

The diffusion of religion in comics  
A case study of the 99 Muslim superheroes:  
a call to Islam (“da’awa”)  
or distortion of the Mohammedan sermon,  
from the point of view of Islamic interpretation?

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## Introduction

In modern popular fiction, which usually has the form of a comic or an animated film, the superhero is a heroic character that wears a special uniform, possesses supernatural or superhuman powers, and has dedicated himself to protecting the citizens and fighting against crime and evil forces in general<sup>1</sup>. There many times, this role is taken by a woman called superheroine.

The reference to the superheroes from Islam’s side is not without importance from the moment connected with the concept of a hero. According to the Islamic worldview, the concept of the hero is interwoven with the wider history of Muslims<sup>2</sup>. There are plenty of Muslim heroes in flesh and blood; their heroic deeds are the outcome of their faith, which is connected with their position towards life and the world.

Two fundamental qualities distinguish all Islam’s heroes: a) their absolute conviction and dedication to the purity of their Islamic faith and

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1. See <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/superhero%27s?r=14> [9.8.2023].

2. An excellent study in which the heroes of the Islamic history are analyzed is M. Esma’il Sieny, *Heroes of Islam*, Darus Salam, India 2000.

b) their continuous quest for the things that please the Creator God (*Allāh*), irrespective of the particular circumstances of their life. The Islamic hero – military genius, an educated ulema, or a simple devotee to his religion – is fully aware of the fact that life in this world is transitory and it is a medium for the passage to eternity, and that the temporary sufferings or pleasures of the present world are nothing in comparison with the endless pains of Hell and the endless pleasures of Paradise – the latter ones are the devout Muslims' primary target. Only by securing divine satisfaction can a person enjoy peace and elation in this world and achieve real happiness in the afterlife.

Amir Hasan Siddiqi observes that, according to the Islamic worldview, there are four main characteristics that one must have to be called a hero: a) the conditions of his birth and the means that he had at his disposal<sup>3</sup>; b) the status of his family and clan and their opposition to his plans<sup>4</sup>; c) his accomplishments regarding his mission during his lifetime<sup>5</sup>, and d) the degree of the determining influence he exercised on future generations<sup>6</sup>. It is not accidental that Amir Hasan Siddiqi, in his book that bears the same title, considers prophet Mohammed the greatest hero of all the ages, as he is distinguished by all four qualities, we've just mentioned<sup>7</sup>.

Shahnaz Husain believes that a hero is a person who, driven by his love for God, wishes to accomplish his mission and bring changes to society<sup>8</sup>. According to others, the main quality that characterizes the Muslim hero and sets him apart from all the others is his willingness to die and sacrifice himself for his faith's sake, by following the example of the martyrs (*al-Shuhada*)<sup>9</sup>. A Muslim hero is characterized by the bravery he exhibits during battle and by being honest<sup>10</sup>. The internal dimension of

3. A. H. Siddiqi, *Heroes of Islam*, 1, Jamiya-ul-Falah, Karachi 1965, pp. 17-50.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. S. Husain, *Muslim Heroes of the Crusades*, 3, Ta-Ha Publishers, London 1998, pp. 11-18.

9. J. Knappert, *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam*, Brill, Leiden 1985.

10. *Ibid.*

*al-jihad*, termed *ṣabr*, leads Muslims to perform heroic deeds – actions that please Allāh<sup>11</sup>.

Historically speaking –and in most cases– Islamic heroes have been hegemons and military leaders who by their actions managed to make Islam one of the most powerful and widespread religions. Some of the most relevant emblematic figures are a) Harun bin al-Mahdi, famously known as Harun al-Rashid (763/66-809), the fifth caliph of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1958); b) Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, commonly known as Saladin (1137/38-1193), brave and chivalrous, and one of the most glorious Islamic figures during the age of the Crusades c) Timour or Tamerlane (1336-1404), the great Turco-Mongol warrior and conqueror, and funder of the Timurid Empire; d) Osman Ghazi (1258-1326), funder of the Ottoman Empire; e) last but not least, Mehmed II (1432-1481) known as the Conqueror after Constantinople's fall; he is quite rightly considered as one of the greatest Muslim leaders.

Of course, similar perceptions apply to different political environments. Besides, a hero or heroine, as a mythological figure and a modern social archetype, is considered a person who exhibits bravery to the point of self-sacrifice and accomplishes deeds of immense difficulty<sup>12</sup>. Usually, heroes are traditionally presented as the main characters of a myth, a legend, or an epic poem, possessing greater abilities and powers than the average human, which help them to execute unusually and daringly benevolent actions (heroic feats); because of them, they become famous. Those abilities and powers are not only physical but also intellectual or spiritual.

Thus, the notion of the hero has already existed in the Islamic oracular tradition. It's possible that, in this sense, the Muslim superheroes are adopted by the comics literature as an element of the popular culture that exerts fascination. Usually, comics try to highlight different aspects of the Muslim world and bridge its differences with the Western one. The depiction of Muslims in comics is a subject that is usually being ignored by the academic cycles and the relevant scholarship, despite

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11. S. Husain, *ibid.*, p. 14.

