



Faith and Fandom: Pop Culture Villainy in Twenty-First-Century Spirituality

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Abstract: The ever-growing fusion of popular culture into belief systems has produced a twenty-first-century rise in commercialized religious and spiritual by-products. Subsequently, faith-based practitioners are also simultaneously consumers of mainstream entertainment. From comics-themed sermons and graphic adaptations of the Bible to the influences of Disney and cultural fairy tales onto occultism, spiritual practices now offer a welcoming gateway for modern generations who feel affection toward pop culture fandoms. This article explores various ways that religion and spirituality have commercialized and celebrated beloved fictional stories—especially in approaches that exemplify contemporary audiences' deep fascinations toward villains. This exploration spans three topics centered on religious-associated commercialized experiences and products: The evolution of contemporary stained glass from religious architecture to entertaining décor, collaborations between popularized fictional villains and contemporary Christianity, and the rise of mainstreamed occultism through a focus on the exponential expansion of pop culture-themed divination decks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, opposing criticisms are presented as juxtapositions to the successful proliferation of secularized spirituality, commercialized consecration, and fusions of faith and fandom.

Keywords: *Fandom, Spirituality, Pop Culture, Villains, Entertainment, Disney, Fairy Tales, Divination*

Introduction

The twenty-first century is experiencing a significant increase in the intersection of spirituality and popular culture. Retheming religious experiences and products through a prism of mainstream secularism is now common practice. With the rise of entertainment brands, product accessibility, and digital connectivity, sacred and secular intersections allow people to engage with and participate in two communities simultaneously—spiritual practitioners (in the broader sense) and popular culture fandoms.

Moreover, within these growing trends of commercialized consecration and secularized spirituality exists an observable pillar of villainy fascination. Contemporary consumers of entertainment often display deep levels of affection toward fictional villains, antiheroes, and antagonists who rival and even exceed the popularity of heroic figures (Hodge 2020a; Hodge and McLain 2021). Consequently, modern-day popular culture influences on religious retheming have leaned largely toward beloved villainous characters.

This article subsequently explores three unique topics in which famous popular culture stories—especially ones involving infamous villains—have invaded spaces traditionally viewed as holy, sacred, or spiritual. From comic books and superhero franchises to Disney and

traditional fairy tales, this article discusses these growing cultural influences on traditionally religious architecture (specifically stained glass), contemporary Christianity, and mainstreamed occultism during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the twenty-first century experiencing simultaneous risings of nontraditional religious practices, commercialized spirituality, and villain-centric popular culture fandoms, their observable intersections and crossovers are important to discuss for the furthering of scholarly explorations surrounding the evolution of historic religiosity within popularized sectors of contemporary mainstream culture.

Definitions

It is pertinent to initially define key concepts that appear throughout this article relating to spirituality and popular culture fandom. Broadly speaking, “spirituality” is an individual practice associated with seeking a sense of peace, purpose, connectedness, and meaning (Bone 2015; Victor and Treschuk 2020). Subsequently, “spiritual practitioners” are people who embrace aspirational approaches (whether religious or secular) through purposeful engagement in activities (such as traditions or rituals) related to spiritual development and enlightenment that are consolidated through intentional frameworks of action (Sheldrake 2012).

Additionally, spirituality is often associated with the concept of “faith,” which is an emotions-based process, typically within a spiritual or religious framework, that attempts to assign meanings to challenging or unknowable situations, transform perceived reality, or establish a relationship with a higher power (such as God, deities, nature, or the universe) (Ramírez-Johnson et al. 2002; Victor and Treschuk 2020). Although “spirituality” and “faith” are frequently associated with “religion,” these concepts have stark differences. Religion is rooted in definitive set systems (personal or institutionalized) of beliefs, practices, and dogma; spirituality and faith are more abstract and subjective, allowing a person to bypass organized religious values with autonomy over defining their own beliefs and philosophies (Bone 2015; Ramírez-Johnson et al. 2002; Victor and Treschuk 2020).

When considering the vast scope of religions, there are specific belief systems referenced in this article that need to be defined. “Christianity” consists of a large number of groups differentiated by their interpretations and assumptions about the nature of God, Jesus Christ, biblical text, church traditions, and theology—with Catholicism and Protestantism being the largest Christian denominations (Hilbun 2007; Martin 2010). Despite differences in theologies and biblical interpretations, both Catholicism and Protestant denominations believe in fundamental principles of Christianity: humans were created in God’s image; the Bible is the word of God; Jesus Christ is the son of God who resurrected and will one day return to fulfill the Kingdom of God; Salvation is through Christ; Satan is a real and evil presence; Heaven is eternal communion with God; and Hell is eternal separation from God (Laurent 2007; Hilbun 2007; Thiessen et al. 2018; The Holy See 2019). Furthermore, there are popular divisions within these prominent faith systems. Examples include the “Jesuits” (referring to the official religious order of men within the Catholic Church who founded

educational institutions around the world) and major denominational families within Protestantism (such as “Methodist,” “Presbyterian,” and “Baptist”) (Hilbun 2007; Martin 2010).

