

**Of Catholics, Commies, and the Anti-Christ:
Mapping American Social Borders Through Cold War Comic Books**

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Abstract

This article explores the use of religion in three different Christian Cold War era comic books, with particular focus upon their reflection of the social borders reconstruction of American identity. Two of the comics are dramatic what-if scenarios of communist takeovers of the United States printed by Catholic educators. The third comic is an anti-Catholic tract linking the Vatican to the communist party. Engaging the relationship between Catholicism and communism, these comics reflect different perspectives concerning American's religious landscape and its relationship to the nation's changing identity.

[1] When the Soviets detonated their first atomic bomb in 1949, it was clear to Americans that the Cold War would be a dangerous and unsettling era. Starting in 1951, schools began to show children the "Duck and Cover" safety film from the federal government's Civil Defense: a brief video in which Bert the Turtle taught them how to protect themselves under their desks in case of an atomic attack.¹ Cold War fears of communist assaults upon U.S. soil were pervasive and strong. One of the main, if not the principal, emphasized that the difference between communist regimes and the U.S. was America's predominantly Christian background. Christian leaders and communities stressed America's religious background and distinguished the communist Soviet government as an "evil power."²

[2] With this unease regarding the country's—and Christianity's—future in America, the Cold War proved to be an auspicious time to restructure the boundaries of American identity.

Communism, an undeniable American enemy, prompted new anxieties about the country's character. What did it mean to be an American? Cold War popular culture reflected various answers to this question, and comic books offer a lens for examining the social atmosphere in which they were created, published and read. This paper will examine three comic books from Christian publishers and explore how they used the Cold War as a backdrop for understanding American identity and its religious element. Two of these comics come from Catholic educational publishers and the third comic is an anti-Catholic tract by Jack Chick. In their stories, religion and the way the comic defines and visualizes America are linked. Engaging the relationship between Catholicism and communism, these comics reflect different perspectives concerning American's religious landscape and its relationship to the nation's identity. This paper will also briefly compare these three religious publications with non-religious, mainstream Cold War comics in order to see the critical role played by the element of religious identity in the religious comics.

[3] The first two comics are 1947's *Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism*³ and 1961's *This Godless Communism*.⁴ Catholic educators published both of these comics, which are "what-if" dramatizations of communist take-overs of the United States. The third comic is the 1982 anti-Catholic Chick tract *The Godfathers*, which explains the Vatican's role behind the creation and proliferation of the Communist and Nazi parties.⁵ These three comics demonstrate two possible attitudes towards the increasing acceptance of Catholics in American society. Furthermore, they reflect two of the main perspectives concerning Catholicism and American identity during the Cold War. Before analyzing these comics specifically, the theoretical method of analysis will be introduced in addition to background information about the social climate of the Cold War.

[4] With their portrayal of American Catholics and Protestants, these comics signify a restructuring of the social borders of American religious identity. History of religion scholar Bruce Lincoln sets out a useful theory of social borders in his book *Discourse and the Construction of Society*. Lincoln defines society as “a grouping of people who feel bound together as a collectivity and in corollary fashion, feel themselves separate from others who fall outside their group.”⁶ Social borders are the “imaginary lines that distinguish one group of persons from another.”⁷ Social borders both separate groups and alienate groups. When a particular social group notes the differences and similarities between themselves and other groups, social borders emerge. These imaginary boundaries provide a point of reference for identity construction. The social borders both organize interaction between members of society and play a vital role in the structure of the society itself.

[5] Social borders have the ability to evoke strong emotional responses. Lincoln defines these “sentiments” as “affinity and estrangement.” People feel affinity for those who are “like” them, those with whom they have commonalities. On the other hand, people feel estranged from those who are different from them, and sometimes perceive these differences as threatening. People often fear that which is different because it can destabilize the established society.

[6] In *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, Lincoln explores various historical examples of the development and evolution of social borders in relation to specific social situations. One helpful parallel instance discussed by Lincoln is the “exhumation and public display of the long-buried corpses of priests, nuns, and the saints” by revolutionaries in 1930’s Spain.⁸ At this time in Spain, the Catholic Church was not sympathetic to the revolutionaries. Therefore, the revolutionaries located the Church on the other side of the social border and aligned it with the revolutionaries’ primary foes, the Right and the bourgeoisie. Revolutionaries saw the decay of

the exhumed bodies as representative of the corruption and decay of the Church. The destruction of the graves and the public display of the bodies de-stabilized and deconstructed the previous social norms and established new ones. The revolutionaries wanted to expose the powerlessness of the Church and display its corruption publicly. In doing so, the revolutionaries created a binary opposition between the powerless Catholic Church and the empowered socialist Left. After this revolt, the Spanish people created and enforced a new Left-ish discourse throughout their country. Lincoln's definition of social borders and this example from Spain provided the framework for the analysis of these comic books, because like the revolutionaries activities these comics reflect the way their publishers understood American social borders.

