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Devoted Heroes:
Muslim Superheroes, Comics, and Fundamentalism

John B. Newhall

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When Superman leapt onto newsstands, he brought religiosity with him, specifically Christian and Jewish religiosity. From his creators' Jewish backgrounds, to the Christian imagery read into him, Superman is a symbol of how religion can intersect with the comic book medium. Debates still erupt over the question: is Superman Jewish?¹ This is reductionist, at best. It begs the question, what does it mean to say that a character is religious? What is the question referencing? The diegetic religion of the character? The religious affiliation of who the character is based on? The writers and artists of the comic? How closely the character's traits and story mimic religious traits and stories? Through these follow up questions it becomes clear that our initial question is far more complicated than it may first have appeared.

A. David Lewis observes that comics have always been about the mythic, retelling or referencing traditional stories and legends, mythic narratives and mythic beings.² It's not just Superman. Batman, Wonder Woman, Thor, Captain America, and Iron Man are symbols for aspects of the culture they were created in and the culture they currently exist in.

Iron Man, for example, can be seen as closely related to Elon Musk. While he first appeared in 1963, eight years before Elon Musk was even born, Iron Man has developed (and continues to develop) close ties to him. In his biography of Elon Musk, Ashlee Vance writes about the relationship between Elon Musk and the cast and crew of *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008). "When he [Robert Downey, Jr.] returned to the *Iron Man* production office, Downey asked that Favreau be sure to place a Tesla Roadster in Tony Stark's workshop. On a superficial level, this would symbolize that Stark was so cool and connected that he could get a Roadster

¹ Martin Lund, "Questioning Frank Miller and Superman's 'Jewish Essence,'" *Sacred and Sequential* (blog), October 13, 2016.

² A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, ed. *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*. New York: Continuum, 2010.

before it even went on sale. On a deeper level, the car was to be placed as the nearest object to Stark's desk so that it formed something of a bond between the actor, the character, and Musk."³ This is particularly interesting. While studios function as corporate entities and require companies to pay millions for such product placement, Robert Downey, Jr. and Jon Favreau did not require such payment from Elon Musk. This continued in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010) when Elon Musk was given a cameo within the film, solidifying Tony Stark and Musk's link. Similarly, Stan Lee stated that Howard Hughes was his inspiration for Iron Man, going so far as to name Tony Stark's father after the eccentric billionaire. Film myths are often rooted in propaganda. With *Iron Man*, the film is implicitly (when it isn't explicitly) discussing capitalism and its benefits, with very little critique. This is but one example of how myths surrounding consumerism and technological development pervade comic book culture.

Regarding Islam's increasing visibility within American society, Muslim characters are emerging at a growing rate. A. David Lewis and Martin Lund, comics scholars, write that it is "surprising that there is not more Muslim representation in the nation's superhero comics, for good and ill."⁴ However, this could be explained by looking at historical-Christocentric nature of popular culture in America that comics grew up in. Pre-9/11, Islam was nearly invisible within the eyes of the dominant culture. Now, with the rise of the war on terror, competing narratives over the violence and teachings of Islam have risen to the foreground of society. Across mediums, Islam and the Middle East continue to migrate towards center stage. Lewis and Lund go on to posit that the comic book industry may be seeking to capitalise on the new

³ Ashlee Vance, *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future* (New York: Ecco, 2015), 182.

⁴ A. David Lewis and Martin Lund, "Whence the Muslim Superhero?," in *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation*, ed. A. David Lewis & Martin Lund (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2017), 1.

visibility of Islam within the media. In post-9/11 America, visibility of Muslims within media has increased. This directly corresponds with the emergence of Muslim superhero characters within comics, such as Dust (2002), Justice (2003), Simon Baz (2012), and Ms. Marvel (2013).

Elizabeth Coody, in an article on *Women Write About Comics*, posited that there are four categories of religion and comics: (1) comics as religion, (2) comics in religion, (3) religion in comics, and (4) religion and comics in dialogue.⁵ The primary focus here will be on the final two categories: religion and comics in dialogue and religion in comics. Coody explains “religion and comics in dialogue” by drawing attention to the fact that “many comics are part of subculture, they get away with questioning powerful religious mores and figures...”⁶ These comics set out to make a statement about the religions they present. The comics are intending to comment on or critique elements of religion. Visual media falling into this category tends to utilise religious imagery or stories. This is exemplified in the film *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) and in the comic *Battle Pope* (Robert Kirkman & Tony Moore, 2000). These comics may posit a theological point or argue that a religion’s true nature is a particular way.

