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***“Movie Superheroes and Divine Play”***  
Paul V.M. Flesher

When is a human not a human? When he or she is a superhero!

As you race out to see the summer's latest superhero film, whether it is “Iron Man 3,” Superman in “Man of Steel,” or “The Wolverine,” take a moment to think about the nature of superheroes. What are they really?

While we can kid ourselves that they are merely super-human, that they are people with extra powers, we are really watching divine beings. Like the gods of Mt. Olympus and Valhalla, they may have human characteristics, even human failings, but their powers take their capabilities so far beyond human nature that they can only be thought of as gods.

Sure, Spiderman is a dorky kid who seems incapable of romancing Mary Jane, and Iron Man's fight against alcoholism (see the comic series “Demon in a Bottle”) is almost as tough as his other battles, but their featured fights are against foes who are beyond the ability of mere humans to combat.

Without their super powers, superheroes would be limited to abilities possessed by other people. But their supernatural character places them into the realm of the gods.

Indeed, rather than disqualifying them, superheroes' humble, human origins and existence enhance their god-like story. The Hindu god Krishna was born into and raised by a human family. He is known for liking butter balls when a child and, as a young man, for attracting and entertaining the village's young women (always chastely).

Even Christians believe that the god Jesus was born to a human mother, and at twelve he behaved like a thoughtless (not quite) teenager who upset his parents when he failed to come home with them.

Many of today's film superheroes began in comic books, such as the Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, the Black Widow and Captain America. By the middle of the twentieth century, the comic book genre was established in India as well, and the Hindu pantheon of gods, especially those with active and warrior reputations, have had their stories featured.

From the male gods Vishnu and Krishna to the female goddesses Durga and Kali, Hindu children have absorbed the exploits of these divine beings through comics. And the adventures narrated in those works are surprisingly similar to those of our comic-book heroes.

Take Superman and Krishna, for instance. Superman is from a heavenly realm, which we call a planet, where he was born to a different life. His strength and abilities are not unusual where he comes from. But he comes to earth and lives humbly among human beings, revealing himself only when danger threatens, and then returns to his humble identity as Clark Kent.

Krishna lives a similarly humble life. He works as a charioteer for a young nobleman named Arjuna, and only reveals himself on the eve of battle to impart wisdom and fight. After his amazing exploits, he returns to his identity as a chariot driver.

What about Jesus? On the one hand, in the gospels he only rarely strays from his character as a humble human “prophet” doing god's will. Even though the film “King of Kings” gave him opportunities to exercise his power, its message is that he did not do so.

On the other hand, beyond the gospels Jesus has taken on a warrior identity. Not only does Dispensational Theology portray him as coming to Christians' rescue at the rapture, swooping down to bring them up to a safe place, but during the final tribulation, he will fight Satan and his minions to the finish.

While dispensational beliefs routinely describe Jesus as a mighty warrior, it seems he will accomplish this without getting blood on his robe or mussing up his beautiful, long hair. While in Hinduism and Buddhism, the protector gods take on powerful, angry and frightening visages, American Protestants and other Christians continue to depict him as a mild-mannered, benevolent figure, whose loving attitude and smile is more apparent than his power to subdue God's enemies.

So perhaps our fascination with superheroes forms a substitute for a Jesus who is so kindly presented that we cannot imagine him uttering an angry word, let alone struggling against someone in battle and subduing them. Watch this summer as our films present the divine, military struggle missing from Christianity's iconography; the superhero gods are continually called upon to “save” humanity.