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## Religion in the Age of Superheroes: Consecration and Exemplarity in Hollywood

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### ABSTRACT

*Twenty-first-century cinema has witnessed a sharp rise in the production of movies based on mythological stories. The increased appetite for mythological content, which transcends race, colour, or creed, has helped shape new genres and academic curricula. At the centre of this trend is the concept of a superhero. The superhero embodies virtue combined with a perfect balance of traits that an average human being cannot achieve, as a mythical figure above the vagaries of emotion or weakness, who is a fighter for social justice and can single-handedly tackle internal and external threats. When first transposed from a classical to a contemporary prototype about a century ago, the modern superhero personified secular humanism as an ideal; however, recent enactments display a more succinct construct empowered by Biblical overtones. This paper explores why religion is making inroads into what has remained chiefly an areligious ideal in the modern world. Furthermore, the paper explores why a towering avatar of excellence epitomises secular virtue while embellished with legendary forms of valour entrenched in faith. The paper argues that the revival of modern-day exemplarity reflects a profoundly religious inclination of Western society. Despite its outward orientation, Western society harbours a metaphysical valuation of self. It may be that in the absence of an indispensable ethical or social figure, the superhero archetype underlines its yearning for a flawless role model. The methodology for this article is descriptive and analytical and based on the corpi of contemporary sociological and political texts.*

**Keywords:** *Hollywood in the Twenty-first Century, Secularism and Movies, Good and Evil, Religion and Popular Culture, social media and Superheroes*

### INTRODUCTION

No sooner had the modern art of storytelling, now known as Hollywood, seen its inception a hundred years ago (Williams, 2005, p. 87) than the question of representation was manifested to its directors and producers. The content curators of antiquity and modernity alike would have had to grapple with the dilemma of which stories to tell and what was technically possible. In motion pictures, technology-enabled new genres were still developing; however, religion emerged spontaneously as a poignant and prevailing narrative. Based on available material today from the earliest versions of the film, it seems logical for creators of the time to have resorted to the most preeminent of all religious fables. From a world that once engendered miracles, the early Hollywood productions spared no time in delving into Biblical chronicles, starting with *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) (IMDB, 2023). The miraculous tone of these stories helped modernise the audience's romance towards uncomplicated forms of joy and suffering, as well as their ruthless precision, not least the exaltedness with which ordinary human beings triumphed over calamity or endured it through periods. From the view of the early American audience, after that, the entire European continent, the advent of the motion picture was a momentous step in civilisation where an average person could relive and feel empowered by a moment in history that may have existed in a

diametrically different time and place by just watching a sequence of animated frames.

Nevertheless, the perennial struggle to overcome tragedy provided ample relevance to the sociocultural milieu of the time. In its immediate backdrop was the First World War and the resultant global sociopolitical rifts of excruciating magnitude, whereas in its lockstep, the looming Great Depression. Surprisingly, the contemporary affairs of the modern age are assessed in the light of the previous century, i.e., financial crises, wars, mass migrations, and rapid urbanisation. In that case, they offer a mirror image of the time of Hollywood's genesis. What has been a relentless constant throughout this journey is the cursor of religious persuasion oscillating between race, gender, and other specific sociocultural instruments. Among these instruments, this article argues, are the notions of good and evil in the form of secular axiomatic metaphors but exacted as anthropocentric organisms, or superheroes, who are embodiments of apothecic agency personifying supernatural powers, in other words, gods. This paper explores how this has been made possible through an areligious and liberal medium of Hollywood, one that not only takes pride in its secular ethos but, since its inception, has also become a vehicle for cultural soft power around the world and, in its own right, is active in propagating its sociopolitical message.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Granted that both race and religion have been complex subjects for Hollywood, the latter has always been a valuable tool for Hollywood in catalysing both sides, including the white supremacist or the civil rights camp. However, if there were a single moment that gave birth to the screen exemplarity, it would have been the movie *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (Toplin, 1996), featuring the genesis of the Ku Klux Klan (Britannica, 2023). When the movie was first played in the White House, President Woodrow Wilson quipped that it was as if history was being written "with lightning" (Benbow, 2010). President Wilson was a renowned admirer of the Ku Klux Klan and is known to have called them "a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country" (Benbow, 2010). Reviews of the movie at the time reflected in no uncertain terms that it bore elements of being a true American classic despite its overtly racist and supremacist tone. During this time, the Ku Klux Klan as a legitimate organisation showed no inhibitions to its exposition of Christian values and held open and oft-celebrated rallies in the capitol of Washington D.C. Kelly J. Baker, a Ku Klux Klan scholar, commented in a *New York Times* interview that the linkage of religious endorsement with the narrative of Ku Klux Klan has remained mainstream ever since despite its rebranding over time (Dias, 2021). In her book *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930*, she made it amply clear that the connection between the KKK motto, now often branded extremism by the mainstream media, and the religion is not new (Baker, 2011). The Ku Klux Klan manifesto consisted of restoring the constitution to uphold white supremacy under the custodianship of Christ.