Spirituality and religion have become increasingly separated in contemporary times, especially in Western countries, due to declining affiliations with traditional religions and theologies (such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) (Bone 2015; Sheldrake 2012). Recent decades have also experienced growing levels of commercialization and commodification of spiritual experiences and goods (such as yogic practices, spiritual retreats, New Ageism consumption, Neopaganism movements, and tourism centered on voodoo and witchcraft) (Bone 2015; Sheldrake 2012; Kitta 2020; Gencarella 2007). Due to a reported increase in the popularity of spirituality that does not adhere to organized religion, especially within the Western world, a prevalence of “secular spirituality”—meaning nondogmatic spirituality—has emerged within contemporary culture (Walach 2015, 1–2; Shaw 2005, 353–354).

As iterations of sacred and secular spiritualities moved into more mainstreamed and marketed spaces, these belief systems forged intersections with popular culture fandoms. In general, “popular culture fandoms” are reciprocal convergences of “popular culture” (often abbreviated as “pop culture”), which typically consists of commercially produced cultural products that earn widespread favor and mass appeal, and “fandoms,” which are subcultures of created communities consisting of people (referred to as “fans”) who are connected in their deep passions for specific shared interests (Reichenberger 2021; Storey 2018; Dunn 2020; Thorne and Bruner 2006). With the twenty-first century experiencing unparalleled mainstreaming of entertainment fandoms, contemporary popular culture is now “defined and dominated by the fan” (Dunn 2020, xvi).

The intrinsic values of consuming entertainment based on fictional narratives have increasingly deepened from the perspective of fandom participants. Contemporary fans not only can find positive enjoyment through pop culture entertainment, but they can also gain perceived meaningful insight into the pondering of human existence—a perception that connects both pop culture fandom and spirituality in their practices of “developing beliefs around the meaning of life and connection with others” (Taylor and Gil-Lopez 2020, 21; Bone 2015, 124). Moreover, if the fascination with villain characters is a leading pillar of modern entertainment fandom, their increasing presence in crossovers between spirituality and pop culture is expected and inevitable (Hodge 2020a; Hodge and McLain 2021). These modern villain-themed marriages of sacred and secular, spirituality and pop culture, and faith and fandom are evident in contemporized versions of three specific topics that this article explores: contemporary stained glass, contemporary Christianity, and divination decks.

Contemporary Stained Glass

One visible art form deeply rooted in religious associations is the craft of stained-glass windows (which involves a process of assembling pieces of colored glass into patterned window frames). Stained-glass windows have existed since ancient Rome, but the artistry

soared in popularity during Europe's medieval era between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, where magnificent stained-glass windows were a pillar of Gothic architecture within large cathedrals, churches, and monasteries (Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters 2001). Although stained-glass windows served practical purposes, such as filtering in natural light while providing privacy, they also served spiritual purposes within Christianity (Faith 2019). Medieval religious leaders considered the enormous sizes and visual possibilities of stained-glass windows to be useful in educating their mostly illiterate congregations on salient biblical scriptures, stories, and lessons; essentially, "these windows served as theological teachers" for the masses (Marks 1993, 78; Lerew 2019). Additionally, stained-glass windows offered more unique representations of Christianity in contrast to wall paintings and sculptures. "Light" was a common theme in Medieval sermons because it was viewed as "a symbol of God's presence," while the "multi-coloured, glittering transparency of stained glass" was perceived as beautiful symbolism of "the heavenly Jerusalem built of shimmering gold and precious stones" as described in Revelation 21:9-10 (Marks 1993, 59).

The twentieth century saw a proliferation of stained-glass work following the restoration needs from the destruction and damage of religious buildings during both World Wars, as well as Germany becoming a hub for stained-glass education post-World War II and the emergence of colored glass as an architectural art form in the United States (Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters 2001; Jekabson, n.d.; The Stained Glass Museum, n.d.; Westminster Abbey, n.d.). During this artistic boom of the craft, numerous artists chose to contemporize the glasswork by moving away from religious iconography to pop art styling. Subsequently, several prestigious art museum exhibits have been curated in recent decades to showcase this growth of autonomous glass art emancipated from religion (Chrysler Museum of Art, n.d.; Jekabson, n.d.; Nalewicki 2021). An additional twenty-first-century by-product of this artistic autonomy is a growing trend of stained-glass work reflecting not just abstract pop art stylings but specific mainstream entertainment with an emphasis on beloved pop culture villains.

One example is found at Disneyland Paris in France, Europe's most-visited tourist attraction (Reid 2023). Visitors can walk inside the park's icon landmark, Le Château de la Belle au Bois Dormant, the Sleeping Beauty Castle, and enter an upstairs circular walkthrough exhibit that visually tells the story of Disney's 1959 animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (Disneyland Paris, n.d.). The gallery attraction, which opened to guests in 1993, consists of decadent illustrated books, enlarged woven tapestries, sculpted statues, and a series of gigantic stained-glass arch windows embedded within stone walls—a visual reminiscent of medieval Gothic architecture practices. These colored windows inside the attraction were created by Paul Chapman, an English stained-glass specialist whose work had included helping restore windows at iconic religious structures such as Notre Dame Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. Chapman chose to come out of retirement for the Disney Castle project because he was reportedly excited at the chance to craft stained-glass windows that told a fairy tale story instead of traditional religious imagery (Volk-Weiss 2021). As attendees stroll

through the exhibit, they will notice that the character Maleficent, one of Disney's most recognizable villains, is prominently featured and alluded to in a significant majority of the visuals (including her human form, her dragon transformation, her threatening curses, and her raven and henchmen sidekicks). The result is a looping gallery of memorable scenes from the classic Disney film—with Maleficent as the leading focal point—presented in the same way that biblical figures were displayed during the explosion of Medieval religious art: through grand stained-glass windows embedded within the stone walls of a massive European structure. Only this time, it is not a Christian story decorating the walls of a cathedral sanctuary but a villain-led fairy tale circling the interior foyer of a theme park castle.