[7] Comic books, because of their everyday-ness, provide excellent tools for analyzing the social borders of a cultural and temporal location. Moreover, in select cases, examining popular culture can disclose more than analyzing higher forms of culture alone, and comic books are a window through which scholars can catch a glimpse of cultural background. In an article on Canada's Captain Canuck comics, cultural studies scholar Ryan Edwardson examines the relationship between the comics and Canadian identity, and his work provides a precedent for this research on various Christian Cold War comics and American identity. He argues that it is "in mass culture that one can find mass national identity," and thus "cultural consumption provides a basis for identity construction."⁹ Edwardson views the Captain Canuck comics as "more than a comic book relic," and rather as "a cultural artifact, a key item in the construction of modern Canadian cultural identity and consciousness."¹⁰ Edwardson believes that comics are valuable modes for popularizing and perpetuating vital aspects of national identity. Given that the majority of comic book readers are from younger generations, the national comic book presents a way for the young to experience elements of their national identity in an approachable manner.

[8] A brief history of comic books and their censure provide further pertinent background information. The earliest comic books were reprints of newspaper cartoon strips, and eventually this grew into larger, self-enclosed stories.¹¹ Adolescents primarily composed the market, and early comics' creators were "outsiders of various sorts," as comics "spoke with special cogency to young people who felt like outsiders in a world geared for and run by adults."¹² Partly due to their outsider status, in 1954 psychiatrist Fredric Wertham argued that comics were a principal source of juvenile delinquency in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*.¹³ As a popular source of entertainment in youth culture, comic books came under scrutiny and some critics deemed the comic book industry as a "subversive agency working to corrupt impressionable minds."¹⁴ Americans were already concerned over the spread of communism and its ability to warp the susceptible, and therefore this fear only furthered the anxieties over comic books. The comic book industry took advantage of the Cold War to redeem opinions on the value on comic books, as they could serve an educational purpose informing young readers about the threat of communism through an accessible medium.¹⁵

[9] Historically, comic books and the Catholic Church possess a disagreeable relationship. American bishops managed the Church's National Organization for Decent Literature, and in its earlier years, the organization sought to keep, what they deemed, inappropriate magazines and comic books from Catholic youths.¹⁶ It should come as no shock that any volume with communist or socialist leanings was another primary target for the forbidden books list, but popular comics were not safe from censure. In 1942 the National Organization for Decent Literature placed Wonder Woman's publisher, Sensation Comics on the list of forbidden books.¹⁷ Students at St. Patrick's Parochial School in Binghamton, New York in 1948 burned approximately two thousand comic books in their school courtyard.¹⁸ For Catholic publishers to

use the comic book medium for instruction despite the prohibition of various mainstream comics demonstrates the recognized power of the comic book's reach. While the Catholic Church banned some secular comics, Catholic educational authorities could not dispute the powerful ability of comic books to reach American youths.

[10] The social atmosphere which saw the creation of *Is This Tomorrow*, *This Godless Communism*, and *The Godfathers* is extremely important for understanding the significance of the specific elements in each comic. The social borders of the period directly influenced the social identity constructions of the comics. The elements of identity important in this paper are anti-communism and religious affiliation. Religious historian Dianne Kirby has argued that "the Cold War was one of history's great religious wars, a global conflict between the god-fearing and the godless."¹⁹ Cold War culture was built upon a binary "us" versus "them" mentality that permeated American culture.²⁰ During the Cold War, anticommunism was a principal element of American existence, and many Americans used the label of communist to describe those viewed as un-American.²¹

[11] Americans not only strongly identified as anti-communist, but Kirby also stated that "Christian ideals and values" were "deliberately positioned at its (anti-communism) core."²² Emphasizing a religious affiliation played a role in affirming "the American way of life," as religion became a marker of anti-communism.²³ Many Americans used religion to make sense of the conflict with communism. Scholars such as David Chidester in his book *Christianity: A Global History* have examined the relationship between Christianity and communism, and religious leaders during the Cold War period such as Billy Graham linked communism to Satan.²⁴ In his article on Cold War popular culture, historian Eric R. Crouse states that anti-communism "thrived as a result of the tendency of individuals to divide the social world into in-

group and out-group categories, with the former viewed favorably so as to protect and bolster social identity and the latter perceived disapprovingly to the point where all characteristics of that group become negative.”²⁵ Religious beliefs had long played a role in this in-group and out-group categorization in America’s history. For instance, in the past, Catholics were an immigrant out-group. “Can a Catholic be an American?” was a widespread question.²⁶