Similarly, Coody defines “religion in comics” as encompassing “comics that contain different expressions of religion.” In these comics, the focus is on how religion exists within the comic itself, within the diegesis. In visual media, this can manifest through the objects placed in the image (such as in *Iron Man* with Elon Musk’s Tesla Roaster). These placements help to signify elements of a relationship or connection with ideas and people. These comics may have a character that is a member of a specific religion, but the comic does not set out to make a

⁵ Coody is here adapting an earlier concept from Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan’s book *Religion and Popular Culture in America*. The original concept posited the same categories except phrased with “popular culture” instead of specifically “comics.”

⁶ Elizabeth Coody, “The Tangled Relationship Between Religion and Comics,” *Sacred and Sequential* (blog), September 17, 2017.

statement about that religious tradition. References to religion within these comics can be explicit or implicit. Implicit references to religion are most pervasive within the superhero genre and mainstream American comics. This is made clear through the discussion of Superman's religiosity. *The 99* and *Ms. Marvel* are great examples of these two ideas about how religion intersects with comics.

In 2007 Naif al-Mutawa, created the superhero comic, *The 99* a series designed to show how Islam is more than simply fundamentalism and extremism. Centered around a group of multi-faith, multicultural, and multi-aged superheroes, each issue joins three together to fight against the fundamentalist view that the villain, Rughal, espouses. While each of the superheroes carry one of the ninety-nine names of Allah, through Noor stones, the characters themselves are not necessarily Muslim. Just a few years later, Ms. Marvel made her first appearance in a 2013 issue of *Captain Marvel* (published by Marvel Comics). Focusing on a teenaged girl of colour in America, Ms. Marvel struggles to balance her life as an American teenager with her superheroics. These two comics both tackle questions of how Islam is perceived within the world. However, they both approach these questions from starkly different standpoints. This difference gets at the division between two types of Muslim comics. The first is a Muslim superhero comic that makes a theological statement about Islam, but does not necessarily contain Muslim characters. The second is the Muslim superhero, which has Muslim characters but does not necessarily make a theological statement about Islam.

Looking at comics this way poses a solution to the perceived problem of Islam, namely fundamentalism, that has emerged in the Western world today. These comics approach religion from two key standpoints: theology and representation. Muslim representation has historically been minimal, or non-existent entirely. By presenting Muslims now, these two comics enter into

a strained dialogue that spans politics, social interactions, and culture. *The 99* attempts to theologise on a popular level and rescue Islam from the grips of fundamentalists. Islamophobia is rooted in the fear of fundamentalism, seeing fundamentalism as opposed to American or Western values. For our purposes here, fundamentalism is defined as a conservative religious movement revolving around strict conformity to sacred texts.⁷ Combatting the fundamentalist theology talked so much about in the media aids in combatting Islamophobia throughout America. Naif al-Mutawa presents an alternative to the fundamentalist theological standpoint.

Relatedly, *Ms. Marvel* and *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel* present Islam as the identity of their protagonist in an effort to provide representation for Muslims in popular Western comics. Using representation, these two series attempt to combat Islamophobia and the conception that Islamic fundamentalism is pervasive throughout American Muslim communities. *Ms. Marvel* attempts to make American Muslim life familiar by presenting a character who is an average teenaged girl, in the style of Peter Parker and Spider-Man. This familiarising work that Marvel Comics is attempting is rooted in the prevailing idea that xenophobia of any kind is rooted in ignorance. To combat Islamophobia, we must combat ignorance. *Ms. Marvel* presents an opportunity for people to engage and connect with a Muslim character in order to combat Islamophobia.

It is important to note that these two comics have significantly different origins and are aimed at slightly different audiences. *The 99* comes from Teshkeel Comics, a Kuwaiti comic book company created by Naif al-Mutawa. This company mostly translates English comics into Arabic, and has only one original series (*The 99*). The comic itself was marketed both to Muslim

⁷ This definition has been adapted from Henry Munson's as put forth in his essay for Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Fundamentalism," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last modified 6 December 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fundamentalism>.

youth and non-Muslims around the globe. It was published jointly in Arabic and English. However, Teshkeel Comics is not a well-known company, thus readership of *The 99* was smaller until the team joined forces with the Justice League of DC Comics, one of the powerhouses of the comic book industry.

