

# Religion & Comics Teaching Resources

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## Overview

Throughout history, comic books have occupied many roles for religious communities. They continue to do so today. Comics have been mediums for both the positive and negative portrayal of religious belonging. They have served as objects of devotion, as well as of controversy and censorship. Some comics are, themselves, religious artifacts. One might approach comics from a literary analytical perspective, identifying and analyzing the theological and otherwise religious themes and characters that appear therein. Join us for a conversation, however, that will discuss comics as sources for the study, teaching, and publication of American religious studies.

## Host:

**Matthew J. Cressler** Ph.D. is Chief of Staff at the Corporation for Public Interest Technology and an independent scholar of religion, race, and culture. He is the author of *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migrations* (NYU, 2017) and numerous peer-reviewed articles on Catholic and African American religious histories, clerical sexual abuse, horror movies, comic books, and more. He has written for America, The Atlantic, National Catholic Reporter, Religion News Service, The Revealer, Slate, U.S. Catholic, and Zocalo Public Square. Together with Adelle M. Banks, he co-reported the Religion News Service series “Beyond the Most Segregated Hour,” which won a Wilbur Award from the Religion Communicators Council. He is the creator of Bad Catholics, Good Trouble (badcatholics-comics.org), an educational webcomic series that brings to vivid life true stories of Catholic injustice and the ordinary people of faith who did extraordinary things to confront white supremacy and colonial violence in their communities.

## Panelists:

**Jenny Caplan, University of Cincinnati** is a scholar of American religion and popular culture. She specializes in American Judaism and work extensively with film, television, internet media, humor, graphic novels, video games, board games, and other sites of pop culture engagement. She has been studying religion and religious history since 1997 and has published extensively on media portrayals of Jews and Judaism. Jenny’s book, *Funny, You Don’t Look Funny: Judaism and Humor from the Silent Generation to Millennials* was published in 2023.

**Yvonne Chireau, Swarthmore College** is professor in the department of religion, where she teaches courses on theories of religion, Africana religions, and American religious history. She is the author of *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (2003) and the co-editor of *Black Zion: African American Religions and Judaism* (1999). Her varied thoughts on the historical intersections between magic, Africana religions, comics, and popular culture tropes of black spirituality can be found at the research blog *The Academic Hoodoo* ([academichoodoo.com](http://academichoodoo.com)). She is currently co-producing a documentary film about contemporary reclamations of the African American ancestral traditions known as *Conjure, Hoodoo, and Rootworking* by millennial practitioners, artists, educators, and entrepreneurs.

**Hussein Rashid, Independent Scholar** is founder of Islamicate, L3C, a consultancy focusing on religious literacy and cultural competency. He works with a variety of NGOs, foundations, non-profits, and governmental agencies for content expertise on religion broadly, with a specialization on Islam. His research focuses on Muslims and American popular culture. He writes and speaks about music, comics, movies, and the blogistan. He has published academic works on Muslims and American Popular Culture, Malcolm X, qawwali, intra-Muslim racism, teaching Shi'ism, Islam and comics, free speech, Sikhs and Islamophobia, Muslims in film, American Muslim spaces of worship, and the role of technology in teaching religion. He co-edited a book on Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel with Jessica Baldzani called *Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal*. He also co-edited *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Muslims and Popular Culture* with Kristian Petersen, and another volume *Islam in North America* with Huma Mohibullah. His most recent publication is *Teaching Critical Religious Studies* co-edited with Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand and Beverley McGuire. He is currently working on a cultural history of Muslims in America.

## Sources Mentioned in Webinar

Ms. Marvel with Hussein

*Up, Up and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* by Rabbi Simcha Weinstein.

*Superman is Jewish?* By Harry Brod

The Rag Man from DC Comics

Martin Lund: History of Religion and Superman

*Do The Gods Wear Capes?* By Ben Saunders

First Black villain: Haitian voodoo man

## Show Notes

1. What got you into comics and examining the relationship with religion? When did you first start to think of comics as sources for thinking, researching, and writing on American religion. How do you engage them in scholarship and in teaching?

Hussein: When I was 11 or 12 got involved in the X-Men, where the tag line is doing good in a world that hates and fears them. It can be seen as an allegory of race, sexuality and more recently religion. A real outsider sense to the series that resonated with me. Magneto as a Jewish man, others as catholic that come up in their backstories. You see religion and race coming in explicitly. Ms. Marvel came out in 2014 and it was first where Muslim character headlined the series, the religion is interesting, how they deal with it and navigate. I also deal with immigration and how that impacts it, how we tie it to race and belonging.

Yvonne: In the 60's as a kid, a neighbor had everything, so I got really into it. As a scholar now we see religion everywhere and it got me questioning black religion and where it is in comics. It grew on me.

***“Once you are trained in religious studies you can't unsee it.”***

Jenny: *Maus* was the first comic I read all the way through in one sitting. Before that the boys would not let me investigate them so when I did it was interesting. In 2000, lots of things in comics were changing and that was in my mind as I became an academic. I am interested in the representation of various kinds of characters.

2. Comics are important in representation and imagination. Think about, in our subfields, the positives and negatives in which comics have helped or hindered marginalized communities. How have they reinforced the racialization of religious communities or how have they opened spaces for the portrayal of religious diversity?

***“Comics are an important artifact of religious imagination and representation for marginalized religious communities.”***

Jenny: There were Jewish coded things happening, but they were very lightly coded until they were ready to be explicit.

Yvonne: Voodoo and hoodoo in comics are a wonderful way to start seeing the racialized areas of culture. Black religion is not just about Christianity. Looking at comics in expansive ways and seeing how these representations of Black religions is built in the comics. Positive or negative. What do the comics have to say about race, religion or more? How are they talking about Voodoo, Black religion or others?

Hussein: Method, a way we can think about these comics in cultural memory. What are we making out of these stories, how they receive the messages. Comics do function as cultural artifacts, and we can use them to learn and study these cultures and time periods. What is the cultural context, why is it important? What is happening in the world when people are writing these comics?

3. What is your favorite non superhero or one comic you have taught or want to teach and/or consider a go to recommendation?

Jenny: *Scalped* written by Jason Aaron and illustrated by R. M. Guéra. It is extremely compelling. Also, *A Contract with God*, by Will Eisne. It is one of the most Jewish things you can imagine to study in this intersection!

Yvonne: Animal Man, Coyote Gospel

Hussein: Black AF, Squire, and The Arrival. No normal of Ms. Marvel

Matthew: *The Wicked* + *The Divine* created by Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie.