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# What Would Preacher Do? Tactics of Blasphemy in the Strategies of Satire and Parody

Michael J. Prince

## Introduction

Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's sixty-six-issue graphic novel series *Preacher* is blasphemous. Scream it from the rooftops, post it behind a sputtering red Cessna on an aerial advertising banner, and be sure to mention it in your Amazon customer review, as hundreds have (Maxfield 2012). Of course, some of the reviewers hem and haw, admitting a guilty pleasure that, in spite of being Evangelical Christians, devout Methodists, or Roman Catholics, they actually *enjoyed* reading *Preacher*, could not put it down. Others cannot resist making a teaching moment of their two-star review, pointing out that, all in all, *Preacher* is lousy theology. "Ennis and Dillon hold religion in undisguised contempt. Therefore, they don't realize the questions they raise are centuries old, or that their characters are little more complex than paper dolls. They just hold the characters, and their faith, up to mockery and derision, and think they've created a story" (Nenstiel 2021). Even serious scholarship is not immune to righteous indignation: "Here, Ennis' Northern Irish Protestantism (even if latent) comes to the fore. Ennis expresses himself as an outraged Puritan, implying that it is better to destroy than to allow contamination (whether societal or religious) to continue" (Grimshaw 2010, 153). Now, given that the *Entertainment Weekly* review blurb on the Amazon page *endorses* it with "features more blood and blasphemy than any mainstream comic in memory. Cool," one is hard pressed to avoid the suspicion that a good-sized chunk of the comics reading public just cannot take a joke.

This is undoubtedly a condition of the times, especially within the perceived conflicts between the waning authority of religion's institutions, and an almost limitless horizon of "things which are no longer sacred." As Kees de Groot points out, 'the market has become more powerful than the state, the church, or the family once were. We are tempted to buy the products that provide elements of an 'authentic' identity" (De Groot 2006, 96). Mike Grimshaw makes strong claims for the *Preacher* series' "[representing] Gen X in search of itself, a generation reading of a loss (the death of God) heard of in their parents' generation, but now experienced in *graphic* detail" (Grimshaw 2010, 161). And fan pages, letters to comics' publishers, cosplay, and Comic-Cons are evidence that readers of graphic novels do encourage in-group identification. Within that, or overlapping it, is another group that is open for the blasphemy excesses this series tactically employs, in this case hinging discursively on a shared notion of irony and ironic expression. Linda Hutcheon notes insightfully that "discursive communities" are a precondition for meaningful communication:

[The] whole communicative process is ... *made possible* by those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions that we bring to the complex processing of discourse, of language *in use*. ... [It] is this community that comes first and that, in fact, enables irony to happen. (Hutcheon 1994, 89, emphasis in original)

After Thomas Kuhn, Hutcheon defines these discursive communities "by the complex figuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies" (Hutcheon 1994, 91). Among these communication strategies are those that, on occasion, participate in what Stig Hjarvard refers to as a "mediatization of religion" (Hjarvard 2016, 8). Does a dispersed group of comics "fans," individually or at a gathering, constitute De Groot's third type of "liquid religion?" (De Groot 2008, 288). I would venture to say, for some, yes; but even at its weakest, the mediatization of fundamental religious questions, narrative tropes, and symbols can be read (as Grimshaw does) as symptomatic of prevalent social attitudes, if for no other reason than Vertigo, the publisher of the *Preacher* series, wants to make money from their product. And to achieve this, they must find their appropriate discursive community.

*Preacher* was published serially from 1995 to 2000 and was reissued in a six-volume collection about a decade later. It is an eschatological satire, a parody of the *Second Coming*, only with an extremely warped figure representing the Jesus of the Parousia. As such, blasphemy is tactically deployed for most intents and

purposes as part of the rhetoric of satire. To be sure, the series certainly merits its “Suggested for Mature Readers” label, but each excessive visual or textual flourish fits comfortably under the aegis of what a work participating in the satiric mode does: cajole, shock, mock, and condemn, all the while exerting control of the medium and genre and involving the reader in a sense of inclusiveness marked by familiarity with extratextual references, and the appropriate mode of humor.

Ennis and Dillon’s comic epic utilizes literary and visual techniques to make a commanding work of Menippean satire, which employs a variety of genre, visual, and literary cues. Chief among these are the two dominant genres exploited in this work, Christian-inspired fiction and the Western. Further, within these genre articulations and expectations, there are some elements of parody, a frequent fellow traveler of satire. With regard to “religious” discourses, *Preacher* contains a complex angelology and eschatology, with the protagonist “Jesse Custer” as a complex placeholder for Jesus Christ. However, in spite of a rich assortment of blasphemies, these will be shown to be fairly pedestrian compared to the religion-based ontology that this series *naturalizes*, a feature of “banal religion.” *Preacher* uses blasphemy as a tactic in the broader strategy of an epic Menippean satire. In short, I will show that *Preacher* may give a bit more than it takes at the table of religious exchange.

## Religion and Blasphemy in a Comics Series

Blasphemy is different things for different people. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* lists three kinds: “It is heretical when the insult to God involves a declaration that is against faith”; “It is imprecatory when it could cry a malediction upon the Supreme Being”; and “It is simply contumacious when it is wholly made up of contempt of, or indignation towards, God” (Melody 1907). While at the federal level, the United States has no laws against it, some states did, trying an individual in the nineteenth century for unflattering statements about Jesus’s mother; and a publisher for denying the existence of God. The Supreme Court ruled to stop all prosecutions in 1952. England and Wales abolished their statutes against blasphemy in 2008 (Vile 2009).

The comics serial *Preacher* is difficult to summarize. Like a television series, a strong draw for the readers is the interest in the characters, and to find out what happens to them in the following episode. This opens up for frequent and complex digressions. A single sentence summary, however, will verify the charges of blasphemy: a small-town preacher, Reverend Jesse Custer, is possessed by an

unholy miscegenation of an angel and a demon, embarks upon a quest for God, and ultimately convinces a hitman to “rub out” the Heavenly Father for being a deadbeat dad and abandoning Earth. Throughout the sixty-six episodes, heresy, imprecation, and contumacy are committed numerous times.

The increasing stream of religious liquidity in the Western society, however, changes a discussion of blasphemy in a humorous work. Just twenty years ago, one could inquire of the television series *South Park*, as does Kevin J. Murtagh, whether Parker and Stone “are doing something morally wrong by using blasphemy for comic effect?” (Murtagh 2007, 29). Still, Murtagh’s definition of *blasphemous humor* is helpful: “some sort of presentation that is intended to be amusing or funny, in which something deemed sacred is portrayed in a disrespectful or irreverent manner” (31). The first sticking point here is with “sacred”: sacred for *whom*? The series *Preacher* calls to it an audience who may not have a strong notion of the sacred on any level, religious, nationalist, or consumerist. Rather, religion for this audience can be seen as a marker for those outside of their ingroup-affinity.

As Jesse Custer’s backstory is that of an abused child of a conservative Pentecostal Christian family of a certain southern backwater ilk; this childhood narrative bears a strong critique (*Preacher, Book One*: 249–335, *passim*). But the denigrating depiction of a religious group has less to do with the religion than the “ethnic” group, for lack of a better term, “white trash.” For example, when Jesse and his sweetheart Tulip are brought to Jesse’s childhood home, the driveway is bordered by burning crosses, invoking an iconic connection to the Ku Klux Klan (*Book One*, 225). In some respects, however, the stern religious aspect of his childhood gives Jesse a messianic sheen, which the passage of time will bring to full light. Murtagh justifies the blasphemous humor in *South Park* as providing pleasure of the audience (even at the cost of others) and by encouraging discussion (Murtagh 2006, 35–7). That show frequently ends with a learned lesson. No such didactic reflection is available in *Preacher*. Contrary to what one would expect in strongly blasphemous characterizations of angels, churchmen, institutions, and God, the critique is frequently aimed at the *secular habits and human sensibilities* of these allegedly holy agents, oddly folding back on a transgressed morality on the part of those characters. The blasphemy of Ennis and Dillon is therefore not solely in the humor, but rather as a tactic to censure characters representing religion.

