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HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE THEOLOGY OF DAILY LIFE IN COMIC BOOK STORIES¹

*Perspectivas hermenêuticas acerca da teologia do cotidiano
nas histórias em quadrinhos*

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Abstract: This study presents hermeneutical perspectives on the theology of daily life in comic book stories through a descriptive approach, stemming from a doctoral research grounded in a bibliographical and exploratory reading with a case study analysis. The study assumes the theology of daily life, that is, the use, in the sense understood by Michel de Certeau, which the authors of the comic make from religious elements, stitching them into their history and the centrality of narrative in the process of constitution of the human world. From this premise, it presents a possible reading of the theology of daily life in comic books from the super adventure genre. The research closes indicating thematic, methodological and ideological approaches between theology and super adventure. Theology and super adventure deal with the values dear to the human being, with the mythic structure and the human faculty of conceiving the ideal and adding it to the real.

Keywords: Theology of Daily Life. Pop Culture. Comics.

Resumo: O trabalho apresenta perspectivas hermenêuticas acerca da teologia do cotidiano nas histórias em quadrinhos por meio de uma abordagem descritiva, decorrente de uma pesquisa doutoral calcada numa leitura bibliográfica exploratória com análise de estudo de caso. O trabalho parte da premissa da teologia do cotidiano, isto é, do uso, no sentido compreendido por Michel de Certeau, que o autor do quadrinho faz de elementos religiosos, costurando-os em sua história e da centralidade da narrativa no processo de constituição do mundo humano. A partir dessa premissa, apresenta uma possibilidade de leitura da teologia do cotidiano nas histórias em quadrinhos a partir

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do gênero da superaventura. A pesquisa encerra indicando aproximações temáticas, metodológicas e ideológicas entre teologia e superaventura. Teologia e superaventura lidam com os valores caros ao ser humano, com a estrutura mítica e com a faculdade humana de conceber o ideal e de acrescentá-lo ao real.

Palavras-chave: Teologia do cotidiano. Cultura pop. Histórias em quadrinhos.

Introduction

Theology and super adventure are two arts of telling stories. They are ways to understand the world and our place in it because both shelter portraits of humanity and worldviews. Theology has always something to do with the more intimate side of each person in an attempt to structure their symbolic universe and to organize the world from the perspective of love. It deals with the meaning of living and dying and it is defined by the stories we tell, stories that are invocations of life and that talk about the meaning of living and dying through symbols of beauty. These stories, which theology is built from, are happening each time they are retold. Theology is not just a “church thing” or “academic stuff”. Long before linking to these spaces, theology meddles in everyday life and it emerges as the human activity of searching for meaning. This theology is called the theology of daily life, a kind of “theological common sense” that can be perceived in different cultural productions. Indeed theological reflection, throughout its history particularly linked to Christianity, was not always open to the “world’ stuff”. A theological reflection that enables this openness and this dialogue with the everyday social life is quite recent. Generally, this kind of reflection still suffers resistance from the traditional academies, which have difficulty in recognizing theology as a human production. In this direction, the present study already starts from a contemporary theological reflection. The reading and the importance of the theology of daily life and of a dialogue at the borders were conceived in a research that preceded this one: a study of the theological thinking of Rubem Alves.³ This study starts from the understanding that theology is an art, a way of telling stories/histories and, in doing so, theology structures our symbolic universe.

In turn, the super adventure genre is a narrative of the contemporary era. It constitutes a network of intertwined relationships that range from the dynamic and narrative processes to the interests and characteristics of a society and a social structure that was born after the Industrial Revolution. At the same time the super adventure genre integrates a collection of stories/histories that people tell to themselves and about themselves, it is conditioned by market structures: it needs to sell and, in order to sell, it needs to seduce; it needs to be a *locus* that expresses values/anxieties shared by a community, even if some of these values may have been induced by the industry that publishes the superhero stories. The situation, however, is much more complex,

³ Published in: REBLIN, Iuri Andréas. *Outros cheiros, outros sabores... o pensamento teológico de Rubem Alves*. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2009. 223p.

because, even though we criticize these stories and analyze them in a critical way, it is not possible to know exactly the different uses that people in their everyday life make of these narratives. And the suspicion of Nildo Viana is that people are drawn to the anxieties of the collective unconscious expressed in the stories by dreams of freedom and power shared by these narratives.⁴ The fact, in any case, is that the super adventure genre is a narrative steeped in contemporary popular imaginary.