G. Babiniotis, *Λεξικό της Νέας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας*, Kentro Lexikologias, Athens 2012, p. 831.

the recent proliferation of Muslim characters in popular comics. Recent important events like the September 11, 2001, Twin Towers attack, the Arabic Spring (2011), the rise of Islamic-oriented terrorism, and especially that of the Islamic State (ISIS / DAESH) have brought to the fore Islam's rapid integration into the comics industry.

However, Muslim characters did occur in older Western comics; the first notable superhero, from Bomber Comics, is Kismet (1944), a fez-wearing fighter against the Nazis. He was followed in 1976 by the Black Tiger, a Muslim Middle-Eastern religious leader from [a fictional Middle Eastern Country] of "Murkatesh". A few years later (1981), the Arabian Knight made his appearance; he was wearing a turban and was using a flying carpet. The comics "made in the U.S.A." often reflect the Americans' prejudices against non-Western civilizations and religious or ethnic minorities. For this reason, the Muslim superheroes are Oriental stereotypes – they were of Arab origin and dark-skinned, wore turbans, had big mustaches, and more often than not their transportation means were camels or flying carpets<sup>13</sup>. This conception is of course erroneous from the moment that only 20% of the Muslim population is of Arab origin and has Arab as its mother language<sup>14</sup>. Besides, the biggest Islamic state (the one with the biggest Muslim population) is not an Arab one but it's Indonesia, followed by Pakistan and India. In the last one, Islam is the second biggest religion after Hinduism<sup>15</sup>.

Therefore, it's not a coincidence at all that in many comics Muslims are perceived as "terrorists", "extremists" and "thieves"<sup>16</sup>. As Jack Shaheen

13. N. Pumfrey, "Avenger, Mutant, or Allah: A Short Evolution of the Depiction of Muslims in Marvel Comics", *The Muslim World*, 106, 4, Special Issue: *Shifting Boundaries: The Study of Islam in the Humanities* (October 2016), pp. 781-794, 781-782. For example, Sinbad was a typical Oriental pirate, who was wearing a turban, and pointed shoes. He was usually saving girls dressed as belly dancers from monsters and genies. Sinbad appeared for the first time in Marvel Comics in 1974. See L. Wein & G. Tuska. "The Golden Voyage of Sinbad!", *World Unknown* 1, 7 (June 1974).

14. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population10/> [21.9.2023].

15. See <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/muslim-countries.htm> [21.9.2023].

16. J. Dar, "Holy Islamophobia, Batman! Demonization of Muslims and Arabs in Mainstream American Comic Books", in: J. L. Kincheloe, S. R. Steinberg, and C. D. Stonebanks (eds.), *Teaching Against Islamophobia*, Peter Lang, New York 2010, pp. 99-110, 105.

rightly observes, from 1991 onwards, from the total of 149 cases of “bad” Arabs in comics, about 50 of them have been characterized as “terrorists”<sup>17</sup>. As expected, after 9/11, the stereotypical equation of Muslims=Terrorists became far more apparent in the comics production<sup>18</sup>. Thus, in comics the Muslims are depicted as “evil”, “terrorists”, “bearded”, “men in turbans reciting Koranic verses and inciting acts of violence in the name of God/Allah”<sup>19</sup>. It is no accident that the hero Iron Man, was fighting not only against the Soviets but also against the Muslims<sup>20</sup>. Another emblematic example is the graphic novel with the title *Holy Terror*, whose main plot is the liquidation of Muslim terrorists<sup>21</sup>.

In the present article, we shall try to outline the case study of the comic *The 99*. We shall present the relevant comic and the reasons that led its creator to shape it by echoing religious ideas. Apart from that, the religious narration, ideas, values, symbols, and performative aspects offer in general a first interpretative key, through which we can highlight aspects of the meaning and the significance of comics, that otherwise would have remained unnoticed. Therefore, we shall put forth the following questions: Which are the messages that the creator of the project in question wishes to highlight? Which are his theological origins that are functioning as his guiding principle? Is this project a medium of missionary activity and conversion to Islam, or –quite the contrary– constitutes a distortion of Islam’s real teachings and sermons, as many important Muslim scholars contend? Those questions will be examined within the context of the multileveled promotion (diffusion) of religions in diverse cultural environments in a way that will prove effective in serving its needs, thus contributing to the diffusion of Islamic religiosity.

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17. J. Shaheen, “The Comic Book Arab”, *Link* 24/5 (1991), pp. 1-11, 10.

18. M. Diapolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, N. Caroline & London 2011, pp. 1-3.

19. J. Dar, “Holy Islamophobia, Batman! Demonization of Muslims and Arabs in Mainstream American Comic Books”, *Counterpoints*, no. 346 (2010), pp. 99-110.