Indeed, *Ms. Marvel* is a product of Marvel Comics, an American comic book company and another powerhouse of the comic book industry. This series was aimed mostly at Western, non-Muslim audiences. However, it garnered significant attention from the American Muslim community and some of the trade paperbacks are housed in the Arab American National Museum's library. It is important to note that *The 99* was created by a Muslim man and *Ms. Marvel* was written and illustrated by Muslim women.

Before beginning, there must first be a brief introduction to the nature of comics as a medium. Comics are a complex visual medium. Composed of sequential images, often including text, comics are an intermodal medium. One of the most interesting aspects of comics is their dual self-driven and reader-driven pacing. The reader is given the power to advance the story by moving their eyes between the panels and turning the pages, even though all of the images are present immediately upon the page turn. The static images carry the most movement when placed next to each other in sequence. These sequential images utilise the concept of closure to portray movement. Closure is the idea that when two images are placed together in sequence, the brain will fill in the gap between them allowing the reader to understand how the first image became the second.

From this conception of closure, an understanding of the gutter can better be grasped. The gutter is the space between two panels. It is the space in which closure exists. Closure exists to erase the gutter, rendering it one of the most essential, while simultaneously most

invisible elements of comics. Even when the gutter is merely a solid line and not white empty space, the delineation between panels provides room for the reader to interpret movement.

The 99: The Problem of Fundamentalism and Theology

To begin with, *The 99* revolves around a group of youth who discover pieces of Noor Stones, which allow them to access inner power. By Captain Planeting (joining together in groups to become more powerful) in groups of three, they fight against evil and strive for peace. Each of the characters has one of the 99 names of Allah and possess powers accordingly. The 99 names come directly out of the Qur'an, as the way God makes himself known. In Figure 1, Noora (based on the name al-Nur, or light) can be seen living out her name. While she is dressed darkly, she radiates light from the palms of her hands, bringing light into the dark alleyway. The Noora gem gives its bearer the ability to manipulate light to create illusions and create invisibility for herself and others. It also gives her the ability to see the good in people. In a TED Talk, creator al-Mutawa, demonstrated how superheroes exemplify biblical archetypes. "The thinking behind that was to create positive, globally-resonating storylines that could be tied to the same things that other people were pulling mean messages out of because then the person that's using religion for the wrong purpose just becomes a bad man with a bad message. It is only by linking positive things that the negative can be delinked."⁸ By associating Islam with superheroes, al-Mutawa believes the negative link between Islam and terrorism can be undone. Grounding *The 99* in positive Islamic theology reduces the power the negative associations. This is the goal behind *The 99* for al-Mutawa. As al-Mutawa sees it, positive ideas, characters, and

⁸ Naif al-Mutawa, "Superheroes inspired by Islam," filmed at TED Global July 2010. TED Talk, 18:14.

stories push aside the negative narratives in the minds of readers. For him, this reshaping will allow the world to reclaim Islam from fundamentalism and extremism. While he speaks more broadly, beyond Islam, it is clear that his primary focus is on reclaiming Islam.

This is further evidenced within the TED Talk. “Now there are two groups that exist within the Muslim world. Everybody believes the Qur’an is for all time and all place. Some believe that means that the original interpretation from a couple thousand years ago is what’s relevant today. I don’t belong there. Then there’s a group that believes the Qur’an is a living, breathing document, and I captured that idea within these stones that self-update. Now the main bad guy, Rughal, does not want the stones to update.”⁹ Al-Mutawa pits progressive and conservative readings of the text against each other, challenging the fundamentalist view that the Qur’an is static and unchanging. He is putting forth an inherently theological statement against fundamentalist Islam. By engaging with Muslim theology and the Qur’an directly, al-Mutawa is rooting himself and his comic within the more liberal theological traditions of Islam. He draws on previous theology and puts forth an argument about the nature of Islam, namely that it is not static as fundamentalists claim.

The comic uses the villain Rughal to position fundamentalism. He is portrayed as demonic within the comic. His origin story begins in the center panel of the page. Rughal’s emergence from a pool of oil, immediately codes him as the demonic. His fingers are elongated and he wears an angry frown. Crossing the gutter between panels demonstrates his exceeding power. The gutter is an incredibly important element of comics. It is, as many theorists claim, where comic movement happens and where the reader creates their interpretation of the image and the image’s movement. The gutter separates two static images with implied movement

⁹ Naif al-Mutawa, “Superheroes inspired by Islam.”

occurring between them. That Rughal is depicted crossing the gutter signifies his power to break free from what is binding him. He is a being who has been reborn after hundreds of years and comes back to life younger than he was before. This power exceeds human power, making him something more. The placement of his hand beneath the others in the scene suggests his controlling power over the gang of locals. Throughout the series, he is marked as the evil and false messiah.

Conversely, in issue #1, Noora, or Dana Ibrahim, is positioned as a sympathetic protagonist, one we can be sutured to. She is not the only one. Each of the ninety-nine exists as the heroic protagonist within the comic. Noora's origin story begins by referencing the bible: "First, there was light." Kidnapped, she spends the next six months trying to escape. It is significant that the first of the ninety-nine we meet is Noora, as her name is closely linked with that of the Noor stones. Noor means light and Noora, from the name of God (al-Nur), controls light. Noora gains her powers, as all of the ninety-nine do, through the Noor stones. These stones are the true embodiment of progressivism within the comics, primarily through their ability to update, as al-Mutawa states in his TED Talk. The stones represent the progressive theology that Naif al-Mutawa emphasises throughout the comic series. Rughal's emergence from a pool of oil, immediately codes him as the demonic. His fingers are elongated and he wears an angry frown. Crossing the gutter between panels demonstrates his exceeding power. The gutter is an incredibly important element of comics. It is, as many theorists claim, where comic movement happens and where the reader creates their interpretation of the image and the image's movement. The gutter separates two static images with implied movement occurring between them. That Rughal is depicted crossing the gutter signifies his power to break free from what is binding him. He is a being who has been reborn after hundreds of years and comes back to life

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In 2014, it was reported that ISIS and al-Qaeda issued a reward for the assassination of al-Mutawa.¹⁰ The Saudi Grand Mufti also issued a fatwa, a religious edict, against the comic book series and subsequent television series, calling for them to be shunned entirely. This raises the question: is *The 99* heretical? Does the fact that each character in *The 99* possesses one of the ninety-nine names of God violate the tenants of Islam? Each of the 99 names of Allah seem to exist as individual qualities of God. So together would all the 99 names add up to God? Is the team, the 99, a manifestation of God?

At first glance, it appears that there are two answers to this question. The first comes from Abu Hāmid al-Ghazali (1059-1111), a classic theologian influential Muslim philosopher. In his book, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, al-Ghazali looks at the ninety-nine names that God used to make himself known in revelation. These are names for God that appear throughout the Qur'an, like al-Alīm (the Omniscient) and al-Rahīm (the Merciful). The different names of God allow worshippers to engage with God in different and more complex ways. God as a whole is unknowable, but by manifesting through different traits, God becomes more knowable and more identifiable.

Al-Ghazali writes that “the name is different from both the act of naming and the thing named, and that those three terms are distinct and not synonymous.”¹¹ Al-Ghazali might position

¹⁰ Matt D. Wilson, “Jihadist Group Calls for Death of Creator of Muslim Superhero Comic ‘The 99,’” *Comics Alliance*, 14 July 2014, <http://comicsalliance.com/jihadist-group-call-for-death-of-dr-naif-al-mutawa-creator-muslim-superheroes-the-99/>.

¹¹ Al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), 5.

the superheroes within *The 99* as distinct from the concept of God. The name is distinct from that which is named. According to al-Ghazali, while they play into the nature of God, they would not become God. Through this understanding of the names, the characters remain distinct from God. While it is a name of Allah, associating the name with another figure does not make that other figure God. Al-Ghazali would not see a problem with the portrayal of the heroes with the names of God attached. This is a wider understanding from an orthodox theologian as opposed to the ideas espoused by the Saudi Grand Mufti, ISIS, and al-Qaeda, who see this series as heretical and idolatrous from a more fundamentalist theological standpoint.

