

# The Sex of the Angels: Hybridization of Judeo-Christian Motifs in American and Italian Mainstream Comics

CARLOTTA VACCHELLI  
*Indiana University – Bloomington*

## Introduction

My paper aims at defining the hybridization of several motifs from the Christian figurative tradition in mainstream comic books, by focusing on the analysis of three case studies: Garth Ennis' and William Simpson's *Nativity Infernal* (#60, December 1992, of the multi-author series *Hellblazer*, DC Comics), Steve Dillon's and Garth Ennis' *Preacher* (1995-2001, Vertigo), and Luca Enoch's *Gea* (1999-2007, Bonelli). A close reading of selected frames and panels of these works with an eye on the structural use of Christian mythology, allows us to identify many common aspects between the two traditions, and to trace significant considerations about the progressive embedment of Christian themes into comics, especially in American and Italian mainstream series of the Nineties and the Two-thousands. In my study I do not mean to develop a general analysis of the "tangled relationship between religion and comics" (Coody), which is already the subject of a wide tradition of comics studies.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, I intend to provide an interpretation of a limited set of meaningful episodes which appear in the latest phase of comics history, when the readership is multifaceted, and printed contents have become more tolerant of non-canonical representations, variations, and even profanations, of sacred themes. I will examine these case studies in light of the idea that, from the Nineties to the turn of the Millennium, the market for mainstream comics allowed illustrators and writers to play with and reinterpret figures and scenes from the Bible, producing a range of effects and conveying different meanings.

Specifically, I will focus on the theme of the prohibited sexual intercourse between angels and demons, followed by the birth of a creature that becomes the center of the narration. This creature is intended to destabilize and break the rules of the given storyworld, as its very existence is perceived as the result of an illicit and sacrilegious act. This angel-devil hybrid ends up representing (or symbolizing) the crucial significance of the story, becoming the fulcrum between the content of the comic book and the reader. By promoting such a character, the story implicitly asks the readers to question the complex of rules of the world(s) in which the narration takes place; furthermore, each narration presents itself as a metaphor of society, problematizing the idea of shared rules, habits, and values.

In *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal*, *Preacher*, and *Gea*, we witness the illicit falling in love between two representatives of opposed races, their consensual union, as well as the consequent pregnancy and birth of a hybrid child. Breaking the basic rule that should keep angels and devils apart operates at various levels in these works. It points to a strong criticism of the socio-political reality in which the comic books were produced, and it employs multiple figurative conventions and symbols from Christian imagery. Finally, all three stories amplify their conflicted universe, accentuating the disparities that exist between the two distinct worlds.

I believe it is therefore clear that the use of religious themes, in these works, contrary to other traditional comics, emerges as fundamentally desacralized and is mostly functional to posit questions that have very little pertinence with theological matters. From its traditional portrayal as a unitary, affirmative, untouchable, and highly codified system of values, the Christian religion is gradually reframed to include hybridization and plot twists, and is diverted from its original nature to serve different purposes. I will therefore argue that, in recent comics, Christian figuration becomes secularized, and functions as a mere mechanism for adventure, as well as a means for a reflection on human matter and societal behavior, rather than a tool for contemplation of the divine.

In order to illustrate the distinctive traits of this development in comics' history, I will first isolate some relevant episodes, sketching an intentionally incomplete and sporadic trajectory, and comparing examples belonging to disparate milieus. In doing so, I will include other examples taken from both the American and the Italian comics tradition. I choose only specific cases that feature a factual representation of divine power, as well as a symbology related to monotheistic religions that often appear relevant from the cover. In the second part of my article, I will compare specific representations of angel and devils/demons, often referring to Renaissance art, by drawing a close reading of *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal* and *Preacher* #1 *The Time of the Preacher*. Finally, I will focus on *Gea* as a case study for mythological transtextuality.

### **Absolute Gods. Portrayal of Christianity in *Gods' Man* (Lynd Ward, 1929) and Judaism in *A Contract with God* (Will Eisner, 1978)**

Since its early days, comics occasionally interrogated religiosity and the relationship with the divine. Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man* (1929) represents an early example of this procedure. Ward's woodcut novel, which many critics indicate as one of the first graphic novels narrates the life of an artist, who obtains money and success thanks to a magic brush received by a mysterious stranger, but feels the need for a different, more just life. After an accident, he is rescued by a woman; the two fall in love, have a daughter, and dedicate themselves to a solitary and tranquil life. The punishment for the protagonist's past sins and vanity, however, is right behind the corner. In the ending, the secretive stranger comes back to reveal his skull-like face, frightening the artist to the point that he falls off a cliff and dies. The work relies on dark Neogothic aesthetics, and is influenced by German Expressionism and the Vienna Secession artistic movement, which, together with Liberty Style, represent the main artistic reference for many coeval illustrations and graphics. This style serves the purpose of supporting a moralistic teaching, with the idea of death as an arbitrary means for divine punishment, perceived as absolute and unquestionable.

The theme of religiosity as a core discourse in comic books of the Western world is not limited to the dominant Christian religion. In the late 1970's, while the superhero genre was specializing in "superheroes with super problems," and new trends emerged affirming the comics medium's complexity, Will Eisner published his acclaimed *A Contract with God*. The work was introduced as a graphic novel on the very cover, and, in so doing, established the term "graphic novel" as a one-shot visual story not belonging to a comics series.<sup>2</sup> *A Contract with God* is openly inspired by Ward's woodcut novels,<sup>3</sup> and follows a narrative scheme that reproduces many of its source's features, in conjunction with a few relevant differences. Most importantly, the religion at the core of Eisner's work is Judaism.

