

The Religious Impact that Anime Has

It is no secret that anime has a worldwide audience with its most popular works being translated to hundreds of different languages. With anime being a Japanese form of media we can expect that with the large outreach of anime there would also be a large outreach of Japanese culture and religion along with it. While most anime are not blunt with its portrayal of Japanese religion it is still prevalent. Many anime simply draw aspects of the author's daily life which may incorporate religion with no fault. While others heavily include religion to tell their story and without it the story would not be fathomable. We can take an in depth look at two different popular animes; Kimetsu no Yaiba (Demon Slayer) and Neon Genesis Evangelion, while also looking at the direct impact that anime has had on those who regularly watch anime across the world, to determine to what aspect does Anime have on spreading religion and culture.

Kimetsu no Yaiba, more commonly known as Demon Slayer, was originally a Japanese Manga released from 2016 to 2020, and later turned into an Anime starting in 2019. In October of 2020 a movie sequel was released being the number one in the world for box office revenue and soon passed Spirited Away as the highest grossing movie in Japan (Green, 2021). Demon Slayer is brimming with both religious and cultural aspects of Japan, from the split rock to the art of the sword. Demon Slayer is set in Taishō Era Japan, a time period where Japan was facing heavy western influence. This meant that while you still see classic Japanese structures, like temples, you also see the emergence of bustling industrial cities. Throughout the series you can see the distaste for this portrayed in some characters. Throughout the series we can compare the actual title of Demon Slayer to that of the real world Shaman that has many comparisons between Japanese Buddhism and Shinto practices. While our main character, Tanjiro, wasn't

born into being a Demon Slayer he would later find out that his father would regularly perform kagura, god entertainment, as his ancestors had done for generations.

We also see, much like Japanese shamans believe, that Demon Slayers are portrayed with birthmarks somewhere on their body that signify what they will be later in life. Maybe the most direct comparison is with the actual demons and their relations to Kami, Oni, and Yokai. Throughout Japanese tradition supernatural figures have taken many forms, including animalistic and anthropomorphic bodies. Kami are meant to be a sort of god-like figure that is nature. In the Kamakura and Muromachi time (1185–1573), Shugendo mountain asceticism, which is the Buddhist practice in the mountains as a way to better connect with nature, became popular in the Kumano Mountains, and ascetics traveled to villages, performing rituals for purification for evil influences, similar in that way to the Demon Slayer Corps (Green, 2021).

The other aspect of Demon Slayer that is as important as the actual demons, are the swords wielded. Every Demon Slayer has their own unique sword style that is treated as the most important part of them, much like Japanese Samurai. We have learned from the Suzuki text that “The Sword is the soul of the Samurai” and this is properly paralleled in Demon Slayer. In Demon Slayer we see Tanjiro go through rigorous training to earn his sword. The sword becomes an extension of he who wields it. Each sword is also deeply connected with the individual by changing color based on who it is a part of. Much like how we see Samurai with Zen and Buddhism being calm and precious in their actions this is the same for Demon Slayer. The majority of high level Demon Slayers were calm and orderly while we can see newcomers during the training arch fail as they lose themselves. We do see Inosuke succeed for sometime by rushing into action without thinking, but we also see fail and have to learn to properly think about what he’s doing and think about the safety of his friends. While we dont see anyone commit Seppuku in the show, we do see those who have fallen accept their death peacefully much in the way of the Samurai. Overall Demon Slayer is a very popular anime that has been

able to spread Japanese values and traditions in a fun, easy to watch form factor that is watched by millions.

Switching to a more obvious religious aspect of Japanese media we look at Neon Genesis Evangelion. Evangelion is an older anime than Demon Slayer, first airing in 1995 as a mecha anime. Taking place in a fictional 2015 Japan, after an event called The Second Impact, there are large beings called Angels attacking earth. Skyscraper sized mechs called Evangelions are piloted by children to fight these Angels and protect the research base holding a creature named Lilith who is depicted nailed to cross. Just from this short description the deep tie to Christianity can be seen with this anime. This is in contrast to the somewhat more subtle integration with Demon Slayer and also with the contrast of this being a religion that is not very popular in Japan. Evangelion could be seen as a way for the creator, Hideaki Anno, to expose more Japanese people to Christianity. The Evangelion name of the mecha units refers directly to the Christian Gospel or good news. While Angels and the names Adam and Lilith are direct connections to Christianity as well.