[12] The Cold War was also a time period when United States identity began to integrate Catholics into mainstream society. Up to World War II, America still viewed the Catholic community as outsiders and with suspicion. However, during the Cold War, American identity underwent reconstruction. The Cold War was one of the major events that played a role in the formation of American postwar identity.²⁷ With the growing threat of communism, Catholics used this opportunity to place themselves in the category of anticommunist Christians, and these comic books reflect perspectives on this change. 1947’s *Is This Tomorrow* and 1961’s *This Godless Communism*, both published by Catholic educators, reflected positively upon the integration of Catholics into the nation’s identity.

[13] The first comic to be closely analyzed in this paper is the 1947 comic book *Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism*. The Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul, Minnesota published this comic and printed four million copies for an estimated readership of ten million.²⁸ Parochial schools and Catholic church groups directed at children composed the primary circulation of the comic. The premise of the comic book is a what-if story of a communist take-over on United States soil and the mayhem that would result. The comic is set shortly after World War II in an America plagued by drought and starvation. A group of communists takes advantage of the country’s fragile condition to seize control of the country by use of propaganda, by withholding food from those not registered with the American communist

party, and with brute and hostile force when necessary. The communist leaders ban religion and attack all who practice any religion.

[14] Jones, the communist leader who has now assumed control of the United States, organizes book burnings to destroy remaining anti-communist thinking. At one of the book burnings, he prepares to throw “the greatest trash ever written, the Bible” into the flames.²⁹ Before he is able to do so, a Catholic man attempts to assassinate him. The leader delights in this perfect opportunity to “crush the Catholics” and portray them as anti-American. His communist agents expel Catholic monks and nuns from their monasteries and convents, and communist authorities circulate widespread propaganda throughout the country to persuade all other citizens to turn against Catholics. Though published by the Catholic community, the comic’s communist “bad guys” target not only Catholics. The communists also attack Protestants. Early in the comic, a Protestant minister preaches from the pulpit against communism, and the next day, his church is bombed. When he reports the crime, the judge tells him “whoever threw that bomb evidently didn’t like your unpatriotic sermons.” Mysterious, unidentified men then abduct the minister. They take the minister to a secluded area, shoot him, and leave his body behind.³⁰

[15] In *Is This Tomorrow*, the “crowing achievement” of the communist takeover happens at the end of the comic. Schools have brainwashed children to advocate communism and deny the existence of God. The comic concludes with a young boy turning in his parents for owning an illegal shortwave radio (in order to listen to foreign broadcasts) and for keeping “religious junk in the basement.” The religious junk refers to a small altar consisting of a statue of the Virgin Mary with a crucifix hanging above. Communist police smash these items with an axe. The pieces of “religious junk” the boy surrenders are two dominant and celebrated Catholic images. It is clear that the comic’s Catholic creators wanted to leave no doubt in the reader’s mind that

Catholics are resolute anti-communists. These parents held onto their religious beliefs despite the communist government's orders. After the communist police destroy the contraband, the father tells the police to take his son with them: "You've got his soul,—now take his body, too."³¹ The father's conclusion stresses that without his American values and Catholic faith, the boy no longer has a soul.

16] *Is This Tomorrow* comments upon American social borders by adopting the cataclysmic good versus evil battle of the Cold War. In this conflict, Catholics and Protestants are fighting on the same side. Putting these two Christian groups together in this battle not only further isolates communism on the "evil" side, but also emphasizes how Catholics and Protestants can be equal partners and that are both righteous Americans. The Protestants and Catholics of this comic cohabit within the same social border. They both fight for the preservation of America, and the communist government punishes them both for their fight. The abducted Protestant minister's clash with communism and the Catholic man's assassination attempt on the communist Jones mirror each other.