Similarly, a Netherlands-based Dutch artist named Arjan Boeve, who has dubbed himself “The Stained Glass Geek,” enjoys subverting the traditional religious associations of colored glass by designing contemporary pop art stained glass inspired by entertainment industries. His pieces include numerous images from video games, movies, comic books, anime, and mainstream culture (Boeve 2021a; Stained Glass Geek, n.d.; 60 Second Docs 2019). More specifically, a significant number of his designs focus on pop culture villains, antagonists, antiheroes, and macabre imagery. Examples of these designs include characters from the Mario franchise (such as Bowser, King Boo, Bullet Bill, Shy Guy, Dry Bones, Piranha Plant, Goomba, Blooper, Thwomp, and Bob-omb), Disney (such as Maleficent, Captain Hook, Hades, Yzma, Jack Skeleton, and Cheshire Cat), Marvel (such as Deadpool and Thanos), Pokémon (such as Salamence and Gengar), Star Wars (such as Boba Fett, TIE Fighters, and lightsabers and helmets for Darth Vader, Stormtroopers, Flametroopers, and Sith Troopers), and Halloween-type visuals (such as skulls, bats, jack-o'-lanterns, ghosts, and UFOs). Boeve's entertaining craftsmanship has garnered him international media attention and high-profile professional collaborations. During multiple interviews in recent years, he consistently describes his passion as a young artist to inspire fresh excitement into a traditional art form often perceived as extremely ancient and religious, believing replacing church imagery with pop culture content can help ensure the twenty-first-century survival of the craft throughout modern generations (Boeve 2021b; 60 Second Docs 2019; Stained Glass Geek YouTube Channel, n.d.; Stoughton 2021; Voyage Phoenix 2022).

Contemporary consumers are also not limited to visiting museums or attractions to awe at their favorite villainous characters immortalized in a similar artistic process as biblical figures were centuries ago. This niche of colored glass pop art can be purchased and displayed within one's personal spaces with the click of a button. For example, leading online retail and e-commerce companies such as Amazon and eBay currently display hundreds of results for the keywords search “stained glass villain,” with a majority of the products featuring Disney villains. Moreover, decorative handmade and custom stained-glass products are easier than ever to find and purchase with the rise of online marketplace platforms. Popular artisan marketplaces such as Etsy and Bonanza similarly produce hundreds of results for the keywords search “stained glass villain,” again with the majority themed to Disney villains. The lengthy journey of stained-glass utility and imagery reflects the evolution of society's

perception of art. What began as luminous sacred-themed windows in medieval cathedrals became twentieth-century abstract pop art admired in museum exhibits before ultimately arriving in people's homes as secular fandom décor.

Contemporary Christianity

Comic book stories are traditionally rooted in the traditional themes of good overcoming evil (Oliker 2001; Hall and Lucal 1999). Since this notion of moral responsibility is also prevalent in religious teachings, popular stories about superheroes and their archenemies have been injected into churchgoing experiences. In recent decades, pastors have delivered sermons from their pulpits that aim to inspire their congregation members by blending figures and stories taken from the pages of comic books and the Christian Bible.

Religious leaders in multiple states have executed comics-themed lessons. H. Michael Brewer, a Kentucky-based Presbyterian pastor and religious studies professor, preached the importance of building a family and supportive relationships by using *The Fantastic Four* as the subject matter (Ward 2005). Brewer's interpretation of the comic was that a group of diverse and flawed humans—Mr. Fantastic, The Invisible Woman, The Human Torch, and The Thing—are brought together by a crisis and must become an unconventional family in order to save the world from the evil Dr. Doom. The pastor asserted that this story could serve as a metaphor for the church, a diverse group of humans flawed by sin who must work together to help save the world, assumingly through evangelical efforts. He also believed that Christians could perceive Superman as a symbolic reference to Jesus Christ, with both being Messiah-like figures who come to Earth to save humanity.

Brewer further expanded his fascination with comics into his 2004 published book entitled *Who Needs a Superhero? Finding Virtue, Vice, and What's Holy in the Comics* (Brewer 2004). Each chapter of the book argues that the substance of modern mythological heroes and villains can directly correlate with scriptural analysis within the Bible. Daredevil's superpower of sensory discernment is connected to scriptures spanning books in the Old Testament (2 Kings, Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah) and the New Testament (1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and Luke)—including the verse that describes mature Christians as those “who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14, NASB; Brewer 2004). Verses in the books of John, Ephesians, and Philippians—including “As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:19, NIV)—are quoted to exemplify how Christians are called to be like X-Men (a group of persecuted but powerful outsiders): be in the world but not of the world (Brewer 2004). Wonder Woman's moral stance on integral honesty toward oneself and others, as represented by her magical lasso of truth, is connected to verses in Genesis, Luke, John, and 1 John, such as “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32, NIV; Brewer 2004). Scripture on controlling one's own destructive patterns, as found in the books of John, Isaiah, and Romans—including “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do” (Romans 7:15, NIV)—are referenced in

connections to the ultimate powerful yet uncontrollably destructive superhero: The Hulk (Brewer 2004). Brewer also discusses the juxtaposition between the heroic Green Arrow and the violent antihero The Punisher to illustrate misconceptions he believes exist about the nature of God, referencing verses from Psalms, Isaiah, and John—such as “[God] will bend and string his bow. He has prepared his deadly weapons; he makes ready his flaming arrows” (Psalms 7:12–13, NIV; Brewer 2004).

