

## When the Gods Failed: Representation of Religion in Super Hero Comic Books of Batman

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### Abstract

*The western world have been traditionally described as rational, practical and logical as opposed to the more religious minded eastern world which is driven by religion and not science. However, in an American art form called comics we find a representation of religion that portrays their ideas and desires of religion in their won society. This is very much reflected in the popularity (once upon a time) of the super hero comic books in America. The paper tries to describe this phenomenon from the perspectives of Nietzsche and Freud's interpretation of religion and its social functions. The form of the comic book itself seen from the deconstructionist perspective is conducive to myth making. Both the content and the form will be analyzed in the paper to bring out the features of myth making and hero worship.*

**Keywords:** Religion, stereotypification, representation

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।  
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।  
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥<sup>1</sup>

Whenever injustice raises its ugly head, a saviour takes birth to reinstate order and justice. This motif is as old and universal as the human existence is, or may be it precedes the existence of 'humanity'. This is the theme of many epics (particularly Indian) throughout the world. According to Levi Strauss, all sentient beings look for order around them because without order no progress can be achieved. Commissioner Gordon (a character in the comic books of Batman) says the same thing, "Because there has to be order. There has to be law."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if American society has prospered militarily, politically and technologically, then it had an ordered society and polity. A disruption of the order retards the development of a civilization and the society craves for the reinstitution of the same. It is funny that a disorder or chaos is usually caused by many and it usually takes 'a' determined person to stop the same. Napoleon, Hitler, and many others like them have done the same. Their individual efforts have brought temporary peace and order into their respective societies. A religion does almost the same thing – bring order. Interestingly both Christian and Islam follow only one god! And super heroes in comic books are usually not a team but an individual and they too bring order into the world. In our modern world where religion is receding into a mere memory the comic

books are reiterating the function of religion in its own fictional world. In this context it is interesting to remember that Drama took its birth during the religious festivals celebrated in ancient Greece. Religion after all is nothing but a very healthy piece of imagination much like the comic books. All these gods and their paraphernalia have been created with the help of really rich imaginative powers nurtured throughout the ages. However, the purpose it serves is very much practical and realistic. Comics had not been able to do this and there is little possibility that it could ever do that. Now even if comics cannot replace or supplant religion they certainly have replaced the myths and the mythmakers. That is why an Ivy League student was once quoted as telling Stan Lee (the creator of Spider man, X-men etc.) - "We think of Marvel Comics as the 20<sup>th</sup> century mythology and you as this generation's Homer."<sup>3</sup>(This just might be the answer to the allegation that America and incidentally the whole of the western world is devoid of any myths.)

Now if we relate or compare the myths of western religion with the myths of comic books then we will find that the myths used in comics are non Christio-Islamic in nature. Instead of one, all powerful god, there are plenty of them. Each reigning in their own domain: Superman in Metropolis, Batman in Gotham, Spiderman in New York. As among the Hindu gods, a hierarchy, in terms of powers can be instituted among the super heroes, for example in Justice League comics, Batman and Flash gets to do those jobs that fit their more human capabilities while the more muscular jobs are done by the bulkier heroes. The superheroes who have super human physical strength, do remind us of the non Christian Greek gods, particularly of Zeus.

Now when we are talking about representation of religion in comic books then we may start by saying something about the origin of the superheroes. Superman – an alien from an erstwhile planet called Krypton owes his power to the Sun. Other than denying the role of god in the birth of a super human, Superman himself might be a critique of the American fossil-fuel driven civilization for he uses the non-polluting and renewable solar power. Certainly, it is food for thought for the Eco critics. Super man has not derived his strength from god; neither has Batman or Spiderman or many such others. Though there are not-so-hyper popular super heroes like Thor or Wonder Woman who are gods or semi gods themselves. Most of these super heroes are the result of some natural or scientific accidents – Spider man got his spider powers after getting bitten by a genetically engineered spider, however, it was his uncle's murder that triggered his desire to fight crime. That was his moment of epiphany. He realised the purpose of his life. Again Hulk was the result of an accident involving gamma rays. The super heroes have snapped their imaginative umbilical cords from the supreme creator. They are on their own. They are unique. They are Satrian existential entities. After Nietzsche pronounced that, 'god is dead', the man had to make it out on his own. However, I personally ask – 'was god ever alive'? Anyway, the superheroes do the same thing that was supposed to have been done by the gods – protect the weak from the strong, secure justice, fight for the right. Godly mercy has taken a human form. More so, in the case of Batman; he is more human, he doesn't

have any super power. He has meticulously worked for his skills. He has honed his body and mind to perfection.

