NEW DIRECTIONS IN RELIGION AND LITERATURE

Do The Gods Wear Capes?

Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes

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INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF LOVE

1

What would it feel like to be a superhero in love?

In the 1980s, Alan Moore and Alan Davis considered this question in their groundbreaking reinterpretation of an obscure British hero named Marvelman—a character who had briefly flourished in the 1950s, as a shameless rip-off of the more famous American superhero, Captain Marvel. (In the US original, an ancient wizard grants young newsboy Billy Batson the ability to transform into a mighty superbeing on speaking the magic word, "Shazam!" In the British version, a mysterious astrophysicist grants young reporter Micky Moran the ability to transform into a mighty superbeing on speaking the magic word, "Kimota!"—that is, "atomic," spelled phonetically and backwards.) Like Captain Marvel, Marvelman possesses the standard superheroic gifts: great strength, apparent invulnerability, tremendous speed, and of course, the power of flight. But in Moore and Davies's revision, the gulf between the human and the superhuman was emblematized less by Marvelman's extraordinary physical abilities than by his capacity for love.

Consider, for example, this domestic scene. Mike Moran, no longer quite so young, talks with his wife Liz at the breakfast table. He complains that he feels alienated before his own super-heroic alter ego. "He's just so much *better* than I am," Moran admits. "At everything. His thoughts are like poetry or something. And . . . his emotions are so pure. When he loves you, it's gigantic. His love is so strong and direct and clean . . . When I love you it's all tangled up with who's not doing their share of the washing up, and twisted, neurotic little things like that."[1]

It's a short speech, but it combines profound aspiration with an acknowledgement of failure and a measure of self-conscious bathos—indicating among other things that the emotional dynamics of the

superhero genre can be more nuanced than some critics acknowledge. It's also a confession of inadequacy that invites us to identify not with the icon of perfected masculinity who stands as the eponymous hero of the story, but with an altogether ordinary man. This man does not care much about bending steel with his bare hands or beating up bank robbers. He just wants to love his wife in a way that doesn't feel compromised by the banal character defects of his all-too-human nature—his acts of petty scorekeeping, his garden-variety narcissism. But, of course, he cannot always love her in that transcendent way, and the superhuman abilities of his heroic alter ego only exacerbate the point by exposing the painful limitations of his everyday incarnation. The irony is poignant, a reminder that even at our best we are rarely as good as we might wish to be. Little things like household chores get in the way of our finest feelings. Striving to grow spiritually, we get stuck on superficial trivialities that diminish our capacity for love.

At this moment, the superhero fantasy has become a self-reflexive allegory about the frustrations of human desire, with some obvious spiritual overtones. For it turns out that what Mike Moran really wants is to want his wife the way he does when he is Marvelman—which means what he really desires is a particular experience of desire itself. He wants to feel a love that is "like poetry," unsullied by either his own human imperfections or those of his no less human partner. He wants to feel a love that is gigantic, strong, pure, and that forgives all trespasses, great and small. In short, he wants to inhabit a structure of feeling that could best be described as divine. Indeed, this longing for an idealized experience of longing bears a more than passing resemblance to the divine etiology of desire that St Augustine famously traced, many centuries ago, when he argued that all sensations of earthly concupiscence were more or less distorted reflections of the soul's original and primary desire for God. Of course, the context is modern and secular, Moran's language is psychological rather than theological, and his choice of devotional object, in orthodox terms, is uxorious. But like Augustine, Mike Moran's awareness of the profound inadequacy of human love is grounded in his sense that more-than-human love is better.

For Alan Moore in *Marvelman*, then, to imagine loving like a superhero is to imagine loving like God—at least, according to several religious traditions. It is to imagine what it would be like to feel an infinite, compassionate, and forgiving love for even the lowliest

and least deserving of creatures. But the actual effect of postulating this super-heroic variant on the experience of divine love turns out to be to focus our attention on the nature of human love and its limitations. This moment in *Marvelman* thus encapsulates a guiding assumption lying behind each of the chapters in this book: the idea that our fantasies of superhuman perfection can not only provide insight into our projections of the infinite, but also sharpen our conceptions of what it means to feel love, as finite and mortal beings, for others who are no less finite and mortal.

