

The Third Side of the Coin: Constructing Superhero Comics Culture as Religious Myth

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The claim that superhero comics culture is a modern religious and/or mythopoeic expression has been repeated so often by academic observers of pop culture over the years, it has assumed the dimensions of a modern myth in its own right. It has provided the driving thesis behind a chorus of academic works that has mushroomed steadily over the decades,¹ and inspired a considerable trend in teaching about religion in North American universities.² Critically evaluating this claim that superhero comics culture is in effect a modern religious or mythopoeic expression can, though, feel at times like reading comics produced by M.C. Escher, since superhero comics “mythology” so often includes elaborate homage to (and exuberant plagiarism of) real-world religions and myths, including the religions and myths held sacred by the heroes themselves.³ To complete

¹ From Umberto Eco’s “The Myth of Superman,” trans. Natalie Chilton, *Diacritics* 2, no. 1 (Spring, 1972): 14–22 to Andrew R. Bahlmann’s *The Mythology of the Superhero* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), such scholarly studies have grown steadily in terms of both quantity and sophistication. See Sections 1 and 2 below for representative works.

² See, e.g., Jeffrey M. Brackett, “Religious Studies 201: Religion and Popular Culture” (Class Syllabus, 2014; Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana); Ellen Kellman, “NEJS 176b: Jewish Graphic Novels” (Class Syllabus, 2015; Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts); Ken Koltun-Fromm and Yvonne Chireau, “Relg 144: Reading Comics and Religion,” (Class Syllabus, 2016; Haverford University, Haverford, Pennsylvania); Salvatore Pane, “FYS 110 01: Superheroes or Supergods?” (Class Syllabus, 2013; University of Indiana, Bloomington, Indiana); Kevin Wanner, “REL 3111: Superhero Comic Book Religion” (Class Syllabus, 2015; University of Western Michigan, Kalamazoo, Michigan).

³ On the use of religious and mythological materials in superhero comics, see Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 13–16, 24–25; Greg Garrett, *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), ix; Christine Hoff Kraemer and Lawton Winslade, “‘The Magic Circus of the Mind’: Alan Moore’s Promethea and the Transformation of Consciousness through Comics,” in *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer

the picture of confusion, one needs only to note the fact that “religion” and “myth” are both notoriously difficult to define to begin with,⁴ and the related fact that taking any given set of phenomena seriously as “religious data” effectively *makes it* religious data for the practical purposes of human cultures and their study—a further layer of recursivity pregnant with its own puzzles and problems.⁵

To avoid either further muddying these waters or imposing a convenient but false clarity upon them, this study promotes no definitive theory of religion or myth (vis-à-vis superhero comics culture or otherwise). Instead, I offer two “locker room” sections that summarily “try

(New York: Continuum, 2010), 274–91; Roz Kaveney, *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Films* (London: New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 37–43; Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2007), 189–211; A. David Lewis, *American Comics, Literary Theory, and Religion: The Superhero Afterlife* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Paul Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (Köln: Taschen, 2010), 48, 495, 539, 565, 611, 619, 630, 684; Don LoCicero, *Superheroes and Gods: A Comparative Study from Babylonia to Batman* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 163, 168; Saurav Mohapatra, “Echoes of Eternity: Hindu Reincarnation Motifs in Superhero Comic Books,” in Lewis et al., *Graven Images*, 121–32; Angela Ndalianis, “Do We Need Another Hero?” in *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*, ed. Wendy Haslem et al. (Washington: New Academia, 2007), 2–3; Darby Orcutt, “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections,” in Lewis et al., *Graven Images*, 93–106; B.J. Oropeza, “Introduction: Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. B.J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 3–4; Thom Parham, “Superheroes in Crisis: Postmodern Deconstruction in Comic Books and Graphic Novel,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 211; Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1992), 9–10, 53–60, 69; Scott Rosen, “Gods and Fantastic Mortals: The Superheroes of Jack Kirby,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 113–26; Andrew Tripp, “Killing the Graven God: Visual Representations of the Divine in Comics,” in Lewis et al., *Graven Images*, 107–20; Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up and Oy Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore: Leviathan, 2006), 15–18.

⁴ See Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84; Russell McCutcheon, “Myth,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (New York: Cassell, 2000), 190–208.