The mention of the Ku Klux Klan is pertinent to this discussion because it embodies a perfect combination of race and religion, working in tandem to construct a modern framework of exemplarity. In the purview of classic American political formations, this was very much in the thread of its social fabric. Goldstein writes that "[i]n 1844, former President John Quincy Adams, while serving in Congress, submitted a petition to amend the Constitution 'so that it shall contain a clear and explicit acknowledgement of the Sovereign of the universe as the God of this nation; an entire and avowed submission to the Lord Jesus Christ as the ruler of this nation'" (Goldstein, 2017). Silverman's view of Ku Klux Klan is that it is a group of "outlaws, out-Heroding Herod" who want to keep Jews and Negroes outside the providence of Christian amplitude. There is plentiful criticism emerging from pockets of

diversity that deem the Ku Klux Klan a racist and extremist organisation; however, the lesson Hollywood learned from the movie *The Birth of a Nation* is employed even today.

A hundred years later, the movie is no longer a popular choice; however, its themes are rampant within all narratives, though in subtle and fictionalised forms. For example, religious context is still the consolatory basis for ever-confounding modernity and its tectonic shift towards out-of-control culture wars. Of course, religion does not get a placement in the motion picture classification today, nor do film catalogues such as Amazon's International Movie Database (IMDB) maintain a film category on religion (IMDB, 2023). Still, Hollywood has kept a steady supply of religious themes, mostly a Judeo-Christian bent, retrofitted within a secular frame that contextualises the political message of the day. Thus, unlike the movie *The Birth of a Nation*, the beneficiary of the times, themes of race, religion, sexuality, and gender are prevalent in clandestinely veneered forms. For example, a recent film, *Mary Magdalene* (2017), raised an uproar with commentators questioning its feminist depiction. A *Washington Post* columnist wrote a column titled *On Easter; Mary Magdalene will be accused as a prostitute. Except she was not* (Dvorak, 2017; Ryan, 2019). The author's intention may have been to prevent profanation of the sacral by attempting to protect the honour of a Biblical figure; however, the range of this sanctity does not go far enough if the same is portrayed in a more up-to-date feminist frame. In other words, modern commentators would happily legitimise choices made by personalities that existed thousands of years ago in the light of rights and statutes enacted in today's justice systems. Still, they would scoff at its stigmatisation of Biblical figures, nonetheless. It should be noted that these legitimisation attempts are made to explicitly draw a lineage of characteristic exemplarity of historical statistics to enjoy higher moral and ethical perfectitude compared to their modern counterparts. Western commentators are deeply apprehensive of denigrating historical exemplarity by paralleling them to politicians or celebrities beyond what is superficially and customarily necessary.

Nonetheless, even today, in Western society, ethical lineage is always presumed to flow from the past to the present, even when there is no apparent secular justification. Moreover, even though modern conditions of secularism, i.e., rational agency and cognitive equity, are supposed to be superior and therefore more favourable, the human condition, according to Western thought, is still an analogy to a larger thematic arena that tends to embody the miraculous core of heroism inside a much wider canonical perimeter. What is beyond doubt is that religious themes evoke the most extraordinary fandom and subscribership despite the controversies they generate. Online magazine *Movie Guide* claims faith-based movies are becoming more controversial yet profitable (*Movie Guide*, 2023). Of course, an apparent fallout of these controversies is a chronic propensity to superimpose complexities of modern life over ancient stories, mainly when they are used as vehicles to carry political cargo, such as the relationship of Jesus with Mary Magdalene as an emblematic virtue of romantic innocence. Despite these facts, and apart from thematic or even peripheral beneficence of religion towards a given political realm, it was generally perceived within the Western philosophical circles that the issue of religious sensibility and complexity was still quite manageable until 9-11. This is because, beyond the turn of the new century, Western thought started homing in on one critical game-changer in its approach towards religion, i.e., the radicalisation of the Islamic faith. After all, regardless of its fractious legacy, the Judeo-Christian tradition, in whichever shape or form, was still considered sympathetic to the North Atlantic cultures and constituted no existential threat to Western ideals. Charles Taylor believes that the approach adopted by Western societies was ideal for taming religious tendencies through intellectual distancing from religion. He describes it thus:

“In some ways, this phenomenon can perhaps best be described in terms of past forms of Christian collective life. It stands from ‘diffusive Christianity’, which stood at a certain distance

from the models of totally committed practice. It is orbiting farther from a star, which is still a key reference point. In this way, the Age of Mobilization's forms remain alive at the margins of contemporary life." (Taylor, 2018, p. 533)

On the other hand, from a Western perspective such as Charles Taylor's, it would probably seem a gratuitous claim by adherents of Islam that the annotation of the sudden reawakening of the West towards a brand-new resolve to civilise Islamic nations is, in large part, due to ideological resilience of Islamic belief. However, such a concession is rarely forthcoming. Taylor himself admits and wishes in part, stating: "It is necessary to say this today because we seem in the West largely to have left the age behind in which this was true—although a glance at Islamic societies shows that this is far from universal" (Taylor, 2018, p. 432). In other words, Taylor's individuation from religious faith in a way that one can levitate above it on a whim and utilise it as an ideological lever, similar to the tactic adopted by Hollywood, would be the fitting operationalism. Such institutionalised dichotomy in Western thought can also explain why religion is necessary to do the bidding of political indoctrination because secularism, by its very definition, creates a nuanced plane that is detrimental to unity of purpose, as Christianity proclaims it.

The founders of Hollywood may have known this since their early productions were densely coloured with pedanticism consisting of the crude ethical premise, ergo, the story's moral. However, along the way, the universality of the ethical messaging came into direct conflict with the secular orientation of political thought. One can only imagine that the powers immediately realised the futility of managing political diversity, which must converge to build consensus at one point or another. Naturally, this consensus-building exercise was less complex in the time of Woodrow Wilson or Quincy Jones. Today, when the spectrum of liberal sensitivities is much broader, competing religion or its ideological axis from the vantage point of secularism is fraught with blunders of political correctness (Holbrook, 1995). The modern West has to strike an awkward balance between a sense perception of its Christian citizenry, and its naturalised (including the distant neo-colonized, Digi-colonised, and eco-colonized populations of the world) Muslim populations in a way that both parties can converge on a common axis of understanding. Therefore, it is much simpler to counter religion with religion rather than countering religion with non-religion. Hollywood has historically used religion as a political lever without needing its secular or areligious audience to subscribe to a complex system of beliefs (Cornea, 2017).

The question is, exactly how does Hollywood do it? As it has already been stated, this type of religious coaxing is hardly without pitfalls. Still, notwithstanding risks, it is a handy social tool to sustain a lasting impression on the audience. Research indicates that the psycho-sociological storytelling device has enormous potential for politics or any other type of persuasion. In *Cinematic Narration and its Psychological Impact: Functions of Cognition, Emotion and Play*, Peter Wuss writes that "the dominance of stereotypes led to a kind of second-hand culture for the cinema which uses stimuli patterns that are well-known because of their inter-textual distribution" to the extent that these stimuli are so seamless that audience accept it without realising their impact. (Wuss, 2009, p. 46). Of course, this does not mean that such devices are targeted to only the Muslim population; however, an increased frequency of chatter in the intellectual circles to "tackle" dissident or radical thought creates sufficient justification to investigate links between Hollywood and political establishment as well as its use of religion as a tool of political indoctrination. This claim can be further bolstered by the fact that within the United States, what is generally termed as mainstream media – print, radio, television, film, entertainment, and other internet-based outlets – is, in fact, a consortium of cable networks which are owned by no more than six organisations (Lutz, 2012). The consolidation of social media platforms such as Facebook and

X, formerly known as Twitter, has further demonstrated that content moderators no longer facilitate the diversity of opinion or views, especially in the post-COVID-19 world (Neate, 2022).