2

Having said this, I should swiftly add that I do not engage in arguments about the truth or falsehood of any particular religious doctrine in the course of the following pages. Nor do I propose to offer a series of allegorical readings of the superhero genre, "decoded" in the light of certain religious and mythical master-texts such as the New Testament, the Torah, or the works of Homer or Hesiod. Such analyses are plentiful enough, and I have learned from some of them; but this book does not really belong alongside them (for all that I sometimes find the temptations of allegory irresistible). Instead, to speak in the most general terms about my intentions, I have simply tried to approach superhero comics as fantastic, speculative, and distinctly modern expressions of a perhaps perennial human wish: the wish that things were otherwise.

Superhero comics address this wish in some of its most basic and fundamental manifestations. Who among us has not experienced frustration (at a minimum) over the limitations imposed upon us by our biological form? In superhero comics, there are no such limits: bodies perform impossible feats of strength, explode into flame, dissipate into vapor, flow like water, morph into animals, merge with machines, and perhaps most resonantly, defy the law of gravity, soaring effortlessly into the heavens.[2] Who among us can remain entirely sanguine in the face of the ultimate biological limitation of mortality? In superhero comics, death is rarely the end, and often seems more like an extended holiday, from which one eventually returns unharmed and perhaps even invigorated, with a new sense of purpose and a more stylish haircut and costume. Who has never felt anguish at the apparent gulf between our sense of what is just and the vagaries of fortune? Who has never felt anger at the way social

and political "realities" contradict our sense of what is moral and right? In superhero comics—at least, during the first thirty years or so of the genre—the venomous, venal supervillains are always vanquished by the victorious forces of virtue![3] In fact, with their enhanced, elastic, and invulnerable-bodied characters, and the comfortingly schematic moral oppositions of their plots, superhero stories surely offer their readers some of the most primal fantasies of basic wish fulfillment available for commercial consumption: a veritable pornography of power.

Of course, for many commentators, this element of wish fulfillment is precisely the problem. It's all just too crudely, painfully obvious, and marks the entire genre as infantile and immature—something to be outgrown, at best. Speaking as an unabashed fan, I cannot deny that superhero comics often seem hyperbolic, even hysterical, in their denial of both our physical limitations and of the apparent moral indifference of the universe. But I also take very seriously the notion that such denials may actually be constitutive of the human. Here I follow the philosopher Susan Neiman, who has persuasively argued that the history of modern western thought can be productively understood in the light of our "refusal of the given as given—our capacity to make demands on reality."[4]

For Neiman, some of the most sophisticated intellectual work of the last three centuries has emerged from the tension or gulf between our sense of what *is* and our sense of the way things *ought* to be. In theological terms, this tension or gulf has traditionally been named "the problem of evil," and formulated in variants on the question of "How could a good God create a world full of innocent suffering?" But as Neiman points out, the problem of evil is "theological" in only the most narrow, historically circumscribed sense, because "nothing is easier than stating the problem of evil in nontheist terms. One can state it, for example, as an argument with Hegel: not only is the real not identical with the rational; they aren't even related." Elaborating on this point, Neiman continues:

> Every time we make the judgment *this ought not to have happened*, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil. Note that it is as little a moral problem, strictly speaking, as it is a theological one. One can call it the point at which ethics and metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics meet, collide, and throw up their hands. At issue are questions about what the structure of

> the world must be like for us to think and act within it. . . . I believe it [the problem of evil] is the place where philosophy begins, and threatens to stop. For it involves questions more natural, urgent, and pervasive than the skeptical epistemological quandaries conventionally said to drive modern philosophy.[5]

If the superhero genre is an obvious fantasy-response to the distressing mismatch between our expectations of the world and the way the world actually appears to be, then according to Neiman some of the most influential figures in the history of modern thought—she discusses Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Sade, Hegel, and Nietzsche, among others—have been crucially motivated by exactly the same distress. Except "distress" turns out to be too mild a word for an intellectual crisis so fundamental that it disrupts our conventional disciplinary intellectual categories, forcing philosophers, theologians, and artists alike to "throw up their hands" in confusion and despair.