Another Presbyterian pastor who reportedly enjoyed comic book themes was Andy McClung in Tennessee. McClung incorporated Spider-Man into his sermons on the responsibility that comes with the power of being a follower of Christ—a religious interpretation of Spider-Man’s famous adage “With great power comes great responsibility” (Ward 2005; Marvel, n.d.). On the day that McClung baptized his son, he preached a sermon on the parental responsibility he was feeling to raise his child as a follower of Christ. Subsequently, he themed his message by comparing himself to Spider-Man and how the character’s journey leads him to accept and embrace the heavy responsibility that accompanies his superpower (a responsibility in the comics that involves defeating the superhero’s iconic nemeses such as The Green Goblin, Doc Ock, Mysterio, The Lizard, Electro, Sandman, and Venom).

Joshua Combs, a Michigan-based children’s minister, executed an even lengthier and more dedicated version of theming biblical teachings to famous superhero comic books and movies (Ward 2005). Combs designed a Batman-themed series for his Protestant-based church that lasted six months and hosted over 1,000 children, with immersive elements including a church room painted with Gotham City murals and a \$1,000 Batman costume worn by Combs (Ward 2005). The Michigan minister, who expressed being inspired by Brewer’s book *Who Needs a Superhero?*, chose to heighten the entertainment factor of the series by focusing on many of the notorious villains that collectively make up Batman’s infamous Rogues Gallery. These topics included sin is no joking matter (the Joker), God will never trick us (the Riddler), and Satan is a two-faced deceiver (Two-Face). Batman’s reliance on his beloved allies, such as Batgirl and Robin, was also used to exemplify how Christians must rely on God to help save the world. Combs expressed his desire for religion to follow his path toward embracing cultural heroes and villains during a 2005 interview, stating, “A lot of times, in churches, we stay away from the experimental; Instead of fearing popular culture, we just snagg’d it and claimed it” (Ward 2005).

The intersection of pop culture villains and contemporary Christianity is not only rooted in the world of comic books. Famous foes from classic fairy tales have been treated with modern-day biblical interpretations—especially characters who have been highly commercialized by “Disney’s monopoly on the fairy tale” (Chang and Luh 2022, 103). G. Ronald Murphy, an emeritus professor of Georgetown University and Jesuit priest, published his award-winning book *The Owl, The Raven, and the Dove: The Religious Meaning of the Grimm’s Magic Fairy Tales*, which argues for the reported and observable Christian influences onto the story versions shaped by the famous German writers (Murphy 2000). In his book, Murphy

dissects five famous fairy tales that are well known in today's pop culture entertainment—*Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Hansel & Gretel*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*—to argue symbolic religiosity within the tales and connect them to the theology-themed notations penned by Wilhelm Grimm, who was the principal editor and final narrative constructor of the stories published by him and his brother (Murphy 2000). One example of Murphy's Christian interpretations is the representation of Christ's apostles (a devout group of protective followers and imparters of wisdom) found within *Snow White*'s dwarfs and *Sleeping Beauty*'s fairies. Another of his argued symbolisms is Satan's earthly form as a tempting serpent who convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (as described in Genesis 3:1–24); Murphy believes that this form of Satan is portrayed in cannibalistic fairy tale figures who disguise themselves and their true wicked intentions while tricking protagonists with tactics involving food: The witch in *Hansel & Gretel* lures and seduces the titular characters with a house made of delicious treats; the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* pretends to be the girl's grandmother to whom she was bringing food; and the wicked queen in *Snow White* disguises herself to trick the princess into eating a poisoned apple.

Moreover, Murphy (2000) interprets the various journeys through the woods that many fairy tale characters must make as representing the temptation and salvation found within the Garden of Eden. Additionally, the wolf's ability to persuade Red Riding Hood from her straightforward path is perceived as a symbol of "the Fall" that mankind experienced as a result of Adam and Eve being swayed off their Godly path by the tempting serpent in Eden (Murphy 2000, 80–81). Furthermore, the hunter who saves the devoured Red Riding Hood and grandmother from the belly of the beast is asserted to be a Christ-like Savior who resurrects people from their deaths. Similarly, Murphy attests that Cinderella's story (a good-hearted girl with a spiritual connection to her deceased loved ones) strongly displays reflections of Christ-led spiritual lessons and themes from the biblical New Testament, such as "the communion of saints" (meaning the spiritual connectedness between all believers in Christ) and the "Beatitudes" (a series of salvation-based ethical guidelines preached by Christ in Matthew 5:1–12) (Murphy 2000, 100–105; O'Connell-Cahill 2014; Ross 2006).

For all of these Christian church leaders and parishioners, God and Jesus Christ are the ultimate heroic saviors, while Satan and the sins of a fallen world are the villainous obstacles that should be decried and overcome. Additionally, twenty-first-century Christian pastors no longer have to rely on their own creativity to craft thematic messages. Online marketplaces now provide religious leaders with downloadable content and ideas for infusing discussions of pop culture heroes and villains into their stories. The popular online marketplace Sermon Central, which allows its paying members to buy and sell sermons, hosts a plethora of ready-made, customizable products that include sermon transcripts accompanied by graphics and slide presentations. One popular series available for purchase is entitled "Holy Heroes." The series, which has earned nearly 60,000 views to date, consists of sermons created by an Illinois-based minister, all themed to one of eight different superhero properties: Superman, Thor, Batman, Fantastic Four, X-Men, Iron Man, Captain America, and Spider-Man (Bayles 2013).