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

Creating, propagating, and enforcing a uniform narrative has traditionally been the domain of despotic regimes. Hollywood stands different from these crude approaches, as its indoctrination follows subtle, comical, cordial, and congenial forms of persuasion often embedded in the story as a secondary plot device (Perelman, 2021). However, to explore the relationship between Hollywood and the political axis, it is prudent to look at the cultural grain of Hollywood that has favoured a peculiar direction in the post-9/11 world. This new direction is not just interested in Islam; it highlights Western society's novel project of a new and modern reformation focussed on neo-liberal philosophy. Moreover, while neoliberalism's remit of values hierarchy (i.e., Wokism) is not a concern of this thesis, it is beneficial to connect it to the underpinning constitution that sacralise new and eccentric modes of being such as new lifestyles, gender, or sexual orientations, into the fold of exemplarity (Hadar, 2003). Hollywood's new archetypal forms of exemplarity are rooted in the ethical modality of ancient Greece and Rome. Their mythological framework helps Hollywood build novel platforms from where to launch and often rebrand variations of modern lifestyles. This is not a new technique as it is rooted in the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which saw a significant containment of the Biblical moral code followed by a rebranding of prescription embossed in the religious canon. The new Protestant varieties of Christianity, including the Ku Klux Klan, became more aligned with ancient Rome, where no written ethical canon existed.

Consequently, modern Europe shared a common thread with the Roman polity because of its recalcitrance towards religious endowment of ethics (Becker and Becker, 2003, p. 37). Today, the secular axis of thought in Western Europe sees only a limited and residual utility in the Bible as ideology; instead, it prefers to relish it as a prolific source of literature. As Dawkins puts it, "The main reason the English Bible needs to be part of our education is that it is a major source book for literary culture. The same applies to the legends of the Greek and Roman gods, and we learn about them without being asked to believe in them" (Dawkins, 2008, p. 333). However, Dawkins' views happen to reflect an additional lasting impression that Western writ tends to favour ancient Greek and Roman legacy not only for the sake of literary enrichment but to build a model of excellence, often referred to as Roman Exemplarity (Herukhuti, 2023) (Conrau-Lewis, 2019). Hampton posits that "the images of exemplars in Renaissance texts are intended as more than guides for practical political action. The heroic or virtuous figure offers a model of excellence, an icon after which the reader will be formed" (Hampton, 1990, p. 5). The new secular bias of the Hollywood film is that it features a version of divinity that prevails over other models because its idealism is not enforceable in any material sense. Nor does it infer from Dawkins's suggestion that this should be a set of laws that need implementation. However, it is a highly compelling proposition if an avatar of excellence embodies traditionally tangential attributes such as being ethnically diverse, gender-neutral, or sexually eccentric and possessing supernatural powers. Hence, superheroes can become modern templates of classical exemplarity without the theological overhead of religion.

Moreover, because these new superheroes are leaner and meaner in physiological and symmetrical perfection, they have shaken off their canonical burdens of divine evaluation. Therefore, they tend to be physically attractive too. Moreover, their fight for social justice garners similarity, relatedness, kinship, and empathy from the masses, even though they are meant to be fictional and entirely imaginary characters. Interestingly enough, this is precisely the bane of modern thinkers that in

the new allegedly enlightened age, historical, fictitious, and imaginary characters do not hold a patent in ethical fortitude over novel secular formalisms underwritten by the reinforced distinction between political and religious thought.

### **POLITICAL CONTEXT**

It is worth exploring exactly how it is possible that Hollywood can get away with the socio-political indoctrination of the global population, which religion is often, if not always, sanctioned for. Beginning with the twenty-first century, the continental West marked a significant political shift in its civilisational ascent. One key observation of millennial polity was its appreciation for binary orientation, such as the global North versus the global South (United Nations, 2013), the one per cent versus the ninety-nine per cent (Van Gelder, 2011), and the neo-liberal versus the neo-conservative. In such a binary-oriented world, new forms of binary consciousness became a fertile ground for (re)machinations of the story of good and evil. A renewed metaphor of good-versus-evil emerged at the turn of the millennium, which has now become an essential political tool for moral appropriation. For example, after September 11, the human race was suddenly and abruptly challenged to be either “with us or with the terrorists” (James Woolsey and Daniel Brumberg, 2022). As a result, the intellectual nobility of the West persuasively allowed the binary penchant to facilitate the siphoning of nuanced opinion in favour of more simplified and atomic narratives. Since then, using good-versus-evil appendages in social discourse has become a wild card because these precepts depend on metaphysical endowment to sustain credibility. This is especially true in a secular arrangement where the preamble of excellent and evil polarity impedes an accommodating spectrum of possibilities that could neither be defined as pure good nor pure evil.