Consequently, the very reason that some critics find superhero comics contemptibly immature—the sheer *obviousness* of the refusal to accept "the given as given" on display in these noisy, spectacular and hyperbolic power fantasies—is also why I find them so wonderful: so entertaining, interesting, and profound. For although superhero comics are not commonly cited within our discussions of theology, philosophy, or literature, to the extent that their appeal also emerges from out of the gap between the *is* and the *ought*, between the way things are and the way we'd like them to be, they engage with some of the most fundamental questions that human beings know how to ask.[6] As Neiman notes, "The fact that the world [apparently] contains neither justice nor meaning threatens our ability to act in the world and to understand it. The demand that the world be intelligible is [therefore] a demand of practical and theoretical reason, the ground of thought that philosophy is called to provide."[7] Superhero comics address themselves to this same threatening meaninglessness—and to acknowledge this fact is to recognize that "the demand that the world be intelligible" is no less a demand of fantasy than it is of reason. Or rather, it is to recognize that fantasy is *not* the opposite of reality, but is rather another way of making sense of that reality. To this extent, fantasy has the same function as reason, and cannot always be distinguished from it.[8] Indeed, the fact that both reason and fantasy are "sense-making" processes helps to explain why so many philosophers have reasoned themselves into

seemingly fantastic places, unable to say for sure whether they are awake or dreaming, or whether there are real causes of events rather than just the appearance of continuous conjunction. Even the keenest minds have sometimes had difficulty keeping the two processes—reasoning and fantasizing—apart.

To put the point still more provocatively: if the basic generic conventions of the superhero story—the miraculous powers and obsessive moral compulsiveness of their chief protagonists—attest to the strength of our demand that the world should make sense (and the depth of our fear that it may not), then perhaps those hyperbolic fantasies are not the absurdly unrealistic opposite of reasoned thought processes, but are rather vivid expressions of the normatively repressed anxiety, unreality, and even madness of reason itself. For if human endeavor really does take place in the context of an ultimately random, indifferent, and unintelligible universe, then reason is just another more or less crazy way of coping. After all, are Kant's obsessive ruminations on the categorical imperative really less insane than the idea of a man from another planet with godlike powers who always does the right thing? Is his suggestion that we should consider what would happen if our actions became universal laws of nature really that different from imagining what it would be like to have such godlike powers? And if not, is reading Kant's philosophy really any more likely to inspire moral action than simply asking the question, "What would Superman do?"

The purpose of these questions is not to denigrate the process of reasoned philosophical investigation into the nature of ethics (though I confess that I don't mind if I manage to annoy a few Kantians). On the contrary, I admire and value the work of philosophy to such a degree that I am actually trying to elevate the status of superhero comics by association. The point to be grasped, then, is that superhero comics draw much of their primary creative energy and appeal from the same rift between experience and desire that constitutes the beginning (and end) of modern philosophical inquiry—a space where traditional distinctions between philosophy, theology, and literature collide and break down—and that, unconstrained by the usual conventions of philosophical discourse, including the bar against overt acts of wish fulfilling fantasy, they can address some of the same profound questions. At the risk of provoking sneers from the skeptics I would therefore argue that superhero comics—brash, broad, and sometimes brutal melodramas though they are—often find themselves

in the same conceptual territory as, say, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the tragedies of Shakespeare—texts that also happen to have a brash, broad, and sometimes brutal quality of melodrama about them, and that famously defy our traditional disciplinary categories by demanding to be read as philosophy, theology and literature, all at once. Therefore, I have attempted to read superhero comics in the way those more widely admired texts also demand to be read, shifting between the perspectives of the philosopher, the theologian, and the literary critic as and when it suits me—or, if you are willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, as and when it suits the material to be so addressed.

But why have I chosen these particular superhero comics to read? It could certainly be objected that I have not always selected "the best" examples of the genre for discussion in the following pages—nor even the most obvious ones, given my stated interests. Alan Moore's Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen* probably represents the most ambitious attempt in the genre to date to imagine the superhero-as-divinity, but I have nothing to say about him; nor do I discuss the spiritual/kabalistic dimensions of Moore's more recent work in *Promethea*. And where's the extended analysis on the pantheist mysticism of Grant Morrison's most ambitious epics? Where's the close reading of apocalyptic Christian imagery in Mark Waid and Alex Ross's *Kingdom Come*? Where's the discussion of Manichean struggle and folkloric themes in Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*? Where's . . . well, you can insert your own favorite recent superhero text here.