Superheroes are a worldwide cultural phenomenon. While being a narrative, the super adventure genre is a reading of the world and, like theology, it seeks to say something to people about themselves and about the world that they experience through its stories. The Super adventure genre and theology are both ways of telling stories. In this direction, the objective of this research is to understand how these arts, sometimes so far apart, and sometimes so close, intertwine in an attempt to give meaning to the human journey, or at least, to connect to socially imposed meanings or even to reaffirm them. The idea is to go inside the history of the super adventure genre, to understand its internal dynamics, what makes it what it is and how it can be a *locus* of the theology of daily life.

Therefore, this research focuses on recovering the importance and the role of narrative in the process of the constitution of the human world and the invention of the human person itself and on resuming elementary conceptions of theology of daily life that are assumed as basis for a reading of super adventure stories. It is not an exegetical or semiological study, but an attempt to establish a dialogue and to identify similarities between theology and the super adventure genre.

Narrative and storytelling in the invention of the human being and in the process of the constitution of the human world

The super adventure genre is a narrative. It tells a story. And the fact is that human beings tell stories/histories since ancient times. The pictures, the pictographic images found in caves, walls and vessels in archaeological expeditions, the popular imaginary of storytelling around a campfire, widespread in literature, cinema, all this illustrate how the human person is tied to storytelling. What are the books, the sacred writings of religions, photographs, drawings, newspapers, films, diaries, audio recordings, but a particular way of telling and preserving received and invented stories? The narratives occupy a central place in human life and in the constitution of their symbolic universe.

In this direction, one of the recurring themes in theologian Rubem Alves' thought is precisely the importance of narrative in the process of the constitution of the human world, the symbolic universe. In his book *Variations on Life and Death*,⁵ Alves dedicates one of its chapters to explore the relationship between theology and

⁴ VIANA, Nildo. *Heróis e Super-heróis no mundo dos quadrinhos*. Rio de Janeiro: Achiamé, 2005.

⁵ ALVES, Rubem. *Variações sobre a vida e a morte ou o feitiço erótico-herético da teologia*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2005b.

storytelling. For Alves, the task of theology is to tell and repeat stories. In this case, despite the recommendation of the Brazilian grammarians of using only one term, *history*, to refer to any kind of narrative, the difference between history and story is crucial to him. According to Alves, “‘History’ is what happened once and does not happen anymore. ‘Story’ is what never has happened because it always happens. ‘History’ belongs to time, it is science. ‘Story’ belongs to eternity, it is magic”.⁶ History would rather be that legitimized knowledge through which researchers seek to understand the present and the past from their heritage, their documents and artifacts. It is the history as fact. Story is rather the “invocation of life” because “stories have the magic power to stir deep within the soul, reaching the places where the laughs, the tears and the furies nest”.⁷ While the first one (history) carries the pretense of truth, the second one (story) carries the primacy of life and the search for meaning. Thus, according to Alves, the task of theology is to tell and to repeat stories, because the commitment of theology does not lie under the pretense of truth, but on the primacy of life.

Alves refers here to the story, or rather the fiction stories or those stories that even if they are linked to an event or some aspect of reality, they do not carry in their lines the clear intention of scientific history books used in schools, academies, i.e., analytical books resulting from calculated and consistent researches based on the scientific rigor of a documental or bibliographical research (History with a capital “h”). The theologian refers here to oral tales, myths, fairy tales, biblical parables, poetry and novels, that is, he alludes to stories that in one way or another, always end up revealing a little more about people and how they understand the world in which they live. For Alves, these fictional stories are able to establish a network of relationships between those people who engage with their narratives. And they are capable of this because of what these stories say. And what they say does not start from a kind of truth underpinned by a positivist science, but from the search for meaning and the reiteration that life is there to be lived.⁸