20. For more information related to this issue, see <https://www.imdb.com/> [28.8.2023].

21. F. Miller, *Holy Terror*, Legendary Comics, Burbank 2011.

## I. The popular 99 Muslim superheroes

*The 99*<sup>22</sup> is a comic published monthly, by the Teshkeel Comics Publishing House. It was first circulated in 2006, and very soon entered into every market of the Muslim world – one year later, it began to be circulated in the U.S.A., India, and Indonesia<sup>23</sup>. It was the product of Naif al-Mutawa's artistic imagination<sup>24</sup>. Al-Mutawa was born in Kuwait and studied Psychology at Tufts University in the Greatest Boston area, and Business Administration at Columbia University in the City of New York. He is regarded as one of the main representatives of progressive Islam as well as a fierce opponent of religious extremism<sup>25</sup>. The idea of a comic with Muslim superheroes –the first one– came to him just after the 11/9 attacks on the Twin Towers<sup>26</sup>. The younger generation heroes of al-Mutawa's books are fighting crime in more effective and better ways, by crushing stereotypes and fighting extremism.

Naif al-Mutawa, who had as his inspiration for the comic Islam's basic principles, created a group of 99 Muslim superheroes with special skills that are going to integrate Allah's 99 names and idioms<sup>27</sup>.

The reference to the number 99 is not without significance nor it is a hollow phrase. According to Islamic theology, God has 99 names and 99 corresponding attributes<sup>28</sup>. At this point, we need to make a necessary clarification from the point of view of the Sunni creed: There is a distinction between God's names and attributes. Therefore, every name

22. N. Al-Mutawa, *The 99*, Teshkeel Comics, Kuveyt 2007-2014.

23. S. Karunakaran, "Muslimahs in Comics and Graphic Novels: History and Representation", <https://theijournal.ca/index.php/ijournal/article/view/29178/21745> [22.8.2023].

24. K. Tsavalos, «Οί 99 υπερώρες του (καλού) Άλλάχ», 14.11.2010, in: <https://www.tovima.gr/2010/11/14/world/oi-99-yperirwes-toy-kaloy-allax/>, [22.8.2023].

25. *Ibid.* According to our view, extremism is not necessarily identified with fundamentalism – at least as far as religion is concerned. As it is well known, fundamentalism as an ideology aims at the return to a religion's fundamental sources. Therefore, someone can be a fundamentalist without resorting to acts of violence, and as a result, he or she is not dangerous to society or social cohesion.

26. *Ibid.*

27. S. Karunakaran, *ibid.*, p. 17.

28. Angeliki Ziaka, *Tò Kalām kai tà islāmiká reýmata skéψης*, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki 2016, p. 63.

of God has its origins in one of His attributes<sup>29</sup>. For example, the divine names The Most Entirely of Merciful (ar-/al-Rahmaan) and Bestower of Mercy (ar-/al-Raheem) stem from the divine attribute of mercy and compassion (al-Rahma), the name All-Knowing/The Omniscient (al-‘Aleem) stems from the attribute of knowledge (al-‘Ilm) and the name The Ever-Living (Al-Hayy) stems from the attribute of life (al-Hayā’) – etc.<sup>30</sup>. Thus, as the modern Muslim scholar Abd al Aziz ibn Abdullah ibn Baz (1912-1999) points out, all God’s names include His attribute<sup>31</sup>.

The *Koran* says that God has many names, which are the best of the names that exist in the Creation<sup>32</sup>. Muslim Theology deals thoroughly with God’s names and attributes, as they abundantly refer to the *Koran*, with which the sense of God’s presence in the world is expressed through His actions<sup>33</sup>. God’s existence is intimately connected with the divine names and the divine qualities as they manifest themselves in the natural and moral order of the world – all-mightiness, creative force, wisdom, justice, goodness, life, will, vision, hearing, and all the other names that are manifestations of His divine wisdom in the world<sup>34</sup>. Of course, in addition to those, there are also the *attributes* that are identified with the divine essence, as well as the qualities that are related to God’s external appearance and deal with God’s natural revelation or theophany’s qualities<sup>35</sup>. They are the qualities of divine energy and actions<sup>36</sup>. Thus, God, apart from the attributes that refer to His essence in itself, there are also those attributes that constitute His creative acts, through which God manifests itself as creator and supervisor of the world (“Şifāt Khalqīyyah” or “Şifāt Fi’liyyah”)<sup>37</sup>. Based on the above, we could conclude that al-Mutawa, the creator of the comic, wishes to demonstrate via the superheroes God’s dominion over His Creation

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29. Saleh Al-Fawzan’s speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otnVENky8b8>, [accessed on 15.9.2023].

30. *Ibid.*

31. Ibn Baz, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā wa-al-Maqālāt*, (6), p. 277.

32. Angeliki Ziaka, *ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

through the divine names and attributes. The whole universe is dominated by the One and Only All-mighty God.