The super heroes bring hope in the minds and hearts of the people. Religion too brings hope into the minds of the people in the real world. Children at least hope that as Batman and Superman save the day in the comic book, they might save them from any kind of danger, including the danger of getting molested by his/her elders. Recently in The Times of India (Kolkata) dated – 25/03/2009, there published a news, titled – ‘Spiderman’ help for autistic kid,<sup>4</sup> where a fireman dressed himself up as the Spider man to coax an autistic child from fire and into his arms. The child trusted nobody but a masked man dressed as his hero. The holy awe (experienced by the children) which once the gods enjoyed had shifted long time back onto the comic book super heroes.

The development of the western world resulted from their development of science and technology and when religion held sway Europe was engulfed in the Dark Ages. Even when the reformation came it was the technology of printing that helped it to succeed. The comic books and the super heroes reflect this trait of the western, particularly of the American civilization. Therefore, one of the ways in which religion is represented in the comic books is certainly by its visible absence. Here, it moves towards the deconstructionist discourse which gauges the magnitude of a presence by its absence.

Till now, we have been talking about the form but now if we come to the content, then we find that the comic books reinforce the Christian themes of victory of good over evil. No matter how sophisticated the form or the idea behind the comic books might be it too follows the western binary system of epistemology. In terms of moral or ethical standards, the west usually thinks of only in terms of good and bad but Nietzsche says, “There are no opposites: only from those of logic do we derive the concept of opposites – and falsely transfer it to things.”<sup>5</sup>

However, Harvey Dent also known as Two Face is a character who is both good and bad. He is a negative character in Batman comic books whose face was burnt in an accident and then onwards his split self (represented as the burnt side of his face) has taken over the good side. He is a typical case of split personality gone to the extreme. Even the Joker was once a kind gentleman<sup>6</sup>. He too suffers from a neurotic disease. He is obsessed with being the arch enemy of Batman. He is the Dionysian half of the Apollonian Batman. Most of Batman’s villains are mental patients (that is why they are kept in Arkham Asylum and not in a prison). They, like all those who were persecuted in the Middle Ages as evil, behaved in the non-normative way not because of the influence of Satan but because of some chemical action that had gone wrong in the brains. Freud pointed out - “... neuroses is not created by the impact of a pathological disturbance upon the mind, but is present already in the normal structure of the mental apparatus.”<sup>7</sup> Thus we see that not only heroes but their antagonists too (particularly Batman’s) deny the presence of good or evil from any external but from an internal and completely secular source. The antagonists of Batman are not evil for the sake of being evil. There is

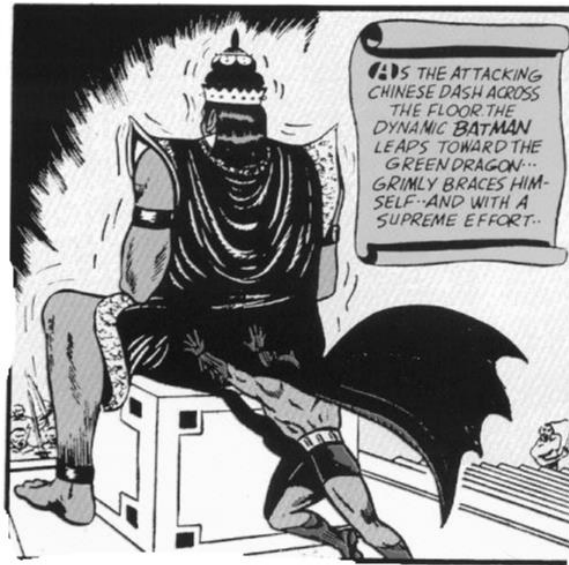
a method (often scientific) in their madness. However, once they become what they are, they actually desire power, may be to compensate for what they have lost – a face (Harvey Dent), a reputation (Jonathan Crane a.k.a. Scare Crow), or a dearly loved wife (Victor Fries a.k.a. Dr. Freeze). However, it is this desire that leads to their fall as it led to the fall of both the Man and Lucifer. Again the negative characters fall first (usually as a result of an accident which is often triggered by the presence of Batman) and then they desire power and the more power they desire the more they fall.