Fredrik Strömberg understands this somewhat differently. The character's relationship with the divine can be better understood, as Strömberg argues, through the Sufi concept of "*al-takhalluq bi-asma' Allah*, i.e. that by striving to embody the names of God, the Sufi manifests the traits of the names..." Al-Mutawa made sure to consult with religious scholars before creating *The 99*, but he has still been attacked and has even had a fatwa levelled against him from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, specifically based on the naming of the heroes.¹² Strömberg goes on to specify that this could be problematic within Islam and that it can be seen as idolatry even though it has precedent within the faith tradition, however al-Ghazali seems to not come to the same conclusion. The Sufi concept Strömberg puts forward, however, is not at odds with al-Ghazali. Indeed, both argue that the name and the thing named are distinct. The Sufi concept ties in directly with the practice of name recitation, practiced near universally by Muslims. This practice of reciting the names of God using 33 beads, allows the worshipper to

¹² Fredrik Strömberg, "Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?," in *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation*, ed. A. David Lewis & Martin Lund (Boston: Ilex Foundation & The Center for Hellenic Studies, 2017), 145.

link their actions with the divine. It is a way of connecting oneself to God, which is different from *becoming* God.

Al-Mutawa keeps any overt Islam, or religion in general, out of the comics, there are, as Strömberg notes, no “overt references to the religious affiliation of the characters in *The 99*, but many female characters wear different variations of the veil.”¹³ It is interesting to note that the characters are not overtly religious while operating in a distinctly religious text. It may be that al-Mutawa is making the statement that anyone can be linked to God. They need not be Muslim. The Noor stones directly connect each character to Islam, regardless of whether they are practicing Muslims. In some sense, *The 99* can be grouped into the category: religion and comics in dialogue. This series is al-Mutawa’s musing over different forms of Muslim devotion. This allows al-Mutawa to posit a theological argument against the conservative, hard-line reading of the Qur’an and fundamentalist understanding of Islam more broadly. *The 99* is intended to combat fundamentalist theology in favour of a more fluid and less static understanding of the Qur’an and Islam generally.

Ms. Marvel: The Problem of Islamophobia and Representation

While *The 99* makes a theological argument against fundamentalism, *Ms. Marvel* utilises representation to combat Islamophobia. For many Americans, Islamophobia is rooted in a fear of fundamentalism. To see this in action, simply witness all the legislation against Shari ‘a law.¹⁴ By introducing a Muslim-American teenager into the narrative, one who is completely separated

¹³ Fredrik Strömberg, 153.

¹⁴ Lizzie Dearden, “Alabama ‘bans’ Sharia law amid fears it could violate American rights,” *The Independent*, 7 November 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/alabama-bans-sharia-law-amid-fears-it-could-violate-american-rights-9847600.html>.

from Islamic fundamentalism, *Ms. Marvel* provides an opportunity for people to learn and engage with a Muslim character in an effort to decrease Islamophobic fear.

Kamala Khan, the title character, is a typical Muslim-American teenager. She's lived her whole life in the United States. Her family immigrated to Jersey City from Pakistan before she was born. The series looks at what teenage life is like for a Muslim, Pakistani-American girl. It raises conversations about the wearing of a hijab, dietary restrictions, and social conservatism (fundamentalism). Throughout the series, Kamala struggles to balance her life as an American teenager with that of being a Muslim. She is often seen as being proud of her faith but is also at many points self-conscious and ashamed. This becomes most apparent in the opening scene of the first issue. Kamala is at a bakery-esque shop with her friend Nakia. While Kamala is not wearing a hijab, Nakia is. Two other teenagers enter the store. They proceed to make jabs at Nakia for wearing a hijab. Zoe, the blonde girl, says of Nakia's hijab: "But I mean... nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to like honor kill you? I'm just concerned." In the background, Kamala can be seen with her hand covering part of her face. This interaction showcases a classic example of how Islamophobia plays out within daily life for Muslims.

The very first page depicts Kamala emblazoned with the iconic lightning bolt that will become her symbol, originally worn by Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers, the original Ms. Marvel until she changed her name to become Captain Marvel). It is important to take a moment to distinguish between Carol Danvers' Captain Marvel (an older, tall, white, and blonde superhero, of alien origin) and Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel (a teenager, Pakistani-American, Muslim, of Earthly origin). Just like how many fans today wear the Batman, Superman, or Flash logo, Kamala is positioned as the average comic book reader, a fan of the super-heroic protectors of

Earth. It becomes clear that she also reads and writes fanfiction about Captain Marvel. She walks a balance between being a good Muslim and a stereotypical American teenager of the media (here understood as the white, Christian in culture if not religion, cis-gendered, heterosexual person). This is emphasised as she is placed next to her friend Nakia, who wears a hijab. Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel seeks to find the balance of Islam and stereotypical American teenage life, and by so doing, familiarise the reader with a Muslim teenager.¹⁵ Being a Muslim, according to the Qur'an, should be the primary identity factor. It should influence every action and interaction. In his article "Living Islam in America," Yahiya Emerick writes of how the Muslim living in America must live their faith to the fullest for it is the only path to happiness. It outlines what Emerick sees as the right way to live in America as a Muslim, from modesty in dress to not telling children what they will be when they are fully grown, while pushing them to be the best at what they do.

Turning attention back to the text specifically, one fascinating moment comes as a part of Ms. Marvel's origin story. Her powers are granted to her by other superheroes who appear in a mist. This seems as though her powers are being ordained by God, or at least, the comic book diegetic pantheon of gods. At the base of the image is Kamala. In the center is Captain Marvel, who represents American society's conception of beauty perfectly: slim, with long flowing blonde hair. Indeed, it is of further importance

On the left is Iron Man, a symbol of capitalism. To the right is Captain America, Marvel's literal representation of American society. Together these three represent one notion of the American

¹⁵ In many ways this is linked to Mark W. Muesse's idea, put forth in his essay, "Religious Studies and 'Heaven's Gate': Making the Strange Familiar and the Familiar Strange," that religious studies' aspiration should be to "make the strange familiar" and "make the familiar strange."

ideal. Captain Marvel is speaking an initially unfamiliar language (at least to the majority of American readers). Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Captain America and Iron Man stand in the background with the English translation of the Sufi poem that Captain Marvel recites. Captain Marvel speaks Urdu, immediately placing her in a position of tolerance. She is othering herself from American society by aligning with the Sufi mystic Islamic world. She is reciting, in Urdu, a poem written by Sufi-mystic Amir Khusro. Captain America and Iron Man in the background translating the poem into English represents the complexity and duality of Kamala's identity. Urdu is closely associated with both the nation of Pakistan and Islam. The largest number of Muslim works were written in Urdu. The language's presence within the comic, being spoken by Captain Marvel, demonstrates how Kamala's identity is tied to her Muslim faith, Pakistani heritage, and American life. Kamala's experience on this page can be described as nothing less than a mystical experience. This becomes clear through the use of the Sufi poem, Sufism being a mystical branch of Islam.

The heroes (Captain Marvel, Captain America, and Iron Man), situated in a cloud of dust and smoke, and positioned above Kamala, are being directly related to the Christian renaissance images of the Transfiguration of Jesus and Jesus' Ascension into Heaven. While upon first glance this may seem odd, Christian imagery being linked with Islam, it is quite common. Islam does not have any issue with Christian imagery or iconography. Additionally, considering the comic is aimed at mostly non-Muslim audiences, this imagery works to ground the unfamiliar within the familiar. The unfamiliar is Islam, because while America is not a Christian country, American culture is rooted in Christianity. This is directly tied in to the purpose of the comic in its entirety, using representation and familiarity to combat Islamophobia within American society.



The Transfiguration, Raphael c. 1520.

This image is the first splash page within the series. Having the single panel page adds to the shock value for the reader and emphasises that the moment transcends all others. Kamala is no longer as restricted as she has been. She is interacting directly with divinity. Kamala looks up at the other superheroes, placing them literally above her, descending from the heavens. Indeed, Kamala is situated on the ground, rooting her to this world while the other superheroes are not so grounded as they hover in the clouds. Outstretched, Captain Marvel's hands almost seem to welcome Kamala into the pantheon of heroes.

Circling the heroes is a piece of long flowing cloth from Captain Marvel's belt. This cloth guides the reader's attention from Captain Marvel towards Iron Man, around to Captain America the grounds the image in Kamala. The text spoken reinforces this. The most prominent and largest text is at the top, spoken by Captain Marvel. The first few lines of the poem are translated by Iron Man with Captain America concluding it.

