

# JUSTICE AS CRY OF THE EARTH

## *The Book of Revelation in Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2*

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**Abstract:** The article explores the apocalyptic themes in a popular Japanese video game, *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2* by juxtaposing it with *The Book of Revelation*. Apocalypse means “a vision.” *The Book of Revelation* is the most widely held epitome of visions and dreams, which is paradoxically about the end, and hope for the salvation, of the world. *Devil Survivor 2* alludes to the biblical apocalypse through the preponderance of sevens. A close reading of both *The Book of Revelation* and *Devil Survivor 2* reveals that suffering is a result of believing that only ourselves matter, when we lack compassion towards other people, including earth, and when we do not hear the cries of those who have been robbed, and left to die, by the roadside. Justice for earth is construed as the end of suffering that marks a “new heaven and a new earth.”

**Keywords:** Apocalypse, Ecotheology, Hermeneutics, Justice, Nature, Videogame, Revelation

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” *Revelation 21:4*

“Everybody’s weak. That’s why we rely on others. We live by helping one another. We can say we need one another. I’ve been able to survive because I have you and the others.” *A Character in Devil Survivor 2*

### **1. Introduction**

The present ecological devastation threatens our very survival. The industrial revolution in the seventeenth century was a critical moment in

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the earth's history when the shift was made from the land-based, ever-renewing, and environmentally dependent economy to a technological, non-renewing, and mechanical economy. The resulting materialistic and consumerist way of life that Western culture espouses have now spread globally, and are simply ecologically unsustainable. The industrial revolution, also known as the modern period, has cemented and propagated a particular view that regard human beings to be apart from nature, owing to human possession of reason. This view has its roots in early Western philosophy and religion and has wound its ways to modern science which grounds the present technological "advances," that are particularly un-ecological. Some commentators regard this period as the time when the root of ecological crisis was established.<sup>1</sup> The root is the development of capitalism and a cosmology that looks at the world as a "machine," a collection of independent, unrelated parts that will work only when prompted or coerced. In this connection, the mechanical worldview sees nature primarily as an assemblage of economic resources to be harnessed for human utilitarian purposes. This anthropocentric approach has in fact contributed to the "death of nature."<sup>2</sup>

Eco-feminist Susan Griffin mourns this consequence that led to both human suffering and environmental disaster. Patterns of destruction, which are neither random nor accidental, have arisen from a consciousness that fragments existence.<sup>3</sup> This destruction then becomes philosophically problematic because it reveals a structure of mind that shapes all perceptions. In a mechanistic worldview, God is seen as a mechanical engineer or a clockmaker. The engineer God, after creating everything and making sure that they work, stands outside the universe while remaining unaffected and unchanged.

Ecological theologian Thomas Berry in *The Dream of the Earth* underscores an urgent appeal to humanity to be "mindful of the earth, the planet out of which we are born and by which we are nourished, guided,

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<sup>1</sup>Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis with Discussion of St Francis," in *Ecology and Religion in History*, New York: Harper and Row, 1974. <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>. Accessed 18 January 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Carolyn Merchant, "The Death of Nature," in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, eds. Michael Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicot, Karen J. Warren, and John Clark, New York: Prentice Hall, 1993, 264-284.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Cambridge: Harper, Colophon Books, 1978, 29.

healed – the planet, however, which we have abused to a considerable degree in the past two centuries of industrial exploitation.”<sup>4</sup> In a move towards a relentless pursuit of a technological wonder world, we have forgotten the primordial connection with the earth, much less with the universe. Consequently, energies were harnessed into building human communities with laws, principles and rules to govern them. The natural world is just the backdrop on which we conduct our human affairs. There is a kind of discontinuity between the natural world and human world, and this division is clear in ethics. For Berry, “In the presence of the human, the natural world has no rights. We have a moral sense of suicide, homicide and genocide, but no moral sense of biocide or geocide, which is the killing of the life systems themselves and even the killing of the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

How should humanity respond to the harrowing message of earth’s destruction? Already, scientists warned that the earth is in the midst of early mass extinction.<sup>6</sup> The earth’s impending demise had always captured the frenzied imagination of humans, and the most iconic in the world is spectacularly captured in the *Book of Revelation*. Apocalypse etymologically means “a vision” (*apokalypsis*). *The Book of Revelation* in the Bible is by far the most widely held epitome of visions and dreams, which Catherine Keller describes as paradoxically about the end of the world (closes) yet at the same opens up (dis-closes) hope for the salvation of the world.<sup>7</sup> It is because the hermeneutical gap offered by the text itself lends itself up to this paradox, which in turn allows for multiple interpretations of both the end and the future of the world.

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988, 6.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Berry, “Ethics and Ecology,” paper delivered to the Harvard Seminar on Environmental Values (9 April 1996). <http://1043mabovethesea.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/ethics-and-ecology.pdf>. Accessed 8 January 2014.

<sup>6</sup>In the abstract of their article, which appeared in the *Journal Science*, the authors claim that “we live amid a global wave of anthropogenically driven biodiversity loss: species and population extirpations and, critically, declines in local species abundance.” Rodolfo Dirzo, Hillary S. Young, Mauro Galetti, Gerardo Ceballos, Nick J. B. Isaac, and Ben Collen, “Defaunation in the Anthropocene,” *Science*, 25 July 2014: 345 (6195), 401-406. <http://www.sciencemag.org/citmgr?gca=sci%3B345%2F6195%2F401>. Accessed February 1, 2014.

<sup>7</sup>Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, 2.

*Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2* alludes to the biblical apocalypse by way of preponderance of sevens – seven days of judgment, seven Septentriones, extremely powerful demons, which are sent by god, Polaris, to test humans and/or destroy the world. *Void*, the rapidly spreading emptiness, which is eating the world, is an allusion not only to the biblical apocalypse but to biblical Genesis as well. Yet at the centre of the game’s narrative is the player, the hero/heroine, who has the power to take it upon the self to save the world or walk away from it. Utopian dreams embracing perfect world, free of want and terror, have always formed one of the foundations of human desire (captured) in the drama to escape the limited conditions of our everyday lives with its eventual suffering or death.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, video-gaming as this newest technology of representation has emerged as one of the most vivid and persuasive media through which narratives are reproduced. Videogames offer us glimpses on how contemporary peoples and cultures cope, negotiate, reflect and imagine the end of the world on the one hand, and the salvation and hope of the same on the other. It is no surprise to anyone in *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2* the main characters use their mobile devices to summon powerful demons through apps. We can say then, that if a look into the apocalypse makes us reflect about ourselves, the use of technology helps us accurately frame those selves as mediated and represented through the various digital technologies, which include videogames.

The effort to juxtapose *The Book of Revelation* and *Devil Survivor 2* yielded a surprising proposal. Both apocalyptic literatures forward the thought that suffering is a result of clinging to an illusion that only we matter – when we lack compassion towards other people, when we do not hear the cries of those who have been robbed and left to bleed to death by the roadside. Nature is the “new poor” and as consistent with Jesus’ ministry, the fundamental option is still to care for the most oppressed, marginalized and most exploited of all God’s creatures.

## **2. The Case for Divine Justice in *The Book of Revelation***

Many biblical scholars deem *The Book of Revelation* unique because it is the only piece of apocalyptic literature that is included in the New Testament. Catherine Keller, in *Apocalypse Now and Then* offers the most comprehensive survey on how the *Book of Revelation* has been read and

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<sup>8</sup>Talmadge Wright, David G. Embrick, and Andras Lukacs, eds., *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Videogame Play*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010, 14.

interpreted over the centuries. However, the most known interpretation which is still largely held by many theologians today is that it places a special emphasis on justice which is intimately intertwined with the final resolution of human history. The apex of which is God’s judgment upon the world and humanity. Catholic theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza underscores justice as the overarching theme of the *Book of Revelation*.<sup>9</sup>

In the entire book, what stands out, not just in the text but in the reader’s visualization of the text, is God’s *wrath*. Because it is not just ordinary anger but Divine Anger, one can very well imagine that this Holy Sacred Wrath descends upon the world with its definite end as goal so that all that is wrong is made right, the sheep is separated from the wolf, and the steadfast believers from the unbelieving ones. God’s wrath undermines everything that we think as justice; that, in a very explicit manner, the *Book of Revelation* regards God and God’s action as just. The *Book of Revelation* alludes to the situation of early Christians vis-à-vis the Roman Empire, in particular, the first two centuries of Christianity, which was characterized by the unmitigated suffering within some communities, both Christian and Jewish. In the latter’s case, such suffering culminated in the destruction of the second temple.<sup>10</sup> The perceived powerlessness of these communities vis-à-vis the immense power of the Roman Empire was so overwhelming; the chasm was so wide that it seemed that only through the direct act of God – the direct outpouring of God’s wrath – that this could be made right. Of course, God’s actions were deemed mysterious, and the understanding of the early Christians was that divine action might not be imminent. In true prophetic fashion, these tribulations or sufferings are projected into the future narrative by the apocalyptic author so that a reading of God’s act slides into prediction. Suffering, pain, anguish experienced by God’s people in the present point to a future where it will even be unbearable but that state will usher in as well God’s wrath after the manner which Keller imaginatively captures as God’s breath (*ruach*, the creation) which has now hardened into sword.

*The Book of Revelation’s* authorship was ascribed to John, when he was in Patmos, and had heard a “great voice.” Although scholars over the centuries disagreed on the person known as John, for our purposes, let us focus on the point established by the *Book of Revelation* very early on, and that is, John speaks and writes from the point of view of the oppressed. It

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<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

<sup>10</sup>Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 55.

is no surprise that it inspired many liberation theologians from Africa to claim that it speaks to them. Foremost among them is Allan Boesak who wrote *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective*.<sup>11</sup> Writing at the time of apartheid, Boesak read the *Book of Revelation* as an underground literature meant to encourage, comfort and inspire. But what kind of justice does the weak, which is in no position to demand for anything, seek? Much has been said about the violence in the *Book of Revelation*, which John Blake of CNN describes as “virtually drips with blood and reeks of sulfur. At the centre of this final battle between good and evil is an action-hero-like Jesus, who is in no mood to turn the other cheek.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the epic battle which has captured our frenzied imagination only occurred in chapter 6, when the seals were broken and out came the Four Horsemen who brought with them sword, the symbol for military might, and scales, the symbol for famine. Both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Horsemen did not bring with them anything but the latter was named Death who was accompanied by Hades.

If we would continue to read further, the oppressors feel these plagues, which have now spread across the earth, much acutely and they cry out for the rocks to crush them and put an end to their torment (6:16-17). Chapter 6 also alludes to the biblical Genesis when God “destroys” everything that God created, which was necessary in order for “new heaven and new earth” to be established. Amidst the cacophony of sounds that come from the thundering hoofs of the horsemen, the great earthquake which shakes the earth, and the cries of the oppressors, John reminds the readers in chapter 16 that God’s wrath is a response to those who “have shed the blood of God’s saints and prophets” (16. 6).