Nevertheless, its incitement has been indispensable towards patronising a path for rational exchange of ideas within society. However, the problem with this approach is that the composition of the good versus evil debate is touted so that it tends to circumvent the entire basis of the secular, pluralist notion of discourse, which should be at the centre of the socio-political cadence of the West. This is to the extent that Habermas et al. have proposed various configurations under which this discourse could flourish in the “public sphere” (Butler et al., 2011). He writes, “The principle of separation of state and church obliges politicians and officials within political institutions to formulate and justify laws, court rulings, decrees and measures only in a language which is equally accessible to all citizens” (Portier, 2011, p. 8). But on the other hand, he maintains that “historically, terrorism falls in a category different from crimes that concern a criminal court judge” (Borradori et al., 2009).

Habermas is not referring to war because he has already precluded its eligibility as a suitable practice of dealing with terrorism or legitimising the terrorist as an enemy combatant. However, despite this preclusion, while Habermas’s proposition is factually incorrect and unconcordant with the historical treatment of cases of terrorism, which have indeed been tried in criminal courts (Britannica, 2022), the problem lies in his propensity to find the correct vocabulary that impugns any discursive treatment towards terrorism in the public sphere. In Habermas’s view, terrorism is a meta-crime that violates the game’s rules because it operates outside its statutory remit. Therefore, it deserves a new language to describe it. This is because under normal circumstances, any treatment sanctioned on criminal behaviour would fall within the scope of good governance or penitence (Taylor, 2018, p. 412) whereas, in the case of terrorism, which does not deserve a just, systematic, or measured redress, the justice system must cross over to the exogenic realm to construct a punitive stance. Subsequently, the definition of terrorism becomes a pliable abstract construct to attract equally abstract realms of engagement external to the legislative process.



For Western society as a paragon of justice and democracy, this attitude becomes inexorably tricky if it were to justify it on the public relations front, except, of course, if the public opinion can be softened towards it, which, if converged on the analogy of good and evil, would happily entertain an exogenic mechanism that vanquishes evil or its physical manifestation. This does not mean conventional legislative systems do not infer excellent or evil intent in certain criminal acts. It is that the importance of a punitive framework merely exists to approximate and tackle crimes as deterministic violations of artificial laws. This type of violation within a justice system does not constitute any inherent bias. Conversely, it is treated as a formative, social or psychological defect needing repair.

On the other hand, treating terrorism, therefore evil, requires improvisational genius in form and function that surpasses customary imagination. These exogenic and extrajudicial judgements are not exotic to the Western world. They have yet to learn about print or media. Popular culture is replete with stories of revenge and punishment, many of which have been converted into films.

One of the most common themes is the story of a lone avenger seeking to equalise their sense of loss with no restraint or remorse, with no recourse to the law (Worcester, 2012). The protagonist, in this case, takes no prisoners. Their sentence is brutally exact in vengeance towards the enemy. The reprisal is exhaustive and conclusive. No law enforcement is involved, and the protagonist walks free once justice has been served. All of this is shown in the story to demonstrate that even if there is hitherto a sense of glee on the hero's part, or sedition for that matter, it is justified for a sentient human being has endured unimaginable pain and loss, as termed "moral wound" (Gruszczyk, Aleksandra, 2019). This lone protagonist story holds enormous appeal in the public psyche for two reasons: first, a hero harkens back to an origins story involving a vacuum of justice for everyone else, something an established system failed to repair. Second, the hero trumps the conventional definition of crime by identifying a level of suffering that is inconceivable and unconscionable. In the hero's view, the agency to harm is not alleged to violate the social contract as described by Habermas but not recognising it or nullifying it altogether (Vessella, 2017). The second point poses a peculiar dilemma for the legislative frameworks of the West because, as already stated, according to Habermas, the conditions for civility are feasible only as long as the parties involved, i.e., the state and the citizens, mutually agree on them. Hence, alienation or disenfranchisement from the social contract can cause citizens to become vigilant, divest away from revolt against the state, or even engage in nihilistic behaviour. Some may even pursue restitution in creative ways. Of course, the apparent predicament of the social contract in the modern world is that it needs to root its terms of reference in some form of good-vs-evil structure while being unable to comment on its contents objectively. This is because, epistemically speaking, precepts of good and evil are intangible and self-referential. The justice system cannot guarantee the deliverance of good or prevention of evil because, save metaphysical qualification, both good and evil are indeterministic. Therefore, the question remains: if there is no place for good or evil in the modern democratic narrative, why do they continue to enjoy legitimacy within the public sphere and be used as legitimisation instruments in socio-political campaigns?