Having received their names from the above-mentioned 99 names and attributes of Allah, the superheroes reinforce Islam's positive message. Through references to many cultures, they create a new "moral framework" to face the forces of evil – for this reason, they reach the point of cooperating with the members of the Justice League of America (JLA)<sup>38</sup>. It is worth noting that the "99" do not give particular emphasis to the religious content – they do not speak about God and they are not Allah's depictions, something that the *Koran* and the *sharī'ah* strictly forbid.

The 99 superheroes are hunting down evil guys all over the planet, especially in the Middle East<sup>39</sup>. They punish the unjust and they never use weapons but only the superhuman powers that are bestowed upon them by the 99 magic stones, with each one of them related to one of Allah's attributes<sup>40</sup>. As Zambia Agrimaki has rightly observed, "the ways that the superheroes could acquire their supernatural powers are connected, in each specific case, with the dialectics of the two qualities – human and superhuman<sup>41</sup>. Based on this assumption, the superheroes can be distinguished into three categories: In the first belong those that come from other planets (Superman, Hawkman, Captain Marvel etc.); their powers are inherent and their human form is a secondary, acquired element, therefore the human element is subordinated to the superhuman one<sup>42</sup>. In the second category belong those that have acquired their powers due to a scientific or technological accident – Spiderman, Hulk, etc.; in this particular case, the superhuman element is acquired and the heroes must be transformed for the powers to be activated; thus, the hero possesses two natures which are distinctive and

38. F. Strömberg, "Yo, rag-head!": Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11", *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 2011, pp. 573-601, 573.

39. K. Tsavalos, *ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. Zambia Agrimaki, «Οἱ ὑπεράνθρωποι ἥρωες ἀπὸ τῆ ρομαντικῆ λογοτεχνία στὴν ἐπιστημονικὴ φαντασία»: νέοι "μεσσίες" σὲ μία ἐσχατολογία χωρὶς τέλος», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 125-161, 138.

42. *Ibid.*



interchangeable and, in a sense, are substantially equivalent<sup>43</sup>. Finally, in the third category, belong those whose powers are owed exclusively to the use of technology (Batman, Ironman, Captain America, etc.); in this case, the superheroes' human nature remains unaffected and the superhuman element is nothing else but a technological *persona*<sup>44</sup>. We have the impression that the 99 rather belong to the third category, as their superpowers are due to external factors.

The 99 superheroes want to fight against the evil forces, the agents of chaos, and bring social justice and peace. They can fly and they are very fast, their vision is powerful, they tame the fire or the water and they can remain invisible from their enemies<sup>45</sup>. As Z. Agrimaki points out, "Their most essential characteristic is the fact that they possess superhuman powers, not only regarding their physical strength but also their senses (hearing, vision) and their capabilities (they fly, they run with light speed, etc.)"<sup>46</sup>. The 99 put all these skills at the service of their supreme goal and motive for action – their selfless zeal for justice. This battle for the cause of justice is equally important from the point of view of Islamic hermeneutics. Important Muslim scholars have emphatically pointed out that Islam is above anything else a religion of justice, not of equality or peace, as it is falsely propagated by certain liberal cycles of Western Muslims<sup>47</sup>.

"The 99" has "Islamic" names – among the men, for example, we meet Jabbar the Powerful, Bari the Healer, and Dar the Afflicter. Among the heroes, there are also women, coming from different nationalities with a variety of clothing styles<sup>48</sup>. Some of them are wearing a headscarf or a full burqa, while others do not follow the Islamic dress code, "without shaming one or the other for their choice, showcasing a less narrow range of Islamic

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43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., p. 137.

47. See <http://www.salafvoice.com/article.aspx?a=4286> [26.9.2023].

48. J. Dar, "A Critique of Muslim Women in Comics – The 99", <https://www.fantasy-magazine.com/11/nonfiction-archive/articles/a-critique-of-muslim-women-in-comics-the-99/> [22.8.2023].

feminism”<sup>49</sup>. Among the superheroines are Samda the Invulnerable, an 8-year-old girl from Libya; Battina the Hidden or Invisible, from Yemen, who hides her face behind a burqa for a good cause, since the moment she wears it she becomes invisible from her enemies<sup>50</sup>; Mumita the Destroyer, an orphan, who, when she was a teenager, she discovered that she is impossibly fast – a qualification which is further enhanced when the good and wise Razem offers her one of the 99 mystical gems<sup>51</sup>; Noora the Light, an offspring of a rich family, who discovers one of the gems when she manages to escape from her abductor<sup>52</sup>, and whose greatest ability is to discern the truth and the light in other people’s hearts<sup>53</sup>. Many of those names are qualities that characterize many people, like generosity, power, faith, and wisdom – virtues that exist not only within the realm of Islam but also within other religious traditions.