The narratives are part of human life as an expression of human activity tirelessly to seek a sense, a home, or like Rubem Alves would say, the incessant attempt to humanize the world.⁹ By telling a story, people say to themselves how the world presents itself to them and how to interpret it. By telling, reading or listening to a narrative, people are presented with a picture of the society in which they live, the values that they preserve, the anxieties that haunt them. In doing so, people not only share this portrait, but they are also able to reaffirm it, embed it, deny it and even change it. It is in this direction that Jorge Larrosa asserted that “perhaps [we] are nothing else than a particular way to tell ourselves what we are”. And he continues, “to tell ourselves what we are, we may not have another option but to go back again to the ruins of our library, in order to collect the words that might speak to us”. Thus, if on the one hand, human search for meaning is going to acquire expression in the stories they tell,

⁶ ALVES, Rubem. *O amor que acende a lua*. 11. ed. Campinas: Papyrus, 2005a. p. 203-204.

⁷ ALVES, 2005b, p. 101.

⁸ ALVES, 2005b, p. 97-109 and also REBLIN, 2009, p. 166-169.

⁹ ALVES, Rubem. *O suspiro dos oprimidos*. 5. ed. São Paulo: Paulus, 2003. p. 12ss.

on the other hand, it is in/through the stories they tell, read or hear where they will seek that sense. Therefore, humans configure and make them up from the stories they tell, hear or read.¹⁰

In this way we can set the concept that *people are, in their hearts, a transitive juxtaposition of inherited and received stories which, at some point and any time, say something about themselves and about the world in which they live and their way of understanding themselves and understand that world*. The experienced and fictional stories – particularly fiction, since, as noted Umberto Eco, “we try to read life as if it were a work of fiction”¹¹ – will amplify each other (overlap/juxtaposition) and they are not complete by themselves (transitive). They continue incessantly being added to others, being processed, denied, incorporated. In this sense, both Larrosa and Alves assert that the human being is a palimpsest, that is, “like one of these ancient scrolls that was erased to write upon, but which was still legible on the remains of previous writings”.¹²

For Rubem Alves, the secret of the stories is precisely this: “The stories delimit the contour of a huge absence that lives in us. In other words: they tell us a wish. And all wishes are true”.¹³ Thus, if on the one hand, it is not possible for people to erase the traces of the words that shape who they are, on the other hand, created and invented stories always bring, in one way or another, traces of those who wrote them. In Larrosa’s words, “all private scripture, as scripture, contains vestiges of words and received stories”.¹⁴ Expressed in another way, the universe fictionally created in fiction stories is inspired by the universe in which their author is inserted. Thus “many stories tell not just episodes of an imaginary story, but much about ourselves”.¹⁵ It is no coincidence that in the contemporary world fictional stories have led more people to bookstores and theaters. In this way, we can set the concept that *narrating stories (experienced and fictional stories) are the way that human beings say to themselves what their fears are, what their hopes are, how the world appears to them and how to interpret it*. It is because of these reasons that human beings create and share stories from the earliest times of their biography.

¹⁰ LARROSA, Jorge. *Pedagogia Profana: danças, piruetas e mascaradas*. 4. ed. 3. reimpr. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2006. p. 22.

¹¹ ECO, Umberto. *Seis passeios pelos bosques da ficção*. 9. reimpr. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006. p. 124.

¹² LARROSA, 2006, p. 25.

¹³ ALVES, Mares Pequenos – Mares Grandes (para começo de conversa). In: MORAIS, Regis de (Org.). *As razões do mito*. Campinas: Papyrus, 1988. p. 13-21. p. 14. See also RICOEUR, Paul. *Tempo e Narrativa*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2010. 3 v.

¹⁴ LARROSA, 2006, p. 25.

¹⁵ GIORDANO, Alessandra. *Contar histórias: um recurso arteterapêutico de transformação e cura*. São Paulo: Artes Médicas, 2007. p. 26.