In the midst of a pious life, Frimme Hersh is put to the test by the death of his beloved adoptive daughter. Wracked with sorrow and angry with God, Hersh throws away the contract

with God that he had carved in a stone as a young boy as a commitment to moral righteousness. A thunder rumbles in the sky, as Hersh makes the decision to become greedy and morally corrupt, which leads him to become extremely rich. Unsatisfied with his success and feeling a deep sense of void, Hersh goes back to the synagogue, where he asks the rabbis to stipulate a new, more official contract that he pays for with a significant part of his belongings. Satisfied with this transaction, and enthusiastic about the new contract, he decides to become righteous again, but his good intentions are immediately foiled, as he has a heart attack and dies. After a while, a little boy randomly finds the carved stone bearing the old contract and decides to keep it.

Simply from the plot, we can immediately see how *A Contract with God* complicates the relationship between the protagonist and the idea of the divine. In this case the message is more blurred than in *Gods' Man*, and the work opens up to different interpretations. For example, it is possible to argue that, whereas in *Gods' Man* the divine component personified by the mysterious stranger determines the protagonist's actions – first by tempting him with the promise of success, and then by causing his death – in *A Contract with God* it is unclear if the divine component plays any role at all. In both cases, the death of the protagonist can be interpreted as non-supernatural, or, depending on one's point of view, as a failed divine test and the subsequent punishment by God. An interesting feature, in this sense, is the epilogue of *A Contract with God*, with the young boy who picks up the stone, which conveys an idea of divine indifference: life goes on undisturbed, and the significance of the parable is consequently diminished. Whether the contract is a real pact between a man and a deity, or a simple human construct is intentionally left unclear. In any case, the idea of the divine is treated as ambiguous and uncontrollable, and the blasphemies pronounced by an otherwise good and godly man do not seem to produce any actual effect on the storyworld.

If these two graphic novels present many common traits, we can easily see how the distance from Ward's 1920s to Eisner's 1970s brought on a more complicated religiosity, if not only for Eisner's open representation of blasphemies and *hybris*. When Eisner introduced *A Contract with God* as a graphic novel, he was no underground author, and his treatment of religious themes was significant precisely because it led to the insertion of a complex poetics in the "institutional" comics tradition.

In sum, the comparison between *Gods' Man* and *A Contract with God* can help us understand how, within the evolution of the medium, the religious theme became increasingly complex, and, as comics opened up to treat a diversified set of issues, religion was included as one of the discourses that comics could engage with.

## **Diverted Christianity. Mixing the sacred and the profane**

As Marco Arnaudo underlines,

If Judaism has left an important mark on the superhero genre, the contribution of Christianity has been equally extensive and pervasive, and, being the religion that the majority of readers identify with, also presents particular problems of representation. It is unlikely that there are legions of the devotees today of Olympic or Norse gods who take offense at the representation of Hercules or Thor in comics. The same cannot be said of the average reader seeing superhero versions of Jesus, Mary, or the saints springing into action (Arnaudo: 39).

While presented with necessary caution, Christian imagery has long been a recurrent presence in comics. For example, only by looking at the superhero genre, it is possible to find a

multitude of surreptitious references, from language reminiscent of biblical or gospel vocabulary, to the structural tracings from sacred art, to the Christological development of many of the protagonists of the most famous series (Arnaudo: 39-62). If Christianity and Judaism appear rather latent in the superhero comics of the Golden Age (1938-1956), later mainstream products started integrating religious elements as core themes or explicit frames of reference.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1960's and 1970's, the comics context supported structures and artistic solutions that were still not codified in this medium, such as a clear-cut authorship and author's independence from other variables (the audience's expectations on the protagonists' action, or the editorial mark). This often produced a predilection for introspection rather than action, a more direct way to treat socio-political issues, and an in-depth psychological characterization. Not having to seek the approval of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), independent comics were the space of choice for subversively charged content.

The auteur and the underground streams obviously played a role in orientating the readership's tastes, and often resulted in direct outcomes on the mainstream world. Gradually, mainstream comics started modifying their aesthetics in the direction of these new trends. In the '80s, mainstream comics became stylistically hybridized with the auteur and underground experiences, and their contents opened up to a more nuanced set of motifs, with unconventional representations of the Christian religion among them. The CCA by then had lost much of its strength. In the mystery genre, occultism and dark magic as emanation of Satan and his devils, versus white magic as emanation of God and his angels, acquired a pivotal role. Two examples in the US are the DC comics characters John Constantine, which first appeared in *The Swamp Thing Saga* in 1985; and Lucifer Samael Morningstar, appeared instead in *The Sandman* in 1989.

Many similarities exist between these two DC protagonists. For example, after being launched as supporting characters, both of received their own solo series under the mature Vertigo imprint. Both of them fall in the category of the villain, rather than the hero, as their actions and methods are morally questionable, and their illustrators do not seem to have any qualms about representing them as such. Most of all, the two are thematically related to the Christian Hell. In the DC universe, Lucifer is precisely the fallen angel of Christian lore, and he rules Hell together with Beelzebub and Azazel (*The Sandman* Vol. 2 #4 1989). Constantine is the "Hellblazer," a dark magician who is able to summon infernal forces. In their evolution over the years, Lucifer's and Constantine's fictions often intersect, and many characters, such as the Archangel Gabriel, appear in both storylines. Also, both protagonists have some unfinished business with God, from whom Lucifer wants to hide, and whom Constantine blackmails (*Hellblazer* #128, 1998).