⁵ See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jamestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

on” common academic approaches to religion and myth, to establish how well they “fit” the superhero comics culture data most commonly identified (in both “positive” and “negative” terms) as religious and/or mythopoeic in nature, and then I close with an “on-ice” third section of conclusions about the ethics of scholarly participation in such an interpretive game. My three-step presentation of the state of the question thus offers a critical-appreciative review of the phenomenon of treating superhero comics culture as a religious/mythopoeic expression from the most basic kind of Religious Studies perspective. The overall thesis served by my review is that the most common ways of reading superhero comics culture as a religious/mythopoeic expression are, to date, unfortunately little more than self-serving and self-fulfilling prophecies, which thereby turn out in the end to be critically self-limiting.

Locker Room Section 1. The “Up” Side of the Coin: Promoting Superhero Comics Culture as a Modern Religious/Mythopoeic Expression

Academics who focus on the “up” side of the idea that superhero comics culture now does “what mythology used to, and if you get into that you can’t avoid the question of religion,”⁶ are an enthusiastic, even evangelical group, and their studies are characterized by hermeneutics of optimism and celebration. The common pop culture claim that superheroes do for moderns what gods used to do for the ancients is accepted in this literature,⁷ and its scholarly promotion is justified in two ways: First, it is stressed that superhero comics culture constitutes a very big body of very widely shared and highly valued stories: it seems to be at work everywhere, these “up” side scholars point out,⁸ and it seem to inspire in many people a “religious”

⁶ Dennis O’Neill, “Notes from the Batcave,” interview with Roberta E. Pearson and William Urrichio, in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, ed. Robert E. Pearson and William Urrichio (London: Routledge, 1991), 10.

⁷ See, e.g., Anne Billson, “Men of Steel: Are Superheroes the New Gods?” *The Telegraph*, June 17, 2013; Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 16, 189; Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House 1996), 14; Rob Salkowitz, “Marvel Universe Co-Creator Jack Kirby is Having a Moment,” *Forbes*, January 18, 2016.

⁸ Fingerroth, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 169; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 3–5; Kaveney, *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders*, 46; Ndalianis, “Do We Need Another Hero?” 1–2;

kind of zeal.⁹ These observations are treated as proof that the “cult of the superhero” is widespread and powerful.¹⁰ Second, superhero stories are conceived as a resource capable of helping people better understand and engage the real world.¹¹ They are approached as a narrative-driven source of sublime and timeless truths,¹² imbued with the power to inspire people not only to wonder but also to the achievement of moral excellence and personal self-actualization.¹³

For these reasons, “up” side writers promote approaching superhero comics culture as a modern pop repository of “religious myth,”¹⁴ often explicitly describing superhero comics culture as a “religious

Oropeza, “Introduction: Superhero Myth,” 2–3; Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 7.

⁹ LoCicero, *Superheroes and Gods*, 163; Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 7–8.

¹⁰ Fingerioth, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 24.

¹¹ Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 19–25; Robert G. Weiner, “Sixty-Five Years of Guilt Over the Death of Bucky,” in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 90–91.

¹² Terry Ray Clark, “Prophetic Voices in Graphic Novels: The ‘Comic and Tragic Vision’ of Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Kingdom Come and Watchmen,” in *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter*, ed. Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Mainwright (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 142–43; John T. Galloway Jr., *The Gospel According to Superman* (New York: A.J. Holman, 1973), 19, 24–31, 141; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, x–ix, 7–8 119–20; B.J. Oropeza, “Conclusion: Superheroes in God’s Image,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 269–271; C.K. Robertson, “The True Übermensch: Batman as Humanistic Myth,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 49–65; Scott Rosen, “Gods and Fantastic Mortals,” 124.

¹³ Jamie Egolf, “Dreaming Superman: Exploring the Action of the Superhero(ine) in Dreams, Myth, and Culture,” in Haslem et al., *Super/Heroes*, 139–51; Fingerioth, *Superman on the Couch*, 14–19, 172, 17–178; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 117, 7–8 119–20; Oropeza, “Conclusion: Superheroes in God’s Image,” 269; Robert M. Peaslee, “Superheroes, ‘Moral Economy,’ and the ‘Iron Cage’: Morality, Alienation, and the Super-Individual,” in Haslem et al., *Super/Heroes*, 37–50; Rosen, “Gods and Fantastic Mortals,” 124; Ken Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, 44; Weinstein, *Up, Up and Oy Vey!*, 15–18, 123–26.