It's certainly not my lack of interest or admiration for the work of these contemporary creators that has led me to overlook them here; in fact, I hope to find time to write about their comics one day, if only for my own benefit as a teacher. But for this project, I was more interested in looking behind the most obvious recent examples of the genre, to explore some historical texts at greater length than they are usually given in academic accounts. For that reason, the greater part of the superhero comics discussed here date from the so-called "Golden" and "Silver" ages—that is, from 1938 to the early 1970s.[9] With a couple of exceptions, then, these essays largely focus on comics and characters that were written and created before superheroes supposedly became "mature" in the 1980s—and one thing I hope they demonstrate is that just because something was regarded as "children's literature" at the time of its production, that does not mean that it is immature or simplistic; it does not mean that it is aesthetically

crude; it does not mean that it cannot ask piercing questions; and it does not mean that so-called adults cannot learn from it. On the contrary, I think these older stories may sometimes do a better job than their more "adult" descendents when it comes to touching "the tender spots of universal human desires and aspirations, hidden customarily beneath long accumulated protective coverings of indirection and disguise," as William Marston so eloquently put it back in 1943.[10] In my opinion, the comics I have discussed here are "tales for all ages," in every sense of that phrase. And to the disappointed fans of the more contemporary superhero, I would add that many of the comics I read here are the same ones that Moore, Morrison, and the rest were reading as children. It was in *these* stories, and others from the first thirty or so years of the genre, that those later exponents of superheroic mysticism found their gods. Let's take a look at what they discovered.

3

The foregoing must stand as a broad defense of my particular academic interest in the superhero, if any such defense is required, and as a general description of my hermeneutic approach and choice of texts. But though the essays that follow blend diverse ideas and methodologies drawn from existential philosophy, psychoanalysis, feminist theology, cultural studies and formalist criticism, they are also united by their focus on that most earthly and spiritual of human experiences—love—the concept with which I began. To explain why this is so, I should perhaps say a little more about my use of that necessarily nebulous and sometimes disconcerting word, "spirituality," and its relationship to an over-lapping but non-identical concept of "religion."

I don't think that you have to believe in religion to believe in superheroes. But according to the deconstructionist theologian, John Caputo, in this current "post-secular" era, you don't actually have to believe in religion to believe in religion. You can have what he calls "religion without religion." What does that mean, exactly? Well, for Caputo, this paradoxical sounding possibility arises as a consequence of the secularizing drive of modernity, a drive that has ironically and unintentionally cleared the space for the return of a revitalized "post-metaphysical" religion. Caputo evokes Nietzsche as an unexpected prophet of the postmodern good news when he refers to what he also

calls "the death of the death of God." He is nothing if not passionate in his views, which I will now quote at some length, in order to avoid distorting them, and also to give something of the sermonic flavor of Caputo's style:

> Marx and Freud always insisted (to the point of protesting too much) that they were scientific thinkers. But Nietzsche thought that science was just one more version of Christian Platonism, that the death of God implies the death of "absolute truth," including the absolutism of scientific truth.
>
> . . . Nietzsche's argument boomeranged in a way that nobody saw coming. What the contemporary post-Nietzschean lovers of God, religion, and religious faith took away from Nietzsche was that psychoanalysis (Freud), the unyielding laws of dialectical materialism (Marx), and the will to power itself (Nietzsche) are *also* perspectives, *also* constructions, or fictions of grammar. They are *also* just so many contingent ways of construing the world under contingent circumstances that eventually outlive their usefulness when circumstances change. . . . Marx and Freud, along with Nietzsche himself find themselves hoisted with Nietzsche's petard, their critiques of religion having come undone under the gun of Nietzsche's critique of the possibility of making a critique that would cut to the quick—of God, nature, or history. Enlightenment secularism, the objectivist reduction of religion to something other than itself—say, to a distorted desire for one's mommy, or to a way to keep the ruling authorities in power—is one more story told by people with historically limited imaginations, with contingent concepts of reason and history, of economics and labor, of nature and human nature, of desire, sexuality, and women and of God, religion, and faith. . . . The declaration of the "death of God" is aimed at decapitating anything that dares Capitalize itself, which included not just the smoke and incense of the Christian mysteries but anything that claims to be the Final Word. That had the amazing effect of catching up hard ball reductionistic and atheistic critiques of religion in its sweep.
>
> . . . In this way of looking at things, the Enlightenment and its idea of Pure Reason are on the side of Aaron and the golden calf, while Nietzsche, God forbid, he who philosophizes with a hammer, stands on the side of Moses as a smasher of idols, and stands right beside Paul giving the Corinthians holy hell about the idols