As we understand through this characterization, American comics' representation of Judeo-Christian motifs is finally legitimized by the '80s and '90s, and variations on Judaism and Christianity are also practiced as a mere device for adventure, just like it had happened for decades with Greco-Roman or Norse mythology. In the mainstream world, this occurred principally in series for adult readers, but it sometimes involved classical sagas, like Superman's.<sup>5</sup> Another interesting evolution is the trend of the sexy she-devils flourishing in the '90s, including publishing house Chaos! Comics' Lady Death, Lady Demon, and Purgatori. These three "demonic babes" epitomize the intersection between Christian imagery, especially demonic iconography, with the so-called "bad girl art," featuring sexually explicit and violent anti-heroines. If the comics' first "supernatural bad girl" is Vampirella when her comics was launched in 1969 she was described as an extraterrestrial coming from the vampire planet Drakulon, rather than from vampiric lore associated with Christianity. This detail tells us much about the premises of infernal

representations in American comics of the '60s, while, for example, the Italian *Jacula*,<sup>6</sup> a horror-erotic series that started in the same year as *Vampirella*, featured as its main character a proper she-vampire.

Christian iconography in Italian comics evolved in a completely different way, as, in Italy, surveillance on comics contents was not as strict as it was in the US, and no official form of comics censorship, had ever hit comics after the Fascist era.<sup>7</sup> Even the frequent complaints coming from the Catholic Church had little impact other than on the length of the skirts of female characters in the 1950s. As a consequence, we find demons and angels much earlier than in the US, and through modes of representation that range from horror to comedy. A significant example is *Geppo*, a humorous series aimed at children which began in 1954 and successfully ran for four decades, until its end in 1994. Geppo is literally a devil, and yet also an “everyman,” or better, an “everydevil,” i.e., what an Italian reader would immediately identify with a “povero diavolo” (lit. “poor devil”), an idiomatic expression meaning a poor man who is oppressed by misfortune. In fact, the name Geppo, a nick-name contraction of the very common Italian name Giuseppe, reminds of Peppe, Beppe, and, most of all, “Peppino,” again used in informal spoken Italian to indicate an unsuccessful, pointless person who is not particularly noteworthy or distinguished. Geppo is in fact a “poor devil,” who rises the reader’s sympathy for his incapability to be as evil and mean as his fellow infernal mates, as he often laments, and his she-devil girlfriend Fiammetta never fails to point out. As we clearly understand, Geppo, who also meets angels and saints, among whom no less than Saint Peter, is very different from the devils who trigger death and catastrophes, or cause epic conflicts between the forces of Good and Evil, in American sagas. A series that treats Christianity so playfully and light-heartedly would be hardly conceivable in 1950s America. Italian comics are clearly more predisposed to “scherzare coi santi” (“joking about the saints”), as Geppo’s comedic escapades reminds us when compared with the later demoniac villains of the heroic poetics of American DC.

Another example of the usage of Christian imagery in Italian funny comics is *Pallino*, a series of single-panel comics appearing from 1988 to 2012 on the youth’s national magazine *Il Giornalino*, printed by Edizioni San Paolo, a publishing house of open Catholic inspiration. The series revolves around the mischiefs of young guardian angel Pallino in his apprenticeship supervised by Saint Peter himself, who is punctually disappointed by his ward’s behaviors.

### **Angel-devil offspring. From *Hellblazer* to *Preacher***

As we saw with Eisner, in the '80s, the mainstream US image-text world started exploring the imagery of their audience’s dominant religions for narrative purposes. In these comics, the hybridization of Christian patterns functioned as a core aspect of the narration, whereas, when Classical and Norse mythology was injected in modern comics, it was often part of the given set. Christianity became the epicenter of the plot or a distinctive aspect of the main character, as comics whose plot originates from sexual intercourse between angels and devils epitomize.

The first example of a comic book whose main discourse revolves around an angel-devil relationship resulting in a pregnancy is offered by *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal* (1992) written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by William Simpson. Most of the story is constituted by Constantine’s recollection of a past event, when, on the night of Christmas 1984, he sheltered a couple formed by the angel Tali and the succubus Chantinnelle (“Ellie”), who was about to give birth to their child. Searching for protection from Hell, whose custodians would immediately

annihilate them if they came to know about this pregnancy, the two lovers visit Constantine to ask for help, and tell him their story. Ellie's had been given the mission to seduce an angel, something that no succubus had ever tried before, but, as an innocent and pure angel, Tali "turned lust into love." In the hope of obtaining future favors and considering how fruitful it would be for him to have debtors both in Heaven and in Hell, Constantine accepts to help them, and conceals them in an hovel where he casts a hiding spell. The "Hellblazer" however only knows how to keep the devils away, and does not expect that also in Heaven this pregnancy would be sanctioned with a rigorous punishment. While he comes back to the hovel after trying to pursue possible strategies to solve the situation, Constantine witnesses with horror the birth of "what wasn't meant to be," while the Seven Archangels break in, instantly incinerate Tali, and stand watch – "the angel of mercy too" – while Ellie delivers with immense pain. Following the stream of memories and the point of view of Constantine, who covers his eyes with terror after hearing the monstrous shrieks produced by the creature coming into the world, the editing elliptically avoids to show either the creature, or the moment in which the Archangels carry it away. This last segment of the story is clarified in the final scene of the sequence, where we see Constantine crouched on the ground and holding his head and, in the back, an exhausted Ellie covered with blood; in the captions, Constantine's first-person narrative explains that he both "prayed God to kill it" and "hope it's still alive."

