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Muslim Superheroes

Podcast with **A. David Lewis** (28 May 2018).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/muslim-superheroes/

David Robertson (**DR**): *Well, it's my pleasure to welcome A. Dave Lewis to the podcast once again. Dave is one of the few, if not the only one of our regular guests to be both an interviewer and an interviewee. Well I might be the only other one, strangely enough! But it's certainly . . . it's been a little while since he's been on. So it's my pleasure to welcome him back. So thanks, once again, for joining us!*

David Lewis (**DL**): Alright, ok. It's good to be here!

DR: *Good. Well this time we are going to be talking about Muslim superheroes, partly jumping off your recent edited volume with Martin Lund, called* Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam and Representation. *Obviously, there's quite a lot for us to unpack here. So maybe we could start with you just telling us a little bit about why you decided to focus specifically on Muslim superheroes?*

DL: Actually it comes from an earlier collection that I did, called *Graven Images*, with Christine Hoff Kraemer And when we did that collection, we had a number of contributors give us perspectives from religion all over the world, and historically. But to be frank we, as the editors even, found the Islam section to be light. And given that that was growing as a focus of my own studies, given that that was growing as focus in my own personal life, it's something that I, in part, wanted to remedy. Now there had been some work out there done, particularly on Islam and comics as a medium in general, but not on this hallmark genre. So I approached Martin and said that I was interested in this – not just the dearth of research on Muslim superheroes, but also the increasing number of Muslim superheroes that we were steadily finding in mainstream US comics. And from there we reached out, and put a call for papers out. And I also tapped a few people that we knew had similar interests. And we tried to synthesise the limited information that was out there, in this volume, as well as inject it with new ways in which we could explore the topic.

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DR: *Great. And as a topic I think there's a number of really interesting aspects that make Islam and superhero comic, specifically, a particularly rich field for us to explore. We can talk about those in a little bit more depth, then. For a lot of people – and I'm a comic fan so I 'm playing devil's advocate a bit here – the idea of the superhero seems to be particularly tied to an American context. It seems to have a lot to do with the American dream of America's role in the world. So, looking at the way that particularly the American comics have dealt with Muslims is particularly fraught with interesting data.*

DL: Oh, hugely. And not only is it fraught with . . . particularly in a post-September 11 context, or even earlier than that, during the hostage crisis of the '80s . . . . But, really, so much of this engagement has been passed over and forgotten, not necessarily chronicled. I reached back as far as I could, looking for not the earliest Arab character in superhero comics, nor the earliest Muslim character across all genres, but I was really trying to pinpoint: when did this genre in its infancy begin to engage other religions, other than ostensibly the Christian norm? And I became, actually, rather enamoured with what I found, which was a character in 1944, going back just a few years into the first superhero boom (**5:00**), called Kismet, Man of Fate . And not only did I start studying this character I found that I took sort-of a shine to him and wanted to start writing further adventures from him, since he had fallen into the public domain.

DR: *It would be quite interesting to look and see if there were similar portrayals of Muslim characters in the British wartime comics. There was a lot of those still around when I was a kid, you know, telling these true life World War Two stories. Because, of course, at that time a lot of soldiers would have come into contact with Muslim soldiers, especially those serving in North Africa and places like that.*

DL: Absolutely.

DR: *Much different contexts than we have now.*

DL: Without question. Although I won't say it's surprising that it would have entered the British consciousness far earlier than the US popular consciousness, given as you said, you know, colonial engagement and, more widely speaking, the theatre of battle. Whereas, for the US, we have been very slow to become aware of Islamic culture, despite it being not only important in the 20th century – being important historically, classically, without the classic philosophers. But no, it would not surprise me in the least to see more Muslim representation – both good and bad, you know, both fair and then highly stereotypical – in British war genre comics than in US superhero comics, as a latecomer.

