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## “GROSS NATIONAL COOL”: Manga as Theological Reflection

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I have been on my guard  
not to condemn the unfamiliar  
For it is easy to miss Him  
at the turn of a civilization.  
—David Jones

*A soccer mom walks into Books-A-Million in search of manga....* Reads like the opening line of a good joke, right? But for her, or for anyone who has never encountered the world of manga, there's nothing comical about it. In fact, it is the very real and present world her teenager inhabits.

She's familiar with the mantra, "Mom, I'll be in the manga section when you're ready to go!" She knows that when he's not doing the things he must do, he's doing the things he can't help but do: reading three or four different graphic novel collections simultaneously and obsessing over when the latest issue will land on the shelf. Today, however, instead of grabbing her *caffé latte* and turning left into the familiar rows of cookbooks and magazines, she's making a detour, on her guard not to condemn, but to explore, the unfamiliar.

Just past a few rows of *Science Fiction* and another row of *Adventure Games*, *Star Wars*, and *Graphic Novels*, she turns the corner and comes headlong into a handful of boys and girls, men and women, gathered before a long row of manga graphic novels. Some sit cross-legged on the floor. (She knows what that's like, being so eager to find a certain book on the shelf and finally getting hands on it, then dropping to the aisle between shelves to start reading!) Others sink into comfy chairs or sit on the benches. All are engrossed, including her son, who is right in the middle of it all, with a book in hand and a few others in a stack next to him. "What's the draw? Why does he feel so at home here?"

What is manga anyway? Is it trash or treasure? Would Jesus read manga? For goodness' sake, I don't even know how to pronounce the word!" Questions abound for her and because I suspect she's not the first to probe for answers with either the best or

worst of intentions, I've decided to attempt a very brief explanatory exposé. Oh, and by the way, it's pronounced "MAHN GAH," like the "a" in "father."

### **"SCARAMOUCHE, SCARAMOUCHE, WILL YOU DO THE FANDANGO?"**

During the summer of 1973, when I was ten, Brian and Eddy, my two best friends in the world, gave me the ultimatum of either sitting long hours cross-legged on Brian's bedroom floor (without bathroom breaks) reading comics, or taking a hike. I was being initiated into their sacred space!

Between placing the latest issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* in its protective sheath for eternal preservation and planning our next trip to James Drug Store to scour the comic book rack (singular) for the next issue, we would listen to and memorize Queen's "Night at the Opera" album, read *Famous Monsters* magazine, and make 8mm Claymation movies. We knew "Bohemian Rhapsody" by heart years before *Wayne's World* sent it viral on *Saturday Night Live*. We were nerds when nerd wasn't cool!

To Marvel purists then, DC Comics were anathema. *Fantastic Four*. *Daredevil*. *The Incredible Hulk*—we turned their covers over slowly and with a sacred cadence as we read each word on each page, careful to evoke the power of the comic genre itself. The ink, the colors, the *onomatopoeia*<sup>1</sup> (on-uh-mat-uh-pee-uh = "Boom!" "Thud!" "Ka-Pow!"). We knew that, like the atom, great power was locked into those simple lines and boxes, great power only releasable by the reader's mind.

Sweet summers flew by, and in the summer of 1977, Eddie brought manga into our sacred chamber, and time stood still. It was like seeing a dead body for the first time. Shock and awe! First of all, the little book was unflopped. That is, manga reads right to left. The front is the back. You have to turn it over to begin reading. Unlike English, Japanese is read right to left, so Japanese comics are read in reverse order from the way our precious *Spider-Man* was typically read. This was cause enough to abandon the experiment.

Yet because Eddie's mom owned a little comic book shanty on the edge of town and he worked weekends there (we thought him wise in the ancient ways of "comic-dom") and because he convinced us we were about to enter a world where angelic art and a devilish story intertwined, we caved. It turns out that Marvel and manga were not two mutually exclusive worlds. We were captured and enraptured, even that first day, and vowed to love them both.

### **UNDERSTANDING MANGA**

Because Scott McCloud's initial experience with manga in 1982 is similar to Brian's, Eddie's, and my own, and because graphic novelist and creator of *Sin City*, Frank Miller, called him "just about the smartest guy in comics," and, too, because he's written three of the best books<sup>2</sup> anyone could read on comics, graphic novels, and manga, I default to his exceptional explanation of the power of the visual storytelling manga generates.

The only difference between his and my initial experience was that I was a fourteen-year-old high-school nerd, and he was a twenty-two-year-old recent college

graduate who had just landed a job at DC Comics (“heaven forbid!”) at New York’s Rockefeller Center, just blocks from one of the biggest Japanese bookstores in America, known as Kinokuniya. He would spend his lunch hour every day rifling through the manga shelves reading the pictures panel-by-panel, cover-to-cover, poring over the visual storytelling techniques rarely seen in American comics.

At least eight of the manga storytelling techniques McCloud found on Kino’s shelves were almost completely absent from the mainstream superhero comics he also read:

- *Iconic characters*: simple, emotive faces and figures that led to a kind of profound reader identification.
- *Genre maturity*: understanding of the unique storytelling challenges of literally hundreds of different genres including sports, business, horror, and so on.
- *Sense of place*: environmental details that trigger sensory memories and, when contrasted with iconic characters, lead to the “masking effect” (where the reader essentially becomes one with the character and enters into the sensually stimulating world the character inhabits).
- *Character designs*: wildly different face and body types and the frequent use of recurring archetypes.
- *Wordless panels*: combined with aspect-to-aspect transitions between panels; prompting readers to assemble scenes from fragmentary visual information.
- *Small real-world details*: appreciation for the beauty of the mundane and its value for connecting with readers’ everyday experiences—even in fantastic or melodramatic stories.
- *Subjective motion*: using streaked backgrounds to make readers feel like they were moving with a character, instead of just watching motion from the sidelines.
- *Emotionally expressive effects*: expressionistic backgrounds, montages, and personalized caricatures—all aimed at giving readers a window into what characters are feeling.

McCloud observed how all of these characteristics contributed to the manga experience in different ways, but as he studied his own reaction to manga and looked into manga’s role in Japanese society, he noticed a common theme, as if all the techniques were being deployed toward a single purpose: to amplify the sense of reader participation in manga, a feeling of being a part of the story, rather than simply observing the story from afar.

## A HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT OF MANGA

In 1965, *Tetsuwan Atom (Mighty Atom)* was the first weekly cartoon made for Japanese television, and it was introduced to the American market as *Astro Boy* that same year. America’s love affair with Japanese pop culture began in the 1950s with monster movies such as *Godzilla*, continued into the 1960s with television shows such as *Speed Racer* and *Gigantor*, the 1970s with video games such as *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders*, the 1980s with intricate toys such as *Voltron* and *Transformers*, and into the 1990s with the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. Yet despite the popularity of these movies, toys, and shows, Japanese manga didn’t really catch on until the 1980s when translated manga began showing up in U.S. comic book and book stores. The first blockbuster manga in America was the *Samurai Action* title *Lone Wolf and Cub*, in 1987. It sold one hundred thousand copies a month, compared to the comic *X-Men’s* four hundred thousand copies. Around the same time, however, Japanese manga producers opened publishing houses in New York and San Francisco and began large-scale distribution in America.

**FIGURE 1: A Three-Stage Model for Theological Reflection in the Reading of Manga**

| <p style="text-align: center;">Stage 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Explore theological terms, phrases, and concepts in text of manga (both dialogue and narration)</i></p>   | <p style="text-align: center;">Stage 2</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Ground theological terms and phrases in the categories of systematic theology</i></p>  | <p style="text-align: center;">Stage 3</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Compare and contrast theological language with systematic theology in theological reflection and application</i></p>  |
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| <p><i>Angel Sanctuary</i>, story and art by Kaori Yuki.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>Protagonist, Setsuna, despite his attempts to be noble, will fight anyone anytime; he ignores all authority. Why is he such a mess?</p> <p>The reason may be found with two demons from the underworld and their enemy, an insane angel.</p> <p>“One who became the bride of the demon, the</p> | <p><b>*The Doctrine of the Word of God</b><br/>How do we know that the Bible is God’s Word? Is the Bible enough for knowing what God wants us to do?</p> <p><b>*The Doctrine of God</b><br/>Can we really know God? How is God different from us? How should Christians think of Satan and demons today?</p> <p><b>*The Doctrine of Man</b></p> | <p>In a panel that appears only a few pages into <i>Angel Sanctuary</i>, interestingly enough, Yuki, the author of this volume of manga, gets us started in our Stage 3 theological reflection when he writes, “What is an angel? There are so many songs about ‘angels,’ and the phrase, ‘like an angel’ overflows in manga. But what about real angels?...Angels often have names which end in</p> |