*Preacher* is a comics series, and as such brings with it some of the narrative constraints of other series, such as radio and movie serials and television series. However, copious digressions notwithstanding, the installments of *Preacher*

were part of the same overarching story arc, unlike an interminable American sitcom, which runs until it “jumps the shark” or otherwise depletes the interest of its audience. *Preacher* was composed with a dramatic climax and conclusion in mind (Hibbs 2020). In this respect, it is similar to a Dickens serial novel. Each issue centers on a part of the overall narrative, generally concerning a particular coterie of characters. But, whereas the characters in a TV show are chiefly determined by the actors, in *Preacher*, and all other comics, the visual portrayals contribute to their characterization, both as individuals and in the narrative. It is then a serial graphic novel, as full of variety and digressions as *The Pickwick Papers*, yet as an illustrated epos of Ennis and Dillon’s commentary on American society and the integrity of the Abrahamic godhead. Their critique of the Abrahamic God, and Christian religion in general has been recognized as “the plot’s driving force, the author’s most prominent intellectual examination of US culture and myth” (Salisbury 2013, 133). Yet, frame for frame, America, its people, its self-image in the media, its sustaining cultural mythology is satirized more than religion.

Nevertheless, religion is central to *Preacher*. Hjarvard writes that in fictional media “religion has become one among many other cultural resources for storytelling, yet since mass media generally ... are in the business of getting the audiences’ attention, religious messages are subordinated ... and have to comply with generic conventions” (Hjarvard 2016, 10). Blasphemy in and of itself is not a genre convention. However, characters in doubt about their religious faith, in conflict with agents of religion (earthly as well as angelic), and in search of the *meaning* of it all are the new generic conventions of the adult serial comic and graphic novel. In the modalities that thrive in a state of religious liquidity, blasphemy can be employed in the repertoire of sustained irony at the core of satire.

## Genres, Satire, and Parody

The impulses behind Ennis and Dillon’s *Preacher* series were iconoclastic against organized religion but also against two crucial supporting cultural myths of Western and, especially, American society: the Christian founding myths and those associated with the Western frontier. This would not be done directly, but implicitly with the arsenal provided by satire and parody. Inspired by the cinema, Ennis constructed the series with an eye to combine uneven parts of David Lynch’s *Wild at Heart* (1990), with a romance to set the world on fire;

Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1987) with its more demotic vampires; and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), a Western with a critical view on the gunfighter mystique. Also, during this time Ennis was living in the United States, so the work was inspired by American cinema, and portrayals of American culture. The *mélange* of these plot and character elements was in the end packaged in a contemporary *Western* (Hibbs 2020). However, unlike the films that inspired it, *Preacher* is an interwoven series of narrative vignettes. As such, the structure lends itself to promiscuous visits to diverse genre topographies, for two reasons. First, as Kathryn Hume has observed, "satire is better seen as a mode adaptable to various genres" (Hume 2007, 303); and second, one signal characteristic of Menippean satire is its use of different genres to achieve its attack (Griffin 1994, 31–3). *Preacher* is a Western, to be sure, but it also participates strongly in the generic expectations of the Christian novel, the horror genre, including (and especially), the vampire narrative. There is a bit of the action-film, the thriller, the detective story, a conspiracy narrative, with visits to old Europe, and the uninformed backwards American South. This great variety is what one would expect of the *lanx satura*, the "full plate" of Menippean satire. And the plate is nothing if not full in Ennis and Dillon's series.

To help the reader navigate the complex plot, the character gallery, and the way these are related to the genre, a slightly expanded, *selective*, plot synopsis is in order. Jesse Custer, a small-town minister, is imbued with a child spirit who is the issue of a love affair between an angel and a demon. This being is called *Genesis*, and it has come to earth in search of a *soul* it can inhabit, in this case, Custer's. Genesis gives its host a superpower, the "word of God," which compels anyone who hears his order to perform it, and it also imparts to Jesse inside knowledge on the true nature of Lord God. He created the world in order to have beings who would love Him. The mixture of angel and demon was an effort to expand His power and province even further. Instead, this creature represents an existential threat, so the Yahweh figure "gets out of Dodge," so to speak, leaving heaven, abandoning earth and His creations. Custer's quest is to use his superpower to compel the Lord to appear to the world and confess that he has been remiss in His duties. So, in the cosmological frame of the series, an absent God is the answer for evil in this world. At the end, when Custer realizes that this plan will not work, he enlists a gunslinging zombie, the Saint of Killers, to kill God (*Book Six*, 352–3).