DR: *Indeed. Of course, superhero comics as a genre – I don't need to tell you that there's many other genres of comics of course – but the superhero genre, in particular, seems to be tied to the American immigrant experience, doesn't it? So, I mean, that's another resonance.*

DL: Very much so. In fact I think it was Danny Fingeroth's book, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, where he points out that the American superhero genre really is largely reflective of the immigrant experience. And you can just look at the pantheon of superheroes. You either have aliens of very different varieties, Atlantis like Aquaman, Kryptonians like Superman, Amazonians like Wonder Woman, or you have the dispossessed, sort of orphans in either the literal or the figurative sense- that's where you get your Batman, your Captain America, your Spider-Man. But the genre – particularly when it was formed in the late 30s - early 40s, here in the US – was absolutely about congealing into a shared American experience, rather than there being one quintessential, pure American experience. And that has gotten, many times, lost in the history of the genre. I think if there's been any time to best recapture it, it might be now – as superheroes are moving from comics as a fringe medium, largely speaking, to cinematic blockbusters. And people who may never have been caught dead with a comic book are now shelling out however-many-bucks to go see them live on the big screen.

DR: *Yes. That's something which has changed dramatically, even in the time I've known you and we've been talking about comics. It's gone from a very fringe interest, as you say, into the biggest genre in cinema right now. And perhaps that's why we're seeing a number of very high profile Muslim characters coming into mainstream comics at the moment. Now Ms Marvel is an obvious example. Can we talk about her a little bit, maybe?*

DL: Absolutely Kamala Khan Ms Marvel: born and bred Jersey girl, but with a Pakistani background, who is a fan of superheroes – who's actually a fan fiction writer – finds that she is incredibly imbued with the power of a polymorph, meaning that she can change the size and shape of her body at will (**10:00**). She has been become, really, the frontline character – I don't like using the word frontline – maybe the banner character for Muslims, in superhero comics. She certainly caught on with a large section of readers, especially with Marvel attempting this diversity initiative. The problem with her, if there is any problem – it's a terrific character, and written by a terrific team with G. Willow Wilson – if there's any problem with the character it's that most people just know her for being Muslim.

DR: *Right, yes.*

DL: The character doesn't come off as often in discussions where religion is not the focus, or where diversity is not the focus. And I only say that's a problem because that does give her an upper limit, a

ceiling of sorts. We can talk about, and generalise, what Captain America does, right, or what Ironman does, or even what Superman does, but we don't yet have – as popular as Ms Marvel is, or as Simon Baz the new Green Lantern is, or any number of characters – we don't yet have that Muslim character who is transcending their Muslim-ness, necessarily, into storylines so compelling and so iconic that audiences are keeping up with them. Maybe Ms Marvel is starting to tilt that way. She is a member of The Avengers and The Champions now. But I think the only context a lay person would know about her in, is in this religious and diversity-centred context.

DR: *Right. And she reminds me, actually, a lot of Miles Morales. I think there's a few clear parallels. I mean, Miles Morales is the black Superman*

DL: Spider-Man.

DR: *Spider-Man, yes, sorry. The black Spider-Man, introduced around the same time in Marvel.*

DL: Black and Latino, he's actually . . .

DR: *That's right. Yes, he is. He is similar to Ms Marvel, has become a hugely popular character, is also a superhero fan, interestingly. I hadn't thought of that until you mentioned it, just now. But similarly, he has had difficulty crossing . . . has had some success crossing into the mainstream, but is still almost always talked about in terms of his ethnicity, rather than simply his being a compelling character. But that might be starting to change now. I don't know if you know that when they made "Spider-Man: Homecoming" they were talking about whether they should use Miles Morales, because they were facing the fact that they had to relaunch this character for the third time. And it was decided against it, because: "a black superhero film can't make any money at the box office, right?"*

DL: That's changed. I think that's been disproven pretty solidly, recently.

DR: *Yes, I think we've completely thrown that out the window! But there is now a Miles Morales animated movie coming out.*

DL: That's true and, just going back to "Spiderman: Homecoming" for one minute – not to stray too far from the subject of comics and religion – I do want to point out that they did cast Donald Glover in that movie in a small part, but his part there is actually playing the uncle of Miles Morales. So we haven't been introduced to his character yet, but they have laid down the groundwork for integrating his character.

