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Turn the Other Chick - Religious Stereotyping in Fundamentalist Propaganda Comics Tracts

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Turn the Other Chick -

Religious Stereotyping in Fundamentalist Propaganda Comics Tracts

Introduction

The word "stereotype" generally carries negative connotations; when we hear it we think of bigotry, intolerance, chauvinism, small-mindedness. There are, however, positive stereotypes as well. In some cases stereotypes are even necessary.¹

The medium of comics is a prime example – comics creators often have to use simplified representations to convey an idea or character trait, use stereotypes as a form of cultural “short-hand.”² This sometimes leads to regrettable results; the jingoistic superhero comics of World War II, like many from the Cold War era, provide ample examples of this.³

Will Eisner, in his weekly comic *The Spirit* from the 1940s, represented the character Ebony in tune with the times; to wit as a big-lipped, bug-eyed, and somewhat dim-witted black youth. An older Eisner, writing in 2003, expressed regret for this treatment. He wrote that he’d realized that there were “good” and “bad” stereotypes – intention, for him, was the key: “Since stereotype is an essential tool in the language of graphic storytelling, it is incumbent on cartoonists to recognize its impact on social judgment.”⁴

This presentation will look at how cartoonist and evangelist Jack Chick uses stereotyped representations, exemplified with his narratives of Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism, to motivate a particular evangelizing narrative and construction of a binary difference between the in-group and an Other.

Chick Tracts

Chick tracts are the brain-child of Jack T. Chick (b. April 13, 1924⁵) who was “born again” as an adult, having long been viewed as “last guy on earth who would ever accept Jesus Christ” by Christian friends.⁶ Inspired by what he perceived as a deadness and hypocrisy in the church he visited, he wrote and self-published a comics pamphlet titled *Why No Revival?*⁷

Shortly thereafter he was supposedly overcome by divine inspiration after seeing a group of teenagers, whom he realized were most likely going to hell. He wrote a story on the spot and soon published his first tract, *A Demon’s Nightmare*⁸ which was quickly followed by *This Was Your Life!*⁹ That was nearly fifty years ago, and his ministry shows no signs of slowing down.

The Chick tract format is simple; they are roughly 5” by 3” in size, contain 20-some pages of simple black and white cartoons that always end with instructions about how to move on if you’ve seen the light and accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior.¹⁰

Chick tracts can’t really be viewed as marginal. Although they have been surprisingly rarely studied, they are a cultural phenomenon with a very wide reach; in fact, Chick is likely the most widely circulated comics creator in the world.¹¹ According to Chick Publications, Chick tracts are circulated in the millions each year,¹² all over the world. The fact that there are translations to over one hundred languages lends credence to this claim; translation is not undertaken arbitrarily but has to be underwritten by the ordering party for an entire print run of 10,000 copies, and is then only done on the condition that the publisher is provided the full translation. This can only be viewed as a testament to Chick’s influence world-wide; if the tracts don’t, as Chick Publications like to claim, “GET READ!” – at least we know that they get spread.

The cartoon tracts discuss one of a wide variety of topics.¹³ Presented in a simple, straight-forward way (some might even say demagogic, and I would not fault them for such a characterization), they all carry the same message; no matter how good you’ve been in your life, you are going to hell unless you accept the interpretation of Christianity promoted by the Chick brand. When I say that they are black and white, then, I refer not only to their monochromatic print – they leave little room for interpretation or shades of gray.

The FAQ on the Chick Publications website states, in reply to the question “Why preach against false religions? Why not just preach Jesus?”:

*God has only one Truth. If something is not the Truth, it is false, and must be revealed as such. How tragic it would be to just stand idly by and let people go to hell, without so much as a word of warning.*¹⁴

In line with this, Chick has produced tracts on Masonry, Hinduism, Buddhism, Mormonism, Santeria, and Jehovah’s Witnesses – as well as several concerning the major branches of the Abrahamic religions, to which we now briefly turn.