Before discussing how *Preacher* participates in the satiric mode, these genres should be explored to examine the ideas, values, and expectations they may carry, as well as the icons, myth narratives, and tropes they make available. The

Gothic horror elements are present in the protagonist's sidekick, Cassidy, as a vampire; the Saint of Killers, as an "undead"; and a visual palette that features a fair share of gore. Grimshaw makes an interesting point about Gen X's reliance on Gothic horror as a multiple-meaning-bearing generic discourse (Grimshaw 2010, 149). Yet, not only does *Preacher* not deliberately try to evoke the scariness of a genuine work of horror, it only tangentially parodies it or uses it for satirical embellishment. In spite of some instances of the demonic supernatural, a subplot based on vampires, and plenty of abject splatter, horror is merely present as other genres unfold. The real genres that are "played with" are the Christian novel and the Western.

In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins describes how the Western novel genre displaced Christian-inspired literature popular in late nineteenth century America. The template for the Christian novel is Charles M. Sheldon's 1896 book, *In His Steps*, about a preacher who vows for a whole year "to ask before he does anything, 'What would Jesus do?'" It was "far and away the most popular book of its time ... Sheldon reports in a 1936 forward to the novel that according to *Publishers Weekly* it had sold more copies than any other book except the Bible." Tompkins mentions four other novels from the same period that make "Christian heroism their explicit theme." Less than ten years after Sheldon's novel came out, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* initiated a genre that would come to rival and ultimately dominate Christian literature (Tompkins 1992, 29–32).

The social gospel religion that Sheldon's work popularized was the descendant and last gasp of the evangelical reform Christianity embodied in the popular fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. The female, domestic, "sentimental" religion of the best-selling women writers—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and dozens of others—whose novels spoke to the deepest beliefs and highest ideals of middle-class America is the real antagonist of the Western (Tompkins 1992, 37–8).

Whereas these domestic novels were indoors, the new genre was outdoors; the Western is male-orientated, the domestic novel was largely focused on women and the family with female heroines; and finally, whereas the religious underpinnings of society were present and reinforced in the domestic novel, the Western was at best agnostic, and where there was a sense of the divine, it was in the scope of natural beauty. Secular, worldly, and violent, the Western genre broke the Puritan grasp on American identity and replaced it with the concerns of surviving a world of Hobbesian violence. While Tompkins positions these thematic genres in opposition, *Preacher* deftly conflates them in several ways.



To begin at the beginning, the first titled subsection of the series is called “Gone to Texas.” The protagonist, Jesse Custer, is a minister to the rough and tumble hayseed town of Annville. So, at the outset, the terrain of the Western frontier overlaps that of saving souls. But in determining the intertwining of the two genres, the character gallery sets up the structural overlap. Let us start with the protagonist, Jesse Custer, a name that deserves closer attention, for Jesse Custer, is the big J. C. of this narrative. There is a long tradition for this, such as the tall soldier Jim Conklin in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. Given the series’ entire plotline, Ennis’s hero’s name is about as ham-fisted as an author can get. I would suggest this lack of subtlety is deliberate, for as a “Christ figure,” a one-time staple of literary discussion and analysis (Detweiler 1964, 111), Custer is a perverted one. His name invokes a conflation of social bandit Jesse James, who fought the corporations exploiting the frontier settlers (morphing into a dime-novel hero in the process), and the US Army General George Armstrong Custer, arguably the most famous Indian fighter, if one of the less successful (Slotkin 1994, 8–9; Slotkin 1998, 133–9).

A second cue to Jesse Custer’s double role as Western hero and Christ figure is in the nickname given him by a hallucinated manifestation of John Wayne: “Pilgrim.” The appearance of the iconic Western actor is a childhood association with Jesse’s dead father. Wayne’s advice, “Yah gotta be one of the good guys” (*Book One*, 292–304), comes late in the first collected volume. But he uses this term in his first utterance in the comic: “Well, Pilgrim ... Couldn’t help but notice ya ain’t mentioned *me* yet’ (*Book One*, 39). John Wayne’s calling Jesse “Pilgrim” is an intertextual cue to the 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*; it was the nickname used by Wayne character Tom Doniphon for James Stewart’s character Ransom Stoddard, an idealistic and impractical East coast lawyer who moved west. It was intended pejoratively, generally reserved for one from the eastern states who finds himself out of his depth in the challenging environment of the frontier west (*Legends of America*). Ennis achieves an intriguing palimpsest on two levels. The obvious is the intertextual reference to John Wayne as a Western hero in films. The other is more subtle, but something which is often at work in this series. The “Pilgrim” invokes an important work of literature for the foundation colonial societies of North America, Paul Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The tribulations of the protagonist in that book suggest that Jesse Custer is in for a rough time. The instance of the protagonist hallucinating a “guardian angel” of sorts out of an amalgam of John Wayne Western characters iterates a satiric attack on an aspect of American identity, updating “What would Jesus do?” with “What would John Wayne do?” If it is, as Jane Tomkins

says, that the “Western *answers* the domestic novel ... [by rejecting] evangelical Protestantism ...; it seeks to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for those ideals” (Tompkins 1992, 39), then Jesse’s twinned thematic charge, as Western and Christian hero, ironically seems to be answering back to the Western.