Superheroines can be met not only in al-Mutawa’s creation but also in other –“Islamic” or not– comics. For example, we have Burka Avenger, the first Pakistani superheroine<sup>54</sup>, who managed to win her battles due to her wide knowledge and her tremendous skill in martial arts. She uses the burqa to hide herself and fights against those who wish to close the school for girls in which she works. We have also Sooraya Qadir, who appeared in Marvel comics as an X-Men member<sup>55</sup>, Kamala Khan Marvel, Faiza Hussain, as well as quite a lot of other heroines with Islamic / Muslim backgrounds<sup>56</sup>.

49. S. Karunakaran, *ibid.*, p. 17. This is something we observed when we visited Turkey, where women wearing headscarves were walking in the streets together with other women who followed the “Western” dress code, without causing embarrassment to either of them.

50. S. Karunakaran, *ibid.*

51. S. Karunakaran, *ibid.*

52. S. Karunakaran, *ibid.*

53. S. Karunakaran, *ibid.*

54. See <https://www.burkaavenger.com/> [27.8.2023].

55. G. Morrison & E. van Sciver, “Dust”, *New X-Men* 1, 133 (Dec. 2002).

56. For more detailed information, see M. Lynn, “Welcome to the Golden Age of Muslim Women in Comics”, 2016b, <https://muslimgirl.com/welcome-golden-age-muslim-women-comics/> [23.8.2023]; A. Mattu & N. Maznavi, *Love, Insh-Allah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women*, Soft Skull Press, Berkeley, CA 2012; M. Kent, “Unveiling marvels: Ms. Marvel and the reception of the new Muslim superheroine”, *Feminist Media Studies* 15, 3 (2015), pp. 522-527.

The aliases of the 99 heroes/heroines are written in the comic's Arab edition without the definite article "al-/ar-" because the latter's use is exclusively related to God/Allah. This is a reminder of the fact that the 99 are mere mortals, with human qualities and deficiencies. At this point, we must distinguish between the hero and the superhero. Being a human, the hero ends up dying, while the superhero transcends death<sup>57</sup>. Certainly, according to the Islamic creed, immortality is God's exclusive attribute, therefore superheroes' immortality cannot be accepted. Death overcomes everyone else except God. The Coran says: "Put your trust in the Ever-Living, Who never dies, and glorify His praises"<sup>58</sup>. Prophet Muhammad asserts that God is the only immortal, since is the Life-Giver<sup>59</sup>. According to the Sunni creed, life is considered an attribute that emanates from God's essence; it belongs more properly to Him since God is ever-existing and ever-living<sup>60</sup>.

Another equally important difference between the heroes and the superheroes is that the latter engage in missions parallel to those of the heroes, but without necessarily aiming at the change of the social status quo. More often than not, the heroes are struggling to change the society or the community they are living in and lay some new foundations, while the superheroes are working to secure social stability<sup>61</sup>. Apart from that, according to comics' *Weltanschauung*, the superhero must remain away and apart from society. Moreover, the superhero is characterized by his secret origin, his pure motives, his redemptive task and his extraordinary powers<sup>62</sup>. His origins lie outside the community he is called upon to save, and in the exceptional cases where he resides within it, he is depicted as

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57. D. Lewis, "The Muslim Superhero in Contemporary American Popular Culture", [https://www.academia.edu/5280870/The\\_Muslim\\_Superhero\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_American\\_Popular\\_Culture](https://www.academia.edu/5280870/The_Muslim_Superhero_in_Contemporary_American_Popular_Culture) [25.8.2023], 7.

58. *The Coran*, Sura Al-Furqan [28], 58.

59. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Abū Kaṭībah al-Faryābī (ed.), al-Ṭaybatān, Riyadh 2006, p. 1249.

60. M. Ibn 'Uthaymīn, *Asmā' Allāh wa-Ṣifātuhu wa-Mawqif Ahl al-Sunnah minhā*, al-Thariyah, p. 16.

61. D. Lewis, *ibid.*, 7-8.

62. Zambia Agrimaki, *ibid.*

a lonely idealist<sup>63</sup>. His identity is secret and his motive is a selfless zeal for justice<sup>64</sup>.

In al-Mutawa's comic, the "good guy" is the wise doctor Ramzi Razem, who acts as councilor and supervisor of the 99 heroes<sup>65</sup>. The "bad guy" is the evil Rughal, and the 99's task is to eliminate him<sup>66</sup>. Ramzi Razem, 99's undisputed leader, is (like the comic's writer and designer) a psychologist and historian, and direct descendant of the "Guardians of Wisdom's" sect<sup>67</sup>. According to the plot, the 99 names and attributes of Allah are codified in 99 magical mystical Noor Stones (Ahjar Al Noor, Stones of Light)<sup>68</sup>; they give to their possessors' superhuman powers and they are scattered all over the world<sup>69</sup>. They are in the possession of 99 young boys and girls, coming mainly from Muslim countries<sup>70</sup>. The sect, through Ramzi Razem, recruits and uses them to fight against Rughal, the greedy leader of the evil characters, who want to steal the power of the 99 "stones of fire"<sup>71</sup>.