Each sermon uses its assigned comic book story as a modern-day parable to illustrate a spiritual lesson by connecting specific biblical scripture and faith-based teachings to similar themes and concepts played out by the comic heroes and villains.

Similarly, Oklahoma-based pastor Steve Ely has contributed numerous sermons to the Sermon Central marketplace, many of which are themed to pop culture's fascination with good versus evil. One example is his comics-inspired "Heroes vs. Villains" series, which has collectively earned nearly 2,500 views to date, consisting of sermons themed to Affinity Wars, Superman, The Hulk, and Hero Worship (Ely 2022b). Other examples include Ely's multiple "Fairy Tales" series, which have collectively earned nearly 33,000 views to date, consisting of sermons themed to Humpty Dumpty, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin, Three Little Pigs, The Princess and the Pea, The Gingerbread Man, The Emperor's New Clothes, Chicken Little, Three Billy Goats Gruff, and Goldilocks and the Three Bears (Ely 2019, 2020, 2022a).

Furthermore, the marriage of comic books and the Bible does not end with themed sermons. Devoted fans of scripture, superheroes, and supervillains can now engage in the visual aesthetics of a graphic Bible. Kingstone Comics (2023) publishes their Kingstone Bible, a comics-style series, divided into individual issues or combined into larger three to six volumes, that the company advertises as "the most complete graphic adaptation of the Bible ever done." Artists who had previous working experiences with DC Comics and Marvel teamed together to design the holistic scope of the Bible in the artistic style of colorful comic books. The massive project consists of 10,000 panels spanning nearly 2,000 full-color pages that chronologically retell the stories of the Bible through modernized English presented in the comic stylings of speech balloons within sequential art. Similar to comic books, Biblical villains—such as the many forms of Satan, demons, evil rulers, ruthless foes, and monstrous creatures—are prominently featured on several of the covers, inked with drawing design techniques that are often observed in the art stylings of comic villains, including beady eyes, angular features, and sinister expressions.

Whether in sermons, books, or biblical graphics, contemporary Christianity is experiencing a generational movement toward embracing pop culture's fascination with superheroes and infamous villains more than ever. During the 1950s, the United States experienced an inflamed widespread fear that comic books were morally degrading the nation's impressionable youth, stemming from the 1954 bestselling book *Seduction of the Innocent* written by German-born American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. Wertham's book argued that comics were a major cause of juvenile delinquency, with part of his argument specifying a perceived problematic empathetic and fanatic relationship between young readers and fictional villains (New York Public Library, n.d.; Wertham 1954). These growing concerns about the moral and ethical consequences of comics led to a series of US Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency, followed by the comic book industry establishing a self-regulating entity called the Comics Code Authority (González 2022). Despite these fears of moral corruption and fights for censorship, heroes and villains continued to play out on

comic book pages and screens for the rest of the 1900s. Now, in the twenty-first century, Christian youth can attend church with a comic-style graphic Bible in hand while engaging with their favorite supervillains from the pulpit.

Divination Decks and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The growing intersection of traditional divination decks and contemporary pop culture has resulted in an exponential rise in fandom producers and consumers in the twenty-first century. With the internet's ever-evolving expansive offerings of digital platforms, online marketplaces, and social media, modern New Age practitioners and followers of divination have constructed a subculture of belief systems overlaid with thematic imagery from the entertainment industry. This growing trend has resulted in both companionship and clashing between counterculture spirituality and mainstream commercialism, a connection that twenty-first-century scholars discuss in observations of religious-like passion and ritualistic behavior within contemporary consumer culture (Wang 2018; Wu, Wang, and Hao 2018; Sarkar and Sarkar 2018).

In recent years, this spiritual crossover with pop culture has arguably been most evident in the tarot community. The history of tarot's trajectory began in the fifteenth century solely as a card game for the Italian nobility before evolving internationally into a popular esoteric divination tool during the nineteenth-century occult revivals and twentieth-century movements centered on Neopaganism and New Age (Farley 2009; Bailey 2021). Furthermore, tarot became increasingly popular among specific pagan magic-centered religions such as Wicca, a belief system that has become a cultural phenomenon in recent decades and is reportedly the fastest-growing religion in America (Hodge 2020b).

As the practice of tarot reading has become more accessible throughout the twenty-first century, so has its mainstream popularity and commercial appeal—a cultural embrace that reached new heights during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. During widespread lockdowns, virtual connection and entertainment became more psychologically and societally significant. The highly visual artistry and practice of tarot allowed for easy consumption on screens, including live-streamed readings on visual programs like TikTok and deck unboxing videos on platforms like YouTube and Twitch. Additionally, younger people are the continuously leading demographics for social media usage, spirituality exploration, pop culture fandom, and consumer purchasing power (Pew Research Center 2021; Winseman 2003; Iterable 2021; Kresnicka 2016; Pagliarulo 2022). The culmination of these categories has climaxed since the 2020 pandemic, with tarot being a prime example. US Games Systems, one of the major publishers of divination decks, estimated that their tarot sales tripled during the first year of the pandemic, a spike that the company believes reflected people seeking ways to process anxiety and fear (Bailey 2021). This expansive interest in tarot during the pandemic has also been described as a “self-care phenomenon” and “a response to widespread anxiety and sociopolitical instability...an attempt to find meaning in an impervious, chaotic world” (Hunt 2021).