[17] Another Catholic Cold War comic book is *This Godless Communism*, printed as a multi-part serial throughout 1961 in the Catholic comic series *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact*. While the year before *This Godless Communism* saw the election of the first Catholic president, some early 1960s prophecy writers linked President John Kennedy to the beast of the Apocalypse.³² George A. Pfaum published *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact* bi-weekly during the school year and distributed the comics in parochial schools from 1946 to 1972. *This Godless Communism* was an educational tool for children which contained a simplified history of communism, starting with a biography of Karl Marx and then following the history of communism in Russia. The cycle starts with a dramatic, what-if scenario of a communist take-over of the U.S. to warn

readers of communism's real and imminent threat (similar to but shorter than *Is This Tomorrow*). At the beginning of the first issue, there is a letter to readers from J. Edgar Hoover endorsing the comic. He praises the comic book for its instructive capacity and informs readers that the "most effective way for you to fight communism is to learn all you can about it."³³

[18] The comic then follows the experiences of the "typical American family" (father, mother, son, daughter, and a baby) when communism rules the country. When the U.S. becomes the U.S.S.A. (United Soviet States of America), the father laments that Americans "should have done our thinking and praying before this happened," and suggests that they go church to "ask God's help."³⁴ However, when the family arrives, they find a sign stating that the church is now the property of the government with plans to become a communist museum. The next day, the newspaper reports that the communist leaders are sending Catholic priests and religious sisters to labor camps. Like *Is This Tomorrow*, the harassment is not only directed to Catholics, but also that Jewish and Protestants leaders are sent to these labour camps.

[19] The situation at schools is also similar to *Is This Tomorrow*; schools now teach students the superiority of communism and that the soul, God, and immortality do not exist. The daughter reports home that her new teacher lectured "there is no God and that Communism is all-good and all-powerful."³⁵ In the U.S.S.A., communism has adopted the benevolent and omnipotent qualities of the Christian God. The teacher also tells students, "those who believe in Communism are good," and furthermore, they are encouraged to turn in their parents if they do not agree with Communism.³⁶

[20] As the comic series *This Godless Communism* progresses beyond this first issue, certain common themes continue to surface. These include the "godless" aspects of communism, the anti-Catholic stance of Karl Marx, and the all-over evil of the communist ideology. When

exploring the history of communism, a later issue in the series informs readers: “In its wake, Communism has left a trail of murders, lies, and misery of a kind never before seen in the history of the world. It is truly the work of the devil.” Also, the comic instructs readers to “hate communism because it tries to stamp out religion.”³⁷

[21] This focus on communism’s objective to eradicate religion, as opposed to only Catholicism, reflects the social borders to which the comic subscribes. While the comic does concentrate on Catholicism (this is what Marx truly hates and this is the tradition from which the family in the take-over story belongs), religion in general becomes an identifying characteristic for communism’s enemy. In *This Godless Communism*, authorities send Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish leaders to labor camps; therefore, all three of these groups compose proper, anti-communist, American identity.

[22] Both *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism* portray the Judeo-Christian tradition as Communism’s absolute opposite. Since the comics and more broadly American culture viewed communists as godless atheists, America’s Christian heritage became a popular means to demonstrate one’s anticommunist position. In the comics, the communist leaders attack Christians, and only true Christians speak out against the communist tyrants. The communist teachers in both comics make it clear that only communism is right and that there is no God, thus shattering the main premise of the Christian faith. However, coming from American Catholic sources it should be obvious to the reader which side of this battle is truly right and which side is truly wrong. Their distribution at parochial schools is indicative of their target audience. Published by Catholic educators, Catholic youths were the primary readership for both these comics. However, youths typically swap comic books with their friends, and it is likely that these comics surpassed this focus group.

[23] In the case of these Catholic insider comic books, much was at stake in their portrayal of social borders. These authors were concerned with the overall perception of the relationship between Catholics and America, and the Cold War presented an auspicious time for them to assert themselves as patriotic Americans. The comics mirror these concerns and this standpoint. What it meant to be an American, they suggested, was to be anti-communist and Christian. In the decades leading up to the Cold War, the Catholic community in the U. S. was an isolated and frequently marginalized population. Catholics were often from immigrant families who organized themselves into ethnic parishes, separated from others in society. In periods of nationalism in America's history, many other Americans singled out Catholics for attack due to their largely foreign-born population.³⁸ Also, due to their loyalty to the papacy, some viewed Catholics with suspicion and perceived them as a threat to national security. In 1949, Paul Blanshard wrote a bestseller entitled *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, which was representative of a widespread anti-Catholic sentiment that continued to exist during the time of the comics' publication.³⁹ In his book, Blanshard argued that Americans should fear the power of Catholicism and moreover, that traditional Catholic beliefs had no place in modern America.⁴⁰ Furthermore, it may be the case that even scholars have marginalized Catholics and done their work through a Protestant lens. Religious studies scholar David O'Brien has proposed that many scholars have looked upon Catholics as un-American. He has suggested that in the past there was "not any deep conviction that Catholics were not religious, or not Christians, but that in some sense they were not really American."⁴¹