> of the philosophers. That opens the door for a notion like the love of God, the idea I love most of all, to get another hearing among the intellectuals. For it is a bald Enlightenment prejudice, unvarnished reductionism, to try to run that idea out of town and denounce it as sucking on your thumb and longing for mommy.[11]

Can I get an "Amen"? Well . . . maybe not. Caputo is an engaging writer, unafraid to take the risk of intelligibility in a realm filled with obscurantist charlatans, and his desire (expressed frequently elsewhere in his writings) to put the love of God back on a firmly social footing—making it a matter of "serving the poorest and most defenseless people in our society"—is entirely admirable. (Here, at least, Caputo's person-of-faith and Siegel and Shuster's original Superman really do have something in common, as my first chapter shows.) But what are we actually left with, if we "decapitate" all Capitalized concepts, as he suggests?

As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, in a respectful but telling response to Caputo's work, we are left with "the well known post-modern meta-truth, the insight into the fact that there is no final Truth, that every truth is the effect of contingent discursive mechanisms and practices."[12] "God" thus becomes just another "name for radical openness, for the hope of change, for the always to come Otherness," and religion is "reduced to its pure destubstantialized form: a belief that our miserable reality is not all there is . . . that 'there is a another world possible,' a promise . . . of redemption-to-come betrayed by any ontological positivization." But in that case, as Žižek asks, why should anyone "go on praying?"[13] To put the point slightly differently, why does Caputo need the word "God"—let alone the more denominationally specific notion of Christianity— at all? If his faith finally boils down to a restatement of the idea that the wise man knows that he knows nothing, combined with the notion that we should all try and be nice to each other—and maybe redistribute some wealth while we are at it—then couldn't he find the support he needs in Socrates, Ms. Manners, and the *New Left Review*? Why steer us into the swampy territory of "religion" if we don't need to go there to end up at the place where Caputo has arrived?

Although he professes himself an atheist, Žižek is troubled at just how much Caputo appears to have given up in the course of taking his deconstructive theological turn:

> In this "deconstructive" way, every . . . instantiation of the Divine is relativized . . . whenever we focus on a particular formulation . . . *ce n'est pa ça*. Within this space, there is simply no place for the paradox of Christian Incarnation: in Christ, this miserable individual, we see God himself, so that his death is the death of God himself. The properly Christian choice is the "leap of faith" by means of which we take the risk to fully engage in a singular instantiation of the Truth embodied, with no ironic distance, with no fingers crossed.[14]

In this essentially Kierkegaardian argument, the whole point of the Christian faith is the *necessity* of a total commitment to an absolute Truth, a commitment that mirrors the awesome character of God's own act of radical self-sacrifice for the sake of humanity, and that is therefore also a radical venture—a *risk*—a decision that might lead to suffering and even death. Being Christian, in this radically committed sense, is obviously difficult. George Herbert, perhaps the greatest Christian poet in the history of the English language, generated many lines out of the problem: "I have considered it," he wrote in one address to Christ, "and find, / There is no dealing with thy mighty passion."[15] The devotional bar is set very high, and most of us would probably not enjoy the company of anyone trying to reach it. But as Kierkegaard would no doubt respond, it's not a popularity contest. The point is, how deep is your faith? Just how far are you willing to go for the God you claim to believe in, the God that died for you? Are you also willing to die? Are you willing to kill? (Notoriously, Kierkegaard did not shy from this unnerving question. I consider his arguments in more detail in my third chapter on Spider-Man—a character whose commitment to the heroic role in the face of tremendous suffering closely resembles that of a Kierkegaardian "Knight of Faith.")