### **3. Justice as End to Suffering: Utopia in *The Book of Revelation***

Philosophers and theologians across centuries agree that the core of ethics and morality is justice. Whether it is construed as due or fairness, justice props the way society strives for harmony and balance amidst differences in and among its members. Ethicist John Rawls warns that social discord, unrest and dissatisfaction arise when some members feel that an injustice has been done to them; that they had been treated unfairly and unequally.

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<sup>11</sup>Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective*, Philadelphia, 1987.

<sup>12</sup>John Blake, “The Four Big Myths of about the Book of Revelation,” CNN Belief Blog, 31 March 2012 (10:00PM). <<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/31/four-big-myths-about-the-book-of-revelation/>> Accessed 18 January 2014.

In the context of massive inequality, when power is held by an oppressive few, and when there is unfathomable suffering of the masses, how does justice as fairness operate? And more importantly, to whom can they turn to? We all hear the familiar refrain of those who are forced to seek redress in our own local courts fully knowing that money and influence tip the scales of justice towards those who have them: Can we ever achieve justice in the here and now? In the *Book of Revelation*, justice has to be supernaturally produced when the oppressed cried out to God with the hope that new spaces, also supernaturally produced, erase the past of suffering and displace death itself.<sup>13</sup> Michael Larson remarks that justice is an impossible ideal, which acts as an impetus for action in the present. Thus, the so-called democracy-to-come, which is often construed as utopia, is an impossibility sustained in the present, urging us to pursue justice with the awareness that there is no realizable ‘absolute justice’ that could be made manifest in the world.<sup>14</sup> However, in the context of the *Book of Revelation*, using justice as hermeneutical key, the desire for the impossible (absolute justice) nurtures the ‘hope’ that it could be achieved. For Michel Foucault, there is a link between apocalypse and western rebellion:

We can understand why revolts have easily been able to find their expression and their mode of appearance in religious themes: the promise of the beyond, the return of time, the waiting for the saviour or the empire of the last days, the indisputable reign of good. When the particular religion has permitted, these themes have furnished throughout the centuries not an ideological cloak but the very way to live revolts.<sup>15</sup>

Revolts are caused by critical engagement with the present, which, more often than not, when juxtaposed with utopian ideals, pale in comparison. Jolyon Mitchell cites a report by Reuters wherein many Muslim viewers thought that images of a U.S. Marine shooting at a severely injured Iraqi, which were repeatedly shown in Arab TV stations, fuelled growing hatred against the United States of America. One such viewer admitted that “I am not a jihadist, I am just a normal Muslim, but

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<sup>13</sup>Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 145.

<sup>14</sup>Michael Larson, “Immature Dreams, Inauthentic Desires: Utopia in a Precarious World,” *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 31 (Summer 2010), 95-112.

<sup>15</sup>Michel Foucault, “Is It Useless to Revolt?” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 8, trans. James Bernauer, 6, quoted in Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 182.

such scenes are pushing me to jihad.”<sup>16</sup> Jihad, which is often construed in mainstream media as a war of aggression waged by Muslims against unbelievers, also refers to ‘struggle with oneself,’ which many scholars of Islam hold to be the greatest battle one can engage in. Mitchell notes that exposure to repeated showings of violent images culled from various news platforms on acts of terrorism, civil wars, mayhem and madness caused by extreme violence, yields two reactions upon those who consume them: compassion fatigue which is exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness and helplessness, and heightened emotions such as anger and violent reactions.<sup>17</sup> In any case, each reaction can be traced to the longing for an “impossible” justice, which, when framed in the context of the *Book of Revelation*, has to be divinely delivered. It is no surprise that, as Foucault had observed, revolts are often accompanied by strong religious fervour. In the case of the *Book of Revelation*, justice becomes the fundamental criterion for a ‘new heaven and a new earth,’ and pushes it to the foreground as a large and looming presence (God as the Avenger *par excellence*) that we cannot dodge nor push aside if we are to live in harmony and balance.

#### **4. Closure/Dis-closure: End and Beginning**

Keller claims that one of the far-reaching effects of the *Book of Revelation* is the dominant understanding that historical time moves linearly; that it has a definite beginning and end. The *Book of Revelation*’s placement at the end of the Bible speaks of its role, which, according to Keller, is to provide fruition, with Genesis at the beginning, to a “fantasy of a single, all-consuming outcome of history.”<sup>18</sup> The allure of literalism – of literally reading the apocalypse in several historical events – consumes the imagination of those who prepare for both rapture and tribulation. Nonetheless, even those who may reject reading the *Book of Revelation* in the literal sense cannot escape the allure of the idea of a *closure*. Those who watch and keep tabs on widespread environmental destruction, spectacular global market crashes, and seemingly unabated terrorist attacks and civil wars all over the world, also tend towards acceptance of a view

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<sup>16</sup>Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell, eds., *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, New York, New York: Routledge, 2012, 219.

<sup>17</sup>Mitchell explains that violent reactions, as evident in the attacks on Asians, assumed to be Muslims, in Britain and USA, follow recent terrorist attacks. Mitchell, *Religion, Media and Culture*, 222.

<sup>18</sup>Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 87.



that the world, as we know it, is going to end, and end so with much trepidations and suffering. If we would grant credence to the view that world is going to end after the manner literally or metaphorically outlined in the *Book of Revelation*, would this view necessitate a saviour? Would God, the Avenger *par excellence*, be acceptable to everyone? Or should it be regarded as an example of a strictly sectarian belief that should be read in its historical context? Keller rejects the notion that the *Book of Revelation* does not have anything important to say about the contemporary world even if it was written more than two thousand years ago.