¹⁴ Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle, *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 86.

phenomenon”¹⁵ and/or a “modern mythology.”¹⁶ The notions that underwrite these descriptions— notions about what “religion” and “myth” are and do—are eminently understandable. Religious Studies scholars and other academics have, after all, often theorized and explored world-building and community-building functions in “religion”¹⁷ and “myth.”¹⁸ Many have even tried to find in “religion” and “myth” coded messages about individual self-actualization.¹⁹ The picture of “religious mythologies” as bodies of particularly widespread and valued stories of sublime suggestiveness and moral import is therefore not idiosyncratic to the “up” side writers who promote treating superhero comics culture as modern religious mythology. This popular conception of religious mythology is in fact actively at work in the academic study of religion.

If many academics and pop culture commentators have been quick to claim that superhero comics culture is a modern religious mythology, it bears noticing that comic makers and marketers have rushed to agree

¹⁵ Les Daniels and Chip Kidd, *Superman: The Complete History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 10; Fingerioth, *Superman on the Couch*, 24; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 91; LoCicero, *Superheroes and Gods*, 163; Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 7–8.

¹⁶ Bahlmann, *Mythology of the Superhero*, 3–24; Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 39; Clark, “Prophetic Voices in Graphic Novels,” 146–55; Daniels and Kidd, *Superman: The Complete History*, 10; Egolf, “Dreaming Superman,” 151; Fingerioth, *Superman on the Couch*, 173; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 5, 7; Tim Lanzendörfer, “Superheroes, Social Responsibility, and the Metaphor of Gods in Mark Waid and Alex Ross’s *Kingdom Come*,” in *Comics – Bilder, Stories und Sequenzen in religiösen Deutungskulturen*, ed. Jörn Ahrens, Frank T. Brinkmann, and Nathanael Riemer (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015), 143–44; LoCicero, *Superheroes and Gods*, 176; Ndalianis, “Do We Need Another Hero?” 2; Oropeza, “Conclusion: Superheroes in God’s Image,” 270; Robertson, “The True Übermensch,” 60–62; Schenck, “Superman,” 44.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 37–41; Peter Mandaville and Paul James, *Globalization and Culture, Vol. 2: Globalizing Religions* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 27.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Kees W. Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (2nd ed.; New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6361–69; Northrop Frye and Jay MacPherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths: The Mythological Framework of Western Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 7–18, 275–278.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: MJF Books, 1949); Frye and MacPherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths*; Carl Gustav Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Anchor, 1964).

that their products *should* be thought of as providing modern mythologies comparable to the ancient.²⁰ Such superhero comic makers and marketers agree that superhero comics culture is a true “mythology” because it is almost universally known in modern global society,²¹ and because it speaks to the human condition,²² showing “the way humans wish themselves to be; ought, in fact, to be.”²³ It teaches the importance of “fighting evil,” for example, world-famous superhero comics creator and promoter Stan Lee insists, which is “religious” in the putatively universal and non-confessional way of teaching the Golden Rule.²⁴ Comics companies are, then, naturally, from this point of view, venerable wellsprings of “modern mythmaking,”²⁵ and Superman is functionally speaking an “American Christ.”²⁶

Scholars who share this enthusiastic perspective often promote superhero comics culture as a positive moral force: “Superhero comics and films are not merely a vast narrative construct,” Roz Kaveney insists, for example, “about men and women with bulging muscles and fetishist costumes; they are about the real meaning of truth and justice, and ways of living in the world.”²⁷ Even the obvious super-heroic addiction to extrajudicial violence is seen as inspirational from this point of view, as it

²⁰ Dooley and Engle, *Superman at Fifty*, 86; Adi Granov, “Foreword,” in *Marvel: 75 Years of Cover Art*, ed. Alan Cowsill (New York: DK Publishing, 2014), 6; Stan Lee, “Foreword,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, xi–xii; Paul Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (Köln: Taschen, 2010), 8; Paul Levitz, “Foreword,” in *DC Comics: A Visual History*, ed. Alan Cowsill et al. (New York: DK Publishing, 2014), 6; Grant Morrison, “Interview,” *Wizard: The Comics Magazine* 143 (August 2003), 180; Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), xvii; Joe Quesada, “Afterword,” in *Marvel Year By Year: A Chronicle*, ed. Catherine Saunders et al. (New York: DK Publishing, 2014), 374; James Steranko, *The History of Comics*, 2 vols. (Reading, PA: Supergraphics, 1970–1972), 2:52.