Other publishers and company holders of entertainment intellectual properties seemingly noticed this rise in tarot's popularity during the pandemic. The production of pop culture tarot decks has drastically increased since 2020. Before 2020, divination decks themed after beloved entertainment were largely designed and posted online by fans without being legally licensed (Romano 2015; Greene 2021b). Since 2020, entertainment corporations have officially joined the tarot industry by approving licensed decks. Examples of these licensed products include decks themed to Disney, DC Comics, Marvel, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Supernatural*, *Stranger Things*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Labyrinth*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Star Trek*, *The Dark Crystal*, *Garbage Pail Kids*, and Universal Monsters. Observably, the Disney-branded decks have been the most popular and commercially successful series of contemporary tarot products, all being released within the last three years by the publisher Inside Editions. To date, Disney's four different official tarot decks—*The Nightmare Before Christmas* (2020), *Disney Villains* (2021), *Alice in Wonderland* (2022), and *Hocus Pocus* (2022)—have collectively earned over 17,000 ratings on Amazon.com with an 88% average of five-star ratings (the highest available rating option) and over four million uses of the hashtag #disneytarot on TikTok.

A significant reason for the ease with which famed entertainment properties are able to translate to tarot is the visual organization of the deck. Today's standardized tarot decks consist of seventy-eight cards that are divided into two sections: The Major Arcana and the Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana consists of twenty-two unique cards, numbered zero through XXI, with descriptor titles such as The Fool, The Magician, The High Priestess, The Empress, Death, The Devil, The Tower, The Star, The Moon, and The Sun. The Minor Arcana consists of fifty-six cards spanning four suits: Wands, Swords, Cups, and Pentacles (sometimes referred to as Coins); each suit contains cards numbered from ace to ten and four court cards—King, Queen, Page, and Knight. It is in the Major Arcana where the different entertainment themes can be extensively customized. The most famous and widely used tarot set version is called the Rider-Waite deck, which was drawn in 1909 by artist Pamela Colman Smith under the commission of occultist scholar Arthur Edward Waite (Palumbo 2022). Each one of Smith's Major Arcana cards displays artwork of a unique figure or symbol, a pattern which now allows for more modern pop culture retheming to showcase recognizable characters and imagery.

Furthermore, since divination decks are often stereotypically associated with occultism, witchcraft, fortune-telling, and mysticism, entertainment entities seemingly respond in kind by licensing themes with prominent villains or macabre characters. In modern-day pop culture fandom, villains and antiheroes often equal or even surpass the cultural popularity and presence of their heroic counterparts (Hodge 2020a; Hodge and McLain 2021). Subsequently, a majority of the officially licensed decks that premiered during the recent pandemic prominently feature these types of darker characters. Three out of the four Disney tarot decks are completely dedicated to beloved villains and macabre worlds: *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Disney Villains*, and *Hocus Pocus*. The official tarot decks that celebrate edgier television series include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Supernatural*, and *Stranger Things*.

Universal's tarot deck holistically celebrates its roster of cinematic monsters, while DC Comic's tarot deck prominently displays iconic antagonists on their box packaging. Each of these tarot products takes advantage of the Major Arcana cards to highlight their popular gallery of fan-favorite villains.

Take the DC and Disney decks as examples of retheming. The Fool card in the classic Rider-Waite deck (which represents a meaning of free spirit and naivety) displays a distracted man on the verge of accidentally walking off of a ledge; yet today's tarot readers can pull a Fool card that showcases Harley Quinn, Kronk, or Jack Skellington. If one pulls the Magician card (symbolizing manifested desire or trickery), it could now feature Dr. Facilier, Winifred Sanderson, or the Mad Hatter. The feminine power of the Empress card (which means nature, motherhood, or smothering nosiness) is now represented by villainesses such as Poison Ivy, Queen of Hearts, and Mother Gothel. Similarly, the High Priestess card (predicting powerful intuition) is now presented through the images of Maleficent or Sarah Sanderson. Both the Devil and Death cards (which represent metamorphosis and reclaimed control) highlight Disney's darker figures like Chernabog, Oogie Boogie, and Hades. Meanwhile, two of Batman's most enduring and complicated adversaries, The Joker and Catwoman, are on full display on the Tower and Moon cards (which are associated with chaos and confusion). The court figures for each Minor Arcana suit also now take on colorful Disney villain identities: The King and Queen of Wands are Jafar and Evil Queen (a suit representing powerful creativity and the element of fire); Scar and Lady Tremaine are the Swords' King and Queen (a suit connected to ambitious intellect and the element of air); The Cups include King Captain Hook and Queen Ursula (a suit symbolizing relational emotions and the element of water), and the King and Queen of Coins are Prince John and Medusa (a suit focused on the material world and the element of earth).

Despite tarot being a widely used type of card divination, it is not the only option. Oracle cards have also grown in popularity and pop culture tie-ins. Oracle decks are considered less structured and organized than tarot but are still read using similar symbolic interpretations for spiritual and enlightenment purposes. Subsequently, recent Oracle decks have also become themed with officially licensed or highly recognizable content. One example is the *Magic of Marvel Oracle Deck*, released in 2022, which highlights several of the company's popular antagonists, such as Doctor Doom, Doctor Octopus, Hela, Loki, Mystique, Venom, Thanos, and Scarlet Witch.