Them and Us in Chick Tracts

Chick’s history of the Vatican – cast in anti-Catholic tradition as the Great Whore of Revelations 17:5¹⁵ – begins in Babylon, in pagan and occult religiosity led by Nimrod and his

wife Semiramis. Under the Devil's guiding hand, their false doctrine has evolved over the centuries into the Catholic Church: a counterfeit Church complete with a counterfeit Bible and a counterfeit God.¹⁶ In the tract *The Doom Cookie*, for instance, the Pope – and there was only ever one Pope in Chick's representation, so as to make the use of stereotype complete – is portrayed as stupid, greedy, and unassertive; qualities that make him patently unfit for leadership.¹⁷ Of course, by possessing these qualities, he is a perfect stooge for the Devil. Together, they devise the Eucharist, an instrument of power with which the Church can control its followers on pain of damnation. With the help of his underlings, through the Eucharist, the sacraments, and the lie of Purgatory, the head of Mother Church has willfully deceived billions in his service of the Devil for nigh on two millennia.

From the view held on the Catholic Church as the Great Whore, Chick expands the clutches of the Vatican outward. Within its grasp one can find Islam, through an exertion of influence that predates the religion's very foundation. The foundation of Islam is not something that happened organically, and certainly not through Divine Revelation, says Chick; rather, it is part of a Catholic conspiracy.¹⁸ Their Allah is not the God of the Bible, but a Pagan idol appropriated to spread lies dreamed up by Catholic agents,¹⁹ and the leaders of Islam – for most of its history in bed with the Vatican – have used a religious terror to force their adherents into dead religion rather than faith in the Living God.²⁰ The horrible, false, and practice-oriented religion perverts the revealed Truth of the Bible and both the Vatican and Mohammad are, on more than one occasion, accused of calling God a liar.²¹

The only religious tradition about which Chick has anything good to say is Judaism. This is hardly surprising, given the tradition that he himself is situated within. The fates of Egypt, Rome, the British Empire, and recently of the USA – to name but a few of the examples he gives in his litany – stems from their ill treatment of Israel. It is "God's country" and as such protected by its master; consequently all trespassers against its people will pay dearly for their insolence.²² This positive evaluation extends only so far as to be satisfyingly in accord with a "classic" reading of Paul, where the Jewish people is destined to play an important role in the eschaton. The positive stance toward Judaism – emphatically – does not extend beyond the Israeli border. After Jesus' sacrifice, the Jews refused Revelation and joined the ranks of the lost. In the tract *Where's Rabbi Waxman?* it becomes clear that Chick does not view the Jewish religion as any less false than Islam or Catholicism; the answer to the title question, which is not implied but spelled out in plain text, is, of course "in hell."²³ Waxman,

like any Catholic or Muslim, cleaves to hollow religion when true faith is the only road to salvation.

These cases all have the same narrative foundation; they serve the dual aim of showing how the major religions deceive their followers and that there is an alternative. In the first instance, they constitute an example of Eisner's bad stereotype: they aim to cast aspersion on religious leaders, and to not only question the validity of the religious institutions discussed but to outright deny their right to exist. Supporting his claims on selective and literal readings of the Bible as well as other writings with a similar basis, many of which have been published or reprinted by Chick Publications, Chick promotes his image of true Christianity in the face of satanic deception with a long reach. Those caught in the damning grip of this deception – every man, woman and child whose immortal soul is in jeopardy – are the ostensible targets of these tracts; it is with these people Chick wants to sow seeds of doubt and eventually to turn onto the right path.

Constructing Difference in Chick Tracts

An at heart Protestant orthodoxy – the doctrine of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone – becomes Chick's vehicle for the kind of bad stereotyping Eisner warned about. Chick makes no distinction between people belonging to one religious institution from one another – they are all equally wrong –, nor does he (overtly) discriminate between ethnicities, skin colors, or nationalities. Instead, Chick divides humanity, *in toto*, into two groups: the *saved*, and the *lost*.

Othering in Chick tracts is a textbook example of what Peter Herriot calls the *meta-contrast principle*²⁴ – the differences between members of the in-group, the *saved*, are minimized while the differences between the in-group and the out-group, the *lost*, are maximized. The represented *saved* are alike in their certainty, both of being heaven-bound and of the Truth of their faith as opposed to all others, and in their will to save others,²⁵ while the *lost* are a contradictory mass of uncertain or too-certain, dangerously ignorant or willfully deceptive satanic dupes.