For Ian Barbour, a metaphor cannot be replaced by a set of equivalent literal statements because it is open-ended.<sup>19</sup> No limits can be set as to how far the comparison might be extended. Barbour claims that metaphors influence perception and interpretation this way. In other words, metaphors inform us that the way we regard the world, other and ourselves cannot be paraphrased, because it has an unspecifiable number of potentialities for articulation. In addition, metaphors often have emotional and valuational overtones – they call forth feelings and attitudes. Metaphors are dynamic because they evoke from both the writer and the reader – a reading that is necessarily perspectival. Paul Ricoeur said as much when he declared that metaphors were other ways to look at reality. He defines metaphor as the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that re-describes reality.<sup>20</sup> Sallie McFague defines a model as a metaphor that has claimed stability and scope so as to present a pattern for a relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation. In *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, McFague explores the call for a theology that speaks for our time, especially one that addresses the central insights of the new sensibility: the need for human responsibility in the nuclear age. Older models and metaphors about God tend to be regarded as closed and definite, rendering new models with suspicion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*, San Francisco, London, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, 14-15.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, London: United Kingdom, Routledge, 1978, 7.

<sup>21</sup>McFague defines metaphor as “a word used in an unfamiliar context to give us a new insight; a good metaphor moves us to see our ordinary world in an extraordinary way. What is at issue, of course, is not just metaphor as a useful (or even a necessary) means of communicating something we already know. This would be allegory, not

Metaphorically then, the *Book of Revelation* dis-closes new visions (*apokalypsis*) and new readings of the end of the world (as well as utopia) without losing sight of its main theme which is that the oppressed, lying by the roadside robbed and bleeding to death, awaits a Good Samaritan, to no avail. The triumphant Christ in the *Book of Revelation* is the Good Samaritan *par excellence*.

This image is particularly poignant against a backdrop of the earth already reeling from sustained, large-scale destruction. This led Indian theologian, V. F. Vineeth to provide an outline of ecotheology:

The ecological vision of this emerging theology can be summarized as follows: 1. The idea of divine immanence in the whole cosmos; 2. A relational, ecological rather than a hierarchical understanding of God, humans, and the created world; 3. A radically reinterpreted view of human dominion over nature in terms of partnership with nature; and 4. A commitment of justice for all creatures, not just humans, highlighting the needs of the impoverished masses and endangered species around the globe.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. The Tyranny of Choice: *Devil Survivor 2*

The preponderance of literature dealing with the end of the world, often imagined as spectacularly violent, has not escaped the interested gaze of social scientists.<sup>23</sup> There must be something in all of those books and films and TV shows that manifests humanity's attempts to grapple with the *fin*, the final destination of which humankind and nature will be subjected to. The *Book of Revelation* is an important apocalyptic literature that had, and continues to this day, captivated the rich, frenzied imagination of game developers. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic games often feature a world that had collapsed, with no government and order to be seen, and the

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metaphor. Rather, metaphor is a way of *knowing*, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are the same; there is no way *around* the metaphor, it is not expendable. One can insist that certain metaphors are incorrect or inappropriate or do not 'fit,' but then all one can do is suggest other metaphors that are preferable. One cannot do without *any* metaphors." In *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 34.

<sup>22</sup>V. F. Vineeth, "An Outline for Eco-Theology," *Journal of Dharma* 36 (July-September 2011), 255.

<sup>23</sup>Talmadge Wright, David G. Embrick, and Andras Lukacs, eds., *Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies: Critical Approaches to Researching Video Game Play*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010.

players are forced to fend for themselves against monsters, zombies, and even other people.

A gamer student of mine likens the satisfaction he gets from constructing virtual selves, worlds and universe as “Godlike.” He interprets this expression as “a feeling of being able to mould or shift things into how you desire them to be and to set things in accordance to what you perceive to be perfect.” Also, that it connotes “to create or construct an environment or a being that a person wishes life could be like, and being able to control the path that you have set upon it. The life one can create in cyberspace has endless possibilities, and to have that feeling of being Godlike in creating such a life in cyberspace is unexplainable.” I think that this accurately captures the intense fascination people have with videogames because, as another gamer puts it, “there is no accountability; you can do whatever you want to do without fear of punishment or admonition.” What all of these boil down to is that the overwhelming lure is precisely that gamers are immersed in a world where they identify with the characters as if they were doing and feeling just like them. Videogames are explicitly designed to be more interactive than books and films and the intimacy with the audience is its main draw. *Devil Survivor 2* is just one in the very long list of Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPGs) that highlights the power of humanity’s self-determination to prosper, and to save the world if it would come to that, even if an overwhelming number of monsters and demons would declare humanity as weak and vulnerable.<sup>24</sup>

Any study, which involves Strategic Role-Playing Games (SRPG) like *Devil Survivor 2*, requires taking into account several worlds that are overlapping – the world of game developers, the world of gamers, and the world where characters live, thrive or die. Moreover, it is a strategy role-playing game so what one chooses in terms of how one’s narrative plays out in the course of the game is very important. *Devil Survivor 2* was released in 2011 as a sequel to *Devil Survivor*, which was earlier released in 2009. Both belong to *Megami Tensei* series developed by Atlus for the Nintendo DS.