For what concerns the qualifying aspects of the characters, some considerations should be drawn about the representation of the angels. Tali is patently drawn accordingly to the traditional iconography of the warrior angels in the fashion of the Renaissance depictions of Archangel Michael. He is tall, blond and handsome, carries a pair of feathered wings, wears an armor, a loincloth, and Greek sandals. The Christian mimesis permeates different aspects that regard Tali and his lover. For example, when referring to Tali, the vocabulary relies on epitomes that convey a Christian ideal of pureness, as the angel is said to be "perfect," "innocent," and "stainless." The narration explicitly insists on the parallelism between the couple, who knocks on Constantine's door right on Christmas night, and the Holy Family. For example, when the Hellblazer first meets them disguised in common people's clothes, he jokes "Herod got the boys after you, has he?." Also, just like Joseph and Mary when expecting Jesus, the two hide in a hovel, composing a sort of nativity scene, as the title *Nativity Infernal* indicates. Moreover, we should consider that this comic book corresponded to the December issue, when serial comics often deal thematically with the festivities of the month in which they are published. Therefore, we can easily understand how this story is meant to set a *Hellblazer* version of Christmas, in both a homage to and parody of Christian lore *and* comics industry conventions.

Beyond playing a central role in the plot, the Christian reference intervenes also in the style. The cover of the issue illustrates Tali and Ellie suspended in an orange apocalypse-like sky, the former tying the latter in a hug that nearly resembles a strangulation, while also bending towards her in a way that has the reader thinking that he is trying to protect her – from what is intentionally left unclear. For the setting, the action taking place, the twisted muscular bodies only covered by pieces of cloth, the bright red of Ellie's skin, the illustration clearly presents a mosaic of motifs from Renaissance Florentine (and surroundings) art depicting the Hell or the Doomsday, with the devils torturing or carrying around falling sinners. In this cover we find the bodies, the expressions and the actions of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, or details from the lunette of the *Damned in the Hell* by Luca Signorelli at the Cappella di San Brizio (Orvieto), as well as a detail of the orange sky in the *Last Judgement* in the dome of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore by Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccari.

When we focus on the scene that represents Tali's and Ellie's intercourse in the succubus' recollection, we can see at a glance that the couple is deeply in love. This idea is conveyed by the golden color of the bodies, which, beyond its sacral connotation, isolates this past moment of pleasure and joy dramatically from the present of Ellie's narration, mostly painted in cold colors such as green and blue. Also, we understand from the editing that this scene corresponds to a long and slow action, as the two bodies are depicted horizontally and occupy the space of a long frame. Finally, the absence of a square frame contributes to giving even more power to the memory of this episode. The pink wavy motif surrounding the bodies purposefully distinguishes this scene from a previous recollection, in which Ellie had not known love yet, and only dedicated to seduction. This prohibited act of making love stands as the moment of Ellie's catharsis from a sinful to a pious life, blurring the boundaries between Christian mysticism and sexual orgasm. This idea seems to be confirmed by Ellie's pose, especially the expression depicted on her face, her central fingers touching each other, and her twisted feet, that are reminiscent of another piece of Christian art, the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome) by the baroque artist Lorenzo Bernini. A parallelism with one more work by Bernini, the *Death of the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* (Church of San Francesco a Ripa, Rome), can be helpful to understand the role played by Christian artistic references in shaping the drawings of this comic book. In his sculpture, Bernini is irreverently playing with the symbolism of saints in their mystical moments, such as ecstasy or the encounter with God in death, by featuring them with openly profane poses and gestures, as his controversial *Saint Teresa* demonstrates. The representation of *Ludovica Albertoni*, even indirectly, might have influenced the way Ellie is drawn in the recollection of the moment she seduced Tali, especially if we look at her abandoned pose and the expression of pleasure on her face, with her head leaning back and her hand lightly touching her breast.

The sacred attributes of Tali and Ellie contrast dramatically with the representation of the Seven Archangels, who wear a white hooded tunic that hides their physiognomy completely, making them look more similar to cultists than to celestial beings. Their actions cause sorrow and destruction, and they seem completely merciless in front of the characters' vicissitudes. They violently break into the shovel destroying it, they execute Tali without even letting him speak, they assist indifferently to Ellie's painful delivery they steal the creature she just gave birth to, and disappear.

In this regard, *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal* can be considered as a case of reformulation of Christian themes, in which the Archangels are the real villains, while the sinful protagonists are those who present a positive model. This principle also extends to Constantine, who pretends not to care about the unfortunate lovers, but welcomes to help them quite quickly. His morality is confirmed in a sequence, when he refuses to compromise with a pedophile who, having a deal with a powerful supernatural entity, could help him solve Tali's and Ellie's situation.

A similar hybridization of Christian motifs is pivotal to another comic written by Ennis: the saga of *Preacher*. While in *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal* the offspring is hinted at as horrendous and potentially catastrophic, and it immediately disappears after its birth, in *Preacher* and *Gea* it becomes the epicenter of the narration, and is meant to transform its surrounding reality.