[24] While Blanshard's book presented a very negative perspective on Catholicism in America, a widespread acceptance of Catholics simultaneously permeated the country. *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism* reflect this latter view. Situating themselves on the same side as

Protestants in this battle of good vs. evil reflects this reconstruction of national identity to include Catholics as equal members. Will Herberg's 1955 *Catholic, Protestant, Jew* provides a similar, more scholarly, reflection on this identity reformulation, arguing that post-World War II, these three religious traditions all represented legitimate ways to be an American.⁴²

[25] Lincoln's example of the body exhumations in Spain illustrates how the reorganization of social borders can happen through cultural practice. In a similar manner, *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism* are reflective of attempts to redraw the social borders of American identity. Religious identification plays a large role in the plotline and the development of characters of these comics. In both comics, Christian leaders become targets for communist attacks, and their anti-communist stances provide the communist leaders with legitimate reasons to attack religion. For example, *Is This Tomorrow*'s "crowning achievement," the destruction of the "religious junk" in the basement and *This Godless Communism*'s transformation of the Church to communist museum are similar to the mockery and exhumation of the Catholic corpses. In both instances, the ruin of images of the Catholic tradition represents a clear delineation of social borders and an assault from one side of a border to the other. While these two comics overall identify Catholics and Protestants still as separate groups, they both inhabit the same side of the major social border between true American and communist.

[26] Jack Chick tells a very different story about Catholics, communism, and American identity in his 1982 tract *The Godfathers*. As far as distribution is concerned, Chick tracts are popular evangelizing tools in the United States and internationally. Often people will leave Chick tracts in public places for others to find. Chick's publication website offers the purchase of tracts in bulk numbers, which speaks to their appeal as common evangelizing instruments. Also, his website claims to have sold over seven hundred million tracts worldwide.⁴³ The apocalyptic

comic *The Godfathers* explores the connection between Catholicism and Communism; however, unlike the previous two comics, this Protestant counter-narrative is quick to put Catholicism and Communism in bed together. The comic explains how the Catholic Church, specifically the Jesuit presence in the Vatican, is responsible for the major problems of the last two thousand years, particularly the major evils of the twentieth century. The comic opens with a strong anti-Catholic tone as a man, hired by the Vatican, spray-paints a swastika on a synagogue.

[27] First, the Vatican is the Book of Revelation's "whore of Babylon" and the "Mother of Abominations."⁴⁴ Two children of this "Mother" that were "nurtured by Satan through the Vatican," are the Nazi party and the Communist party. The comic then gives a history of the Vatican's role in world terrorism from 900 C.E. to the present, explaining how the Catholic Church created both parties and the large number of deaths that occurred in the process.

Interspersed throughout this history, Chick also tells of the role the Catholic Church played in American history, further demonstrating his anti-Catholic perspective. The Jesuits, or "special forces for the Vatican," have "started wars and murdered kings and presidents, including Abraham Lincoln."⁴⁵ Also, Catholics are responsible for the creation of the KKK, and the exploitation of the great Vatican treasure was the catalyst for the Great Depression.

[28] With regard to the Vatican's role in the creation of Communism, for Jack Chick its part was indeed major. According to Chick, the *Communist Manifesto* and its writers, Marx and Engels, were "coached and directed by Jesuit priests."⁴⁶ The comic also informs readers that Jesuits "worked closely with Marx, Engels, Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin," and furthermore Jesuits played a major role in the "long and careful preparation for the Russian revolution."⁴⁷ Therefore, if it were not for the Catholic Church, Chick says communism would have never been created, and thus, never become a threat to the American way of life. In addition to the Vatican's role in the

cultivation of communism, Chick also claims the Vatican planned Hitler's rise to power in Germany and communicated with Italy's dictator Mussolini.

[29] This comic is not as overtly concerned with nationalism as the previous two comics, but *The Godfathers* does engage issues of national identity. The Vatican is to blame for many American hardships, such as the invention of the KKK, Abraham Lincoln's assassination, and the stock crash that instigated the Great Depression. For many Americans, the KKK symbolizes a shameful aspect of the country's past and the beloved Abraham Lincoln symbolizes a dedication to personal freedom; therefore, to place the responsibility for them on the Vatican insinuates that Catholicism is anti-American. In addition to *The Godfathers*, many other Chick tracts seek to demonstrate that Catholicism is the root of many social problems in America, such as assaults upon the traditional family, political subversion, and drug addiction.⁴⁸