The "99's" basic mission is to find and reunite the 99 stones that disappeared from Baghdad, when the Mongols invaded there in 1258, defeated the Abbasids, and put an end to their empire (750-1258)<sup>72</sup>. Those

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63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Al-Mutawa et al., *The 99*, Issue #1 (2011).

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. The Abbasid Caliphate was the third caliphate to succeed the prophet Muhammad. It was founded by one of the ancestors of Al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, Muhammad's paternal uncle and sahabi (ca. 567-653). Under the reign of al-Manṣūr, the second Abbasid caliph (754-775), the capital of the empire was transferred from Damascus to the newly founded city of Baghdad. During their reign, the Abbasids promoted education and the study of Islam, and built mosques and madrasas, while at the same time, they were deeply influenced by the Persian civilization, absorbing many customs related especially to statehood. They gave great emphasis to the development of agriculture, artisanship, and commerce, while at the same time, the era of the Abbasid rule was a great period of flourishing of the arts, theology, philosophy, and Islamic Law. Finally, during the reign of the Abbasid dynasty, Islam spread to a large part of

“Noore stones” preserve all the wisdom of the world<sup>73</sup>. After Bagdad’s suck by the Mongols, the Noore stones were transferred to Andalusia to be repositied in the “House of Knowledge” [a sort of reproduction of the Bayt al-Hikmah, the great library and intellectual center of the Abbasid Baghdad that was destroyed in 1258 by the Mongols], and guarded by the ancestors of the librarians of the original institution<sup>74</sup>. Thus, al-Mutawa presents Mu’tazilit Baghdad and Andalusia as the real harbingers of the Islamic heritage and wants to highlight Islam’s “Golden Age”<sup>75</sup> marked by the flourishing of sciences and religious tolerance and co-existence<sup>76</sup>. Of course, within this context, we could not register any fruitful criticism by al-Mutawa related to the political or theological debates during the famous “Golden Age” of Islam or any reference to the serious arguments that have been proposed by historians specialized in this period, who claim that the Umayyad (661-750)<sup>77</sup> and Abbasid caliphates exhibited authoritarian and intolerant tendencies –especially the second one, and more particularly under the reign of the caliphs Al-Ma’mūn (813-833) and his heir, Al-Mu’tasim (833-842), who they tried to impose the Mu’tazilī doctrine<sup>78</sup>. It is well known that under Al-Ma’mūn the doctrine of the created Qur’ān was proclaimed as the state dogma, and in 833 a *miḥnah*, or tribunal, was instituted to interrogate and try those who disputed the doctrine. One

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the then-known world, from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa to Iran and the Central Asia plateaux.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

75. The so-called “Islamic Golden Age” was a period of scientific, economic, and cultural flourishing, traditionally dated from the 8th century to the 13th century.

76. K. Chitwood, “‘Hero and/or Villain?’: The 99 and the Hybrid Nature of Popular Culture’s Production of Islam”, *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation*, 2017, pp. 170-191, 175.

77. The Umayyad dynasty was the second of the four great caliphates which was founded after Muhammad’s death. The caliphate’s epicenter was Syria and its capital, Damascus. The Umayyads continued the Muslim Conquests, conquering Ifriqiya, Transoxania, Sind, the Maghreb, and Hispania (al-Andalus).

78. F. Griffel, “The Project of Enlightenment in Islamic-Arabic Culture”, in: J. T. Robinson (ed.), *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, Leiden 2009, pp. 1-20.

of the most important “dissidents” was Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780-855), a great theologian, jurist, and martyr of his faith, founder of the Ḥanbalī school, one of the four Sunni schools of religious law, and the most strictly traditionalist one<sup>79</sup>. Ibn Ḥanbal was repeatedly persecuted and imprisoned by the Abbasid caliphs. It is a sad and ironic fact that, while the Muʿtazilī were proponents of rational thought and freedom of speech, when they became entrenched, they were trying to impose their ideas by resorting to violence. That led the renowned Egyptian scholar Mohammed Refaat El-Saeed (1932-2017) to give to their course the following characterization: “From reason to sword”<sup>80</sup>. Therefore, it is somehow problematic that al-Mutawa seems to overlook these facts and to imply that the famous “Golden Age” of Islam (8th-14th c.) is identified with the liberation of the human spirit, which is not the case. While the “Golden Age” framework corresponds up to a point with the spiritual and social climate of the era, it nevertheless is quite simplistic, something that is true for all generalizing schemes.

The “99” superheroes brings to mind Batman’s or Wonder Woman’s “good and benevolent” versions, and are avidly read by children in Kuwait, Lebanon, or Jordan, but also from the Arabian diaspora’s offspring in Europe and America<sup>81</sup>. Here we have a case study that helps us to properly understand that religion and popular culture constitute a common language but also that this double, hybrid nature is an intrinsic quality of ecumenical Islam<sup>82</sup>. By using this particular comic as a medium, al-Mutawa wishes to promote within Islam’s spectrum values like cooperation and unity. Even though the comic is not purely religious, his creator aims to communicate the Islamic virtues, which, according to him, are of ecumenical value.