²¹ Granov, “Foreword,” 6.

²² Stan Lee, “Foreword,” in Fingerioth, *Superman on the Couch*, 10.

²³ Elliott S. Maggin, “The New Bards: An Introduction,” in Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Kingdome Come* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 6.

²⁴ Lee, “Foreword,” in Oropeza, *The Gospel According to Superheroes*, xii.

²⁵ Levitz, *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking* (See Section 3 below).

²⁶ Morrison, “Interview,” 180.

²⁷ Kaveney, *Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders*, 267.

stresses the importance of courage seeking justice, and redirects the worst of our own tendencies toward real violence.²⁸

In the work of some doubly evangelical apologists, the modern religious mythology of superhero comics culture is said to deserve attention and respect because the transcendent ideals it expresses can inspire real people to lead more authentic spiritual lives in the real world.²⁹ Promoting superhero comics culture is not, therefore, limited to defending it from educated disdain. Superhero comics narratives can, from this enthusiastic point of view, also be treated as a source of “religious” and “mythic” cultural critique.³⁰ Terry Ray Clark, for example, applied Conrad Ostwalt’s assertion that “[s]ecular fiction can operate as myth to offer insight [regarding] spiritual issues,” and “critique a culture’s ideologies, religious institutions, and moral codes” to the graphic novels *Watchmen* and *Kingdom Come*, in order to argue that they are “prophetic voices” revealing to the modern secular world the ultimate futility of violence.³¹

These, then, are the common reasons scholars give for treating superhero comics culture as religious myth, and they are indeed in line with a conception of “religion” and “myth” that is easy to find within both popular culture and scholarly culture. One can appreciate some of the good intentions of these scholarly reasonings without necessarily always agreeing, and add that sharing satisfying systems of emotion and imagination, finding new values in old things and vice versa, etc., can be seen as good things in and of themselves, however we may judge their use case by case. As we will see in the next section, though, the approving and optimistic popular conception of “religion” and “myth” promoted by the “up” side writers only supplies part of the scholarly picture.

²⁸ Fingerioth, *Superman on the Couch*, 21, 119–37; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 75.

²⁹ See, e.g., H. Michael Brewer, *Who Needs a Superhero? Finding Virtue, Vice, and What’s Holy in the Comics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004); Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 117, 120; Galloway, *Gospel According to Superman*, 19, 24–31, 141; Oropeza, “Conclusion: Superheroes in God’s Image,” 269–71.

³⁰ Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 75–79.

³¹ Clark, “Prophetic Voices in Graphic Novels,” 142–43, quoting Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 107.

Locker Room Section 2. The “Down” Side of the Coin: Interrogating Superhero Comics Culture as a Modern Religious/Mythopoeic Expression

Scholars who treat superhero comics culture as modern religious myth are not always positive and enthusiastic. Some express doubts about the likely moral influence of superhero mythology, or otherwise introduce hermeneutics of suspicion. Danny Fingeroth wondered openly, for example (in his otherwise optimistic work on superhero comics culture as a morally promising body of modern mythology) about the level of moral inspiration to be found in stories of vigilantes who solve every problem with miraculously powerful fists.³² John T. Galloway Jr. argued in his explicitly Christian theological study that although Superman inspires people positively, and positively reflects a Judeo-Christian heritage, Superman’s attractive image also raises the spectre of a “god of pop religion” who requires no meaningful commitment.³³

Other scholars have criticized superhero religious mythology for its sexual politics, noting ruefully that, “like other religions, the world of superhero [pop culture] is a boys’ club”³⁴—as indeed the worlds of superhero comics³⁵ and Religious Studies³⁶ themselves often unfortunately still seem to be.

This last point about the need to interrogate the relationship of a society’s mythology to its structures of power does indeed seem pertinent here. It is widely accepted, after all, by observers in and out of the academy that religion “acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” in people,³⁷ and that religious mythmaking has always been implicated in the political construction of power,³⁸ very often in the

³² Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 21.

³³ Galloway, *The Gospel According to Superman*, 19, 24–31, 141.

³⁴ Anne Billson, “Men of Steel: Are Superheroes the New Gods?” *The Telegraph*, June 17, 2013.

³⁵ Kaveney, *Superheroes!*, 16–20; Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 79–83.