*Preacher* narrates reverend Jesse Custer's quest to (literally) find God, who has left Heaven and given up his supremacy on the world.<sup>8</sup> A principled and godly pastor in his late twenties, Jesse is disgusted with the crimes committed by the members of his community, a small rural center in Texas inhabited by a narrow-minded and sanctimonious people. He is losing his faith as a result of his environment, as well as his lonely childhood spent with a wicked grandmother obsessed

with religion. On a Sunday, when Jesse is in his church and about to begin his sermon, he is suddenly possessed by Genesis, a supernatural being who needs a host body to manifest itself in the world. This event causes the explosion of the church, crowded with people. They all die but Jesse, and he must hide from the police and disguise his identity, to avoid being accused to be the author of the massacre. Also, Jesse discovers that the symbiosis with Genesis gives him the ability to speak the word of God, which people cannot help but obey. Jesse, who had a traumatic amnesia about the incident, starts recalling how his possession happened. His memories also carry events that do not belong to his past, but involve Genesis, the illicit child of a he-angel and a she-devil who fell in love with each other. Also, Genesis informs Jesse that God gave up his responsibilities. The pastor decides to find and confront God, resolving to use his irresistible power only for this purpose and to never overindulge in it. In the meantime, confusion rules in the celestial spheres: after God's departure, hostility starts spreading among the angelic ranks, especially the Seraphi (warrior angels) and the Aephi (scholar angels). The situation is aggravated by the fact that the Aephi decide to have Genesis captured by the Saint of Killers, an immortal and unstoppable celestial hitman, who, toward the finale of the series, ends up killing God himself and all his angels.

In the light of this brief summary, we can clearly see how the entire saga of *Preacher* can be considered a speculation in what would have happened if the creature in *Hellblazer #60* had survived. Moreover, this series presents itself as much more nonchalant with the embedment of Christian motifs. It seems that, from 1992 to 1995, and with the foundation of the mature Vertigo imprint, Ennis could freely experiment with openly sacrilegious subjects. This "extreme" content matches well with the aggressive and explicitly violent visual style: the human bodies are overly muscular; the monsters are horrifying; the editing supports an epic dimension through the alternation of long takes and quick actions; the frames are varied in their sizes, shapes, and structures, and often crowded, detailed, and vividly colorful; the movements are dynamic, the facial expressions exaggerated. The verbal component alternates biblical tones, especially in the captions and paratexts, and vulgar language, that often appears, together with various American vernaculars, in the balloons, and is spoken both among the terrestrials and the celestial beings.

Unsurprisingly, from *Hellblazer #60 Nativity Infernal* to *Preacher #1 The Time of the Preacher*, the motif of the angel-devil sex scene shifts from a more delicate and romantic to a more aggressive and sexually explicit representation. The scene now occupies most of a large panel, which is diagonally divided in two moments: the timeline of Jesse's adventure, when he explains the nature of Genesis to his partners Tulip and Cassidy, and the one in which Genesis is conceived. Like in *Hellblazer #60 Nativity Infernal*, the intercourse is a recollection of a past event, and the absence of panel borders to surround the scene emphasizes the centrality of the episode in the narration. In both cases, what is represented is the sexual orgasm, but the two events look completely different, especially if we focus on the characters' physical appearance, expressions, position, as well as the colors used and the space occupied in the panel. Also, whereas in *Hellblazer #60 Nativity Infernal* the background's role is to insist on the emotional involvement and the sacredness of the event, the flames that surround the two lovers in *Preacher #1 The Time of the Preacher* evoke an idea of damnation, and hint at the burning passion that brought the two together. The scene is built around a main diagonal line, where the two bodies encounter, crossed by two additional diagonals, the first connecting the heads, and the second the chests and the wings. This structure establishes a specular opposition between the characters, also implemented by the different colors of their bodies: the angel, that the reader recognizes as belonging to the warrior rank introduced a few pages before, featuring the Mohican-like hairstyle and the black tribal mark surrounding his eyes of his class, has a golden skin and a pair of feathered wings, while the devil



is depicted in dark red, has goat-like legs and bat-like wings, as well as horns. Also, whereas in *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal* the angel is kissing the devil and leans on her, in *Preacher* #1 *The Time of the Preacher* the position is reversed, with the devil on top of the angel, and the lovers gripping on each other's bottoms, conveying a feeling of animalistic physical pleasure. The colorful scene, dominated by warm tones, such as red, yellow, and orange, clashes dramatically with the blue and purple aura around Jesse, whose face is crinkled in the effort of understanding his new power.

What emerges in the comparison between *Hellblazer* #60 *Nativity Infernal* and *Preacher* #1 *The Time for the Preacher* is the strong turn in a desecrating direction. The art of *Hellblazer* #60 is permeated by Christian iconology and cultural references, as a means to negotiate a new Christian ideal with the readers; on the contrary, *Preacher* does not seem to propose any religious key to understand the narration, as much as it seems to condemn bigotry. Secular figural traditions, such as sci-fi aesthetics in Heaven, or the western flavor of the episodes set in Texas, are preferred to Christian art. The series ends up depicting the Judeo-Christian God as an irresponsible, blabbermouth manipulator, who relies on the liturgical vocabulary to have his people serve him, as it happens, for example, when he resurrects Tulip, so that she can convince Jesse to give up his quest (*Preacher* #11, 1996). From *Hellblazer* #60 to *Preacher*, the sacredness of Christianity is completely ruptured, and the Christian topics are used as a mechanism for action and adventure, or as a means to speculate on how religious blindness affects societal behaviors. This negative judgment on Christianity becomes even more explicit when we consider Jesse's sober and moderate temper. A responsible character, Jesse does not abuse his almighty power, although sometimes he employs it to punish abominable characters, such as the chief of his village's police, who is ashamed of his deformed son. This scene (*Preacher* #4 *Ancient History*) presents itself as one of the many hilariously sacrilegious moments in the series: after using the word of God to stop all those who hunt him and try to prevent his quest to move away from him, Jesse tells the chief "you're gonna go fuck yourself." In the following page, Jesse and his friends are gone, and we find the chief in an ambulance that is about to bring him to the hospital, as he literally did what the word of God commanded.