Super Adventure and Comic Books: a look into a contemporary mythology

Addressing the super adventure genre means dealing with a particular type of narrative and a particular art of storytelling. Although this art has expanded and diversified over the development and trajectory of this genre, transcending its early *Sitz im Leben*: the comics, super adventure history is intertwined with the history of comics, among other reasons, because the super adventure genre has consolidated the comics in the editorial market, making the comics definitely independent of the Sunday supplements and special editions, being also one of the catalysts of the series production – the periodization – of the comics. Even if narratives of heroic characters, of super powered beings, of gods are present since the dawn of human history through the myths and campfire talks, the super adventure genre, such conceived, came within a particular context and within a very unique style to tell stories.¹⁶ In turn, as a result of this context, of social changes and the emergence and improvement of the combination of text and image, the super adventure genre created the demand for and the consolidation of publishing comics.

Throughout its evolution, the super adventure stories took such peculiar characteristics that scholars began to regard it as a genre itself, distinguishing it from fantasy, science fiction, police stories. The stories of superheroes are not necessarily fictional, dramatic, comedic, scary, most often; they are all at the same time and sometimes none of them. Its proximity to the ancient myths as in terms of narrative structure, to tell a fantastic story full of “gods” and their great deeds, an exemplary story, as in terms of the representation of the hero’s journey reinforces the idea that the stories of super heroes are more than stories, they are also – in narrative terms – a particular way of telling stories. This understanding is reflected in the conceptual terminology currently used to refer to stories of superheroes: “superhero stories”, “superheroes genre”, and “the super adventure genre”.

The stories of superheroes assemble a set of primary conventions that allow us to classify them as a standalone narrative genre. The stories of superheroes emerged in a specific context and on an innovator media at the time, characterized by the harmonious combination between text and image, although soon they expanded into other media like radio and cinema, becoming thus a trans-media phenomenon. The stories of superheroes portray a contemporary hero’s journey, far from epic superhuman characters like Perseus, Hercules and others, due to the fact that superheroes emerge in an industrialized society centered on the individual and live, in a way, in a noticeably more simplistic world: a world where good and evil summarize the asymmetries and the struggle for justice often focusing on the maintenance of the social order

¹⁶ REBLIN, Iuri Andréas. *Para o Alto e Avante: uma análise do universo criativo dos super-heróis*. Porto Alegre: Asterisco, 2008b. 128p.

responsible for the injustice.¹⁷ Still, stories of superheroes always portray and at the same time respond to the context from which they emerge, developing over the years, with increasingly complex and controversial themes. They can be as a reflection as a projection of a type of individual, society and behavior. While the hero as a character is always, in general, an expression of the noblest and esteemed values of a group or society, narratives of superheroes always have the potential to serve as a horizon, an ideal to be achieved. It is as if they have the potential to express who the human being is, they have the potential to reveal who he or she wants to and can become. Of course, this whole dynamic between being and becoming, between portraying and projecting does not happen so distant from the market view which insists on an attractive narrative that in view of their producers can and should be marketed and consumed.¹⁸ In any case, there is no doubt that the stories of superheroes are a peculiar way of telling adventures of heroic characters, either by intrinsic elements to the composition of the character and general structure of the plot, either by extrinsic factors such as nomination, parody, imitation and repetition.¹⁹

Although the term defined in the U.S. context to this particular way of storytelling is “the superhero genre” and has been established as such, sociologist Nildo Viana proposes another classification based on the definition of superhero itself: super adventure. Without problematizing this categorization, the fact is that the narratives of superheroes are nonetheless adventures that depict the journey of a hero, which holds all typical attributes of the hero archetype (strength, courage, moral attributes), but with superpowers.²⁰ Furthermore, by conceptualizing the superhero genre as super adventure, the emphasis falls not on the character – which does not necessarily mean that the character is subtracted in the plot or becomes less important to the story – but on the adventure, that is on story development, of which the superhero is the singular character. This emphasis is crucial because it enhances the perception of the plot, of the different adventures that the superhero faces in each new edition, and consequently how they, in that plot, will overcome or resolve emerging conflicts, instead of restricting this insight to the character.