One way is to have the acme of the Western hero as a protective familiar spirit, a guardian angel, who warns Jesse of the true nature of his greatest nemesis, the “Saint of Killers,” and urges Jesse to “watch him” (*Book One*, 68–9). As an indication of genre conflation and contrast, the zombie assassin combines Christian religious tradition and hierarchy (even the angels in heaven refer to him as a “saint”) with the bleak life-and-death struggles of the Western genre. He is a hired gunman of supernatural abilities, incidentally one who regards killing angels a valid act. Visually, he is first revealed in a Western genre topos: the abandoned mine. Further, he is portrayed as the quintessence of the “black hat” gunman—think Jack Palance as Jack Wilson in *Shane*. The moral valence of the angels and religion in general is shifted with their employing of this wraith to hunt Custer. Ironically, though, it is the Saint of Killers who ultimately will assassinate the principal Yahweh figure in a parody of the Western showdown. In terms of genres, there is a certain logic at work here: if God is dead, the Western has helped kill Him. Yet, this character possesses some complexity borne from the Western. Though Custer has convinced him to challenge God, the murder is also a gesture of Frontier revenge: the Saint of Killers punishes God for not being present to protect his family against a pack of murderous outlaws.

The genre marker is clearly articulated right before the final issue in a Bill Hick’s quotation about his childhood wish to be “an avenging cowboy hero” (*Book Six*, 351). By the concluding pages, the obvious cowboy hero is Jesse Custer, since he is riding off into the sunset on a horse with his good lady behind him. But at the same time, it is not Custer who performs an act of vengeance, but the Saint of Killers. The how and why of this is tidily sown together in issue #66 with three-long letters, Jesse’s to his beloved Tulip, Cassidy’s to Jesse, and Cassidy’s to Tulip. The fact that Ennis and Dillon had to resort to epistolary exposition to conclude the series in a meaningful way is testament to just how varied (to put it mildly) the plot gyrations have been.

To participate in the satiric mode, Kathryn Hume tells us, certain markers have to be present in sufficient “intensity.” A target must be attacked; this target may be historical or more universal. Humor and wit distinguish the satiric from merely the invective. There ought to be textual evidence of “the author’s glorying in his or her literary performance”; since we are dealing with a comic,

I would include here visual flourishes as well. An element of exaggeration or extreme extrapolation from the present historical-material circumstances may also be present. At the same time, the reader may recognize a “moral or existential truth,” “some version of authorial malice,” and an aspect of “inquiry” when sheer indignation is not so present (Hume 2007, 305). Grimshaw, among others, identifies the attack on Christianity, and yet at the same time iterates the *presence* of a strong base of residual religiousness (Grimshaw 2010, 162). As I will highlight below, a major factor justifying the critique of God is not just apocryphal, it is wholly invented: God’s desire to gain even more power via an angelic miscegenation.

Up to now, I have emphasized the impressive control of rival genres, the Western and the Christian narrative, as indicative to a commanding “literary performance.” At the same time, there is a double-coding in *Preacher* in the parody exercised within the respective genres. Parody lampoons the text it inhabits, playing off of genre expectations. It works with excesses and permutations to make its point, similarly to satire, with a metafictional and a comedic aspect (Rose 1993, 254). As a book of Christian faith, *Preacher* reads as somehow too literal; as a Western, too esoteric.

### *Preacher’s Angelology and Eschatology: Banal Religion in Extremis*

This equivocal genre quality becomes apparent in the ontology of Ennis and Dillon’s world, in a depiction of the powers of religion, earthly and heavenly, as incompetent, corrupt, and unpalatably corporate. In short, the problems with the Abrahamic faith portrayed in *Preacher* come down to divine beings’ succumbing to *human* weaknesses, from a Yahweh figure, who fears being alone, to peevish low-level angelic bureaucrats. The mortal agents fare even worse. Ennis and Dillon rely on traditions already in place, and embellish when they must, to recreate heaven, and the role of angels on earth. English literature has done this before with John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and while there is no evidence of direct textual references, Milton’s Pandemonium and the early twenty-first-century earth do share some characteristics. However, rather than expulsion, Jesse and Tulip as the new Adam and Eve seem to be riding back toward a landscape of freedom by the end of the series.

The primus motor for the entire *Preacher* narrative is the conception of the child, which is to be called “Genesis,” the child of a male angel and a female

demon. Late in the series, the reader learns that this union was, if not encouraged, at least sanctioned by the Lord God as a way of increasing the province and variety of beings who could love Him. This child, however, was too powerful and had to be imprisoned in *heaven*. This was the state of affairs at the start of the story. In order for there to even be such a creature, a complex intertextual referencing system had to be brought into the narrative to justify the existence and practice of angels' interbreeding, and the existence of demons on earth.

Since they mated, it is logical to assume that the angel mated with a *fallen angel*, and here popular literature has a rich tradition to draw upon, chiefly the book of *Genesis* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *Genesis* 6:2 says that "the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them" by way of introducing the situation that justifies the great flood. So, having Elohim come down and take wives on earth was a thing. *Paradise Lost* essentially describes earth as under control of fallen angels, one of which, Satan, is nominally in charge. While Milton himself was only indirectly informed of an apocryphal book, *1 Enoch*, which elaborates on the angel-human interbreeding (Williams 1940, 298–9), it may be that Ennis and Dillon have further buttressed their view of the fallen angels from this text. In some traditions, Nephilim are said to have mated and produced children, and it is likely one of these whom a "Seraphi" mates with in *Preacher*. This is established in the first episodes of the series.

It begins in Texas, and at the outset it is clear that Jesse is not atheistic, he is anti-church. The reader is presented with a preacher on the cusp of losing his faith, and his visit to the bar in Annville positions Jesse as the suffering leader of a wayward flock. The action then moves to heaven, which contains the prison "Genesis" has escaped from. This is unequivocally rendered as a *space-station*. Fifty years ago, this stopped being science fiction, but the portrayals of the Seraphi and the Adephi also teeter on this science fiction edge: the Seraphi do have wings, but the Adephi would not look out of place in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In addition, heaven is portrayed as bureaucratically hierarchical, but based on a class of nobility. The "working class" Adephi are *in fear* of the "Seraphi," the highest rank of Christian angelology. They are described in *Isa. 6:1-8*, and are mentioned in the *Book of Enoch* and *Revelations*. The Adephi are not part of the Christian Angelic Hierarchy, though one does claim to be "one of the host ... of angels" as he is dying. But since the term itself is one letter away from *adelphi*, which means "brothers," they do fulfill the role of some monk-like order. The hair fashion and uniform dress in plain blue tunics would imply the same. And when one of them is killed by the Saint of Killers, it is clear, they are mortal. When they are confronted by an angry grieving Seraph

carrying his dead brother, the Adephi fear them as masters (*Book One*, 21). In addition, the spatialization of heaven and earth is intriguing: the Seraphi had been in the “stratosphere,” indicating earth orbit; and Genesis “came charging out of the rising sun” (21), which, while not clarifying where exactly heaven is, places it at a distance determined by interplanetary space. And finally, with the Seraphi “left in charge,” the implication is that earth has been abandoned by God. In the logic of the narrative, God is not imaginary, God is not dead, God *has run off*.

Literalization is a rhetorical device in satire to poke fun by presenting something so that the reader perceives the metaphorical meaning, but a character in the narrative takes the same statement literally (Quinlan 1967, 517). However, Ennis and Dillon are doing this on a much broader level: they are literalizing a Biblical cosmology, and it is portrayed as *corrupt*. Heaven is an interplanetary outpost, inhabited by peevish bureaucrats and snooty supervisors. It is a *workplace*; and the angels are doing a *job*: running a maximum-security *prison* for a demon bastard child. Given that Milton’s tale is culturally available for the author and artist, if not necessarily for the reader, it is a further jibe to invert the demon prison in *Paradise Lost*, earth, with heaven.