When contrasted with the passionate, radical, self-consciously anti-rational faith of a Kierkegaard, Caputo's religion-without-religion feels anything but risky. On the contrary, it starts to look like a cautious hedging of the metaphysical bet, a refusal to believe too strongly in anything at all on the grounds that we might incriminate ourselves, a kind of theological pledging of the Fifth Amendment. It might be the wiser position, the more reasonable position, and even perhaps the less harmful position. But would such an ontologically empty,

"post-metaphysical" deity have inspired the actions of, say, a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or an Etty Hillesum, or a Martin Luther King? Compared to those twentieth-century martyrs, Caputo seems a likeable, moderately liberal agnostic with a curiously sentimental attachment to the word "God"—a word he doesn't really need for his arguments about the importance of love, tolerance, openness, undecidability and all the other things he likes.[16] If this is postmodern religion, then I'm inclined to say give me that old-time kind. It's more courageous, and more honest, even if it's sometimes also (as Kierkegaard almost described Abraham) completely fucking insane.[17]

And there, of course, lies the problem. Because as Kierkegaard well understood, to display the kind of commitment to an idea—perhaps any idea—that Abraham displayed in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac is, precisely, insane. The choice between orthodox and postmodern religion thus seems to be a choice between a glorious, passionate, irrational, and—at the least—potentially self-destructive commitment on the one hand, and a safe, aseptic, bloodless detachment on the other. I know which perspective I admire more, but I also wouldn't blame anyone for not wanting to be tested in the way Bonhoeffer, Hillesum, and King were tested, and I would consider anyone who actively *desired* martyrdom crazy. Crazy with love, perhaps, but still crazy. And that madness can shade over into something much less admirable very quickly, if you decide that your idea of love is worth killing for as well as dying for. The line that separates a hero like Bonhoeffer from the kind of religiously motivated political assassin that we would repudiate in disgust is hardly self-declaring.

Thus it seems that on the one hand, we can embrace the passionate but potentially destructive madness of total commitment to a metaphysics of Truth, or, on the other hand, we can make a temporary selection from the vast array of lesser truths in the theological warehouse, like shoppers browsing an outlet mall. The range of "goods" can seem liberating, even intoxicating, until we realize that nothing will satisfy us for long—and that there is no way out of the mall and back to the church, because they knocked down the church in order to build the mall. Upon making this discovery, I find myself inclined to paraphrase Winston Churchill's famously self-canceling remark about democracy being the worst form of government: "postmodern religion is the worst form of religion, except for all those other forms that have been tried."

I have been round this altar a few times myself. When I was younger, I came up with my own version of the distinction between orthodox religion and Caputo's "religion without religion." I decided I wasn't religious, and didn't much like people who were, but that maybe I could be "spiritual." What I thought of as "religion"—genuflecting towards the two-thousand year old God of a bunch of desert patriarchs, or refusing to eat certain foods on certain days, or making everyone ashamed of their sexual desires, or just proclaiming that those who didn't see things your way were doomed for all of eternity—well, it seemed awfully cold and mean-spirited and unimaginative and just not a lot of fun. "Spirituality," on the other hand, was more appealing. It left open the possibilities of all kinds of groovy mysticism, and did not seem to require the condemnation of outgroups. What's more, far from being thorny and narrow, the "spiritual" pathways mapped by some of the late twentieth-century figures I most admired—the rock musicians of the 1960s, for example—seemed strewn with pleasures: art, music, poetry, sex, and drugs, for example. The sad truth, then, is that "spirituality" really appealed to me, not because it looked kinder or more tolerant than what I took to be "religion"—although it generally did seem that way—but because it looked easier and more enjoyable. Of course, Caputo doesn't intend his notion of "religion-without-religion" to signify in this teenage hedonistic way, but as an effort to make an end run around the horrors of dogma it too has the appeal of being more fun than the "old time" religion to which it is opposed—more intellectually sophisticated, and even cool and trendy in its invocations of all that wonderfully oracular theory and philosophy.