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| <p>first wife of Adam, that incorrigible woman, the evil deeds of Lilith.”</p> <p>“Behold the messengers of the creator. They who shall pronounce sentence on the day of judgement. They are neither God nor mortal.”</p> <p>“You used to be an angel. But when you sided with the evils, you were sentenced to the most severe punishment given to the fallen. Your soul was separated from your body frozen in angel crystal...there to stay until the end of the world.”</p> <p>“But now I’ve found you at last, Alexiel, my Liege!”</p> <p>“Your soul has been reincarnated in the material world. There to train until the day your sins are gone.”</p> <p>“I’ll find you. And in that moment you are resurrected...God, angels, and yes, even mankind will be no more.”</p> | <p>What is sin? Where did it come from? Do we inherit a sinful nature from Adam?</p> <p><b>*The Doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit</b><br/>Was it necessary for Christ to die? What is the cause and nature of the atonement?</p> <p><b>*The Doctrine of the Application of Redemption</b><br/>What does it mean to be born again? What is true repentance? What is saving faith? What does it mean to be “in Christ” or “united with Christ”?</p> <p><b>*The Doctrine of the Church</b><br/>What does it mean to worship “in spirit and in truth”?</p> <p><b>*The Doctrine of the Future</b><br/>Who will be judged? What is hell? What is heaven? What will it be like to live in the new heavens and new earth?</p> | <p>‘el.’ It is said that ‘el’ has the meaning of ‘one who radiates light.’ In any case, I am most certainly not trying to portray real angels. These aren’t even angels as I imagine them to be. This is simply me inviting you to see the birth of fictional angels from my own inner space. Whatever that means.”<sup>6</sup></p> <p>Other questions raised in the quotes in Stage 1 that might be worth exploring in Stage 3 are, for example: Satsuna’s view of the nature and character of God and sin, his distorted ideas of the hierarchy of angels and demons and their powers and limitations in both heavenly and earthly realms, the idea of reincarnation in light of the doctrine of humanity and the doctrine of the future.</p> |
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Over the past decade, manga has gone from accounting for one-third of the \$70 million dollar graphic novel industry to claiming almost two-thirds of what is now a \$550 million movement. According to Senior Editor Jason Thompson at manga

powerhouse publisher VIZ, “What 20 years ago seemed too culturally specific for export has become another extension of Japan’s soft power, what journalist Douglas McGray calls its ‘Gross National Cool.’ Manga has achieved liftoff.”<sup>3</sup>

### **MANGA AS THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

Theological reflection<sup>4</sup> enables us to ascertain God’s presence and action in the world and allows us to reflect on ministry practice in light of the Christian heritage (Scripture and tradition) and the cultural context. With this in mind, one can attempt to connect the world of manga with the Christian worldview one holds by linking his or her story with others’ stories and with God’s.

This kind of theological reflection helps us become aware of how we are actually living compared to how we aspire to live; theological reflection helps us see and heal the disconnect between our beliefs and our practice. Space does not allow for a detailed explanation of the importance of exploring systematic theology for building a strong Christian foundation for all of life. Likewise, theological reflection, when practiced, proves a powerful tool to connect the narrative of a secular genre such as manga to this foundation of faith.

For the soccer mom whose questions prefaced this brief exploration into the world of Japanese comics known as manga, the twin disciplines of both also allow her a conversational bridge she might easily cross, now that she’s braved the crowded aisle of the manga section at Books-A-Million. The three-stage model for theological reflection I offer here is my own. There are many more from which to choose.

May the latest issue come early and may there always be a comfy reading chair for you as you navigate the crowded aisles among the rows of manga!

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#### NOTES

- 1 *Onomatopoeia*: the formation of a word, as cuckoo, meow, honk, or boom, by imitation of a sound made by or associated with its referent. The use of imitative and naturally suggestive words for rhetorical, dramatic, or poetic effect.
- 2 You couldn’t go wrong adding these to your reading list (all titles by Scott McCloud): *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: First HarperPerennial, 1994); *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing Art Form* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
- 3 Jason Thompson, “How Manga Conquered the U.S., a Graphic Guide to Japan’s Coolest Export.” *Wired Magazine* 15, 11. Available online at [http://www.wired.com/special\\_multimedia/2007/1511\\_ff\\_manga](http://www.wired.com/special_multimedia/2007/1511_ff_manga).
- 4 There are many wonderful books and articles on theological reflection and systematic theology available for the seeker. I offer two that I have found invaluable with both my own exploration and with my patients (as a hospital chaplain) and students (as a college professor). They are *The Art of Theological Reflection* by Patricia O’Connell Killen (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994) and *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to*

- Biblical Doctrine* by Wayne Grudem (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).
- 5 Kaori Yuki, *Angel Sanctuary*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: VIZ Media, LLC, 2004).
- 6 *Angel Sanctuary*, 29.