Another presupposition of Christianity is not literalized, but rather *naturalized* by the fact that Genesis has gone to earth to obtain a *soul*. When the Adephi first decides that they must retrieve this being, one of them suggests that “it will attempt to bond with a fully developed consciousness. With a soul” (*Book One*, 21). And further on, an Adephi explains his target to the Saint of Killers. “It holds a power like unto that of God Almighty. It seeks to join with the spirit of mortal man: if it succeeds, the two together will know the secret ways of Paradise as no other mortal has done. Together they could end us all” (*Book One*, 30).

Genesis’ merging with Jesse Custer, as a divine being combined with mortal, is mimetically similar to Jesus’s coming to earth. Yet, instead of Satan plotting against Him, it is the *angels* of the Abrahamic religious tradition. To be sure, this inversion may well be the single strongest blasphemy in the *Preacher* series, implying that the forces of Satan have been replaced by God’s ordained stewards of earth. The church, under this guise, is itself an agent of Satan. The depiction of Jesse possessed by Genesis on page 35 sustains the satirical inversion: Jesse is suspended in the air, black and white in his clericals, and yet he is part of a larger being, with cloven hooves and red skin below and the lighter hair and outspread angel wings. Later, when Jesse is trying to make sense of the information Genesis has imbued him with, the reader is shown a Seraphi with a female demon mounted on him in a variety of intercourse referred to as “Cowgirl.”

The reference to a couple who have done something of which God disapproves, invokes the First Couple driven from the Garden of Eden. Genesis' merging with a mortal will result in a parody of Adam and Eve as depicted in *Paradise Lost*. Forbidden knowledge is still something the Elohim emphatically guard, but unlike the first couple, a more powerful knowledge is on hand, one that can "end" the Heavenly Host. This is the knowledge that Jesse Custer wrestles with and tries to make sense of.

Now, I do not want to suggest that the readers of this comic are therefore believing Christians. After all, the conclusion to this epic is the murder of an unarmed God, albeit by one of His more questionable creations. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that this improvised angelic hierarchy extends into a world that would resonate with the readers of fantasy and horror. Still, the vocabulary is charged with an acknowledgment of "a soul" and "a spirit of mortal man"; and it is to imbue a mortal with "a power like until that of God Almighty." In the sheer enjoyment of the visual presentation and action-packed plot, the reader may overlook connecting this with Jesse Custer. Yet, again, a mortal man imbued with the powers and understanding of God? Hmm. Where have we heard that before? I would suggest that whatever else *Preacher* may be, when it comes to identifying the protagonist as a Christ figure, it is none too subtle. Jesse Custer *could* be the Anti-Christ. But he does attempt to fix the corrupt Texas hamlet of Annville; he attacks the corrupted earthly representatives of Christ, the Grail; and he tries to relieve humanity of the quandary of the presence of evil by getting the Lord God to come clean, as it were. In these particulars, the overall drift of Jesse Custer's actions suggests that he is here to combat the Anti-Christ, clearing the Temple of earthly vanity and corruption, right and proper. God is not dead, in this instance; He is in each and every one of us, and at the end of this narrative, He is riding the horse away from the metropolis and into the desert.

It seems, then, that in the cosmology the narrative plays out, Ennis and Dillon take away with one hand—heaven is a space station, humankind is the product of a vain and lonely supreme being—and serve with the other: the human soul is real; morally correct behavior counts for more than elevated social status. It is this latter theme, the importance of correct behavior in relation to one's fellow man or woman, which is the clear normative ethos in this satire; and, within the parameters of the satire, the blasphemy is essential to this message as a carrier wave on which righteous behavior can be inscribed. It is difficult to dispute Grimshaw's conclusion that *Preacher* is Puritanical in its absolute stance on disputing existing (if waning) authorities (Grimshaw 2010, 153), but I am

inclined to view this more as a feature than a bug. The excesses of the series suggest some genuine value in wiping the slate clean.

The strongest invective is reserved for the human members of a religious order called “the Grail,” a group who has the task of keeping intact the bloodline of Christ. These earthly powers, trading in the coin of religion, are also combatted by Jesse Custer. While something akin to an ordinary religious service is not depicted after the catastrophe at Annville, something analogous to “church fathers” are present in this institution. Other Christian elements are mentioned. The Grail is introduced as another part of the Godhead hierarchy in charge of earth (*Book One*, 72), and they fear the spiritually imbued Jesse Custer. The Allfather, who is consulted by this organization, appears dressed as a Pope, only comically obese.