[30] When Chick uses terms from the Book of Revelation, such as the "whore of Babylon" and the "Mother of Abominations" when referring to the Vatican, he accuses the Vatican of performing the work of Satan. Near the end of the tract, Chick informs readers that "Satan was quick to form the Roman Catholic Institution out of Baal worship."⁴⁹ The tract then summarizes how the Vatican has duped and betrayed numerous groups. The section on the Communist Party reads that they are "simply a branch of the Roman Catholic Institution—the bully for the Vatican. They are the muscle, looking for a utopia on earth. But they'll be destroyed by Christ when they attack Israel, on orders from the Pope."⁵⁰ Much like the "antichrist" figure of the Book of Revelation and the role of the Communist party in the previous two comics, in Chick's piece, the Vatican performs the work of Satan. The tract ends with a couple of pages explaining Chick's view of Christianity and its justification. Chick again identifies the Roman Catholic Church as the Book of Revelation's "Mother of Harlots and Abominations," from chapters

seventeen and eighteen. Catholic readers are encouraged to “Find a Bible-believing church where the King James Bible is honored, the pastor is sold out to Christ and His doctrines, and is not afraid to speak out against the Vatican.”⁵¹ On the whole, Chick’s views support a specific thread of fundamentalist Protestantism and vehemently oppose Catholicism in everyway.

[31] By the 1980s, most Americans considered the Catholic population to be a part of the mainstream American populace.⁵² Chick fights fire with fire and responds to the restructuring of social borders as reflected in *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism* with his comic *The Godfathers*. Chick’s comic is a direct reaction to the changed boundaries of American identity and the American religious landscape and the view espoused in *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism*.

[32] These three religious comics differ from mainstream Cold War comics, but still possess similarities to their comic book contemporaries. During the early part of the Cold War, anticommunism was one of “the most common and successful themes exploited by comic book makers.”⁵³ Comic books often strongly hinted at the importance of civil defense, integrating a fear of communism to daily life.⁵⁴ Many early Cold War comics utilized the atomic bomb in their plot, and a large number of these comics belong to a “curious variety of folklore ... advancing the idea of a benign bomb ... a bomb that would never hurt anybody unless we willed it.”⁵⁵ The religious comic books of this paper do not directly engage the atomic bomb, but rather focus upon attacking the philosophy of communism.⁵⁶ On the other hand, mainstream comic books were more interested in the secular aspects of communism and its conflict with America. As opposed to the take-over stories of *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism*, many conventional comic books needed only two operatives to defeat communism. This would further the idea that Americans were far superior to the communist Soviet Union.⁵⁷ However, the two

Catholic comics and the Chick tract, as comic books with a religious educational goal, choose to persuade readers by presenting either a worst case scenario (in the case of *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism*) or a historical review of communism (in the case of *The Godfathers*). [33] “Captain America ... Commie Smasher” of the mid-1950s took advantage of the communist enemy to give Steve Rogers’s alter ego a contemporary and relevant opponent. With his patriotic insignia, Captain America serves as a symbol for the United States. Pitting him against communists taught youths that communism was the nation’s enemy, but did little more.

American historian Bradford W. Wright, author of *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, argues that the series “offered no further discussion of Cold War issues beyond the message the Communists were evil, overweight, and poor dressers.”⁵⁸ In addition to Marvel Comic’s Captain America, the Human Torch also enlisted to fight the communists over the thirty-eighth parallel in Korea.⁵⁹ While depicting communists as evil, these Marvel Comics Cold War publications do not engage the religious distinctions between Americans and communists. There is a clear social boundary between Americans and communists, but it is a straightforward division.

[34] Due to their involvement with American social borders and religious affiliation, *Is This Tomorrow*, *This Godless Communism*, and *The Godfathers* become more complex. Each of the authors aimed to shape the readers’ opinion of the relationship between communism and Catholicism. The first two come from Catholic insider perspectives, while a Catholic outsider wrote the third. This insider/outsider dimension manipulates the story they tell and the viewpoint that they want to impress upon the reader. The insider perspective comics, *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism*, both have the Catholic community situated on the “good guys” side, the Christian side fighting for all that is moral and upright for America and the

world. The outsider perspective comic, *The Godfathers*, positions Catholicism firmly on the “bad guys” side, the side influenced by and acting on the behalf of Satan. Furthermore, all three comics involve an invasion of America’s righteousness, be it a communist take-over in the case of *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism* or immoral infiltration in regards to *The Godfathers*.