The emergence of super-heroes in their specific moment not only culminated in the creation of a new kind of narrative or genre, but in the eruption of an entire contemporary mythology that permeates what has been named pop culture – or, to quote one of the fetish-concepts discussed by Umberto Eco in the beginning of his book *Apocalyptic and Integrated*, the so called “mass culture”, or, as he prefers,

¹⁷ VIANA, 2005, p. 37-56. And also: VIANA, Nildo. Breve história dos super-heróis. In: VIANA, Nildo; REBLIN, Iuri Andréas (Orgs.). *Super-heróis, cultura e sociedade: aproximações multidisciplinares sobre o mundo dos quadrinhos*. Aparecida: Idéias e Letras, 2011. p. 15-53.

¹⁸ See for example the first pages of BROWN, Lyn Mikel; LAMB, Sharon; TAPPAN, Mark. *Packaging boyhood: saving our sons from superheroes, slackers, and other media stereotypes*. New York: St. Martin Press, 2009. The theme is also noticed by books about the cultural industry.

¹⁹ As asseverated by Peter Coogan in: COOGAN, Peter. *Superhero: the secret origin of a genre*. Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006.

²⁰ VIANA, 2005, p. 37ss.

the “mass media”. It is no wonder that stories of superheroes are known, in general, around the entire globe, inspiring regional cultural productions, creating discussion forums, encouraging dialogue, social movements and even, as suggested by Christopher Knowles a kind of devotion.²¹ The narratives of superheroes are contemporary myths. The characters live beyond the story that created them. The superheroes exist independently of their stories. They are part of the popular imagination of the contemporary world. As Umberto Eco recalled, “When they begin to migrate from one text to another, the fictional characters have acquired citizenship in the real world and became free from the history that created them”.²² In addition, many artists were inspired in ancient mythologies to create their characters;²³ Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel (Shazam) and Thor are some of the most explicit expressions of that inspiration. Therefore, to understand the super adventure, it is essential to rescue some considerations about the meaning of these narratives as contemporary myths.

The stories of superheroes, the super adventure genre itself, are contemporary mythologies interwoven in the complex web that constitutes the contemporary cultural goods. If, on the one hand, they express the aspirations and pursuits of the contemporary human person, if they rescue and represent values rooted in culture, remnants of a tradition, which are expensive to that human person, coating secularized symbols with a sacred aura, moreover, on the other hand, they fall into the cultural dynamics of post-industrial society: they participate in a novelistic culture that tries to seduce the reader through the diffusion of a “mass-Übermensch”, which obeys the interests of a hegemonic class producer of meaning and, concomitantly, of the logic of the market. For Eco, the narratives of superheroes would be as an entertainment phenomenon elusive as symbols of power, and this double characterization as an “escape valve” and as illusion of power (characterization that can be summarized in the idea of solace) uses the mythic structures to achieve success. The power that consumers of these stories crave and cannot reach is achieved through identification with the character, expressed especially in their humanity (whether by way of secret identity, whether by their “Achilles heel”, their weak points, regardless external or internal ones).²⁴

Even if we assume a model-reader by creating a particular story,²⁵ we cannot ignore the possible and unpredictable uses that readers will make of this story, whether due to the increased interest on fantastic aspects of the narratives, as reiterated Nildo Viana,²⁶ whether due to one of “a thousand ways” to reinvent things or to use what is imposed on them, as suggested by Michel de Certeau.²⁷ Even if, sometimes,

²¹ KNOWLES, Christopher. *Nossos deuses são super-heróis: a história secreta dos super-heróis das histórias em quadrinhos*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 2008. p. 35ss.

²² ECO, 2006, p. 132.

²³ REYNOLDS, Richard. *Superheroes: a modern mythology*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1992. p. 53.

²⁴ ECO, Umberto. *Apocalípticos e Integrados*. 6. ed. 1. reimpr. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2004. p. 247-248.

²⁵ ECO, 2006, p. 7-31.

²⁶ VIANA, 2005, p. 65.