Skipping to the end of the series we can see the main character Shinji be transformed into “the source of all souls” which is closely related to the Tree of Life or God in classic Christianity. Shinji also tries to recreate the father son relationship that was lost as a child. According to the New Testament the father son relationship is the strongest bond possible. Throughout the series the bond is shown in terrible condition as the father only wishes to use Shinji as he is the only person to pilot the Eva mech unit. If there was another option he would use that instead and forget his son, which they actually end up developing a dummy pilot for just this. From this we can see that “This is placed in stark contrast to the relationship of Christ to the Lord in the New Testament, and more broadly the emphasis on the importance of the father/son relationship throughout all Biblical tradition.” (Carpentieri, 2020). While these are contradictions to Christianity, the obvious direct contradiction shows the actual relation the series has to Christianity. Along with this the Cross is often depicted in Evangelion. Misato, another main

character, wears the cross around her neck to remember being in the Second Impact, while Lilith is depicted as crucified on the cross similar to Jesus.

The entire story telling of Evangelion is an epic telling of religious experiences while having the mental health struggles of an adolescent. Whether these two topics are supposed to correlate with each other is up for debate. It can be seen that religion is woven directly into the themes of Evangelion.

After looking at these two anime we can take an in depth look at how these religious depictions influence their audience across the world. There was a study at the University of Eastern Finland that did exactly this. This entailed finding avid anime watchers from across the globe and asking them probing questions to see how their personal lives or ideals were affected by anime. Everyone in this survey was found via social media and all above the age of 18. Questions were left open ended to allow them to answer the questions to their full extent citing any and everything they wished.

Asking the question of whether there was an anime that was formative to their religious beliefs there was a common answer. While none of them have gone to devote their life to a religion because of anime, it has given some a more positive outlook on life and spirituality. They referenced anime such as Fullmetal Alchemist and Kenpuu Denki Berserk/Berserk. Neither of these shows would be considered religious in their own hand, but the fact that the overall themes of the shows paced onto the viewer shows the potential of spreading religion through the media. There was a followup question of whether there was an anime that taught them more about any religion and they all agreed. This time two religious anime were cited, they being Saint Oniisan/Saint Young Men and Natsume Yuujinchou/Natsume's Book of Friends. Both shows have heavy emphasis on religion, with Saint Young Men having its focus on Christianity and Buddhism while Natsume's Book of Friends focuses on Japan and Shintoism. Even though this is true the exact usage of these religions varies from being used to make a

joke to the use of real-life references. Questions like these would go on to assess how much of an impact anime and manga have had on the individual's life. (SAURAMAA, 2021)

Analyzing the data the author came to the conclusion that, even though the odds of someone becoming devoted to a religion because of an anime is very unlikely, the possibility of someone becoming more aware and more open to different cultures and religions is quite likely. Even saying that “they stated that how they saw religion or spirituality had changed and that they understood it better thanks to them” (SAURAMAA, 2021). Everyone that was interviewed, while admittedly a small sample size, seemed to have a positive impact on them because of watching anime. This is even from those who claim to follow a religion and those who claim to not be religious at all. Being able to see the religion depicted in an interesting story better helped people understand what it was about and became more accepting of it. This isn't necessarily a new idea as there are plenty of children's shows that are made completely intended to inform them about religion. However because these are made for children they can have a negative look from adults outside of the religion seeing them as trying to brainwash their kids. This same concern can be brought up with anime, however as these shows are more intended for an older audience there isn't as much of a concern. We can also see from the research conducted that no one was brainwashed into committing their life to a religion because of an anime.

In conclusion we can see the anime can vastly differ in the type of messages and cultures depending on the show. Demon Slayer has shown traditional Japan and Buddhist ideals while still creating an interesting story that captivated audiences across the world. While Evangelion has portrayed a somewhat difficult to follow story that is heavily influenced and incorporates Christian and Biological aspects into its story. Both of these anime have been able to become world renown and adored while not tiptoeing around these religious aspects. From the study conducted at the University of Eastern Finland we can see that anime has had a positive effect on all those interviewed. Even making them more open to other cultures and

more accepting to other religions, even though none of them followed a religion because of anime. Whether these anime artists intentionally incorporate religious aspects to their art in an effort to share their beliefs, or if its unential storytelling from a familiar aspect of the artist, is yet to be known. What we can draw to is that while there are religious aspects to anime, there are little to no negative repercussions on the audience or the storytelling of them. A question I still have to ask would be how do those who dedicate their entire life see these anime? I can see a devoted monk hating the idea that their culture is being marketed and commercialized, maybe invalidating or making fun of their ideals. However I can also see that same monk grateful that their religion is reaching more audiences and while might not convince people to join his following, at least be more accepting of his practices.