³⁶ Randi R. Warne, “(En)gendering Religious Studies,” *Studies in Religion/Science Religieuses* 27 (1998): 427–36.

³⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Book, 1973), 90.

³⁸ Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” 6360–69.

service of a real or ideal *status quo*.³⁹ It has also often been noted that comics and superheroes have proven themselves to be handy tools for all kinds of propaganda.⁴⁰ For these reasons alone, the phenomenon of superhero comics culture as religious myth has a serious built-in potential “down” side. Umberto Eco argued, for example, that “the Superman myth” might actually function to *obstruct* meaningful moral awareness and individual agency, since Superman invests his cosmic powers primarily into protecting local private property, and since “doing good” in his narrative world is essentially limited to charity by the fact that no big or permanent change is ever really allowed to happen.⁴¹

From this more suspicious point of view, the common boast that superheroes are largely immune to change⁴² does indeed look like potential bad news. If every true “superhero has a mission to preserve society and not re-invent it,”⁴³ the promises of moral improvement and prophetic critique reviewed above in the analysis of the promoters of the “up” side of the story sound a bit hollow. It has, I note, been counter-argued that comic book superheroes are not *all* as supportive of the *status quo* as Eco’s analysis of Superman might imply, since some heroes can be seen to oppose or protest a given *status quo*.⁴⁴ This tendency is indeed worth noticing and exploring, but its mere existence does not exonerate superhero comics culture of all charges of the worst kind of (capitalist) conservatism. Just as electrical resistors ultimately serve the stability of the circuits they modify, rebellious heroes blowing off steam in fiction can presumably serve the stability of repressive *status quo* systems. It has also been rightly noted that the hero worship and

³⁹ McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 33.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009); Fingerroth, *Superman On the Couch*, 19; Frederik Strömberg, *Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2010); Kate Netzler, “A Hesitant Embrace: Evangelicals and Comic Books,” in Lewis and Hoff Kraemer, *Graven Images*, 218–29.

⁴¹ Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” 17–19, 21–22.

⁴² Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 34; Levitz, *The Art of Modern Mythmaking*, 702.

⁴³ Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 77.

⁴⁴ Peaslee, “Superheroes, ‘Moral Economy,’ and the ‘Iron Cage,’” 50.

muscular easy answers of *any* superhero comics culture is actively, seriously dangerous when imported directly into real-world politics.⁴⁵

These are some risks that “down” side scholars have perceived in the putative phenomenon of superhero comics culture as religion and/or mythology. To these, one might add the basic observation that sales are one of the explicit controlling goals of superhero comics culture’s production, which means that participation in the phenomenon of treating it as religious myth will usually amount to supporting one entertainment giant or another. Promoting the idea that special, powerful people fix problems with violence can also, it should be noted, encourage a hazardous social addiction to hero worship and “golden violence” that is already an epidemic in pop culture generally⁴⁶ and superhero comics culture specifically insofar as it relates to the interpretation and deployment of religious traditions about righteous victimhood and revenge.⁴⁷ As the next section suggests, though, the scholarly promotion and the critique of superhero comics culture as a modern religious/mythopoeic expression are both severely limited, as long as such boosters and critics ignore the fact that they themselves are engaged in actively constructing both “religion” and “myth.”

On-Ice Section. The Third Side of the Coin: Constructing Superhero Comics Culture as a Modern Religious/Mythopoeic Expression

In 2010, thirty-eight years after Eco published his critique of “the myth of Superman,” DC Comics partnered with Taschen Books to release *75 Years of DC Comics: The Art of Modern Mythmaking*, edited by Paul Levitz. The book’s 721 pages and \$490 CAD price tag conspire to encourage the impression that DC “mythology” is a serious, “weighty” business (the book itself weighs 14.5 pounds, or 6.5 kilos), and DC superhero comics culture is praised as “myth,” “mythology,” and “mythmaking” on the dust jacket alone.

⁴⁵ Louis Krasniewicz, “‘True Lies’ Superhero: Do We Really Want Our Icons to Come to Life?” in Haslem et al., *Super/Heroes*, 12–19.

⁴⁶ See Robert Jewett, *The American Monomyth* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

⁴⁷ See Aaron Ricker, “The Devil’s Reading: Revenge and Revelation in American Comics,” in Lewis and Kraemer, *Graven Images*, 15–23.