DR: *Absolutely.*

DL: But I think you put your finger on one of the problems there, David, which is that these characters are always becoming known as a subset of another character. I mentioned Simon Baz, he's now the Muslim Green Lantern; we mentioned Miles Morales, he is the Black or Latino Spider-Man.

DR: *We also had the female Thor as well, recently.*

DG: Female Thor; there's the Batman of Paris, a Muslim Batman of Paris, Nightrunner, And even Ms Marvel is inheriting a mantel from the former Ms Marvel, now Captain Marvel – who's going to get her own movie. So we haven't quite gotten to the point where we have a Muslim character whose core identity, partly, is Muslim but also is forging a superhero narrative in their own right (**15:00**). And the reason I keep coming back to superheroes – I feel like this is worth saying: you are absolutely right, there are any number of genres out there when it comes to comics. Almost as limitless as any other medium. However, A: comics are often judged in terms of superheroes, and B: as you mentioned earlier, superheroes are largely an American-made product, or an American-originating product. They're the closest we have to what Richard Reynolds calls a Modern Mythology. So the reason I keep returning to the superhero is, basically, this has to be the testing space for whatever religious theory or criticism we're bringing to this medium. Is comics superheroes and superheroes comics? No, absolutely not. And I would never limit either one in that way. But if we can't talk about the superhero comic in terms of the subject that interests us here, religion and representation, then that challenge is going to keep presenting itself. Until it can be brought into this space it will always be penultimate.

DR: I had a thought, actually, when I was reading the book. You mentioned that . . . most of the examples we've given today, in fact, except for the Green Lantern, are Marvel characters. And what you're saying there, about modern mythology, I think is the reason why. DC characters are harder to represent as having a religion, because DC write more mythologically. DC characters are essentially gods. So it's much harder to represent religion, ethnicity, gender issues and these kinds of things, because they relate to humans. But the classic argument is that while DC are gods, Marvel are always telling metaphors for being a teenager. So Marvel characters are much better suited to these kinds of discussions about identity and representation, because that is the Marvel style.

DL: And I think that's true historically, right? DC has been around longer as a unified company. And Batman and Superman reach back further than the Fantastic Four, or Spiderman or the X- Men. But I think there is the opportunity to challenge that just the same. I mean, we could focus on Superman's alien-ness instead of his godliness. Or we could focus on The Flash – he really is your most mortal and

your most human of heroes but he gets elevated to this god-like Hermes status, at least in popular consumption. So I don't think that either company has to be locked into these positions. And there have been a number of times that Marvel has experimented with sort-of the more godly figure with its characters. But, yes, I think if you had to do a fast summary of each one, you get Marvel with its very human heroes being raised to an elevated status that they may or may not be able to handle, and DC superheroes being sort-of gods – but more gods with feet of clay, or gods with an affection or a tie to humanity. That said, neither approach precludes any spiritual or religious material. I thought it was when . . . . This was a Justice League annual back in the year 2000. It was pre-September 11. But they did try to introduce a Muslim character at that time called The Janissary. And The Janissary, she was a fine character. But the more interesting thing that came out of that particular issue is, does Wonder Woman, an Amazonian, a princess, a goddess-like character – and, at certain times, practically portrayed as a goddess – does she wear a hijab? Is she either subject to the cultural norms of the society she finds herself featured in, or does she transcend that (**20:00**)? Or does she even find it alien to her? Because she has proof of her own gods and not of an unseen Allah. So these can be engaged in any number of ways, if the companies, frankly, see a profit motive for it.

DR: *Yes. I'd like to dig into some other examples. Ms Marvel: there's been a few papers and stuff and people can go and read more widely, and obviously we can point them to your book where there's a lot of good examples. But I want to bring up a few sort-of perhaps more problematic examples. One that you don't talk about directly in the book, but was the first time I became aware of this as an issue in comics, was* Holy Terror.