79. The Ḥanbalī school is also called *al-Salafiyya*: see J. Hoover, “Ḥanbalī Theology”, in: Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 2016, pp. 625-646. See also our study (in Greek), D. Athanasiou, *Tò Salafitikò Ἰσλάμ (al-salafiyyah): Ἱστορία καὶ Πεποιθήσεις*, Herodotos Publications, Athens 2021.

80. R. Al-Saʿīd, *Azmat al-Fikr al-ʿArabī wa-al-Islāmī*, Cairo 2008, pp. 169 and 180.

81. K. Tsavalos, *ibid.*

82. K. Chitwood, *ibid.*, p. 171.

Naif al-Mutawa intended to reconcile Islamic civilization with the Western one, along with popular culture, and to emphatically highlight the fact that the values of the two civilizations are common<sup>83</sup>. He not only borrowed various elements from the West but he also consulted important Muslim jurists [ulama] to see if his comic was compatible with *Fiqh* –the Islamic jurisprudence–, that is the expansion and development of *Shariah* through interpretation<sup>84</sup>.

Yet, this particular endeavor was not accepted by all Muslims. Traditionally inclined Muslims focused on –according to their opinion– problematic aspects of the comic, especially its anthropomorphic tendencies and the danger of idolatry, from the moment that God’s divine names were personified<sup>85</sup>. Again, it is important to note that ISIS, the Islamic terrorist organization has demanded that the death penalty be imposed on al-Mutuwa<sup>86</sup>.

## II. Muslim scholars’ verdicts regarding comics

Comics and animated films had already become a subject of heated discussion within the Muslim world before the appearance of “99”. From the very beginning, there was a question that demanded an answer, namely if comics and animated films are permissible from the point of view of the Islamic Canon Law, and especially to what extent comics that put forward Islamic ideas can function as Da’wah<sup>87</sup>. As a medium for the spread of Islam and an invitation to it. That was a question of

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83. K. Chitwood, *ibid.*, p. 174.

84. J. Clements, R. Gauvain, “The Marvel of Islam: Reconciling Muslim Epistemologies through a New Islamic Origin Saga in Naif al-Mutawa’s *The 99*”, *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 36-71.

85. J. Clements, R. Gauvain, *ibid.*, p. 38.

86. J. Pecquet, “Kuwaiti cartoonist battles IS death threats, US bigots”, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/11/99-netflix-comic-cartoon-kuwait-death-threats-isis.html> [26.8.2023].

87. Da’wah “has the literal meaning of ‘issuing a summons’, or ‘making an invitation’. This term is often used to describe how Muslims teach others about the beliefs and practices of their Islamic faith”. See <https://www.learnreligions.com/the-meaning-of-dawah-in-islam-2004196>.

concern for members of the community, which is why they asked for the opinions of notable jurists and ulema on that matter.

When the great Muslim scholar Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz was asked to express his opinion based on Islamic Jurisprudence about the depiction of humans in comics and the latter's publication in newspapers and magazines, his rejection was categorical: comics and depictions of humans belong to the bad things and they should be prohibited<sup>88</sup>. The authentic prophetic traditions are adamant on this subject: they forbid the depiction of all living beings, irrespective of the medium – either by hand or by mechanical reproduction. In *Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (“*The Authentic Collection*”), the selection and compilation of traditions made by the great scholar Al-Bukhārī (810-870), we find a saying (*ḥadīth*) by the prophet Muhammad – as it was narrated by his third wife, Aisha: “Those that they will receive the harshest punishment on Judgment Day, are those who made pictures (human beings or animals)<sup>89</sup>. In another ḥadīth the following words are mentioned: “The owners of these images will be punished on Judgment Day and it will be said to them: ‘Pure life into the thing you’ve created’”<sup>90</sup>. Apart from that, Allah’s dictum in the Qur’ān is crystal clear: “[...] when He has detailed for you what He has prohibited for you, except that to which you are compelled?”<sup>91</sup>.

The contemporary Muslim scholar Salih al-Fawzan has expressed a similar opinion, by pointing out that Muslims are forbidden from depicting (*taṣwīr*) living things, irrespective of the medium – painting, sculpture, photography, etc.<sup>92</sup>. He also refers to Ibn ‘Abbās’s exegetic comment: “I heard the Prophet saying the following: ‘Whoever makes an icon / a painting or a sculpture, he will enter to burning Hell where he will face a soul for each icon he made (in his earthly life) and he will be tortured on its behalf’”<sup>93</sup>. The same scholar saves another important testimony from

88. Ibn Bāz, *Maḥmū' al-Fatāwā*, (4), Dār al-Waṭan li-al-Naṣr, Riyadh 1992, p. 362.

89. Al-Buchari, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Damascus-Beirut, Dar Ibn Kathir, 1495.

90. *Ibid.*, 1426.

91. *Qur'ān*, 6, 119.