At the beginning, the main character assumed by the gamer, meets up with friends Daichi and Io. These two introduce the protagonist to an app, Nicaea – The Dead Face Delivery Website – where they can see their friends’ dead faces. Though a bit unnerved, they dismiss Nicaea as hoax but when a scene from Nicaea is re-created before their eyes, horror sets

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<sup>24</sup>Atlus, *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2*, Tokyo: Atlus, 2011.

in. Tico, the character in Nicaea, asks, “So, what’cha gonna do? Give up on life?” Two choices then pop up: a) Don’t be ridiculous and b) Yes, I want to die. Depending on the choice a gamer makes, what follows after are either seven days of adventure that will test one’s courage, skill and determination to survive long enough to save the world, or end one’s life right there and then. The latter’s case merits a MISSION FAILED notification, which also signals the end of the game for the player. The scene then shifts to a closing statement, which declares that the void has now taken over the earth.

There is a very important element in SRPG and that is choice. Gamers are presented with choices on how to proceed with the game with each choice leads to a wholly different landscape, fate or destiny. *Devil Survivor 2* offers gamers thirteen characters to root for most of them can die if they are not too careful in stocking up on Fates and building allegiances, which are needed for characters to level up.

Are game developers just playing us up in the sense that they present gamers with choices when in fact those do not really encompass all the possible choices we normally are confronted with in real life? Because it is a closed system, game developers had, in designing games, put parameters to how we can act – the agency, which is supposed to be selling point of a strategy role-playing videogame, is thrown under the bus. There is no dialogue or a marketplace of choices. In so doing, game developers can input their own prejudices into the narrative of the game, which in turn can generate a false assumption that there are only two possible choices for gamers: good and evil.

I believe that game developers put their own biases and prejudices into the narratives of the games they have made. I disagree, however, that gamers do not exercise real choice when they proceed with either A or B or C scenario because for us humans choice is crucial. We do not choose only for ourselves but for the rest of humanity, and that our self-realization of who we are is at the same time a projection of this image to the world. That is why self-deception is acting on bad faith because one has failed to live up to the “ought,” this reason for living, and that is, to choose good absolutely. To fail to be authentic is also an act of freedom, which will make you aware of how forlorn, anxious and desperate life is. In other words, one chooses according to one’s values, and it does not matter whether such choices are played out in real or virtual world.

In *Devil Survivor 2*, gamers are presented with different routes and corresponding endings: Restorer, Meritorious, Egalitarian, Liberator and

Kingmaker. Each ending corresponds to a character. There is no “perfect” ending, despite fans’ attempts to prescribe one, and from my research on what this perfect ending could be, the most popular is the Restorer where Polaris (after suffering severe loss of power) decides not to end the world but “restores” everything the way they were before the Days of Judgment. Happy days are here again! As one astute fan observes, the preservation of the Status Quo constitutes perfection.

Let me clarify, however, that I am not dismissive of this ending at all and I have perfectly understood where the preference is coming from vis-à-vis the Yamato route or the Meritorious Ending. Yamato believes that the ending of humanity is inevitable but he looks forward to a time when he can face Polaris alone to negotiate for a new earth, which he hopes this time will be governed by a Strong Few to oversee the weaker majority. Liberation Ending, however, is too much it seems, because in this ending, the world is left in utter destruction.

The Daichi route or the Restorer Ending’s appeal on the other hand lies in the fact that majority of the Demon Tamers can survive the final battle with Polaris. When the Protagonist lapses into doubt, a Demon Tamer asks, “Are you gonna let your friends die and the world die just like that?” What all these ruminations points is the inescapable truth *that we cannot not make a choice*. Indeed, part of being human entails to act; action is paramount. For it is in action that we define ourselves, that we create that which we make ourselves. A coward is only a coward if their actions are cowardly. A hero is equally only a hero if their actions are heroic. Potential means nothing.

In Japanese society, to elevate one’s desires and wishes over that of the community is abhorrent. However, the lure of selfishness, for self-preservation, is also powerful because it is instinctual. The self always vacillates between these two overpowering tendencies. The self then negotiates and chooses. We cannot but make a choice. The Anguished One in the game is the one who developed a conscience. Isn’t the choice of name very telling?

While the desire for balance and order in nature is in itself desirable, if it would be done at the expense of humankind, is grossly unfair and unjust. It is unjust because humans are not given their day in court. That is why as a gamer, you want to survive the game well up to a level where majority of the Demon Tamers can meet Polaris face to face in order to present their case for humankind. *Devil Survivor 2* answers the perennial question, “What does it mean to be human,” startlingly and surprisingly,

considering it is a video game; yet the way it presents its case for humankind is consistent with a human-centred worldview: that notions of self, individuality, community, duty and moral consideration ought to uphold the common good.

## 6. God Polaris

Well into the game I was confronted with one of the most startling differences between the *Book of Revelation* and *Devil Survivor 2* and it has something to do with the nature of God. In the *Book of Revelation*, we see God as the Avenger *par excellence*, who comes down from the Throne and slays all God's enemies because God has heard the cries of the weak. In *Devil Survivor 2*, God is Polaris, an impersonal Puppet maker far removed from his creation, and who has decided, no one knew why early in the game, to send seven Septentriones within a week. Their aim is to destroy the world while humanity is fending them off, and fighting for its own existence. In Japan, mythologies abound with stories of *kami*, a deity with an interest in the lives of humans and the ability to intervene in human affairs, either directly or indirectly, by influencing the activities of other *kami*, animals, or natural events and features.<sup>25</sup>

Polaris is construed in the game as an impersonal god who is more concerned with the restoration of the natural order in the universe than the petty affairs of humans. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Day of Judgment, also known as Wednesday of Transformations, it is revealed that Polaris has arrived at the conclusion that in order to restore the natural order of things in the universe, humankind has to be wiped out because their "existence has become not beautiful."<sup>26</sup> Though they have lost the meaning of their continued existence they still unconsciously prosper, which creates an artificial order of things. Septentriones then are Polaris' mechanisms to restore the natural order in the world. Yet things twisted strangely when the Anguished One, himself a Septentriones who developed a conscience later in the game, reveals that the demon-summoning apps the Demon Tamers have used to defeat Septentriones came from Polaris in order to test the will of humans to survive. In other words, the survival and

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<sup>25</sup>Michael Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc, 2003, 29.