DL: Oh, yes.

DR: *Which was originally going to be a Batman book.*

DL: It was originally going to be *Holy Terror Batman*, punning on the whole 1960's television Robin catchphrase: "Holy terror, Batman!" And it was pitched by Frank Miller of "Dark Knight Returns" and "Sin City" and "300" fame, to DC. And DC thought about it and ultimately rejected it. So he reworked it as his own independent book, I believe with Legendary Comics.

DR: *Yes. And I don't know an awful lot about Frank Miller, but I'm guessing his politics must definitely be towards the more right-wing end of the spectrum?*

DL: They have absolutely grown that way over the years. I can't say if he's always held a right-wing position. But I do recall that shortly after September 11th there were any number of charity relief

books that were being published by various companies. And it struck me that he contributed a very militaristic piece. Like: "Get ready for our thunder! Get ready for our power! You've woken a sleeping giant!" And since that time his work has turned quite . . . I would almost say *radically* to the right. And in Holy Terror he reworks a Batman archetype into a character that I believe he calls The Fixer.

DR: *That's right.*

DL: And The Fixer is intent on wiping out terrorism. But the only form of terrorism showcased in the book . . . basically terrorism becomes synonymous with radical Islam, with extremist militaristic radical Islam. And having it enjoin us . . . that lens really portrays an Islamophobia that's concern isn't terrorism – or else we could look at spots around the world that are unrelated to Islam, where terrorism is being employed. He really takes a turn there towards a xenophobic fearing of "the other" and one that stands, in his view, in opposition to America and the American norms and democracy. It's worth noting that one of the works that he did which followed this up, which followed up Holy Terror, was that he returned to Dark Knight Returns for a third time. He did Dark Knight Returns, Dark Knight Strikes Back- which happened right as September 2001 struck, and may have actually changed the way he concluded that story. But then he returned with Dark Knight III: The Master Race, which is, in very brief summary, all about basically Kryptonians – Superman's people – coming to terrorise and dominate humankind. And only Batman and Superman can save us. And it rings the same bells of, basically, this xenophobia against an outside religious group that seems to be, from his perspective, aggressive, and attempting to conquer. So these are things that he has pursued in a rather, I find, distasteful manner – but definitely in a forthright manner. He's not hiding or being cute about it (**25:00**). There are a number of other comic creators who are injecting anti-Islamic themes into their content without saying so explicitly. But when we focussed on *Muslim Superheroes* as a book we said that that's less our concern, tracking Islamophobia in comics - which is its own tremendous topic, and there has been some great work done it – but more looking at how they're trying to integrate the heroism and the principles of, frankly, US heroism or Western heroism to interface with what are perceived Islamic ideals.

DR: *I would be quite interested to know a little bit about black Muslim superheroes, because obviously that's another important aspect of Islam in a America, historically speaking. Presumably here we're going to be mostly talking about the pre-9/11 situation.*

DL: One of our chapters is a terrific piece on basically reading earlier black superheroes and we can point to John Stewart as a Green Lantern or point to The Falcon, Captain America's partner, as I

believe our contributor calls them, "crypto-Muslims" or "proto-Muslims". Basically, if you're a New York writer of comics, which is where the two – DC and Marvel, the two major superhero companies – were stationed, what you're seeing of black strengths and black presence, in the news and in your environment, is either the Black Panthers or the Nation of Islam. Black Panthers being not the superhero Black Panther, but the group.

DR: Although there is a direct connection there. Stan Lee took the name of the character directly from the Black Panthers.

