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Jessica Knippel

Claremont Graduate University, jessica.knippel@cgu.edu

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Marveling Religion: Critical Discourses, Religion, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Abstract

This is a book review of Jennifer Baldwin and Daniel Hodge White, eds., *Marveling Religion: Critical Discourses, Religion, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Ladham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).

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Author Notes

Jessi Knippel is an academic, artist, and professor. She holds a BA degree in Theatre and in Religious Studies, three MA degrees in the intersections of Religion, Gender Studies, and Media/Art, and is currently working on an interdisciplinary PhD in Religion, Gender Studies and Media at Claremont Graduate School. Her research includes Witchcraft and Witch trials, Post/Ex-Evangelicals, Evangelicalism in the US, Emergent Religious movements, Deviant Sex Cults and NRMs, syncretism and folk practices in religion, and pop culture and religion.

Baldwin, Jennifer and Daniel Hodge White, eds., *Marveling Religion: Critical Discourses, Religion, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Ladham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).

Given the popularity and ubiquity of the Marvel franchise, it would seem like a fertile realm for critical dialogue especially regarding how these films engage with concepts of religion. For example, Loki's iconic scene in the first *Avengers* (2012) movie, that begins "humans crave subjugation," alone, has enough context for detailed analysis, if not a full-length critical study. Yet there has been very limited scholarship and most of the texts that claim to offer dialogue between the franchise and religion are devotional texts or Christian life texts that are using Marvel as a thin throughline for their theological musings. Very few of the texts on the Marvel Canon deeply engage it through a critical academic study discourse of religion. Therefore, *Marveling Religion: Critical Discourses, Religion, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, edited by Jennifer Baldwin and Daniel Hodge White, stands out given its scope and depth of engagement. *Marveling Religion* successfully meets its objective and provides critical tools for understanding the relationship between the Marvel Cinematic Universe and religion in an accessible way.

In the context of the prologue, the editors discuss the unique situation of writing this text during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, noting that much of life felt—and many might say it still feels—like the end of Marvel's *Infinity War* (2018), bleak and dark. And we are without the promise of the restoration offered by the Stark-created time machine of *Endgame* (2019) that can restore what has been lost to us. That aura of bleakness persists, in that it seems like we are living through at least one potentially world-changing or apocalyptic event every year, if not every few months. This ever-present instability of life is mirrored within the saga of the Marvel Universe, whether it is the global instabilities represented in the *Black Panther* or *Infinity War* narratives, or a more personal tale such as *WandaVision*. As Baldwin, White, and their contributors write in their

essays, there is great value to engaging with stories that don't resolve these complicated issues and times with easy answers. Rather like any good story, those in the Marvel canon (at least at their cliffhangers) leave us with great questions and ideas to mull over: Can technology solve all our problems, or does it only create larger ones? Who is our neighbor? Does the fight for good always demand a sacrifice? This is what the essays in this book do as well.

Baldwin and White lay out a clear overview of the book and the guiding throughline which connects the various narratives. This is the “critical intersection of religion and (Marvel) cinema through the lenses of critical discourse” (xiv). They do this through four key subsections: 1) themes of technology, violence, and sacrifice; 2) power transfers within the various cultures of the Marvel universe; 3) deconstructing of hegemonic norms; and finally, 4) the investigation of female identified characters (xiv). Additionally, they helpfully name how they are defining religion, both as a broad term, as well as a narrower one for the film context.

In broad conceptualization, they define “religion” as the practices that members of a community enact and perform together for the purpose of connecting to and exploring the sacred. As distinct from “spirituality,” as the set of our personal practices of connection to the divine presence, “faith” as a Tillichian concept of centering one's life, and “theology” as the linguistic and conceptual articulation of spirituality, faith, and religion, “religion” includes the symbolic, ritual, and embodied acts that tie a group together as a community of faith (xi).

Religion is also understood as providing a shared mission for this community, similar to the relationship between the characters in the canon of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Defined in this way, there is space for the variety of beliefs and worldviews expressed by the characters within the MCU that also reflect the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of religion as defined by the field of religious studies—as opposed to a narrower Abrahamic construction of religion as always

monotheistic and scriptural. Putting religion in dialogue with cultural elements and using the broader definition allows both religious studies and popular culture criticism to be treated as equal players, as opposed to a devotional or inspirational approach which subjugates the cultural icons in service of the religious ideology being marketed. It is with this dialogue of equals that the conversations begin.