As, in *Preacher*, everything that is associated with religion turns up to be violent or ridiculous, the bringing up of Christianity is resolved in a resolute profanation, which is explored through different narrative and figurative possibilities, and contributes to the general secularized system of beliefs carried on by this comic book, where characters, and not God, are responsible for their own actions and behaviors. This makes sense also in Jesse's rendering of Genesis' conception, where the narration heavily relies on profane language: "Shit you wouldn't believe -- about a guy and a girl who fell in love and set the world on fire, and the kid they had, and something massive behind it all, something no one's ever supposed to know...." If we consider *Spiderman*'s legendary line – "With great power there must also come great responsibility!"— we can clearly understand how Jesse's ability to speak the word of God treats Christianity and its theological norms as a means to describe any superhero comics' power. In this sense, *Preacher* equates Christian religion to any other mythology employed in American mainstream comics.

### **Christianity as mythology. Luca Enoch's *Gea***

Luca Enoch's *Gea* offers the next step into the treatment of Christianity as a mythology in mainstream comics. This series first appeared in July 1999, and was published biannually until

November 2007 (18 episodes). It is centered on the adventures of a 14-year old girl, Gea, who, runs a secret life as a member in an inter-dimensional police agency, the “Baluardi,” whose role is to prevent the contact between worlds and the interaction between those who do not belong to the same dimension.

Enoch’s series was distributed by one of the most important publishing houses of comics in Italy, Sergio Bonelli Editore. Then as now, Bonelli targeted older children, teenagers, and adults. The creation and circulation of this series took place during a very delicate phase of the recent history of Italy. In those years, Italy was facing a considerable increase in immigration from North Africa, Albania, and other Eastern European countries (as a direct consequence of the fall of Communism). The extent of this migratory flow reached a climax between the end of the Nineties and the New Millennium, when Italy passed a number of laws to regulate it. Gea’s task to prevent contact between different worlds, therefore, resonated closely with the sudden migration crisis and debate of those years.

*Gea* is set in a heterotopia characterized by the hidden presence of mythical figures, like dragons, ogres, centaurs, satyrs, and various pantheons’ deities who came to our world from other dimensions and gave birth to the most well-known fables and legends. With the coming of age, Gea discovers that enmity is a relative concept, and that welcoming the multiverse migrants that she bumps into, rather than attacking them, as her role would demand, might be the way to solve conflicts between worlds. Eventually, she ends up transforming the Earth into a new world, where she founds a supra-dimensional melting pot of inhabitants from various universes, coexisting peacefully.

*Gea*’s meta-history envisions Earth as part of a *multiverse*. Gea herself, as she will find out later in the series, is the last descent of a lineage originated in Inanna, the ancient Mesopotamian goddess of love and war – or, better, an alien who became a mythical figure in a human pantheon. Her ancestry makes Gea more incline to embracing, rather than opposing, transdimensional clandestine migrants. The series features an ‘enemy number one’, the demons, an aggressive species whose desire is to invade and colonize the Earth, headed by the Mesopotamian trinity of demons, Lilu, Lilitu, and Ardat Lili. The latter, who lives on the Earth hidden under a humanoid appearance – Diva, the director of a fashion house – is the ‘head of the bridge’, an entity whose role is to open the transdimensional door that makes the arrival of the demons on the Earth possible. For most of the series, Lilu, Lilitu, and Ardat Lili are incubating a weapon, that, towards the end of the series, turns out to be a powerful young Prince of demons, ironically called Angelo (‘angel’), a ‘chosen one’, to be sent to Earth to destroy the Baluardi. The Baluardi, including Gea, are indeed the Archangels of the Christian religious tradition, and the Demons harbor an ancient and resentful rivalry with them, as Diva illustrates while looking at a painting by Renaissance artist Marco d’Oggiono, the *Pala dei tre Arcangeli* (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan – *Gea* #2, *Il corteo di Dioniso*, p. 54). While over the series the boundaries between good and evil become blurrier, and the Baluardi experience crisis due to their incapability to contain the demons, Gea shows superior powers, and is selected to oppose the Prince of demons. When the two meet, Gea is reminded by Angelo of her ancestry, when their two ancestors Dumuzi and Inanna made love with each other, after the former resurrected the latter, and begun Gea’s dynasty. The two repeat their ancestor action, but Gea introduces a new feature: she kills Angelo right after their intercourse, and, in doing so, she ends the war, eliminating the major source of violence of the Multiverse. The encounter with the Prince of Demons leaves Gea pregnant with a baby, the promise for a world that is able to create something new from the gathering of different ethnicities.

Mythology plays a central role in this series: *Gea* includes mythological creatures that belong to different imageries, among whom northern Europeans fairies and dragons, Classical beasts, such as Blemmyes, satyrs, and nymphs, Mesopotamian gods, Hindu monsters (etc.). Christian angels and demons appear in this multifaceted pantheon, personifying the clash between two opposite peoples, one of them essentially xenophobic (the Archangels), and the other too violent in its expansion (the Demons). In this sense, the traditional depiction of the clash between Archangels and Demons as representing the fight between good and evil is complicated by the fact that the ideas of absolute good and absolute evil do not exist at all in this saga. Angels and Demons are equally questionable: it is not by chance that Lilu, Lilitu and Ardat Lili name their savior Angelo.

To fully understand the role of Christianity and Christian references in this series, we should also frame them in Enoch's rich aesthetic of transtextuality, which, beyond affecting the whole *metahistory* of *Gea* also relies on the fact that the series' panels are scattered with a number of Easter eggs and cameo appearances. This mechanism is very frequent in Bonelli comics and cartoons, and reaches its climax in this series. Moreover, *Gea* presents further forms of art appropriation, recontextualizing entire sequences of movies, or displacing real artistic objects, such as sculptures, books, paintings, or buildings. This kind of intertextuality, rather than adding information about the characters or integrating the plot, targets directly the reader: Enoch exposes the reader to a wealth of aesthetic contents, and challenges them to discover the hidden cultural elements in the book. In this sense, Enoch's intertextuality serves an educative purpose: an education to humanities is an education to ethics. The device of art appropriation produces a sort of alignment between the reality of the reader and the fictionality of the comics, making the message of the work itself more clearly visible to the reader. The exposition of the reader to contents from various humanistic sources activates an interactive education.

Most of the references – and Renaissance Christian art among them – are to be found in what we could call 'expanded' liberal arts, a category that includes not just literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, but also fantasy literature, pop music, comics, media, cartoons, and so on. Such insertions of pop, literary, artistic icons are not directly relevant for the plot. Nevertheless, in *Gea*, art appropriation serves the task of letting the reader access the protagonist's psychology through an insight in her tastes. *Gea*'s home crawls with posters, gadgets, prints, books, T-shirts with quotations from cultural items. All this information on *Gea*'s everyday life is directed to qualify what Enoch presents as a model of behavior for teens, and can be integrated into the type of liberal education that Enoch supports. Therefore, in *Gea*, quotations from Christian iconography serve to operate a secularization of Christianity, which appears referenced among other cultural sources without being given a place of honor.

### **Secularized Christianity in the mainstream comics of the new millennium. Fiona Staples's and Brian K. Vaughan's *Saga* (2012-, Image Comics) and Mirka Andolfo's *Sacro/Profano* (2013-2017, Dentiblu)**

The cases in American and Italian mainstream comics I have discussed so far highlight the progressive desecration of motifs deriving from the Judeo-Christian tradition. By looking at the depiction of sexual intercourse between angels and devils, it is possible to understand how the sacred iconography, such as Renaissance Christian art, plays an important role in this process, often intervening as a model, as well as rupturing and hybridizing with other contents. Other

examples can be included, among which Craig Thompson's graphic novels *Blankets* (2003) and *Habibi* (2011), to Maicol&Mirko's (Michele Rocchetti) enigmatic collection of comics fragments *Il papà di Dio* ("God's Dad," 2017), Don Alemanno's (Alessandro Mereu) satirical webcomic *Jenus* (2012-2017), or Daniele Caluri's and Emiliano Pagani's *Don Zauker* (running on *Il Vernacoliere* from 2003 to 2011).

Limiting my research to the specific pattern of angel-devil sex, we should mention Staples' and Vaughan's *Saga*, which adopts the traditional portrayal of winged angels and horned devils to depict two alien species belonging to different worlds, involved in a long and catastrophic war against each other. This refined and metatextually rich space opera revolves around the constant flight of a multiethnic family escaping from war and persecution, after the protagonist couple, an angel/fairy-like spy and a devil/satire-like war prisoner, break the law by falling in love and giving birth to a baby. The story makes it clear that that the anti-miscegenation's point is to nourish racial hatred, in order to facilitate each planet's interest in the ongoing war. Christian iconography intervenes already on the cover of the first volume, a fantasy/space version of the highly represented Renaissance motif of the Rest on the Flight into Egypt, with Alana breastfeeding and Marko looking around.

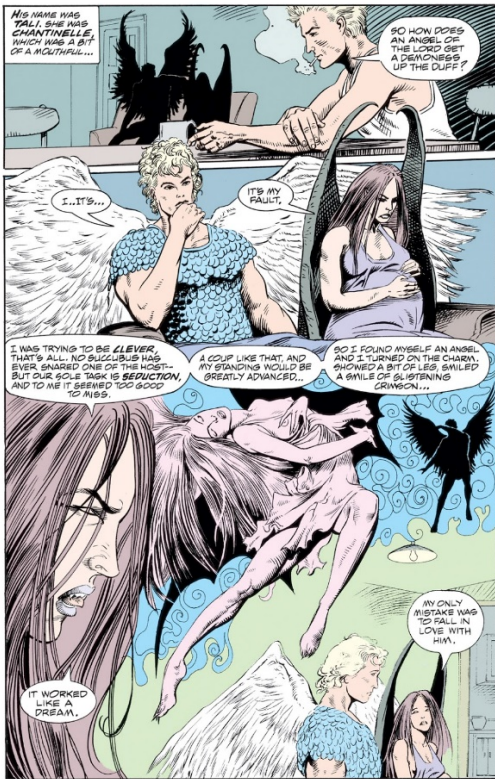
Another work that falls in this category is Mirka Andolfo's humorous webcomic *Sacro/Profano* (later published in various volumes), featuring a couple formed by a she-angel and an he-devil who, despite the social differences deriving from their status become a couple. This comic is intentionally funny and light-hearted, with the devil Damiano trying, and constantly failing, to seduce the virtuous Angelina, who is firm in her intention to preserve her virginity until marriage.