<sup>26</sup>Polaris' words echo God's in Genesis 6: 13 (NIV): So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth."

continued existence of entire humanity is now in their court; the choice to survive has now been bared.

### **7. To Save the World, Not to End It: The Case for Justice for Humankind**

The Daichi Route, also known as the Restorer Ending, essentially argues that it is wrong for Polaris to assume that humanity’s continued existence serves no purpose whatsoever. It is wrong for Polaris to place humankind in particularly terrifying and destructive ‘Seven Days of Judgment’ just because Polaris can do so at a whim. In the *Book of Revelation*, God is “Justice” embodied in various terrifyingly spectacular figures to strike terror in the hearts of oppressors. In *Devil Survivor 2*, humans are empowered whenever they work together, and whenever they summon their inner powers for the benefit of all, or so it seems in the Restorer Ending.

Nevertheless, Yamato, the leader of an underground organization called JP, highlights the strong versus weak storyline. As a cut-and-dried Social Darwinist, Yamato comes off as arrogant and rude. He doesn’t flinch at the thought of sacrificing lives for a greater good. His goal in the game is to lead a society fundamentally based on merit – a system in which the strong thrives and the weak struggles to survive. For Yamato, humanity’s continued existence is unsustainable because the weaker majority does not act and think rationally; they are too concerned with themselves and un-caring about how to develop their potentials that will ultimately benefit everyone. Yamato’s logic basically states that those who ought to rule the world are those who have proven that they do not flinch from taking on immense responsibility to govern it because they are strong, talented, and intelligent. Most often, they have to eschew personal relationships because in the natural order of things, the weakest humans usually die prematurely and it is not beneficial to be too attached to them. The strongest, on the other hand, survives, even the ‘Seven Days of Judgment,’ to negotiate with God against total annihilation of the world. Instead, a utopian world should rise from the ashes where the strongest few rule it over the weaker majority. For Yamato, this arrangement is fair and just, not only to those who are bestowed with strength and talents yet take on immense responsibility to govern the world in ways that will ensure that those who truly deserve to have power will have them. It is grossly unfair for things to remain as they are where those who do not deserve their power are also the most corrupting.

Other characters flinch at this notion of justice. For them, Yamato's justice goes against our intuitive grasp of justice which is that people ought to be treated fairly regardless of their abilities and talents.

In the Restorer Ending on the other hand, most of the characters survive the apocalypse. Even aloof, arrogant Yamato abandons his ideals in this ending because he realizes that he needs the help of other Demon Tamers to survive long enough to battle with Polaris in the hope that the latter will change its mind about annihilating humankind. But what is being restored? Faith in humanity – that is what is being restored. In the *Book of Revelation*, suffering is due to the unabashed and extremely cruel use of power and dominion by those who considered themselves almighty and invincible.

In *Devil Survivor 2*, which is set in modern-day prosperous Japan, the sufferings of the economically deprived, the poor, and those who have been stripped off their land by colonialist conquerors, are not highlighted. In fact, they are not present at all! So a different kind of suffering from that which confronted John of Patmos in the *Book of Revelation* is played out and it is more of the existential kind.<sup>27</sup>

## 8. Closure/Dis-closure: End and Beginning

However fantastical it can get, the game reflects its milieu and life-world, which is contemporary Japan, very much in the same way that the *Book of Revelation*, which I have established in the first part, speaks and refers to its historical context.

The preponderance of Biblical allusions especially those that are apocalyptic in *Devil Survivor 2* is reflective of the contemporary Japanese critique of traditional Buddhism, which privileges non-engagement with the world through its emphasis on personal transformation. Peter Clarke notes the rise of Japanese New Religious Movements (NRMs). What sets

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<sup>27</sup>The 1<sup>st</sup> *Devil Survivor* game's context is the gamer's confrontation with the cultists collectively known as the Shomonkai. According to game analysts, the Shomonkai is inspired by real-life Aum Shinrikyo cult. Several members of the cult released sarin gas in crowded Tokyo subway on 25 March 1990. 13 people were killed and scores were wounded. Game analyst, Patricia Hernandez argues that the 1<sup>st</sup> *Devil Survivor* game's "morality options" include the choice to join the cult. This, for her, is consistent with young Japanese people's general discontent with their world, and to have a choice to join a cult known for its doomsday narratives, feeds their desire to end the world. Patricia Hernandez, "The Rules of Religion, and Why the Next One Just Might Be a Game," *Kotaku* <<http://kotaku.com/5883361/the-rules-of-religion-and-why-the-next-one-just-might-be-a-game>> Accessed 29 January 2014.



apart some of the most popular NRMs that emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the development of specific features of ‘engaged Buddhism’ alongside Shintoism, an indigenous Japanese religion that was originally established to counteract growing Buddhist influences in ancient Japan.<sup>28</sup> This is evident in lay Buddhist organization, Soka Gakkai (Value Creation Society), which understands salvation as the harmonious development of the world.<sup>29</sup>

In the recent United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report released in September 27, 2013, climate change is largely attributed to human activities.<sup>30</sup> The usual flurry of media coverage of the findings of the report predictably fell into two categories: from the obvious headlines like “Warmer Earth, Humans to Blame” to downright scary one like “Earth’s Temperature Rise Equals Four Hiroshima Bombs.”<sup>31</sup> In the latter’s case, the choice of words seems to allude to the

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<sup>28</sup>Peter Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective: A Study of Religious Change in the Modern World*, London & New York: Routledge, 2006, 297. Engaged Buddhism is a term coined by Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh to refer to the ways by which insights from meditation and dharma teaching can translate into actions that can bring about social change for the better. Thich Nhat Hanh elaborates his view on engaged Buddhism in an interview with John Malkin. <<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1579>> Accessed 2 February 2014.