²⁷ CERTEAU, Michel de. *A invenção do cotidiano: 1. Artes de fazer*. 12. ed. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1994. p. 37ss.

the audience reproduces simply what is presented, whether according to the intention of who produces the stories, whether according to their own intentions, we cannot assume that the “mass” of readers, listeners or viewers is totally submissive, mindless, that is, that they are completely at the mercy of producers of symbolic goods. There is an underground movement that appropriates, adapts and is able to transform (usually in tactical and cunning use, as stated Certeau) the information and ideas circulated by a thinking elite, a hegemonic class, and their symbolic capital produced and commercialized.

Perspective of a Theological Hermeneutics on Comic Book Stories

The theology of daily life²⁸ is part of the discussion while the religious symbols and concepts articulated and presented in the super adventure narratives emerge from everyday social life, that is, it is not linked with arguments of theologians or speeches proclaimed by religious institutions that pop up in the narratives, unless, of course, when it is a narrative produced by a theologian or a cleric of some religious institution in order to convey a specific message. What we find in the super adventure stories will be elements or elaborations from a popular religion, from a religious collective imaginary, tied to the social context of which and to which the story is intended, tied to civil religion as identified by Robert Bellah (in the case of the U.S. context),²⁹ to the motivations and anxieties of the artists who create these stories, etc. In other words, what we find in the different narratives, sometimes in a greater, sometimes in a lesser proportion, are theological elements resulting from life experiences, which are conditioned by the intentionality of the narrative, and by the values and beliefs of the authors. Here it is worth remembering that the theology of daily life is not a new theology, neither another theological trend, but a formal term that refers to the *perception* of a theology that meddles in the intricacies of everyday social life, it is a theology constituted by the ordinary people in their daily lives and expressed in so many different ways. In other words, people in their daily lives not only “just” have religious experiences, but they seek to develop arguably to themselves and others what those experiences mean.³⁰

People are continually bumping into values, symbols, stories and role models in their daily relationships that may or may not tell them something about how to live, how to solve certain situation-problems, how to express their search for mean-

²⁸ The “theology of daily life” is a concept that emerged at the end of my master degree dissertation and, therefore, precedent to and presupposed in this research. This concept has as background the thought of Rubem Alves (where the term originally comes from), Ivone Gebara, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Clifford Geertz and others, and it can be viewed in REBLIN, 2009 and REBLIN, Iuri Andréas. *A Teologia do Cotidiano*. In: BOBSIN, Oneide et al. *Uma Religião Chamada Brasil: estudos sobre religião e contexto brasileiro*. São Leopoldo: Oikos, 2008. p. 82-96.

²⁹ BELLAH, Robert N. *The broken covenant: American civil religion in time of trial*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975.

³⁰ REBLIN, 2009, p. 191.

ing. In fact, since birth, people are inserted into a particular cultural universes, from which they learn models and formulas (which can come from education, memory, tradition, institutions, media, interpersonal relations) of how to deal with the challenges that come before them. When confronted with a particular situation-problem, they craftily manipulate this repertoire in continuous construction, tailoring, deleting, adding, changing, mixing values, symbols, stories, to respond, resolve and get out of this situation. It is in this direction that people will structure their symbolic universe in a way that pleases them best. The learned or acquired models and revenues will be continuously shaped to match their desires, their search for meaning, while being relevant to fulfill their purpose.³¹ The theology of daily life is a theology that springs from the bowels of human bodies before and upon their life experiences and the nuances and subtleties pertaining to them. It is a theology that is forged outside of the academies of theology, outside of the walls of religious institutions, conciliar debates, etc. It is an unfinished theology which is constantly creating itself and which reminds the “official” theology what the first and basic concern all theology, of all theological activity is, its *raison d’être*: to answer the craving for meaning, to deal with the living and dying in human experience.