[35] Each comic also dedicates at least a few pages or frames to the education of the reader. *Is This Tomorrow* contains a warning page telling the reader how real the threat of Communism is and that the best way to combat Communism is to know all about it and be able to identify its party lines. *This Godless Communism* opens with a letter from J. Edgar Hoover addressed to readers stating that the “most effective way for you to fight communism is to learn all you can about it,” and the final frames of the first installation of this comic series end with a picture of Hoover reciting the same line. Also, there is a frame in which a priest tells readers that prayer is the best method for combating Communism. Chick concludes *The Godfathers* with an explanation of what Christianity is, in his eyes, and why Catholicism is wrong. The final page also contains an area for the reader to write about their conversion to Christianity based on the tract (as is typical in many Chick tracts).

[36] What is at stake for these three comics? Quite simply, these comic vie for America, what the nation stands for, and what it means to be an American. As history progresses, national identity continues to be reconstructed. Comic books offer an avenue for the materialization and presentation of symbolic boundaries of identity. *Is This Tomorrow*, *This Godless Communism*, and *The Godfathers* are not the only comics to take on heated topics such as national identity in the face of disaster. In an article on the Captain America comics and post-9/11 America, social geographer Jason Dittmer argues that the comics are “attempts to create order out of the

complexity of global events by constructing narratives through which the region's place in the world is understandable and legitimate."⁶⁰

[37] The symbolic boundary of good and evil takes centre stage in all three of these Cold War comics. Each shows the location of American identity and Catholic identity in relation to this boundary and provides the readers with the information they need to understand why the authors tell the story the way they do. In the case of *Is This Tomorrow*, *This Godless Communism* and *The Godfathers*, the American-ness of people is a key issue. Like the post-9/11 Captain America comics, the Cold War comics played a role in fostering unity among all who identify as American against a common enemy, be they Cold War communists, Catholic leaders, or contemporary terrorists. Political scientist Benedict Anderson defined nations as imagined communities, and thus nations require constant effort to keep the community defined and to clarify who is part of the nation and who is not.⁶¹

[38] In addition to the social function of these comic books, their images alone, particularly the front covers, are an effective way to create relationships between people which play a crucial role in the establishment of national identity. According to visual culture scholar David Morgan, to create and experience community, members need "symbolic forms ... to allow them to participate in something that is larger both spatially and temporally than their immediate environment."⁶² The front cover of *Is This Tomorrow* depicts a physical assault against three patriotic Americans, one of whom is a cassocked priest, against the background of a waving American flag. Flames have engulfed but have not consumed or visibly burnt the flag. *This Godless Communism's* front cover shows an image of the Statue of Liberty encased by communism's icon of the hammer and sickle. Thirdly, the front cover of *The Godfathers* is graced by the shadowy image of three Catholic clergy leaders in front of the Nazi swastika, the

Jewish Star of David, and the same symbol of communism that envelops the Statue of Liberty for *This Godless Communism*. The two Catholic insider comics utilize American icons to present a unified American identity besieged by communism, while the Chick tract focuses solely on the corruption of Catholic leaders and their involvement with Nazism and communism.

[39] Examining popular culture in order to extrapolate issues of religion is not a new scholarly phenomenon. Looking at church doctrine and the preaching of religious authorities does not necessarily produce an accurate reflection of the religious beliefs of average Christian Americans. When studying the religious beliefs and practices of the American people, investigating the popular level can disclose information that would not surface if one looked only at the level of “elite culture.” The work of Erika Doss and an edited volume by Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan provide two excellent examples of research engaging the intersection of religion and popular culture. In her book, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image*, visual culture scholar Erika Doss explored Elvis fan culture and the spiritual, religious, and emotional significance of the King for his fans.⁶³ For example, fans construct altars to Elvis that contain Elvis popular culture mixed with Christian images, such as Warner Sallman’s Head of Christ. For many fans, a sacred essence has permeated the identity of Elvis, and he “occupies a big space in the daily lives of many Americans.”⁶⁴

[40] In *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Forbes and Mahan are concerned with popular culture because “approaching the study of religion through popular culture can help us learn more about widespread perceptions of religion, and the role religion plays in the everyday lives of people.”⁶⁵ The relationships this book describes between religion and popular culture encourage work in this developing focus within the field of religious studies. This examination

of religious Cold War comics engages this relationship between religion and popular culture and provides an example of the use of popular culture in order to define or re-define identity.

[41] The frightening and tense times of the Cold War presented an auspicious opportunity to fully integrate Catholics into the ambit of American identity. In banding together with mainstream American Protestants against communism, Catholics were able to establish themselves as loyal Americans who upheld similar values to Protestants. However, not everyone viewed Catholics so positively. When America's religious identity is reconstructed, much is at stake for all involved. *Is This Tomorrow*, *This Godless Communism*, and *The Godfathers* exemplify how religious identity can be tightly wrapped up in American identity and reflect this phenomenon.