DL: Yes, I'd heard different reports on that. I've heard that it either entered his consciousness, or he did conspicuously think . . . I don't know the exact details, there. But yes, you can read a lot of black characters in comics, in the 60s as well as the 70s, as what we call crypto-Muslims. But then you can go forward and find actual black Muslims in a number of comics, particularly around the 1990s. Milestone comics had Wise Son. Marvel comics featured Josiah X who was a Muslim, a black Muslim preacher who also had a family member experimented on in Captain America's super soldier programme. So they definitely exist. But even here, they did not have yet the nuance or just the enjoyability of characters like Simon Baz; like Kamala Khan, Ms Marvel; like Excalibur; and a number of others. These were very serious, angry, severe characters. And being included is terrific; being represented is important. But often their full humanity wasn't portrayed, I dare say. And that could be because they were not being written by black creators, or minority creators. They were white – usually male – creators' imagination of the black man and of the black Islamic man, rather than a more authentic experience. I don't want to be mischaracterised as saying that only black writers can write black characters, only Muslim writers can write Muslim characters. That's not what I'm suggesting at all. But I am suggesting that when you have a gulf, and a conspicuous gulf, between such characters and their creators that's something that has to be examined and looked at cautiously.

DR*: Yes. Absolutely. It's actually quite a good link, then, into my next question which was (**30:00**):foundationsuperhero comics which come out of the Islamic world, and which perhaps play with and reframe some of the American context, in the creation of their own superheroes and superhero teams. Can you give us a couple of quick examples of those?*

DL: Yes, absolutely. And, again, we dedicate at least two, if not three, chapters in the book to this topic. The most notable of them – the Ms Marvel equivalent, the most well-known – would be The 99, which came out of Kuwait. And this was actually spearheaded by a professional psychologist, Naif Al-Mutawa. And the issue they ran into – at least according to our contributor in the book – is that there

were any number of superhero genre elements that they could reproduce with Muslim characters, except for two. And that was the hyper-sexualised nature of the superhero – and you could start with the skin-tight costumes if you like, but you can also look at their physique and physicality and go from there. The other thing that they were cautious about – other companies were less cautious, but this was a challenge for The 99 – was their resolving everything, or nearly everything, with violence, which was very much an image that Dr Al-Mutawa wanted to move away from. He wanted these comics to be inspirational of solving conflicts with other powers, with other abilities, with conflict resolution or with building and such. So they struggled with that. Other companies like AK Comics – which were admittedly less successful – out of Egypt, they were more embracing of those two additional elements, but they did not last nearly as long as The 99. So we don't yet have . . . now there are more publishers, even today. One that comes to mind is Youneek Studios, and that's spelled Y-O-U-N-E-E-K, which is an African company. And I think they're doing a terrific job of sort-of trying to thread the needle in the way that the Black Panther movie does: being genuinely African, right, but also still delivering on narrative elements that audiences have come to expect, rather than being some weak copy of an American superhero or diverging into its own sub-genre. This is a challenge because the American superhero has characteristics not only that may not translate into other cultures and religions, but may have ones that the American superhero industry itself doesn't want to fix: again referring back to the issues of violence and sexuality; also looking at misogyny, patriarchy, heteronormativity. How much it can be changed by a non-white and non-Christian group, before it becomes unrecognisable, is the challenge of the day.

DR: *Indeed. We've been talking a while now and we could go on quite a while more, I'm sure. But I've got a couple of questions to wrap up, then. One is: I particularly liked the little chapter at the end of the book that you and Martin Lund contributed, which talks about the idea of using these in schools. I absolutely love the idea of using an issue of Ms Marvel, for instance, as a text for students to engage with these issues.*

DL: It seems like not only the natural outgrowth of these things, but also the *raison d'être*, you know, the whole: are we just studying these things for our amusement? And just as an exercise? Or is there something to be done here? Can we include a call to action? And, as I said, the most natural call to action is to bring this into the classroom, and let students have a foundation where they can engage with it (**35:00**). And I think, as we know in the final chapter, this doesn't have to be head-on. We're not proposing that we need Muslim superhero classes, and we need Muslim superhero curriculum and degrees given out on Muslim superheroes. We're actually suggesting that instead this genre, and this religious interaction with the genre, can be a powerful way to explore historical events, to explore

cultural differences, to explore media bias and media studies. So we really just want to open this to the educator, who may not be an expert in comics, or may not be an expert in Islam – and certainly not the two combined – but will see the inherent value of working on materials that access student's attention in a novel way.