Ruben Alves anthropologized and universalized the concept of theology by transforming theology into an activity inherent to human beings as social, cultural beings, finally, that as beings who are able to (re)constitute and (re)invent themselves continually and, in this process, are able to (re)create their own world. So, if theology refers to the innermost of every human being and of a community, if it deals with eschatology, hope and absent possibilities (the restructuring of reality, the universe of meaning, of “conceiving and ideal and adding it to real”, as said by Durkheim), it can be found in symbolic productions, in the told stories, in the different aspects that shape the human world. That does not mean that theology is a direct and explicit expression of a particular religious tradition, it is exactly the opposite: theology of daily life is an amalgam of experiences, stories, symbols, sometimes contradictory, syncretic, pragmatic, secular, Manichaeic,³² that correspond in one way or another to certain yearnings of a collectivity. This also means that there is not a theology of daily life, but endless ways to think, to understand and to express religious experiences in everyday life. If, on the one hand, what to theology is the word that can reverberate in the human heart, on the other hand, this reverberated word acquires crisper contours in manifestations and meanings that escape the mere space of the rational, spaces such as art, poetry, myth, mystique.³³

So while it is a narrative that portrays the human experience of life and its surroundings, the super adventure becomes the stage for the performance of the theology of daily life. Moreover, it is possible to suggest that this activity intensifies or can become more explicit in the super adventure due to the fact that this genre deals

³¹ REBLIN, 2009, p. 193.

³² REBLIN, 2009, p. 194-195.

³³ OLIVEIRA, Kathlen Luana de. *Por uma política da convivência: teologia, direitos humanos*, Hanna Arendt. Passo Fundo: IFIBE, 2011. p. 35.

with heroic characters, mythical figures that act as saviors in a context of oppression, violence, restriction of freedom and the need to overcome these challenges. Dealing with a narrative that is so mixed in everyday life and simultaneously an expression of that implies “get[ting] away from what we are used to”, that is, a reading of a theology of daily life in a contemporary narrative must also seek resources outside its disciplinary scope and establish a dialog at the borders with other disciplines. Thus as well as the exercise to see how conceptions and theological symbols are articulated and presented in the super adventure narratives draws attention to a theology of daily life, the existence of this same daily theology drives us to a transverse and interdisciplinary approach. In other words, the investigation of theology of daily life implies a “theology of the borders”, that is, a theological attitude that operates and promotes an epistemology at the frontiers of knowledge.

Considered these aspects, in order to identify the theology of daily life in comic book stories, we propose, as methodology, a reading exercise inspired by a methodology adapted from the methodology of Liberation Theology. This methodology was at first proposed in another study on theology of daily life and was outlined as followed: (step 1) to find a symbol or a set of symbols – i.e., the reading of the context – (step 2) to understand these symbols in the dialogue between the story of a group as well as the context in which this group is inserted – i.e., the evaluation of the identified elements –, and, from that, (step 3) to verify in which ways these symbols are a refusal or a maintenance of reality, identifying the tension between the desires of a group and its context.³⁴

Considering the dynamic around comic books (the market, the publishing policies etc.) and the genre (the structure of the superhero narratives), it was possible to realize the centrality of myth in the super adventure stories. The novelistic principles tied to the intentions of a “culture industry”, the mass *Übermensch*, the hero’s journey, the anxieties of the artists, the portrait of social life, the expression of values, beliefs and worldviews, all that is condensed in the myth and its structure. This indicates that the religious and theological elements present in the stories are linked to the meanings of myth in these narratives (the meaning of the story) as well as to the way that myth behaves from the narrative resources at its disposal (the comics). Therefore, considering from Roland Barthes that the sense of myth presents an inflection, a distortion of the sense of its significance³⁵, the objective of a reading of super adventure genre is to investigate the deformation or even the reform of religious signifiers used in the narrative. In our study we carried out a theological reading of two stories: *Superman: Peace on Earth and Shazam: Power of Hope*. Due to the limits of this article, we will not describe the full analysis of these stories, but the main conclusions.

³⁴ REBLIN, 2009, p. 210.

³⁵ BARTHES, Roland. *Mitologias*. 4. ed. São Paulo: Difel, 1980.

