Motherhood and Fear: The Influence of Traditional Religion on American and Japanese Horror

With the sensation generated by the 2002 release of The Ring, the American take on the classic Japanese horror film Ringu, a new trend in American horror was born. Shifting its attention away from more common Western themes, Hollywood focused on emulating the Japanese psychological viewpoint by shying away from demented murderers and turning instead to vengeful ghosts and cursed apparitions.

Aside from these backbone elements, however, the emergence of Japanese horror remakes highlighted another distinct, fundamental difference between the traditional American and Japanese takes on horror: the portrayal of powerful, villainous women. Why does American horror suggest contempt for female characters, whereas Japanese horror suggests the opposite: fearful respect? What factors influence these portrayals? These are the questions I aim to answer.

Through examination of traditional American and Japanese religious doctrine, historically predominant cultural views, and the treatment of female characters in both visual and literary horror genres, I have reached the conclusion that the portrayal of women in horror reflects religion-based societal views on motherhood, the most fundamental form of women’s power. In Christian-based American culture,
motherhood and childbirth are fundamentally associated with impurity and guilt, the characteristic result of Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden. This negative connotation subsequently manifests as fearful contempt of dominant, villainous women in American horror. In contrast, traditionally Shinto Japanese culture regards childbirth and the creation of life as an almost divine act, and reverence for this mystical power manifests as fearful respect of the frightening, dangerous female characters in Japanese horror.