DR: *Right, and using popular cultural texts – be they comic, or television, or films, or whatever – I think, actually, can be a more powerful way of introducing the students, and teaching the students the critical skills. If we start with academic texts then getting the students to be able to read the biases and the positionality of the papers can be quite tricky, because academic language is very qualified and very specific. But using popular texts to start with, and teaching them to read them as media texts, we can do a lot to train them in that way of critical reading that they can then take on and apply to more obviously academic texts.*

DL: And this has long been true. Educators have tried to incorporate music in the classroom, and incorporate film in the classroom. And really, any medium that isn't a text book that can sort-of take these students unawares into learning, or into critical thought, is always welcome. We highlight the comic book because of our fascination with comics in its dual-channel delivery system: its verbal, visual, creative engagement with the reader that will work for a number of students in particular, who don't have to be comic book fans themselves but may be looking to light up different hemispheres of their brain at the same time. That, a lecture, or a strictly prose textbook, would not be able to do.

DR: *Absolutely. As a final closing kind-of point here: is there any further thought on how the work that you're doing in the book and elsewhere . . . what can it tell RS? How can these kinds of analyses, then, enhance Religious Studies more broadly?*

DL: Well, I think that a particular area . . . two come to mind. The first is that we talk often about lived religion, right? And we often want to explore how religions are either evolving or being expressed in a modern context, and then tracking that against the religion, historically or classically. And I want to point out that comics are a relatively cheap and very evocative space in which to track that sort of lived religious experience. Whereas television is highly scripted and highly censored in many cases. And film, while perhaps less censored, is again driven by a huge profit motive. Comics, while a business and while a business that wants to sustain itself, has a greater freedom with the most reach. So, that would be my first response. That if we're trying to do a present-day lived anthropological read of religion in popular culture or interpretation, comics is an ideal space. One further argument to have – and this is a little more radical on my part . . .

DR: *OK, we like that.*

DL: I wrote about this for an up-coming book (**40:00**). This is going to sound wonky, but I have the perspective that comics, when read intensely, when read seriously, when read genuinely, can lead to their own transcendent experience. Now, this is going to make me sound like someone who's drunk the Kool-Aid . . .

DR: (Laughs).

DL: Inasmuch as we say frescos, and tapestries, and stained glass windows, and sculpture can all really unlock, as arts, the human mind to some spiritual dimension, I want to suggest that there are comics out there that could do similar. That can actually, by their . . . . And I think the way I phrase it in this up-coming text is that, by basically going down into the mundane, down into the print, and the ink, and the paper of the comic, it can actually trip us and flip us towards the sacred, towards what lies behind it: the "real real" – and here I'm being very Eliade in my language. But I'm exploring that more and more. I'm not necessarily saying you're going to get that from your average Superman comic off the rack, right? And I'm not saying it's better to read Ms Marvel than go to a Mosque. I'm not saying anything of that sort. But I am suggesting that we can't rule out this medium as having its own access to potentially transcendent experience. And in the chapter that'll be coming out I think later this year, I make the argument for why it's not just legitimate but actually might be favourable to view them in this way.

DR: *There are some inklings of that in* Graven Images. *We can maybe pick this conversation up in a year's time, when I interview you the next time. It does sound a bit wonky – but as somebody who reads The Invisibles every year, you know you're not going to get an argument from me!*

DL: That actually is a terrific example of precisely the sort of comic that you can deal with. And, actually, I came up with a fantastic, really out-there, crazy term for it! We'll talk about it next year.

DR: *Yes. We'll pick it up next time.*

DL: I call it the "wormhole sacred". So, be sure to ask me next year about the wormhole sacred!

DR: *Excellent. I will do that. Let's put it in the diary already! Until then, though, I would urge listeners who've enjoyed the conversation to check out* Muslim Superheroes. *And I'll just say thanks, A. Dave Lewis, for joining us again!*

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DL: I love coming back. Thank you so much for having me!

DR: *Thank you.*

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader transcription project, please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

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