But nowadays, although I still adore The Beatles, and despise religious intolerance, I feel differently about just about everything else, and am embarrassed at the complacent ignorance of my former attitude. Without wishing to provide more details of my personal life than is absolutely necessary to make my point, I have come to realize that by a more substantial account, the notion of a "spiritual experience" involves a radical reorientation of values, and an unflinching inventory of the consequences of one's life and actions up to that moment. Although long familiar with artists and critics who spoke about "the temporary dissolution of the ego," I began to realize what that phrase actually meant, if taken seriously: a total loss of bearings, and a shattering of cherished illusions about the self, making certain

old ideas and behaviors impossible to sustain, and leaving one raw, confused, and grieving. I also came to notice that in many spiritual texts—and perhaps in most of them—the first step on the path of genuine enlightenment is usually more of a hard shove.

I'm not saying that some kind of Pauline "Damascus moment" is a requirement for spiritual insight—just that it's common experience in many spiritual texts. I also believe that it is perfectly possible to rediscover your sense of joy, even after your world has been leveled by God's wrecking ball (though depending on the violence of the blow, it may not be easy, and it may take some time). I don't think that a spiritual outlook need be a tormented one, and certainly not any more so than a secular outlook. But what remains, after such an awakening, is a new awareness of the spiritual as marvelously simple in theory, and extraordinarily difficult in practice. Because the philosophies of figures like Christ, or the Buddha, or Mohammed, or Gandhi, are not terribly complex, in the end. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Don't be so selfish. Don't be so judgmental. Don't expect to get your way all the time. Try loving yourself as you are. Try love, period. This is not astrophysics or brain surgery. It's not Kant or Hegel or Lacan or Derrida or Jean-Luc Marion. It's more difficult than all of them. Be kind, you say? What . . . all day? Be kind *all day*?

The irony is that the religion I rejected, because I thought it looked difficult and restrictive, is actually a thousand times easier than this kind of spirituality. Saving yourself for marriage, not eating shellfish, covering or shaving or not shaving your head, hating infidels and burning heretics—by comparison, that stuff is *easy*. But loving your enemy? Loving your neighbor? Heck, loving yourself? Now, *that's* difficult—maybe as difficult as it gets.

As you will see, all the superheroes discussed in this book either teach this lesson, or discover it for themselves, the hard way. Thus, in what might turn out to be the biggest surprise for those readers who think of the superhero genre as predominantly about the pleasures of violent fantasy (in the unlikely event that any such readers have picked up this book), the real subject of all these essays turns out to be love. Superman teaches us just how miraculous it really is to be able to love one's enemy; Wonder Woman asks us to think about what it really means to surrender to love; Spider-Man discovers that love is the greatest risk that he can take; and Iron Man learns that

unless he can admit his own need for love, and accept the vulnerability that goes along with it, his soul will die inside that shiny suit.

To conclude: it may be worth reiterating that my purpose here has not been to slip a proselytizing theological pamphlet into the pop culture section of the textbook store (as if to say, "hey kids, thinking about spirituality can be cool!"). Neither has it been my desire to prove that superheroes makes good grist for a variety of intellectual mills—although this is no doubt the case, and there's no shortage of books, ranging from the execrable to the enjoyable, that use the genre to explore such topics as education, philosophy, psychology, business, fashion, and physics, as well as religion. Unlike the authors of most of those books, however, I am at least as interested in making some claims for superhero comics themselves as I am in using them for illustrative purposes as part of some other project. I believe that the ethical and existential questions that inspire so many of our philosophical and theological inquiries are also *constitutive* of the superheroic fantasy. I believe that we hear and respond to the urgency and power of those questions when we are swept up in the experience of a superhero comic, in the same way that we hear and respond to the strains of gospel music in classic Rock & Roll—another popular, hybrid, and uniquely American art form that went global in the twentieth century—even if we do not even always consciously recognize the "spiritual" nature of the source. I further believe that superhero comics are especially, *generically*, suited to the task of engaging, expressing, and addressing urgent ethical and existential questions—and that it is partly because they can perform this task as well or better than some philosophers and churchmen that they have enjoyed such popular success.[18] I can offer no clinching proof for such an assertion, of course; but the essays that follow may serve as a kind of cumulative argument, as repeated demonstrations of the point.

In short, because this book is about superheroes, it cannot help but also be about spirituality—and consequently it is also about love. Finally, it is about how all three can kick your butt harder than any religion you have ever heard of. And I say we should thank the gods for that.