Meta-contrasting takes place through a process of *depersonalization*,²⁶ in which stereotyping is of central importance. The Other, the *lost* in Chick's case, becomes one in a mass of people who are all alike in the one respect that matters. While people are acknowledged to be different *as people*, their personal identity matters little compared to

their belonging to a collective; members become interchangeable. It may be that many are on the “wrong side” because they simply “do not know any better” – but ignorance is no excuse. Jesus does not want anyone to be damned, and sends his true believers to spread the Word to one and all, often through Chick tracts.²⁷ The difference between the two groups is not expressed in orthopraxy or the lack thereof for, which becomes incredibly clear from reading the constant repetition of this stance in the tracts, *actions mean nothing*;²⁸ with one exception. There is only one thing that separates Us from Them, and that thing is the single moment it takes to be – fundamentally and immediately – changed forever, the moment of salvation, when the Truth is accepted and Jesus is invited into the heart.

This absolute divide requires not only an Other – the out-group stereotype – but a perceived binary opposite in-group *prototype* – a characteristic or set of characteristics believed to describe group members.²⁹ In one tract, Chick states “[g]oing to heaven is not a matter of GOOD or BAD. It’s a matter of SAVED or LOST. No matter how **bad** you’ve been, Jesus **died** for you and wants to save you **right now!**”³⁰ The only action that matters – the prototypical action – is the crucial step of “[admitting] that you are a sinner”, of being “willing to turn from sin (Repent),” and “[t]hrough prayer, invite Jesus into your life to become your personal Saviour [sic].”³¹

Some tracts go to great lengths refuting the worth of good deeds;³² by far the most egregious example of this disregard for worldly action is found in the tract *Lisa*,³³ where Henry, an unemployed heavy drinker, takes to sexually molesting his daughter, and even letting his neighbor “share, and share alike.” Meanwhile his wife, knowing what is going on, keeps quiet because of her own history of molestation. Instead, she begins physically abusing her children to vent her frustration. It all works out for the best in the end, however; a pediatrician discovers Henry’s “indiscretions” and confronts him. Instead of going to the worldly authorities, he tells Henry of his impending doom – that is, unless he turns to Jesus. Seeing the Truth of Revelation, both Henry and his wife are saved by the timely intercession of the good doctor. A good example indeed.

Henry is *prototypical*, while rabbi Waxman, or the pious and generous Dr. Ali in one of the anti-Muslim tracts,³⁴ are both *stereotypical*. In all three cases, as in many other tracts, at least one of three of the following occurrences climaxes the story:

1. *Heavenly judgment*: Many characters in Chick tracts, more of them from among the *lost* category than from the *saved*, are shown coming face to face with Jesus after

their death. If they have accepted Jesus, they are inscribed in the Book of Life and sent along to their heavenly mansion. If not, they are – on occasion literally –tossed into hell. In every instance this confrontation brings with it the realization that they’d been wrong, and that billions more among the still living face the same fate.

2. *Damnation*: Often, when facing Jesus, the damned plea for clemency, citing their good deeds. Since, as we’ve seen, actions count for nothing, they plead in vain. These scenes usually include a “flashback” to the moment – or moments – where the Truth was offered and rejected.
3. *Salvation*: Those who are shown the Truth and accept it usually do so with great emotion, kneeling and clasping their hands, sometimes crying. In those tracts where the moment of conversion does not serve as the end, a statement of feeling changed – cleansed, free of sin, saved – usually follows.

Concluding Remarks

Being comics, Chick tracts use stereotypes; being a particular form of evangelization, the grand narrative structure is significantly shaped by the meta-contrast principle. Rather than falling into the trap of ethnic stereotyping – which at least in the case of Jews and Muslims could arguably be very easy³⁵ – Chick shapes his drama through a binary representation of the perceived relationship between the prototypical *saved* and the stereotypical *lost*. Difference is elevated to dichotomy; the in-group embraces those who accept the Truth and are saved, while the out-group consists of everyone else, but is most forcefully represented by those who willfully cling to falsehood in the face of Revealed evidence and become irrevocably damned.

Among the many questions raised by Chick tracts, perhaps the most interesting one that remains to be answered is who they influence most – does the uncompromising and often clumsy rhetoric save the *lost* in significant numbers,³⁶ or is their primary purpose to “preach to the converted,” to bolster the self-identity of the *saved* in the face of a world that often shows, quite clearly, that it does not share their views?³⁷

Notes

¹ The dividing line, according to some, lies with how difference is represented. What is alien and dangerous in one context can be exotic and enticing in another. Cf. Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE, 1997), 238. See also Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on representation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 11-18.

² Cf. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Harper Paperbacks, 1994), passim.

³ For these examples, and many more, see Fredrik Strömberg, *Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010).

⁴ Will Eisner, *Fagin the Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 4.

⁵ Robert Ito, "Fear Factor - Jack Chick is the World's Most Published Author - and one of the Strangest," *Los Angeles Magazine* (May 2003): 58.

⁶ "Biography of Jack Chick," *Chick Publications*, n.d., <http://www.chick.com/information/authors/chick.asp>.

⁷ Jack T. Chick, *Why No Revival?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1986), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0008/0008_01.asp.

⁸ Jack T. Chick, *A Demon's Nightmare* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1972), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0004/0004_01.asp.

⁹ Jack T. Chick, *This Was Your Life!* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2002), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0001/0001_01.asp. To this day, this tract is one of his most popular works

¹⁰ There are usually one of two standard pages; one general that tells how and what to pray, or one that is meant to inspire apostasy. They vary only slightly, substituting the word of the particular delusion dealt with, so that *The Visitors* ends with "Dead God, thank you for showing me what You think about Mormonism. **I also reject it!**", *The Crisis* having shown what God thinks of the Watchtower Society, and so on, all so that the reader can also **reject it**. They also usually come with a stamp on the back cover indicating what church or congregation has distributed that particular copy.

¹¹ Darby Orcutt, "Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections," in *Graven images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. David A. Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 93.

¹² "In the last 50 years, over 750 million Chick tracts have been printed in more than 100 languages. And hundreds of thousands of Christians have found, like I did, how easy it is to use tracts to share the gospel. They work whether you hand them out or put them where someone can find them." (Jack T. Chick, "A Message from Jack Chick," *Chick Publications*, n.d., http://www.chick.com/catalog/message_from_jack.asp.)

¹³ "View Chick gospel tracts by category," *Chick Publications*, n.d., <http://www.chick.com/catalog/tractkeywordlookup.asp>; "Tract Subject Lookup," *Chick Publications*, n.d., <http://www.chick.com/catalog/tractCustomkeywordlookup.asp>.

¹⁴ "FAQ's concerning Chick Publications," *Chick Publications*, n.d., <http://www.chick.com/information/general/chickinfo.asp>.

¹⁵ Catholicism is represented from a perspective that can be found as early as in the writings of Martin Luther, but is overtly formulated in Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons: Proof That Roman Catholic Beliefs Came From Pagan Babylonian Religion* (Chino: Chick Publications, 1998). This is a staunchly anti-Catholic book, wherein the Catholic Church is claimed to be the Great Whore of Babylon mentioned in Revelations.

¹⁶ Jack T. Chick, *Man in Black* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2003), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/5023/5023_01.asp.

¹⁷ Jack T. Chick, *The Death Cookie* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1988), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0074/0074_01.asp.

¹⁸ Jack T. Chick, *The Deceived* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1990), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0029/0029_01.asp. See also Jack T. Chick, *The Prophet* (Chick Publications, 1986), http://media.chick.com/digital-comics/0117/0117_1.html.

¹⁹ Jack T. Chick, *Who Is Allah?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2006), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1104/1104_01.asp; Jack T. Chick, *Men of Peace?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2006), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1031/1031_01.asp.

²⁰ Jack T. Chick, *Unforgiven?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2007), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1043/1043_01.asp.

²¹ See for instance Chick, *Men of Peace?*; Chick, *Unforgiven?*; Jack T. Chick, *Is There Another Christ?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1983).

²² Jack T. Chick, *Somebody Angry?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 2008), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1055/1055_01.asp; Jack T. Chick, *Love the Jewish people* (Chick Publications, 1998), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1000/1000_01.asp.

²³ Jack T. Chick, *Where's Rabbi Waxman?* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1996), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0014/0014_01.asp.

²⁴ Peter Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity* (London: Routledge, 2007), 32.

²⁵ A will that is often accompanied by a helpful and opportune erudition in matters of the delusion *du jour*. Cf. Jack T. Chick, *The Crisis* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1985), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0026/0026_01.asp; Jack T. Chick, *The Visitors* (Chick Publications, 1984), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0061/0061_01.asp; Jack T. Chick, *The Curse of Baphomet* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1991), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0093/0093_01.asp.

²⁶ Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity*, 32-35.

