

The Theology of Daredevil, Batman, and the X-Men: Engaging Secular Society with Modern Mythology

People need stories to make sense of life. Sometimes these stories or myths are true and other times they are fabrications or caricatures of reality. The people of old used myths and spiritual folktales for entertainment, and then these evolved into narratives to give coherence to the world they inhabited. Fyodor Dostoevsky said it best; "At first, art imitates life. Then life will imitate art. Then life will find its very existence from the arts." Today these myths are told in many forms with the most popular form being that of superheroes: Superman, the Avengers, and Spiderman to name a few. This talk will discuss effective ways to engage this secular culture using the modern mythos of superheroes.

Khaldoun Sweis is the former Chair and current Associate Professor of Philosophy at Olive-Harvey College in Chicago and serves as a tutor in philosophy with Oxford University in England. He was born in Amman, Jordan. His experience entails teaching philosophy for over a decade as well as speaking at conferences both nationally and abroad such as in Hong Kong, Romania, Australia and England. He has three books including *Debating Christian Theism*, co-edited with Chad Meister and JP Moreland (Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources* co-edited with Chad Meister (Zondervan, 2011). He recently completed *Killing God: Addressing the Seven Most Common Objections from the New Atheists* (forthcoming). He is a member of the American Philosophical Association and the Evangelical Philosophical Society. Khaldoun's greatest achievement is getting Luciana to marry him and being the father of his two precious children, AnaKaterina Cosette and Daniel Zacharias.

I. Power One: The Visual

- A. The effects of the visual as opposed to the written word is profound.
 - 1. Comic books
 - 2. Graphic novels
 - 3. Cartoons
 - 4. Movies
- B. **Daredevil** does not have a visual problem; he is blind. But in his blindness, he sees more than those with sight. What problems does that create for those who we can see?
- C. Is the visual superior to the written word?

II. Power Two: The Desire for Justice

- A. Why has justice mattered to people in all tribes and times?
- B. It is in suffering **Batman** finds the strength to fight evil. How do he and other anti-heroes fight villains without becoming one?

III. Power Three: Supremacy of Identity

- A. What issues do the **X-Men** raise in helping us with identity?

- B. Why does our identity, who we are when no one is around, and divorced from anyone anywhere else, matter?
- C. If it is not who I am that matters, then what does matter?

IV. Power Four: The Influence of their Mythology

- A. Why do we find stories so compelling?
- B. **Superman** is a messiah figure, but so are so many others. What makes Jesus Christ different?
- C. What is the difference between theology and mythology?
- D. Did Christians borrow or steal from their pagan counterparts?

In the spirit of CS Lewis: Yahweh is more than a pagan god, not less; Christ is more than Superman or Galactus, not less. We Christian apologists have tried to minimize these parallels arguing that “Jesus is not the same as these pagan myths.” But I argue that we should not fear the mythical radiance resting on our theology in the mythology of messianic figures like Thor, Hercules, Balder, Mithras or even the Avengers and the Matrix. The parallels ought to be there--it would be a stumbling block if they weren't! We must not, in a superior attitude of false spirituality, place boundaries on the imaginative creativity of God, for He is the most creative artist there is. He has left seeds and kernels of his truth in the sand of all the religions and cultures and mythologies and legends in world history. Yes, in Jesus is the fullness of God revealed, but his silhouette is everywhere for people, who seek, to find. He said it through his messenger The Apostle Paul to a pagan audience on Mars Hill:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth ... made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.” Acts 17:24-27.

“Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.” --GK Chesterton

Suggested Readings:

Movies

The Watchmen (2009)

Unbreakable. (2000)

Iron Man (2008)

X-Men series (2000-2014)

The Dark Knight Trilogy (2005-2012)

Books

Comic Books:

Kingdom Come, Graphic Novel by Mark Wade.

Dark Knight, Graphic Novel, by Frank Miller

Academic Books:

Tom Morris, *Superheroes: Truth Justice and the Socratic Way*. Open Court Press, 2005.

Barkman, Adam. *Imitating the Saints: Christian Philosophy and Superhero Mythology*. Hamden, CT: Winged Lion, 2013.

Morrison, Grant. *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us about Being Human*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012.

DiPaolo, Marc. *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

Jewett, Robert and John Shelton Lawrence. *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.

Lewis, David and Christine Hoff Kraemer, ed. *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. New York: Continuum, 2010.

Wandtke, Terrence. *The Meaning of Superhero Comic Books*. London: McFarland, 2012.