<sup>29</sup>Clarke continues: “Mahayana Buddhism in Japan – and this is important in the understanding of Japanese NRMs that derive their ethos and worldview from this form of Buddhism generally – offers an affirmative response to society in contrast to the world-denying philosophy of so-called “original Buddhism,” which preaches the pursuit of inner, personal enlightenment as an end in itself, a pursuit, which many contemporary reformers reject claiming that enlightenment is a means to an end – the end being social transformation – rather than an end itself (*New Religions in Global Perspective*, 300-301). Clarke also notes that one of the major influences of these new religious movements in Japan is the Nichiren School of Buddhism. It is named after the militant messianic monk, Nichiren who witnessed the strife-ridden and war-ravaged situation of Japan in the 13th century. Nichiren saw himself as one sent by Buddha to spread the word about the final stage of degeneration. He also preached on the need to create a Buddhist state to save Japan from disaster.

<sup>30</sup>For the full document, see <[http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5-SPM\\_Approved27Sep2013.pdf](http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5-SPM_Approved27Sep2013.pdf)> The Working Group 1 (WG1) prepared this report for the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report. Accessed 28 September 2013.

<sup>31</sup>Headline for 28 September 2013 of *rappler.com*, a Philippine-based online newspaper. <<http://www.rappler.com/science-nature/40020-ipcc-5th-assessmentreport-Released>> Accessed 28 September 2013; Headline for 28 September 2013 of *Deccan chronicle.com*, an Indian-based online newspaper <<http://www.deccanchronicle.com/>

Biblical apocalypse; the fulfilment of the prediction foisted upon us by John of Patmos. The rhetorical sleigh-of-hand-technique employed by the second headline suggests that “Doomsday” is now looming on the horizon, exactly as predicted in the *Book of Revelation*. Unfortunately, the emphasis on the imminence of the end of the world obscures the real message of the climate change report.

If we would pause for a while and reflect on the real and timely threats of extremely vicious weather conditions because of climate change, nuclear wars because of increasing tensions between countries, along with the rise of extreme poverty in two-thirds of the world, we would come to a realization that these are all results of human actions. *Devil Survivor 2* imagines the end of the world, which, alongside the *Book of Revelation*, to be extremely harrowing and full of tribulations and extreme human suffering; but it presents the reason behind it in a rather stark and straightforward manner. Polaris said, “After soiling your world and involving me...”

Polaris’ pronouncement is in keeping with the Buddhist understanding of *Karma*, which operates in the ethical realm. Karma involves planning, thinking and deliberating. Therefore, it refers only to actions that are intentional, deliberate and conscious. Whenever we perform this kind of action, we generate the corresponding consequences. It is like planting a seed, and when the conditions are right, grows to become a tree, and bears fruit. The fruits that fall to the ground are the consequences. There is a kind of a causal link between the seed and the fruit, action and reaction. There must be something in the seed that makes it into a particular tree and not any other. That is, effects have certain similarities with their causes. Actions of a particular type have some similarities with the effects/reactions. In other words, whenever one performs an unwholesome action, the result will be unwholesome as well.

Literally, the *finality* or closure in *Devil Survivor 2* is manifested in every ending or a mission failure. Every time a main character dies because of the gamer’s action or decision, the mission fails and *Void* takes over the world by erasing all traces of human existence. Metaphorically however, the closure *dis-closes* a way for humankind, and by extension the world, to avoid total annihilation. In the *Revelation*, such way is the second coming of the triumphant Jesus. In *Devil Survivor 2*, there is no such figure. Although Yamato comes closest to a Superman – the

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130623/news-world/article/earths-temperature-rise-equals-four-hiroshima-atomic-bombs-climate> Accessed 29 September 2013.

*Übermensch* – after a Nietzschean character in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his route still entails the annihilation of the world, as we know it to be, in order for ‘new earth and new heaven’ to commence.

*Devil Survivor 2* basically throws the idea that a metaphorical hope for humankind and the world depends on how one sees oneself in relation to the community and that to regard the self to be over and above others (such as the world’s saviour) is a parallel view with that which holds that Polaris ought to erase all traces of humankind in the world because they are no more worthy than “worms.”

### **9. Let’s Survive! Restoration as Counter-Apocalypse**

Keller rightly highlights the metaphorical reading of the apocalypse in the *Book of Revelation* because then we can approach it not as a prediction but a cautionary tale on the future of humankind and the world. According to her, “dis/closure slashes open the closed circle for the sake of a wider spiral of hermeneutical circulation, while still acknowledging the horizon, always permeable and moving, of any truth-relation.”<sup>32</sup> Here lies hope, I am inclined to think, and it is in the ever-changing, ever-evolving interpretations or re-visions of what we can do as humans to alleviate suffering, which I have established early on, a manifestation of the apocalypse. In other words, the crucial question to be asked is: Should we wait for the end of the world for justice to triumph, for earth to be renewed? One of these re-visions is *Devil Survivor 2*. Provocatively, it forwards an idea that if we set aside the beliefs in paradise or damnation, we could begin to construct an utopia in the very same earth that we have lived in for millions of years already. All it takes is to restore our faith in humanity. Perhaps a monologue by one of the Demon Tamers says it best, “Everybody’s weak. That’s why we rely on others. We live by helping one another. We can say we need one another. I’ve been able to survive because I have you and the others.”