*Saga* and *Sacro/Profano*, both belonging to the 2010s, employ two different strategies in desecrating Christian iconography. *Saga* reduces it to a symbolic frame that visually characterizes two opposite species, to make the story more relatable to the audience, but without entailing any actual Christian content. *Sacro/Profano* plays on the traditional division in Christianity between angels and devils, to explicitly address sex. It is therefore clear how, in both Italian and American comics of the new Millennium, the desacralized usage of Christian iconography remains rather nonchalant. From being conceived of as a unitary set of values and beliefs, first the Judeo-Christian religion becomes a source for adventure, next is equated to a mythology or to secular cultural sources, and finally becomes a mere frame of symbolic reference.

## Images



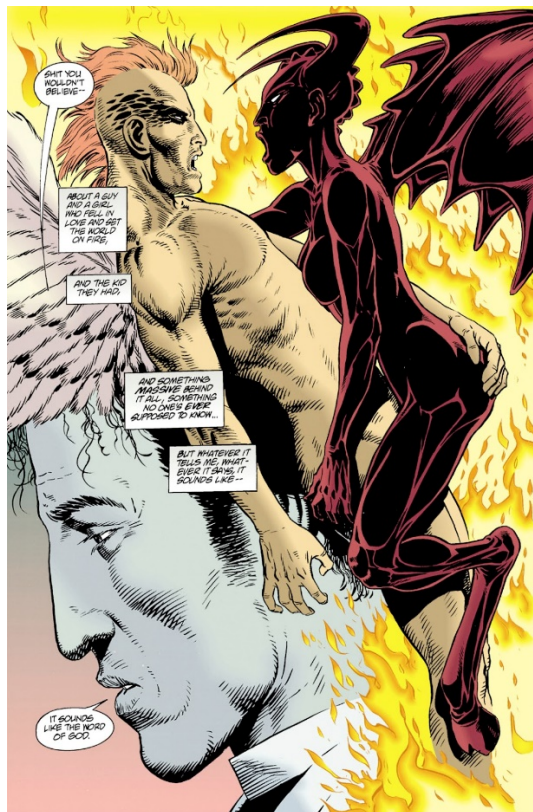
*Hellblazer* #60, 1992, front cover; *Last Judgement*, 1568-1579, detail; *The Damned in Hell*, 1499-1505, detail.



*Hellblazer* #60, 1992, p. not numbered; *Death of Beata Ludovica Albertoni*, 1674.



*Hellblazer* #60, 1992, p. not numbered; *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647-1652.



*Preacher* #1, 1995, p. not numbered; *Gea* #14, 2005, p. 102.





Gea #2, 1999, p. 54; Pala dei tre Arcangeli, 1516.



*Saga* vol. 1, 2012, front cover.

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<sup>1</sup> A consistent amount of considerations about the intersection between religion and comics is gathered in the online journal *Sacred and Sequential*, <http://www.sacredandsequential.org/>. See Brambilla for an inquiry in the Judeo-Christian theme in a selection of western comics.

<sup>2</sup> The term graphic novel pre-existed *A Contract with God*, but this book made it famous and increased its usage.

<sup>3</sup> “I consider my efforts in this area attempts at expansion or extension of Ward’s original premise” (Eisner).

<sup>4</sup> If we check on *Comic Book Data Base*, we can find occasional references to “Satan” in comics of the 40s, but, they are quite isolated cases ([http://www.comicbookdb.com/character\\_chron.php?ID=15956](http://www.comicbookdb.com/character_chron.php?ID=15956)); references to “Jesus”, for example, appear only since the 2000s

([http://www.comicbookdb.com/search.php?form\\_search=jesus&form\\_searchtype=FullSite](http://www.comicbookdb.com/search.php?form_search=jesus&form_searchtype=FullSite)), while “Christ”, if we exclude all the titles containing the word “Christ” as part of “Christmas”, appears rather underrepresented ([http://www.comicbookdb.com/search.php?form\\_search=christ&form\\_searchtype=FullSite](http://www.comicbookdb.com/search.php?form_search=christ&form_searchtype=FullSite)).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in *Superman Vol 1 #666* (2007), Clark Kent even becomes the ruler of Hell, and, in issue #8 of *DC Special Series* (1977), Batman and other superheroes meet Lucifer and his infernal advisors Guy Fawkes, Benedict Arnold, Adolf Hitler, Jack the Ripper, Nero and Bluebeard.

<sup>6</sup> A history of the sexy female comics protagonists in Italy is offered by *Bellissime e perverse: Le sexy eroine del fumetto Horror ed Erotico italiano* by Fabio Giovannini and Antonio Tentori (2016).

<sup>7</sup> As Carlo Passavini's book *Porno di carta* witnesses, it seems that Italian censorship has always been more concerned with sexual obscenity, rather than profanation of religious contents.

<sup>8</sup> I will limit my description to the main events of the first two narrative arches.

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