Other recent oracle examples include the *Alice: The Wonderland Oracle Deck* and *The Faerytale Oracle Deck*, with both using darker approaches to original public domain versions of stories now often associated with Disney properties. Their artwork and written guides veer toward alternative counterculture styles emphasizing messages rooted in the stories' villains and antagonistic challenges (e.g., cards showcasing eerily surrealistic depictions of the Queen of Hearts, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat, Little Red Riding Hood's wolf, and Snow White's poisoned apple). Perhaps these approaches aim to appeal to Disney fans without needing official licensing agreements; or, conversely, to appeal to folklore purists and

consumers who desire the original darker tones of fairy tales before the stories experienced “sanitization” through “Disneyfication” (Meslow 2012). Also, in addition to physical decks, both *Alice: The Wonderland Oracle* and *The Faerytale Oracle* are now readily available on electronic devices as downloadable applications, collectively earning hundreds of downloads and positive ratings to date, helping to bring digitalized divination to twenty-first-century practitioners and pop culture enthusiasts (Cavendish 2021a, 2021b; Oceanhouse Media 2023a; 2023b).

An additional significant example of thematic overlays lies within the card spreads for these recent tarot and oracle decks. The way cards are laid out in a spread is considered a powerful aspect of reading and interpreting pulled cards, including observing the specific card pulled and its upright or reversed (upside down) direction (all cards and spreads are explained in each deck’s accompanying guidebook). A three-card spread is traditionally a very common and easily adaptable way to organize three pulled cards that the reader can then assign meanings for, such as past–present–future or mind–body–spirit (Drolet 2021). The contemporary pop culture decks recommend multiple spreads to their users, each themed in their name. Besides more original spread layouts, most of the decks share in common a recommended three-card spread that is traditional in style while appearing fresh due to its new label. Examples of these themed three-card spreads include the “Eureka” spread (*The Nightmare Before Christmas Tarot*), the “Diamond in the Rough” spread (*Disney Villains Tarot*), the “Wisdom of Witches” spread (*Hocus Pocus Tarot*), the “Trinity” spread (*DC Tarot*), the “Lucifer’s Cage” spread (*Supernatural Tarot*), the “A Curiosity Voyage” spread (*Stranger Things Tarot*), the “Ready, Aim, Fire” spread (*Magic of Marvel Oracle*), and the “Three Times the Charm Spread” (*The Faerytale Oracle*) (Siegel and Larson 2020, 120–121; Siegel and Goldwine 2021, 122–123; Siegel, Schafer, and DreaD. 2022, 120–121; Gilly and 17th & Oak 2022, 124–125; Siegel and Skiff 2021, 122; Gilly and Szalay, 118; Gilly and Devia 2022, 62–63; Cavendish and Becket-Griffith 2017, 30).

Moreover, practitioners of divination decks—whether they be a traditional style or themed after modern pop culture—are offered recommended instructions on various ways to consecrate, cleanse, and intuitively connect with the cards. These recommended processes are described in various online and print resources, as well as in accompanying guidebooks to certain decks. Examples of how to establish a spiritual connection and consecration (meaning a declaration of something as sacred) include enacting a multistep ritual cleansing of yourself and the deck through salt and water, blessing the cards and creating a dedication to them, wrapping your deck in a silk cloth and keeping them in a special box or pouch with a crystal inside, leaving your deck out under moonlight overnight, sleeping near your cards for a few nights so their energies can subconsciously speak with you in your dreams, making a Book of Shadows and Light for journaling about your cards, and hand-sewing a special card reading cloth that has your intentions purposefully stitched into it (Cavendish and Becket-Griffith 2017, 2021; Esra 2022; Tiana, n.d.; Blake and Alba 2017; The Tarosophy Tarot Association, n.d.).

Criticisms

The meteoric rise of spiritual commercialization fueled by modern-day pop culture fandom seems to be hitting a cultural and commercial stride, yet dissenting and critical perspectives are also publicly present in both the spiritual and fandom communities. For example, some serious practitioners of occultism lament the injection of Disney theming into their products, with the argument being made, “If Disney gets into occult religions, are they even occult anymore?” (Greene 2021b). One pagan podcaster, Drew K. Prince, described his annoyance at Disney’s multiple Tarot decks, saying, “I don’t think Disney or any corporation should cash in on the magical arts. Whenever anything sacred becomes popularized, it generally becomes kitschy and loses its mystery. They might as well produce Mickey Mouse Jesus dashboard miniatures or Disney-themed Bibles” (Greene 2021b). Further contempt for giant corporations, like Disney, entering the tarot market was described in a recently published 2021 article for *The Guardian*, listing the *Disney Villains Tarot Deck* as another example of “when mystical goes mainstream” and tarot being exploited by the current trend of being “absorbed and repackaged by the mindless forces of capitalism it aims to counter” (Hunt 2021). Scholars have also published remarks decrying how a prominent emphasis on commerciality is reason enough to deny any validity of New Age movements and beliefs (Bone 2015; Redden 2002).

Conversely, other types of Disney fans argue that associating the company with occult heritages could tarnish the brand and “plant seeds of evil into children’s heads” (Greene 2021b). Disney’s recent perceived leanings into matters of witchcraft and the occult have angered vocal Christians. A 2020 article for the *Christian Broadcast Network* lambasted the company, declaring, “Over the years, Disney has gone farther and farther into the darkness of the spiritual world that opposes the living God” (Bunting 2020). Disney’s presentations of spiritual and religious themes in their properties have united some on both sides of the spectrum in their disapproval—those who follow the belief systems and those who reject them.