“Superman is our version of Greek myth,” the back cover proclaims, for example, in a quote attributed to Gloria Steinem, since he is “an inspiration to ordinary people,” and such laudatory references to DC superhero comics culture as “myth/mythology” continue throughout inside.⁴⁸

Of course, boasting about 75 years of mythmaking is itself mythmaking, and in this case also marketing. The claim repeated by Levitz in a later similarly glossy volume that DC is a source of “complex mythology” serves his claim on the same page of that volume that DC is “America’s greatest and longest running comic publisher.”⁴⁹ Joe Quesada’s similar claim—made the exact same year, for the exact same publisher—that Marvel’s “mythology” compares positively with classical mythology⁵⁰ similarly serves the claim made in that volume that Marvel is “the most captivating comic book company of all time.”⁵¹ Such claims about the status of superhero comics culture as a modern religious/mythopoeic expression do not, therefore, simply reflect a common modern experience or perception. They also feed a cultural money machine, and indicate something about the potentially self-serving motivations behind the invocation of religious myth in such a context. If superhero comics culture is a modern religious mythology (the logic of this rhetoric implies), then it deserves to be taken very seriously, and supported with all due critical attention, media buzz, and massive cross-media-platform sales.

The fact that promoting superhero comics culture as a significant modern religious mythological expression in a situation where its products are proprietary mass-marketable properties amounts to a highly interested and self-fulfilling claim does not only highlight the nature and relevance of the likely motivations of makers and marketers. It also points to a basic but unrecognized responsibility on the part of those playing the part of cultural observers. In his 2000 essay on understanding “myth” for the purposes of Religious Studies, Russell McCutcheon suggests, after reviewing the ways in which people (including scholars) commonly use myths and the word myth, “that myths are not special (or ‘sacred’) but ordinary means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and believed-in ‘worlds,’ [and] that a people’s

⁴⁸ Levitz, *The Art of Modern Mythmaking*, 8, 9, 469, 508, 559, 587, 588, 627, 630, 637, 703.

⁴⁹ Paul Levitz, “Foreword,” in Cowsill et al., *DC Comics*, 6.

⁵⁰ Quesada, “Afterword,” 374.

⁵¹ Tom DeFalco, “Introduction,” in Saunders et al., *Marvel Year By Year*, 8.

use of the label ‘myth’ reflects, expresses, explores and legitimizes their own self-image.”⁵² Following Roland Barthes in seeing myth as a “network” of “assumptions and representations,” and Jonathan Z. Smith in seeing myth as a social “strategy,” McCutcheon concludes that a given society’s “myths” are in fact “the product and the means of creating authority.”⁵³ McCutcheon’s assessment recalls myth scholar Bruce Lincoln’s conclusion that “myth is ideology in narrative form.”⁵⁴

From the point of view outlined by Lincoln and McCutcheon, if there is a danger in myth, it is not the long-feared possibility that it might spread useless lies.⁵⁵ The real danger of an insufficiently critical approach to myth lies in the possibility of participating without due care in a largely invisible and even unconscious way of manufacturing and supporting social structures of ideology and power. In the present case of the modern myth of superhero comics culture *as* modern myth, such ideological assumptions needing investigation would include the assumptions seen above that “self-actualization” is a religious/mythopoeic goal, or that the Golden Rule is “religious” in some universal, non-confessional sense. A person could review a lot of myths, for example, in Hittite tablets or Indian dance, without ever seeing individual self-actualization or the Golden Rule emerge as central messages. The identification of true myth and religion with such purposes and messages therefore seems to serve a very particular modern (post-)Christian point of view, rather than the timeless, universal spiritual needs of any particular putative *homo religiosus*.

A modern culture of “spiritual” consumerism can also be served by uncritical approaches to superhero comics culture as religious myth. According to Thomas Luckmann, the most successful new (“invisible”) religion of the modern world is the cult of “self-realization”⁵⁶ that “supports the functioning of modern industrial societies . . . without explicitly

⁵² McCutcheon, “Myth,” 200.

⁵³ McCutcheon, “Myth,” 201–7.

⁵⁴ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.

⁵⁵ On the common elite intellectual expression of this fear, see Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” 6386; Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, ix–x; McCutcheon, “Myth,” 190–91.

⁵⁶ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 107–14.

legitimizing them.”⁵⁷ If Luckmann is right about the “invisible [capitalist] religion” of self-realization, it is important to notice that when superhero comics culture is held up by makers and marketers as an inspiration to moderns starved for “spiritual leaders”⁵⁸ their claim does not merely position them as moving into the inspiring, authoritative positions of those needed leaders; it also courts (and helps to construct) an audience willing to be “spiritual without necessarily being religious” primarily through its consumer habits. It is certainly true that the “Spiritual But Not Religious” demographic of North American society is large and growing,⁵⁹ and that one of its most obvious public manifestations takes the form of consumers seeking individual self-actualization from sources “selling spirituality.”⁶⁰ By uncritically accepting common ideas of “religion” and “myth” in their approaches to superhero comics culture, scholars support makers and marketers in promoting this commodified spirituality. The common assumption, for example, that massive sales at the bookstore and box office are sufficient evidence of the importance of the religious myth of superhero comics culture⁶¹ indicates how deeply such scholars are buying into the kinds of assumptions and values just discussed. Their own local imam or Quaker circle may not, for example, see a powerful ability to attract disposable money as the mark of a particularly representative or interesting religious mythic expression.

For these reasons, it should also be noted in closing that McCutcheon’s observation that “people’s use of the label ‘myth’ reflects, expresses, explores and legitimizes their own self-image”⁶² applies to scholars as well. “If myth is ideology in narrative form, then scholarship is myth with footnotes,” writes Lincoln: “Students of myth seem particularly given to producing mythic,

⁵⁷ Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, 116.

⁵⁸ Morrison, *Supergods*, xvii.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–12; Cary Funk and Gregory A. Smith, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2012), 41–44.

⁶⁰ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–29.

⁶¹ Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 24; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 3–5; Oropeza, “Introduction: Superhero Myth,” 23.

⁶² McCutcheon, “Myth,” 200.

that is, ideological, narratives, perhaps because the stories they tell about storytelling reflect back on them.”⁶³ By choosing what to study as religion, scholars help define religion, and the ways in which we do this can often look lazy and (confessionally and/or professionally) self-serving.⁶⁴ For these reasons, when scholars choose what “religious myth” means by choosing what to study as religious myth,⁶⁵ they are as likely to make self-interested and self-fulfilling claims as the makers and marketers discussed above. A decision to read Superman as religious myth through the pop philosophy lens of Joseph Campbell⁶⁶ may therefore understandably be criticized as being too easy an answer to reveal much,⁶⁷ but it may also be criticized as constructing interpretive authority in self-serving and obfuscatory ways, for example by promoting the implied office of a (post-)Christian universal culture interpreter whose expertise promises to reveal “the real underlying meaning” of any and all valuable human mythmaking.

Reading superhero comics culture as religion and myth in the (positive and negative) ways reviewed above may serve to justify and valorize the further pursuit of three topics that a certain kind of North American scholar already knows and likes, more than to discover anything widely or particularly useful. It is easy in such a situation for a scholar focusing on the intersection of religion, mythmaking, and comics culture to end up saying, in effect, “Look at how relevant these things are that I already know and like! The academic world ought to validate my attention to their theoretical intersections with middle-level publications and appointments.” Jonathan Z. Smith’s point that the “student of religion . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious”⁶⁸ is therefore well taken here, especially given the problems involved in trying to see and understand the most significant myths of one’s own culture.⁶⁹ If it is not always clear which myths are most effectively at work in constructing and maintaining social structures of ideology and power—even to those people most actively and consciously involved in a

⁶³ Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 209.

⁶⁴ McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 27–50, 127–57.

⁶⁵ See also Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” 6369.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 60–66.

⁶⁷ See Geoff Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics... and Why* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 10.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

⁶⁹ See Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” 6369.

given system of mythmaking—the critical faculties of academic observers aspiring to intellectual and ethical integrity must be exercised at their maximum at all times, including the most self-critical modes and methods of investigation and awareness.

Whether the putative modern phenomenon of superhero comics culture as religious myth is being promoted or interrogated, then, its active *construction* is by definition always at work, and needs as much careful attention as any other aspect of the investigation. It is the forgotten, non-Euclidean third side of the coin that makes the two “up” and “down” faces possible. The decision to treat superhero comics culture as a religious mythology effectively *makes it one*, and whether it takes the form of “direct” (creator/marketer/fan) participation, the more reflective participation of observation, or the dizzying participation of observing the observers, its most common public expressions are, to date, far too unconsciously interested and uncritical to serve the best potential and the best ethics of careful critical reflection.