92. See Salih al-Fawzan’s speech at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b74e8ZZ8dNU> [accessed on 20.8.2023].

93. Al-Nawawī, *Riyad as-Salihin*, 1684.



hadith narratives, that the Prophet warned: “Angels do not enter in a house with dogs and icons”<sup>94</sup>.

Based on this passage, al-Fawsan makes the following comment: “From the moment that angels do not enter into a house, since there exist icons, demons enter instead of them. Angels and demons do not co-exist in the same place. But if demons do not enter into this house, then angels will pay a visit to it”<sup>95</sup>.

It is worth noting that Islamic Law permits the depiction of all “soulless” things, while the term “icon” refers to any depiction of a head or face. There is a saying attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, Muhammad’s cousin, who, according to the Prophet, was one of the Qur’an’s greatest exegetes (*mufasssirūn*): “If you are going to paint (and, more generally, to depict), then paint/depict trees and other nonliving objects”<sup>96</sup>.

Zakir Abdul Karim Naik (1965-), a popular Indian Islamic orator, in answer to a question that a little boy put to him –if it is permitted for Muslim children to watch animated films–, he was adamant: “Most of the movies, animated ones included, estrange children from Islam”. This is due to their violent elements – e.g., friends that kill each other. Instead of that, he proposes that the parents install satellite antennae to have access to “Peace TV”<sup>97</sup>, which promotes Islamic ideals. He points out that there are Islamic comics that children can watch because they are based on Islamic ideals, they talk about the *Qur’ān*, the traditions and their interpretation, etc.; at the same time, there are other comics that narrate the history and the deeds of Muslim heroes, like Fatih Sultan Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople<sup>98</sup>.

From all the above, it becomes obvious that many Muslim jurists and scholars are emphatically opposed to comics. Apart from that, though, there is also an official legal ruling (*fatwā*)<sup>99</sup> issued by Abdul Aziz al-

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94. *Ibid.*, 1684.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Al-Bukhārī, *ibid.*, pp. 530-31.

97. Peace TV is a non-profit Emirati satellite television network that broadcasts free-to-air programming. It is one of the world’s largest religious satellite television networks.

98. See Zakir Naik’s speech at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xpGxh2Ygg0> [20.8.2023].

99. *Fatwā* is a nonbinding yet trustworthy legal ruling on a point of Islamic Law issued

Seikh, Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia<sup>100</sup> and signed by himself as well as the other members of the relevant committee, that forbids and unqualifiedly condemns the screening of “*The 99*”, based on the reasoning that created beings incarnate the 99 heroes’ divine qualities through animated figures. The committee’s ruling ends by turning to *Qur’ān*, where it is expressly said that “there is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing”<sup>101</sup>. In this case, therefore, God the alone uncreated Creator, is likened to created beings<sup>102</sup>.

## Epilogue

The superheroes represent a special category of heroes, who save the world from evil persons or supernatural forces. The 99 superheroes unquestionably represent a multileveled promotion/diffusion of Islam in different cultural environments, thus serving more effectively Islam’s spread. Within the context of the global postmodern religious market, religion can, on the one hand, be socially visible as a kind of institutional monopoly, but on the other, is visible as a product ready for consumption, especially in the form of a spectacle, and that is reinforced by comics with superheroes. The diffused religion constitutes the field on which religion preserves its social and cultural presence in the modern world, either by antagonizing the traditional religious institutions or by allied with it.

“The 99” contributes to Islamic religiosity’s global diffusion, even though this runs counter to Muhammed’s God-inspired teachings. Its creator wishes to highlight the fact that the institutional rigidities of the Islamic religion became a burden over time and work against not only for ummah but also the good intentions of her propagators. Through the superheroes’ redemptive action, Islam’s positive face emerges,

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by a *Faqih* (Islamic jurist).

100. *Mufti* is an interpreter of Islamic Law, qualified to issue *fatāwā*, in response to a question posed by an individual.

101. *Qur’ān*, 42, 11.

102. Al-Iftā’ al-Sa’ūdiyyah, Tahrīm al-Musalsal al-Kartūnī al-Abṭāl 99, [https:// almoslim.net/node/205352](https://almoslim.net/node/205352) [accessed on 20.9.2023].

and that reinforces the Islamic perspective within the context of late modernity. Al-Mutawa used supernatural forces to awaken the young people's minds to a certain kind of spirituality, based on faith in God and the virtues of the faithful, which reflect God's formidable 99 names.

In any case, there are official positions of Muslim scholars as well as Godly inspired words of Muhammad, that clearly and unequivocally express their opposition against the use of comics, while there is a relevant legal verdict convicting "The 99". The jurists claim that this project, while it allegedly promotes Islamic ideas and notions, in reality it distorts the Islamic faith's content, adulterating its original preachings and Muhammad's God-given message. Islam, as a monotheistic religion par example, rejects any effort to make God resembling the created reality. This fact is invariably emphasized by God's absolute transcendental nature, which is all pervasive in the Muslim tradition.