accepted as a righteous being, who has mercy on people, whom he helps, who can help people understand the role of a supreme deity. This also applies to my case, especially in animes where justice is done.

Animes helped me understand human's need for the sacred, especially through symbolism, which seems like a code imprinted in man's archetype. In animes, there are many examples of the need for the sacred and the organization of the sacred in religions, which brought me closer to mysticism”.

- I. T. age: 30, programmer, Romania, passionate about Hinduism and Taoism:

“Hmmm... I never thought about anime and divinity, I mean I always considered them SF, but, you're right, I often find spiritual lessons, tips for being a better person, and religious elements like Yin & Yang that link me to spirituality in a way I can relate to”.

- P. K. 27 years old psychologist, Romania, orthodox Christian:

“Anime developed my imagination, I saw different universes, different relationship types, different reactions and I can say that they made me more creative and more open to other people even to those with different traditions. They made me unite principles that I thought were different, to understand that we are all human, and we all try to do the same thing. They helped me to shape my idea of relating to a personal God because that way it's easier to relate to certain values”.

- A. B. age: 24, psychologist, Romania, non-practitioner orthodox Christian, open to New Age:

“So I think anime is a cultural product and culture is 100% related to religion and from that point of view I could see how anime could promote communication between religions.

Now that I think about it, many of my conversations with friends and colleagues about religion started based on Naruto's content, and I like that it promotes a mentality opened to the New Age”.

- A. M. 25 years old, teacher, Romania, orthodox theologian:

“Well, what can I say, you saw The Shield of the Trinity in Bleach and the fight in D Gray Man. These did not influence me much, but Death Note and that little boy with bones adopted by Orochimaru who said that ‘if God exists, why does he let this happen?!’, kind of made me wonder. It's like they somehow helped me to get past my madness. Since I was a seminary student, I’ve started to think that everything is a sin. At one point, I couldn't take it anymore. These animes helped me to have the courage to become more myself”.

I have been observing this person for the last 6 years. 4 years ago, a change in his behavior occurred. He has become much more casual and showed the problems he was facing inside. From an early age, he watched anime until, during the theological seminary, he concluded that, this might be a sin. Finding out that I wrote my bachelor's thesis in theology on anime, three years ago he started to address this topic in our discussions. In the meantime, I recommended him many animes and he started watching them, realizing that there is no sin in that, at all. Animes like “The Promised Neverland” changed his existential paradigm.

After watching this anime, his behavior calmed down, he began to think differently and take proper action. It might have not influenced his relationship with the personal transcendent as the ones he mentions in the quote above, but The Promised Neverland also made him reconsider his idea of the sacred and the mundane and change his way of thinking and existing. I found that all these animes naturalized his relationship with God and his relationship to his own self.

5. The Christian view of anime

Searching on the internet I had the surprise to find out about this amazing site, Beneath the Tangles, where you can find anime recommendations for Christian viewers and even a guide for Christian otakus (B.T., 2014). Moreover, there is a list of 12 days of Christmas anime recommendations that I followed in December.

On the Methodist Church websites posts about “Shaman King and the power of tradition” can be found. Comparisons between ghosts, saints, ancestors, the Holy Spirit, and the protective spirits in the Shaman King anime are made in this article (Webb, 2021) and it is awesome.

Also, there are various anime-related posts on Jesuit sites, including discussions about “Shaman King and human dignity”, based on the analysis of the main character, Yoh (Barry, 2021). On Jesuits sites, you can even find invitations to watch anime together with Jesuit students and maybe even with (future) Jesuit monks (Bilgere, 2018).

However, if anime leads to religious relativization, why do the Churches approach these media and cultural products and why do they appreciate them? I think that the best answer regarding this matter is given by another interviewed subject:

- Ş. D. 32 years old, church singer, Romanian theologian:

“My conception of God is developed through anime. Here I can see Him in His works. That's how I learned to be a true friend and a fighter in life, and I think God is glad because of it. Therefore, I am waiting for my son to grow up, so we can watch anime together to praise the Lord. Anime can clearly contribute to interreligious dialogue. The concepts there can be accepted by anyone. They are as universal as Christ.”

Therefore, we can see that the religious relativization sustained by anime opens: the atheists to spirituality, even to agnosticism; those with bigoted tendencies towards naturalness in their relationship with the sacred, which prevents terrorism; and people, in general, towards interreligious and intercultural dialogue, promoting the supreme good.

Conclusions

Some animes promote religious relativism, which is a good and useful thing, so religions appreciate anime. „Metaphysics seeks to reach the absolute truth, religion – the supreme good” (Dancă, 2015, p. 37). If we try to combine them, we might, someday, reach both of these aims. But to accomplish this, some relativization might be needed.

Relativisation occurs when there is a need for it and then it is welcomed. In this world of compulsive religious practices, it has the potential to lead us to a natural relationship with the sacred. The Jesuits are adamant about the use of reason in faith. Regardless of our religious beliefs, we should follow their advice. Christians promote anime, a phenomenon that also promotes a rational approach to faith. Even if anime promotes many religious relativisms, it is good and representative of our time.

Animes are not only influenced by the post-truth era, but they also create post-truth elements such as religious relativization, which is relevant to our current social needs and is welcomed.

Nonetheless, there is no need for this process, which is induced and sustained (also) by anime, to be reported in the press. When it comes to the information it publishes about anime, the press has not changed in the post-truth epoch. And it is wiser to stay that way because if it remains neutral to religions, it will attract many readers.

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