Videogames highlight humanity’s horrifying fascination with death and destruction, not so much in the ordinary sense, but in the grand, apocalyptic sense. Just like books and films, games often offer safe spaces where we encounter the sublime, the frightening, monstrous, and the like. We know of course that in actual reality, horrors confront us all the time, exacerbated no less by media which multiplies these horrors a thousand times over through graphic images and videos. *Devil Survivor 2* offers this space for gamers the opportunity to choose among various scenarios.

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<sup>32</sup>Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 33.

Whatever a gamer chooses, it is reflective of his or her values, attitudes and worldviews. It could be that a choice involves finding a way to save this ally or killing them for one's survival and continued existence or desiring the end of the world in a spectacular manner. What the game presents is the truth that our choice of a scenario is not too fantastical, and that it is just not confined to imagining an apocalypse, but that in everyday life, we do make choices that reflect how we see ourselves in relation to other selves in our community in particular and other beings in the world in general.

## 10. Conclusion

The theological import lies on the thread of ecological consciousness interwoven in the re-reading of the *Book of Revelation* in the contemporary period and the allusion to it by *Devil Survivor 2*. Part of this ecological consciousness is the transformation of the way God is seen. God does not stand apart from the world that is increasingly destroyed and ravaged largely inflicted by the human species. It becomes crucial then to highlight the fundamental point in *Genesis*, that *everything that God created is good*.<sup>33</sup> Keller underscores that a metaphorical re-reading of the *Book of Revelation* in our time necessitates the abandonment of the image of God who stands apart from creation; that in many ways, both *Genesis* and the *Book of Revelation*, reveal God who is “immanently transcendent.”<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>33</sup>The often-quoted portions of Genesis chapters one to three are the bases of the message of John Paul II for the celebration of the World Day of Peace in 1990. The Pontiff stresses that “in the Book of Genesis, where we find God’s first self-revelation to humanity (Gen1-3), there is a recurring refrain: “and God saw it was Good.” After creating the heavens, the sea, the earth and all it contains, God created man and woman. At this point, the refrain changes markedly: “And God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman, and only then-as we read-could he rest “from all his work” (Gen 2:3). John Paul II, “The Ecological Crisis as A Common Responsibility,” Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP900101.htm>> Accessed 2 February 2014.

<sup>34</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 34, cited in Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 300. In his earlier work, Moltmann wrote Incarnation as “the recognition of the presence of God in the world and the presence of the world in God.” *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God. The Gifford Lectures, 1984-1985*, New York: Harper & Row, 1985, 13. Sallie McFague uses the metaphor, the world as God’s body. This metaphor suggests that God is “physical,” and therefore more personal and accommodating as opposed to a God that is distant, monarchical; a being-in-itself, and therefore unrelated or stands

nuance is that God is vulnerable – suffering, even. Another dimension of this ecological consciousness is the ethic of care that is extended to nature. Ecotheologians like McFague claims that Christianity has preached the Good News for so long that it has forgotten that the Redeemer of human beings is also the redeemer of everything that is.<sup>35</sup> It is an “oversight” on the part of Christianity when it fails to include nature as one of the recipients of the “Christian praxis” that opts for the poor, oppressed and the needy, or when it fails to develop a subject-subjects model for nature as part of its expression of faith. It is a fact that the natural world is vulnerable, sick, and needy and deteriorating, thus, Christian nature spirituality as Christian practice in relation to the natural world means caring for nature. This praxis is an affirmation that the redeemer God is also the creator God, that God loves all creation, especially those who are vulnerable, sick and needy. God’s love is an *inclusive* love. The word “oppressed” changes over time; it is best that nature be included inside the circle of divine concern, not outside it.

This Christian praxis is grounded in what the Latin American theologian Leonardo Boff calls “social ecology, the ways that human social and economic systems interact with the natural ecosystems.”<sup>36</sup> What this ecology underscores is that whatever onslaught is done to the poor affects the natural world and vice-versa. This relationship is captured in the ideology of unrelenting, unlimited economic growth.

It is within the dynamics of a Christian ethic of care to condemn the arrogant eye of the oppressor, and this word to the oppressor is a call for

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apart from creation. According to McFague, to use the metaphor of body to speak of God is not to describe God; rather, it is a way of thinking about God based on something very important to us, our bodies. To see the world as God’s body brings us close to God. God is not far off in another place, a king looking down, as it were, on his realm, but here, as a visible presence. “The world is the bodily presence, a sacrament of the invisible God.” Sallie McFague, “The World as God’s Body,” <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=56>. Accessed 8 January 2014. For a thorough discussion on the “World as God’s Body,” see *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993.

<sup>35</sup>Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 167.

<sup>36</sup>“Social ecology studies human historico-social systems in interaction with environmental systems. Human history is inseparable from that of the environment, and from the type of relationships that we have interwoven with it, in a dynamic interplay of mutual involvement.” Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 88.

repentance and a radical change in their consumerist lifestyle. These people cast an arrogant eye towards the earth; an eye that objectifies it and view it as theirs for the taking. They do not accept the intrinsic value of either people or other life forms. Ecological ethics of care sides with the oppressed, those creatures and aspects of earth that are experiencing the greatest decay.