## **MODERN FILM**

Linking back to the question of representation stated earlier in the introduction, the use of screen production (film, television and so on) as a legitimisation tool for the excellent and evil metric is crucial for two reasons. The first reason is that ethnic minorities in the Western hemisphere are enjoying increased participation and representation in the political arena and are also aware of their need for representation in media. Thus, similar to political actors who represent their constituencies in the parliamentary institutions, growing ethnic minorities in the West aspire to be represented by artists who

look like them. Moreover, they are susceptible to accurate representation, free from superficial stereotypes. The second and more subtle reason is that once the question of equity has been settled, the discussion of right and wrong can begin. However, because the various groups within a pluralist democracy hail from conflicting ideologies, scriptwriters must tread cautiously so as not to trample on cultural or religious taboos.

According to critics, in the case of Blacks and Muslims, Hollywood has historically had a less than stellar record of representation, be they people or parlance (Robb, 2022). Then, the post-9/11 lethargy has paved the way for new generations to skip religious indignation altogether and look elsewhere for supernatural inspiration (Lipka, Michael, 2015) (Pew Research Centre, 2010). Like many other sectors of sociocultural negotiation, media is a generational act. As the newer generations take over the baton from their predecessors, it is becoming increasingly evident that they are not interested in the religious demonisation of minorities (Robertson, 2015). In a speech delivered by former president Barak Obama while visiting a mosque in Baltimore in 2016 (Boorstein, 2021), he insisted that the Hollywood industry be more inclusive by introducing “Muslim characters that are unrelated to national security” (Rosenberg, 2021). After that, new woke sensibility campaigns further sacralised areas of critique, making them a no-go zone for storytelling (Richard Mwakasege-Minaya and Juri Sanchez, 2021), except when that storytelling did not teach any criticism. However, the true impact of Obama’s statement was not realised by the media or by the Muslim minorities of America; in an information-oriented world, it is the media that sets the perception of reality rather than the reality directing the media on how to reflect on it. Obama’s comments were meant to be no less than a watershed moment for American Muslims who were more interested in gaining access to Hollywood rather than reflecting on Obama’s speech because tacitly, it contained a landmark admission that perception is everything and no matter how reality is oriented in the everyday affairs of citizens, their perception of the reality is going to be formed by the media outlets. Obama’s presidency happened to be timed with the emergence of the Woke movement, which brought about a second realisation that media channels cannot be used to parlay complexity anymore. American Muslims felt the intensity of this second realisation when the detective drama *24* was first broadcast on American cable networks (Doward, 2005). The story's tone granted complexity to its national security imperative while portraying the Islamic faith in negative and simplistic terms. The drama evoked incensed rebukes from around the Islamic world. As Iqbal Sacranie, then president of the Muslim Council of Britain, stated: “There is not a single positive Muslim character in the storyline to date” (Doward, 2005). In short, Muslims around the world were taken aback by the simplicity or naiveté of the plot, allegedly failing to build subtlety into the story. However, the message was delivered that indoctrination is straightforward and simplicity is vital.

Hollywood has only entertained a little latitude for building complex, engaging stories except for stereotypes based on good versus evil. Therefore, this is also true in the case of terrorism, which is a preeminent trend catering to simplistic dogmas. Therefore, a typical methodology would be to make stories more palatable for the audiences by garnishing the essential preamble with culinary treatments of sex and violence as hedonisms of choice. Then, good and evil will be layered over them as a safe overarching backstory. The caveat is that religion, while being a complex instrument in the eyes of storytellers, is the only one that can recognise such postulates, or else the substantive equipment of the storytelling genre will be rendered meaningless. For example, the redress claim to the torment of evil is religious. In support of this claim, asking if a story can be non-religious is reasonable. Put another way, can any form of storytelling ever be called epistemically non-religious at its core? The answer is no because it must teach “the story's moral.” The script writer would know that embedded in the sensory appetite of commons is an unspoken admission that one way or the other, while watching a movie, religion gets synthesised by the audience as a meta-constitution, hoisted in their collective image of

being.

Notwithstanding society's canonical lineage, this meta-constitution can take on concentric or eccentric forms of morality or justice. Nevertheless, it stays central to the theme of error and redemption. The secular state is fully aware of the power of good and evil narrative that a secular society itself cannot do without a religion, even if it is just pseudo-scientific banter. It has no other option than to actively capitalise on these precepts to further its goals. While the pontification of excellent and evil drives the mechanics of this delivery, there is still a missing link. Here, a mediator force is needed in the shape of a besieged protagonist who embodies the essence of good and an understanding of evil. This protagonist then rises to the challenge and becomes a hero, undertakes it, and prevails over it after a long and arduous battle, eventually bringing equilibrium to the world of profane. At the same time, the protagonist can overcome shortcomings within the self and be victorious by leaning to the side of good and bringing a balance inside the spiritual self. This is known in media and storytelling as the "character arc" (Perelman, 2022). It is crafted so the viewers can relate to this story and visualise or conceptualise the heroes.