Additional criticism that branches off from tarot involves the commercialized media representation of voodoo and witchcraft, especially the portrayal of black women practitioners. Both voodoo and witchcraft can incorporate tarot reading within their spiritual practices, but there have been growing criticisms about how these practices are portrayed on screen for entertainment purposes. A 2020 *Variety* article interviewed real-life black witches and voodoo experts who criticized how popular entertainment often portrays practitioners of the spiritual arts who are women of color, stating they “are usually shown with evil tendencies and rarely get happy endings” (citing examples of characters in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *American Horror Story*, and *Charmed*) (Bell 2020). The interviewees in the article also expressed frustration with the inaccurate Hollywood depictions of practitioners being motivated by dark forces, stating, “It’s always either someone using curses, sacrificing animals, or calling on evil spirits” (Bell 2020). One prime

example of this type of depiction is the villainous Dr. Facilier in Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, a voodoo witch doctor who uses tarot to manipulate other characters.

The Princess and the Frog is not the only Disney film to receive criticism for its treatment of religious figures and themes. A 2002 article published by religion and film scholar Steven D. Greydanus ridiculed Disney animated movies for their depictions of spiritual-related content (Greydanus 2002). Greydanus's criticisms argued that Disney was displaying a rise of "negative images of Christianity as well as positive pagan or New-Age images" (Greydanus 2002). His examples of negative treatment of Christianity included his perceived distorted presentations of "contemptible" clergymen and "botched" church weddings in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney's excising of the central Christian theme in Hans Christian Andersen's original *The Little Mermaid* story (where the mermaid's deeper reasoning for marrying a human is rooted in obtaining an immortal soul for a heavenly afterlife), and the juxtaposition of the "explicitly catholic—twisted catholic" villain and "agnostic" female protagonist in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Greydanus 2002). Meanwhile, Greydanus argued that the films *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* contributed to the emergence of "an increasing development of pagan and New Age themes and imagery" (Greydanus 2002). Greydanus also interpreted *Aladdin* as a film that "carefully avoided any positive or negative reflections of Islam" with the goal of "not wanting to offend either Muslims or Christians" (Greydanus 2002). Conversely, a recent 2020 article published by media critic Aaron J. Alford accused Disney of leaning too far into Christian themes. Alford's article situates Disney's *Hercules* as an example of how he believes the company disrespects source material in favor of a more westernized Christian interpretation of stories. Concerning *Hercules*, Alford (2020) wrote, "This film is a Christian story driven by Christian values, not an ancient Greek story...Hades is nothing like the Christian devil, and the Greek underworld is nothing like Christian hell. Zeus is nothing like God, Hercules is nothing like Jesus, and Greek morality is nothing like Christian morality." Disney has not been able to avoid opposition from critics, whether it be content perceived as condoning or condemning religion.

Similar to the controversial depictions of Christianity in Disney films, there have been points of controversy regarding the relationship between Christianity and comic books. In 2019, DC Comics faced intense backlash for announcing an upcoming comic book titled *Second Coming*, which would have featured Jesus Christ returning to Earth to team up with a superhero named Sun-Man to complete his "most holy mission by God" (Burke 2019). The announcement of the comic led to a wave of vocal criticism and a widespread online petition that stated, "This blasphemous content should not be tolerated"; after the petition earned nearly a quarter of a million signatures, DC Comics ultimately decided to cancel the project before its release date as a result of this organized outrage (Burke 2019). However, this has not been the first time religious communities felt mocked by the comic book industry. *The Washington Post* printed an article in 1981 discussing the accusations that the comic book series *Crusader Comics* (published by Chick Publications) frequently attacked most religions, but with a specific "assault on Catholicism" (Kendall 1981). The article more specifically highlighted that the series

was “being sold by the thousands in evangelical Christian bookstores,” furthering a potentially broken relationship between evangelists and Catholics (Kendall 1981).

Conclusion

The rising fusion of sacred faith and secular fandom continues to evoke strong reactions from devoted religious practitioners, spiritual hobbyists, and critical dissenters. Subsequently, the significant fame and cultural impact of pop culture villain characters have become substantial contributing factors in the mainstream retheming of religious experiences and products within the twenty-first century. As modern generations find value in designing individualized belief systems, people who act as “spiritual explorers” adopt a notion of “unbundled faith”—which refers to “the unpacking, merging, and embracing of various elements from different religious and spiritual practices” (Greene 2021a). For instance, recent research reports that “many young Tarot readers continue to identify with a traditional faith,” essentially viewing alternative practices as supplements—not replacements—for traditional religions (Greene 2021a).

This rising comfortability in curating customized spirituality in the twenty-first century has led to unprecedented blends of traditional and alternative approaches to faith within the simultaneous blending of sacred and secular cultures. Contemporary approaches toward secularized spirituality and commercialized consecration are furthering the ongoing fusion of faith and fandom. Whether they be historically religious art repackaged as entertainment-themed décor, theological debates on the spiritual warfare of Heavenly salvation versus Hellish damnation, occult teachings of light over dark magic, or beloved villains antagonizing iconic superheroes, the depictions of “good” and “evil” are reaching new creative—and commercial—heights of entertainment and pop culture immersion.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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