Section one asks questions around the interplay of technology, violence, and sacrifice, through the characters and films of Tony Stark (Iron Man), Black Panther, and Luke Cage. Each essay highlights the tension inherent within technology as the possibility for good and progress versus the threat of harm and destruction. This same question is addressed as it relates to institutional power holders and cultural systems and how they uphold or counter violence and harm. Also asked are questions around the role of sacrifice and how it affects the characters and their narratives. In all of the narratives discussed in this section, sacrifice is presented as a transformative or redemptive element for the characters, whereas there are more nuances and variations when it comes to technology and how it relates to the characters' positionality and intersectional identities. For example, Tony Stark's relationship to technology is tightly connected to his positionality of privilege, and he lives in a space where he can almost completely escape the negative implications of technology—at least until he is forced to confront these implications by others who are negatively affected by the technology he has created. Luke Cage does not have this luxury, as his identity and positionality has left him at the mercy of others and their use of technology, even to the point where he has lost his bodily autonomy to someone else's technological desires. Underlying the technology question is that of the role of systemic and institutional violence, which both Black Panther and Luke Cage address in their narratives. The essays in this section beg us to think about technology and its implications, and ask us to think

about sacrifice as an agent of transformation as well as the “role of sacrifice and power as a remedy for violence” (xv).

Moving into section two, the focus is on the way power is transferred within the Marvel contexts, and how this complicates narrow Abrahamic or monotheistic versions of religion. Thor is the central figure discussed in the majority of the essays in this subsection, given his narrative arc of the loss and regaining of power across the MCU. Additionally, *Black Panther* is discussed in relationship to the power transfers and leadership structures present throughout that film’s narrative. The essays that address these two figures are well written and thoughtful, especially “Old Gods in New Films: History, Culture, and Religion in Black Panther, Doctor Strange, and Thor: Ragnarök” by Shannon Grant and Jo Henderson-Merrygold. In this essay, the writers remind us of the deep-rooted prevalence of white protestant hegemony in US culture, even when seeking to tell stories outside its boundaries through narratives that are connected to other cultural spaces. The call to be oneself, to move beyond the warrior narrative to be a “humanitarian and teacher,” as Ryan Smock names it in his essay, is another transformation discussed within the first *Black Panther* narrative. It is also a challenge against that white protestant individualism present in the inescapable hegemony that Grant and Henderson-Merrygold name. Smock also highlights the deep importance of representation, opening his essay with the vital need for his students to see someone who looks like them in the hero role. Finally, this section closes with two essays that address characters and narratives that aren’t immediately thought of in relation to the transfer of power, Spiderman and the Snap event (the eventually reversible destruction of half of all life) that ends *Infinity War*. In these final essays, the importance of the hero’s humanity, grief, suffering, loss, and misplaced trust (especially when experiencing loss), are addressed. These essays raise questions that feel ever present in our current cultural situation.

The interplay between the sciences and religion, especially regarding the breaking or deconstruction of perceived norms, is the central theme of the essays that form section three. Breaking down binary and colonial thinking is central to the ways in which the writers in this section are inviting the reader to explore their conversations. They suggest that altered states of reality, such as Doctor Strange experiences, make clear that while there are no magical quick fixes, the “best things in life require clear-eyed vision, courageous tenacity, and an open heart” (192) and alternative states of being might offer space to gain clearer vision by expanding understanding of one’s trauma. In addition, being open to the multiple ways people and cultures interpret the world (160) allows for coalitions and better ways of dealing with the various issues we are facing. The authors name and break down toxic insidious thinking, such as colonial ideologies that place science and cultural knowledge as binaries in opposition to each other instead of viewing them as different ways of knowing. They assert that we need the creative and dynamic thinking that comes from various perspectives and experiences, and the community connections to transform and challenge the devastating multiple “once in a lifetime” events that we are encountering. Speculative fiction and multiple narratives of our history and our present can help ensure there is a future, through the ways in which they hold up mirrors and offer critiques.

Positionalities and identities that come with multivalent narratives and experiences are the central focus of the final section. How do otherness and gender offer new ways of understanding and seeing, that break away from a homogeneous white western male perspective? The authors of this section center gender as the starting lens to discuss both it and other forms of otherness (racial, political, and religious). Their essays engage the female figures of the Marvel canon, to ask how white male norms are still centrally used even in narratives that seek to dismantle or question that exceptionality, connecting back to similar questions seen through other lenses in this text. Rightly,

questions such as who the monster or terrorist is, and who will be the ultimate powerful hero or sacrificial figure, or who has to be transformed from a “bad” figure to a redemptive good one, sit at the intersections of gender in the Marvel universes and their broader attempts at inclusion of nonwhite male positionality. As the authors suggest, representation is important, but the MCU has much further to go.

Marveling Religion stands as a powerful text, and the questions and conversations posed by the writers are engaging and challenging in the best possible ways. They name how these films offer representation and diversity while also spotlighting spaces and elements that continue to uphold problematic ideologies and worldviews. Marvel narratives are multivalent in their reception and can act as a mirror or prophetic lens to the toxic and insidious elements of our culture, while also still being bound to it as a product of a cultural time and place.

From a teaching standpoint, the essays in this collection are a strong tool for engaging the variety of questions posed in them. On a personal note, I have used several of the essays from this text in my freshman interdisciplinary seminars. They have offered my students a great space to be guided through wrestling with questions of technology, otherness, and the monstrous in relationship to films and characters they know well. Who is the monstrous other, and why are they constructed that way, is a question that we have found very fruitful as we have engaged these essays. *Marveling Religion* is an important and valuable text to use as a conversation starter and scaffolding piece.