It comes time to address the significant oddities of this image, specifically: the winged sloth in Iron Man's arms, the peace-loving porcupine, and the array of birds (some of whom are wearing headgear). It's amazing that when looking through reviews of *Ms. Marvel #1*, most reviewers say something to the extent of, *Iron Man flanks her right with a flying sloth!* (or something to that effect). There is very little effort to dig into what these figures mean. For some, they may just be figures of Kamala's deepest imaginings, hallucinations conjured by the fog she is engulfed in. This however, in the context of the larger image, seems reductionist. The most promising argument regarding the sloth, specifically, claims that it comes from the larger

cultural obsession with sloths that was present in the early and mid 2010s, around the time this comic was first published.¹⁶

However, sloth is also one of the seven deadly sins within Christian teaching. Commonly understood as lethargy and laziness, sloth is closely associated with the intrusion of the Devil, through inactivity, into life. Additionally, by being inactive, a person is forsaking the gifts that God gave them. This failure to act with the gifts of God invites the Devil. In the context of the panel, sloth is intertwined with capitalism. Iron Man carries the sloth in his right arm, immediately linking the concept of sloth with Marvel's icon of capitalism. It is not uncommon to link sloth with capitalism. There are significantly strong arguments for how capitalism breeds laziness. As society develops and progresses, breeding further industry, people are asked to do less and less. One great current example is the self-driving Tesla, decreasing the need for humans to exert energy driving.

The image's structure is directly referencing the transfiguration of Jesus. It is also related to the ascension of Jesus. Flanked by two men, Captain Marvel, in the role of Jesus, hovers above Kamala Khan. Her hands are positioned open and slightly tilted. Aligning these two images shows the mystic power of transfiguration, drawing attention to the transfiguration of, not only Kamala Khan, but the superhero who is imbued with power. It raises the question, what does it mean to have such power? The transfiguration is the story of when Jesus becomes a radiant light of glory on the mountaintop. It is alluded to in the Gospel of John. This image positions Ms. Marvel above average people. It places her within the realm of the godly, the holy,

¹⁶ Justine Figueroa, "A Sloth Specialist Breaks Down The Internet's Obsession With The Cute Creatures," Medium. https://medium.com/@tinafigs_/a-sloth-specialist-breaks-down-the-internets-obsession-with-the-cute-creatures-673c433a4150

the divine. She has transfigured into something *more*. Kamala Khan has transfigured into the superhero, Ms. Marvel.

Ms. Marvel does not focus on Kamala’s Muslim identity explicitly. The author, G. Willow Wilson, a Muslim woman, writes: “As much as Islam is a part of Kamala’s identity, this book isn’t preaching about religion or the Islamic faith in particular. It’s about what happens when you struggle with the labels imposed on you, and how that forms your sense of self. It’s a struggle we’ve all faced in one form or another and isn’t just particular to Kamala because she’s Muslim. Her religion is just one aspect of the many ways she defines herself.”¹⁷ Here, is a comic creator indirectly distinguishing between a Muslim superhero and a Muslim comic. *Ms. Marvel* does not exist to say anything in particular about the Muslim faith as a whole. Ms. Marvel’s relationship with Islam is not the only one presented. The comic situates itself so that any commentary on Islam it makes exists more as commentary of Kamala’s conception of Islam rather than a definitive statement on the nature of Islam. It exists to say that there are Muslims who are not fundamentalists and they are not frightening. The way Kamala understands Islam is different from how her brother, her father, and Nakia experience Islam. The comic both simultaneously argues that Kamala Khan is just like you and Ms. Marvel is glorious, divine, and above.