While much more could be discussed on this, three points speak to the element of the satiric. First, the idea that there is an “essence of Christ” in the blood is lampooned by depicting the current heir of this heritage as a blithering idiot. As the executive agent Starr puts it: “Son of God or son of man, ... you can’t fuck your sister and expect much good to come of it” (*Book Two*, 225). So, the current heir to “the blood of the lamb” has maintained that purity by ironically exercising the Pharaonic taboo. Second, the profound conflicts within the series participates in what Michael Barkun has identified as a characteristic of millennialism, “stigmatized knowledge,” information of the ilk of UFOs aliens and Atlantis (Barkun 2013, 36–8). In this case it covers the angelology and the blood line of Christ. Stigmatized knowledge is a feature of some types of satire, usually involving secret societies, of which Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* stands out as an example. Finally, in the fullness of time, Starr, who is in charge of the Grail, wishes Jesse Custer to be the new vessel of the blood of the lamb, again, iterating and strengthening Custer’s position as a Christ-figure in the narrative.

Blasphemy in *Preacher* is not the *intent*, but in our times of liquified religion, is available as a marker for in-group/out-group boundaries. Irony (and by extension, satire) finds its own audience. In *Preacher*, the blasphemy portrays those associated with the Christian religion as pederasts, sadists, and backbiting bureaucrats. In this case, they become just another set of one-time sacrosanct entities at the ready for defamation in the name of artistic, in this case, satiric intertextual aesthetics. As blasphemy is employed, the objects of religious worship are made literally ridiculous. It is in this conjoined ridicule that the readers revel, not endorsing an insult to a “real” God, but going along with the intriguing premise that the Elohim are just as petty and egotistical as some functionaries

within their own parishes and dioceses. Whatever else may be going on here, it is *not* an appeal to cognitively nested ostensive physical reality, the atheism of Richard Dawkins. Non-cognitive supernatural events are the norm in this series, with Jesse's being possessed by a spiritual entity being the most fantastic element of them all. Obviously, there are others, for instance, the vampire trope. However, the overarching generic attitudes of the West provide a materialist alibi for the supernatural goings-on.

*Preacher*, blasphemy and all, does qualify as what Hjarvard terms a "banal religion." "[The] various logics of the media influence the ways in which religion is represented and condition the ways in which authority to speak about these issues is constructed" (Hjarvard 2016, 14). In this case, the work is the product of a comics production label deliberately cultivating an adult audience, not with eroticism, but iconoclastic ridicule. It plays fast and free with the very pillars of the "religious" symbol set of Western society, as well as some esoteric, arcane, and outlying aspects parodying stigmatized knowledge. The allegory the author and artist construct blatantly positions Jesse Custer as Jesus Christ; the ossified bureaucracy of heaven and their accomplices on earth, as Pharisees. On the cosmic level, the battle of good versus evil plays itself out as Jesse's having been imbued to fight the Anti-Christ on Earth. Its contribution, in spite of its iconoclastic climax, is to bring into circulation some "religious imaginations and practices ... fundamental for any kind of religion" (13). Its subject matter is loss of faith, and the regaining of—if not faith—at least a personal and conjugal equilibrium: in the end, *Preacher* is a comedy. Comedies generically serve to endorse a social order, perhaps the weakly moralistic, secular society of the readers. In this way, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* could be charged with blasphemy when Satan collects twelve disciples, in imitation of the Apostles; but in terms of the late Renaissance English-speaking world, it, too, was participating in social discourse as a banal religion (Milton 1971, 392–490). And what of Charles M. Sheldon, reading aloud in his drafty church at the end of the nineteenth century? The allegory may be tighter, but the *media* and popularity, as well as the way these works have mixed themselves up in discussions of religion, qualify them, too, as banal religion. But these works, and *Preacher* too, serve to bring important issues and questions to light, as a nutrient in the noological sphere on which religious authority can take root.

According to material provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses, blasphemy also "includes the act of claiming the attributes or prerogatives of God, or of ascribing these to another person or thing" (Watch Tower 1988). Again, Jesse Custer, the complex Christ-figure in a Christian Western satire, is certainly



guilty of blasphemy. In a world where God appears to be absent, is it wrong, is it *blasphemous*, for someone, *anyone*, to try to sort it out? What would Preacher do?

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