## **SECULARISM**

So far, this article has tried to build a case for indoctrination as a sociopolitical toolset of which media constitutes a vital component. The media must, however, ensure that the indoctrination takes place in a religion-neutral language, in line with the secular manifesto of modern democracies. Furthermore, indoctrination must be composed of precise and atomic narratives, which are simplistic and binary, and they must revolve around the precepts of good and evil to be effective. However, before this can be done, it is incumbent to appropriate sufficient space for secularism to balance the equation. This is because the outright orchestration of this entire overture of storytelling and the accompanying terminology is expected to be secular, inasmuch the purview of modern democratic state apparatus expects it to be. However, in the actual sense of the task, what entails an imperfect semaphore that may constitute a mixed signal for the consumer? To solve this imperfection, it can be assumed for now that within the remit of this thesis, secularism is taken as a methodology that is devoid of any tilt or sway to the traditional definition of a meta-narrative to the extent that religious conviction is absent from its range of visibility. What is needed now is a commitment to some theological plagiarism from the scripture, thus harvesting etymologically or semantically polymorphous terms and leaving indissoluble terms by replacing them with those that do not carry any theological baggage, such as replacing "God" with "the Universe." Repeating this exercise in further depth and scope, entire anthologies can be formulated in a secular lexicon.

In a way, the silver screen strips religious cladding from canonical stories and repurposes them for a secular narrative. This way, religious symbolism is delivered in the movie dialogue without seeming religious. The unassuming mind tacitly processes the ontological atomicity of first principles. It develops an affinity towards them, such as miracles, chivalry, bravery, faith, devotion, betrayal, acrimony, jealousy, love, and hate without discerning the divine undertone or patronage of ethos (Subby Szterszky, 2018). The viewership accepts this arrangement because this exposé is meant to be fictitious. However, it leaves an impression on the viewer not because of the factual absence of the narrative but rather the sense that it is an impressive story, even if fictitious. The audience accepts and internalises it as a what-if scenario and moves on.

## **SUPERHERO**

To culminate all the previously discussed themes, it is now appropriate to assemble on the

model of a superhero, which is Hollywood's answer to creating a pseudo-religious but secular locus of ideology. The superhero combines all historical exemplarity into a single unified conceptual anchor. The superhero enjoys the mythical duality of Greek deities in that they have earthly or earth-compatible biology. At the same time, their powers originate from other alien worlds, as well as miraculous outcomes from scientific experiments gone wrong, genetic aberrations, insect bites, or simply a connection to the extra-sensory realm. These possibilities are now granted in the storyline on the grounds of a fictional narrative. However, it was not always so. When the first American superhero, i.e., Superman (1938), was featured in its first comic book edition (Harris, 2013), followed by the movie Superman (1978) (Donner, 1978), he was touted to possess extra-natural powers having originated from another more biologically evolved planet. In the twenty-first century film, superheroes are no longer limited to their evolutionary endowment; instead, they could become influential in several different secular ways. However, even this convention was broken with the conception of the first-ever Muslim superhero, Ms Marvel (Ms Marvel, 2022). Conceived and produced by Netflix, Ms. Marvel has been portrayed as a Jinn in humanoid form, living unaware that her whole family belongs to a clan of genies. Unbeknownst to non-Muslim and often Muslim populations of the world, to facilitate this depiction, the only credible source of knowledge is the Qur'an, therefore Islam, which introduces these creatures to the world in the first place. Ms Marvel herself is depicted in the drama series as a run-of-the-mill American-born Pakistani girl weathering growing pains during her teenage years. Discovering that she has superpowers, she comes to terms with her true self, and the subsequent character arc follows. However, the fact that there is little known about Jinn and how they live in the Islamic tradition is unimportant to the fanbase. As for Muslims, their delight in fulfilment of diversity quotas, i.e., a substantial number of cast members being of Indian origin, suffices to put their scepticism to rest even when the presumption of a Muslim superhero in the form of a Jinn makes no logical sense in the light of Qur'an or Hadith. Thus, on the surface, a secularist approach to film is such that it assembles a mishmash of religious elements in such an unintelligible pattern that a commentator would be hard-pressed to scramble to find the sound basis for critique. However, religion is an essential tool to create a connection with an entire generation. Younger, less discerning populations of Muslims are joyous to see actors like themselves become part of the fantastical realm of movies and, in a way, those who represent their versions of mythological divinity.