All the super heroes wear masks. In many tribal cultures it is believed that wearing a mask (usually made in the image of an animal) inculcates some super natural powers. It is usually worn by some priest in an exorcism to exorcise an evil spirit from a person's body. Super heroes too do the same. Interestingly, our NSA commandoes too were wearing masks when they were exorcising the terrorists from our land on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008. Talking of masks we all wear masks. And if according to Derrida one word only points to another and that word to the third then we too wear masks and when one is taken away we only put forth another. If according to Derrida there is no ultimate truth then there is no ultimate face either.

Many of the creators of the super heroes were/are Jews. For example Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel who created Superman, Stan Lee who created the Spiderman and Hulk, Bob Kane and Bill Finger who created Batman. The Jews, one of the most persecuted races of all, dreamt of the super heroes who in Freudian/Jungian terms might be the wish fulfilments of a horribly thrashed race (not to forget, in the name of religion) by the Nazis. The bulging muscles only manifests, on a personal level the creators will to power and on the collective level the 'Persecuteds' will to power.

Contextually or textually we find many motifs present in the comic books that bear similarity to that of religion and its texts. The super heroes themselves are modelled on the figure of Christ the saviour. They too, (Batman always) 'bleed' to save the people. They are often resurrected, though not necessarily on Good Friday! Importantly they never kill, remember – 'Thou shalt not kill'! More specifically, the 'Bat cave' where Batman recedes to revitalize himself can be the 'Seven Sleepers' Den'. Batman's whole life is as austere as a monk's though he gets to have all the fun in the morning as the playboy - Bruce Wayne.

We have talked about the representation of religion in the superhero comic books of America. This representation was the representation of their religion i.e. Judeo-Christian. We may also talk about the representation of the other religions. While doing this we will see the same spectre of reductive stereotyping in these representations, which haunt the post colonial literature usually put forward by the west where the eastern cultures are generally represented as diminutive in terms of intelligence and rationality. A tiny example might suffice here:



**Figure. 1.** Bob Kane (writer), Sheldon Moldoff and Bob Kane (artist), “Detective Comics # 35”, comic book, (New York: DC comics, Jan 1940 ) 20.



**Figure. 2.** Bob Kane (writer), Sheldon Moldoff and Bob Kane (artist), “Detective Comics # 35”, comic book, (New York: DC comics, Jan 1940) 20.

Here we find that Batman is using an oriental idol to crush its own followers. We find a great similarity of the idol smashing tradition of both Islam and Christianity which starts from time immemorial and continues today. According to the Bible Christian heroes and gods have often smashed idols of false gods. Few years ago we found American soldiers in tandem with Iraqi people smash the idols of Saddam Hussain. Again, many Muslim invaders who from time to time have invaded India have known to destroy statues of Hindu deities. A few years ago the Taliban razed the statue of lord Budhha at Bamiyan in Afganistan. If we stretch a little bit (or a lot) we may find an analogy to the suspicion of the written word by Socrates and Plato in the suspicion of the idols by the western world. After all, the western philosophy is highly indebted to the philosophy of the Greek masters. The written word is more visible where as the spoken word is intangible, similarly, the

visible statue/idol is according to the Platonic view point a suspicious thing. However, it is well known that the Greek themselves worshipped idols. What I am trying to do is to find an analogy between the written word and the idols since they are more visual than auditory. The visual appeal of the idols is a point of reference. According to both Islam and Christianity god is formless and to tie it to a form will be a blasphemy. Yet, Christians do wear the cross as a mark of devotion or allegiance to god. In the similar way, Islam too has artefacts to this end. To complicate matters further, the west has always found the written word to be of more enduring value than the spoken word. But then that's politics, religion is altogether different matter.

Therefore we see that religion is both 'absently present' and 'presently present'. It does signify the resurrect able character of religion itself which finds its outlet even in comic books – one of the most (once) popular forms of popular culture itself. After all when religion began and reached its peak, it was 'popular' and no wonder when religion is almost dead in the western world, it has found a way to assert itself in a popular medium – the comic books.

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