²⁷ "Meta-witnessing" is a common feature in Chick tract; they are often shown as highly effective in saving people. See, for instance, Jack T. Chick, *The Pilgrimage* (Chick Publications, 1999), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1004/1004_01.asp; Chick, *Where's Rabbi Waxman?*; Jack T. Chick, *The Tycoon* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1993), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0016/0016_01.asp; Jack T. Chick, *Somebody Loves Me* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1972), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0006/0006_01.asp.

²⁸ I have, on several occasions, been asked what happens *after* conversion. Chick tracts do not deal with this, other than – on the final page – encouraging readers to read their Bible (King James Version), talk to God in prayer every day (often adding "in your own words," to "[b]e baptized, worship, fellowship, and serve with other Christians in a church where Christ is preached and the Bible is final authority", and to tell others about Jesus Christ. Some versions of the page also promote the Chick-authored *The Next Step* (Jack T. Chick, *The Next Step* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1973).) Within the tracts, however, there are few of the *saved* present, and those who make it onto the drawn page are most commonly shown evangelizing, with little characterization beyond their knowledge and blessed status.

²⁹ See Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity*, 33-34. Particularly p. 33: "[C]ertain features of the belief system may single out adherent from others, such as the belief of many American Protestants in the importance of a single moment of conversion to the faith, when the sinner is forgiven once and for all. On binary representation, see also Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'," 243-244.

³⁰ Chick, *Men of Peace?*.

³¹ These quotes are taken from the standard page that ends most Chick tracts.

³² Cf. Jack T. Chick, *Flight 144* (Chick Publications, 1998), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0041/0041_01.asp; Jack T. Chick, *Gun Slinger* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1997), http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0037/0037_01.asp.

³³ Jack T. Chick, *Lisa* (Chick Publications, 1984).

³⁴ Chick, *The Pilgrimage*.

³⁵ Examples of exaggerated representations of Jews and Muslims have long been, and are still, commonplace. On the purpose of the previously cited graphic novel *Fagin the Jew*, Eisner wrote that "[c]ombatting [ethnic stereotypes that we take for granted] became an obsessive pursuit, and [that he] realized that he no choice but to undertake a truer portrait of Fagin by telling his life story...." (Eisner, *Fagin the Jew*, 4.)

³⁶ As is claimed in Chick, "A Message from Jack Chick." The "slogan," if one can call it that, of Chick Publications is, after all "Chick tracts GET READ!" The Chick.com website also states that "Everyone loves Chick tracts!"

³⁷ In fact, Chick's use of the medium of comics – most likely coupled with his fire-and-brimstone rhetoric – has inspired what I think can be categorized as "retaliation." Not everyone reads the tracts in the way Chick intends them to be read; as vehicles for salvation. The anti-role playing tract *Dark Dungeons* is often read by those who practice what is preached against as a source of great humor.

Similarly, the simple format and formula of the tracts have inspired several parodies that aim to show the absurdity of the tracts' fire-and-brimstone rhetoric by transplanting them into pure, albeit still apocalyptic, fantasy. Thus there are now tracts like *Who Will Be Eaten First?* and *Galactus is Coming!* available on the internet. (See Atomicmutant, "Who will be eaten first?," *LibraryThing*, n.d., <http://www.librarything.com/topic/61539>; Ed Contradictory, "GALACTUS IS COMING!," *Your Mom's Basement*, November 14, 2006, http://www.yourmomsbasement.com/archives/2006/11/galactus_is_com.html.)

The former tract parodies Chick by replacing the God of the Bible with the Elder Gods of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, while latter substitutes the same deity with the world-consuming cosmic entity Galactus from the Marvel Comics universe. This reversal, shifting focus from what some believe to be a reality to something that most people agree are fictions, highlights what many people feel about Chick and his works. In both cases the message, in another mimic of Chick, is rather simple and straight-forward: Chick's use of scare tactics is only a way to frighten the easily-led into accepting his own world-view. In the parodies, Chick's claims about salvation and the Other are represented in a way that is clearly meant to illustrate how absurd they are

considered to be. With this reversal of subject matter comes a reversal of the creator, for good or ill; the man who so fervently seeks to Other those who do not agree with him becomes, in the eyes of his critics, the stereotype *par excellence* of the wrong-headed, “Bible-thumping”, Fundamentalist “nut-job.”