In the grand scheme, the fact that Ms Marvel is a Jinn is only an ancillary detail. However, because she can execute her superpowers to positive social ends while displaying a spectacular show of force, with a sense of humorous quick wit and flex, she can win the hearts of young onlookers by romanticising their versions of exemplarity. There is no doubt that while she will become an indispensable role model and influencer for millions of Muslim youths, the danger is that all other characteristic, and often secular, ethos associated with her, when parlayed through a pedantic and academic focus, will permeate the impression that whatever she embodies through her values is the honest Islam or a value system rooted therein. This way, modern secularism's subversive approach to gain access to the Muslim mind, or any other persuasion, is the reason religion is so vital to the secular ideal. Hollywood's interface with Islam has never dared to venture at a philosophical level, let alone a theological one. However, one thing that Hollywood cannot be forgiven for is its desperate ignorance of the Islamic faith. The only viable ideological precept it can find is a creation that is exophysical, all the while viciously lambasting all other metaphysical, more significant concepts of the Islamic narrative. Islam is not alone in this comical treatment of its tenets, as all other religions are construed in similar strawman caricatures of divinity.

A more important truth that this phenomenon reveals is that secularism engenders its peculiar wishful grievance toward religion stemming from its disinclination to fight for justice. A superhero is

typically an ideological outsider (other), someone who aspires to be god incarnate or at least an agency of change whose job is to clean up the mess created on planet Earth by rowdy, reckless juveniles who are too inept to see through the indictment of inequality created by them or too guilty to avoid being party to it. In a way, most of the superhero movies share this basic plot that the immediate prelude to the advent of a superhero is, in fact, a means for the civilisation to shed light on its own ethical and moral poverty, which is produced by indulgences anchored in its self-promotion. However, when the established power fails to contain the resultant evil or suffering as a product of its choices, the combined apex of human progress and its leadership rolls its eyes to the heavens to construct mythical creatures and supernatural deities so that they can be fashioned to prepare their descent to a world of profane in the hope that it can be reset back to its original and pristine self.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of a superhero enjoys a prophetic legacy or, in other places, divine acumen. Their phantasm and otherworldliness are owed to an inherent need in the human psyche to revere exemplarity in anthropomorphic but consecrated and sacral displacement. Supernatural powers are the contents of legends, but they are much easier to relate to when they can be personified. A philological manifestation of concepts is historically available to modern civilisation through art or scripture; however, in recent times, it has been sentimentalised in nationalistic terms. Recent history is rife with founding fathers, national heroes, armed liberators, etc. However, exemplarity continues beyond there. It is no accident that German Nazis (Whyte, 2008) took a particular likening to Nietzsche's Übermensch while the rest of Europe continued to treat him as the "European Buddha" (Bilimoria, 2008). Eugène Delacroix's painting "The Liberty" became an equally abstract ideal of "freedom" in the form of a woman (Ringbom, 1968). These allegories remind us that superheroes are best placed in a sacral yet distant universe of nobility because the world of profane cannot trash their virtuosity and purity. A hundred years ago, the Ku Klux Klan made a crude attempt to instruct this ideal in the vein of bloodline, but it failed due to a shifting zeitgeist. Today, with the help of technology, Hollywood can enact fantastical worlds of gods and goddesses, playing out their altercations inside a sanitised and sacralised realm. At the same time, the rest of the population can pay to watch these legends come to life.

Meanwhile, modern democratic systems insist within their constitutional texts and public relations bulletins that contemporary society has no place for religious thought. When it does allow it, it is contained, detained, and scrutinised within ideological quarantines lest it contaminate other non-religious ones. Seen through the lens of Hollywood's exemplarity, conventional religion has no place for the rest of society. However, there is a version of religion that is indeed the religion of the gods and goddesses of Hollywood. These new gods are paragons of virtue, existing in a world of higher order, bestowing manhood upon the plebian ordinariness, sanctioning physiological and aesthetic standards of perfection on anthropoids of the lesser ilk, teaching them their history through temperance and charity, and finally, delivering felicity through self-indulged platforms of social media.

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