The Magnificent Ms. Marvel: Islamic Representation Expanded

Picking up roughly where *Ms. Marvel* left off, *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel* (Salamin Ahmed, 2019) continues to tell the story of Kamala Khan. The opening narration, which enters sporadically throughout the narrative, positions Ms. Marvel as a mythical hero. It begins by

¹⁷ “Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan),” Wikipedia, Accessed May 14, 2018.

vaguely describing the scenes presented to us visually. As the narration's story continues consistently, building Ms. Marvel up, we are reintroduced to Kamala Khan, the human side of the mythic being. The narration continues to describe the myth: "Always did the Destined One hold her head high, an inspiration to all." This narration is paired with an image of Kamala, head slumped over as she sits on the door stoop. Indeed, the second issue of the series changes the narrator from aliens on a distant planet, to her best friend Bruno. However, this change does not change the discussion of her in mythic terms, nor does it change the discussion of her as "destined." On the third page of *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel* #2, Bruno speculates that Kamala was "destined to become a super hero." At the conclusion of the second issue, she is met by aliens from the planet Saffa, the antagonists behind the plot of the series thus far. They kneel before her and tell her of a prophecy. "You are the Destined One! And it has been written that you will return with us to live on our world, or our planet will die."¹⁸

It is fitting that Ms. Marvel is a superhero that shoots society forward. For as Joseph Campbell writes: "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back."¹⁹ Superheroes, while often considered to be tied to conservatism, are also intricately tied to counterculture movements and liberalism. Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of Alan Moore, R. Crumb, and the emergence of underground comix in the 1960s and 1970s. These comics are characterized as being "convention-defying, politically charged, and independently produced."²⁰ While the character of Ms. Marvel is owned and published by

¹⁸ Saladin Ahmed, *Ms. Marvel* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2019), 45.

¹⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Mumbai: Yogi Impressions, 2008), 7.

²⁰ Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 52.

Marvel Entertainment, the character of Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel is an undoubtedly politically charged and is arguably convention-defying.

Presenting a religio-mythic Muslim superhero in the post-9/11 and War on Terror era, can (and arguably must) be understood as a socio-political statement. The statement here is a critique of the myth that all Muslims are terrorists or extremists. Kamala, as demonstrated before, is presented as a typical American teenager and a hero fighting for good. Her appearance in *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel*, if anything, doubles down on this message. Within *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel*, Kamala is elevated beyond the mere status of a hero. She becomes a saviour. Making a Muslim superhero into a saviour within Western culture today is *necessarily* political, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Even the title of the series, Ms. Marvel is elevated through the word “magnificent.”

This elevation of superheroes is common within the genre. Superheroes, functioning as saviours, are granted the status of divinity. The “supersaviors,” as Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence call them, stand in for the Christ or saviour figure. They argue that the Christ figure’s “credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism... But their superhuman abilities reflect a hope of divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind.”²¹ This deifying of Ms. Marvel positions a brown Muslim character as a goddess, an ideal, the mythic being. To bring a Muslim superhero into the public discourse as not merely a key figure, but as a supersavior, is to take a stance against Islamophobia and Islamic fundamentalism. It is to take a stand against oppression and raise up visibility and representation.

²¹ Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 13.

All of these mainstream comic book series depict a version of Islam that is opposed to fundamentalism. In *The 99*, Islam addresses fundamentalism theologically, through the structure of the piece: names and concepts. In *Ms. Marvel* and *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel*, Islamophobia is addressed through representation, with characters like Kamala Khan. Islamophobia is rooted in a fear of fundamentalism. Allowing people to engage with an Islam that is not fundamentalist, enables the reader to develop tolerance and acceptance in ways they may not have had the opportunity to before. Religion continues to be an important aspect of the lives of characters and the construction of narratives. Religious themes are widespread throughout comics. Through understanding how comics can combat widespread cultural myths, we can better begin to understand how comics function within culture. Here, specifically, myths surrounding fundamentalism within the Islamic faith tradition are being challenged.

Representation and the opportunity for engagement are the keys for combatting Islamophobia and challenging fundamentalism. Through the medium of comics, these series challenge the Western social understanding fundamentalism, and therefore Islamophobia, within the United States. The comic form is especially suited for this because it does not require the same number of crewmembers to be involved but is still rooted in visual culture. For both of these comics the primary story was constructed by a writer and artist working closely together.

Comics have commonly been associated with the counterculture and youth culture and they are a powerful means of communication. Writers and artists utilise the form to challenge social norms and advocate tolerance. *The 99*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel* are three such examples of this type of work within comics. Islamophobia is rooted in a fear of fundamentalism. All three series attempt to combat this fear through either combatting Islamophobia or fundamentalism itself. Whether it is a religious comic or a religious character,

comics are being used to challenge society's conception of religion, enhance representation of marginalised groups, and challenge society's fear of the other.

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