[42] Religion played a major role in the reconstruction of American identity during the Cold War, and through the lens of these comic books, two perspectives on this transformation become visible. Using the polar extremities of Christianity and communism, these comics sought to influence their readers' perspectives on good and evil and where various religious identities fit on the spectrum. *Is This Tomorrow* and *This Godless Communism* situate Catholics along with other Christians deeply within the anti-communist/moral/American side of the spectrum thus reflecting an integration of Catholics into American identity, while *The Godfathers'* exploration of the Vatican's involvement in communism's creation identifies the Catholic presence in America with apocalyptic evils. The first two comics reflect the Cold War era's general acceptance of Catholics, while the third comic displays a negative reaction against this assimilation. These three comics demonstrate how religion's relationship to American identity materializes not only within church buildings but also in the frames of comic books.

Notes

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- ³ Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul, "Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism!?", 1947. Copy of comic in pdf form provided courtesy of the library of the University of Wisconsin.
- ⁴ George A. Pflaum, "This Godless Communism," 17,2 *Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact* (1961). Comic retrieved online at [http://www.authentichistory.com/1960s/treasure_chest/cover_01.html]. Accessed October 12, 2008.
- ⁵ Jack Chick, "The Godfathers," (1982). Comic retrieved online at [http://www.chick.com/reading/comics/0114/0114_fourpages.asp?=01]. Accessed October 12, 2008.
- ⁶ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁸ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 106.
- ⁹ Ryan Edwardson, "The Many Lives of Captain Canuck: Nationalism, Culture, and the Creation of a Canadian Comic Book Superhero," *Journal of Popular Culture* 37,2 (2003), 185, 186, respectively.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ¹¹ William W. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 5.
- ¹² David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 5.
- ¹³ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954).
- ¹⁴ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 88.
- ¹⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 110.
- ¹⁶ T.F. O'Connor, "The National Organization for Decent Literature: A Phase in American Catholic Censorship," *Library Quarterly*, 65,4 (1995): 386-414.
- ¹⁷ Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 75.
- ¹⁸ Referred to by Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 86.
- ¹⁹ Dianne Kirby, *Religion and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.
- ²⁰ In addition to religion, economic and political differences played a large role in the creation of this binary. David Ryan, "Mapping Containment: The Cultural Construction of the Cold War," in *American Cold War Culture*. Douglas Field, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 51-60.
- ²¹ Joanne P. Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader's Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), Introduction.
- ²² Kirby, "Divinely Sanctioned", 412.
- ²³ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion 3: Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 294. And Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 83.
- ²⁴ Respectively, David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000) and Billy Graham, "Flames Out of Control," *World Aflame* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965).
- ²⁵ Eric R. Crouse, "Popular Cold Warriors: Conservative Protestants, Communism, and Culture in Early Cold War America," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 7 (2002): 9.
- ²⁶ Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2002), 6.
- ²⁷ Randall Bennett Woods, *Quest for Identity: America Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33-41.
- ²⁸ Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared! The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 156.
- ²⁹ *Is This Tomorrow*, 32.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 45-47.
- ³² Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 275.

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- ³³ *This Godless Communism* 17,2: 2.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³⁸ Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*, 92.
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- ⁴³ Jack T. Chick, "English Chick Cartoon Tracts." <http://www.chick.com/catalog/tractlist.asp>. Accessed February 6, 2009.
- ⁴⁴ *The Godfathers*, 3.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁴⁸ Michael Ian Borer and Adam Murphee, "Framing Catholicism: Jack Chick's Anti-Catholic Cartoons and the Flexible Boundaries of the Culture Wars," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 18,1 (2008): 95-112, and 100.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁵² Julie Byrne, "Roman Catholics and the American Mainstream in the Twentieth Century," National Humanities Center, Essays on Divining America, 20th Century. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/tmainstr.htm>, Revised November 2000. Accessed February 12, 2009.
- ⁵³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 110.
- ⁵⁴ Alice L. George. *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2003), 141.
- ⁵⁵ Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 16-17.
- ⁵⁶ Even an example of a Christian Cold War era comic book that does engage the fear of atomic warfare, only does so briefly. Hal Lindsey's *There's a New World Coming*, published by Spire Christian Comics in 1974, is focused on connecting current events with the Book of Revelation, but atomic culture plays only a very small role.
- ⁵⁷ Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 40.
- ⁵⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 123.
- ⁵⁹ Marvel Comics Catalog. "Marvel Masterworks: Atlas Era Heroes 2." <http://www.marvel.com/catalog/?id=8290> Accessed February 6, 2009.
- ⁶⁰ Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95,3 (2005): 627.
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