Thematic Proximities between theology and super adventure

The journey throughout the study and the stories of *Superman: Peace on Earth* and *Shazam: Power of Hope*, revealed some general considerations about the relationship between theology and super adventure. These considerations may open paths for further investigations, of other super adventure stories, in other approaches. The specific question to be made here is, after all, why is there proximity between theology and the super adventure narratives? And the answer emerges from three perspectives: thematic, methodological and ideological.

There is a **thematic proximity** between theology and super adventure. Firstly, because every super adventure story addresses precious themes to theology: death, injustice, hope, and good. Every super adventure narrative is usually a story of salvation. There is, however, a displacement that maintains the distinction between the theology and super adventure. The super adventure identifies the subject of the action in the superhero; theology, in God, Jesus or any other deity of another religion.

Secondly, both super adventure and theology deal with the issue of the presence of evil and how it interferes in our daily life. While super adventure commonly identifies evil and violence as located outside of humanity or situates evil and violence in characters or groups, theology understands that evil, named as sin, may occur by/through any person. In super adventure stories, evil is usually represented by a supervillain or a catastrophe, and the superhero's action is focused on fighting the supervillain or on overcoming the disaster. The greatest superheroes' villains are often aliens who want to destroy humanity, which lead us to understand evil as something that comes from outside. Even psychopathologies of certain villains (as the Joker, for example) reinforce the idea of a misplaced or outsider evil. In theology, especially Protestant theology, evil extends to all humankind, that is, all humans are capable of evil.

Thirdly, the thematic proximity lies in the question of the relationship and commitment established between the hero and humanity. This motivation that makes the hero do what he does also finds associations in theology. Why superheroes do what they do? Thinking theologically why is there a God who is committed to humanity? In this direction, the theological answer is easier: God is committed to humanity and relates to them because God is the creator of all things. God loves God's creation. Super adventure answers are plural: Spider-Man, for example, is committed to humanity from a moral-ethical principle: "with great power comes great responsibility", Batman, in turn, becomes a hero because of tragedy. By his way, Captain Marvel (Shazam) becomes hero despite the tragedy. The super adventure implies a commitment of the superhero to humanity. Similarly, the stories of salvation, the sagas and religious legends always express a relationship, a God's commitment to humanity. There is therefore a thematic proximity between super adventure and religions' stories of salvation related to the mythic characteristic that permeates both narratives. However, the explanations that theologies and super adventure genre provide are different.

In this point it is interesting to highlight the dynamics of theology of daily life. Religious people have explanations of Good and Evil in a similar way that super adventure stories (and other stories too) communicate. The character who wants to

destroy humanity will be identified with evil. A religious person clearly identifies that selfishness is the reason for hunger, as suggested in *Superman: Peace on Earth*. They also will identify the importance of keeping alive the “child spirit” in order not to live a miserable adulthood, like suggested in *Shazam: Power of Hope*. In other words, there is a religious argument which is shared by “common” people in their daily life. There is a theology that permeates daily life and that is shared in the comics, in super adventures. This does not mean that it is imperatively something negative. It is rather pragmatic, comforting, consoling, it has the intention to sustain a sense that is valid for a community, even if that meaning can reiterate certain values, be comforting or be limited by lack of reflection, etc.

This theology of daily life becomes interesting for research as it enables one to think about theology from the representation that is held by another (which is neither a religious institution nor an academy of theology). Examining the theology of daily life implies precisely seeing how this kind of “theological common sense” interpenetrates the most different languages and narratives that permeate everyday social life, the human world. In this direction, the comics in general, and the super adventure in particular, become a unique *locus*.

In addition to a thematic proximity, there is a **methodological proximity** between theology, the religious stories, and super adventure. This is the aspect of the narrative, emphasized throughout the chapters of this research. This is the way in which the themes are presented. If, on the one hand, the ways to introduce super adventure are distinct (film, comics, etc.), on the other hand, there is a “ritualistic proximity”. The theological and religious experience is always a ritual, *anamneses*, a remembrance of a history of salvation that is updated to a new context. It is an extraordinary action for the sake of humanity that is not only historical, but that continues today. As mythic narrative, super adventure genre is basically this. Basically, it tells always the same story: a threat arises, a hero emerges, a battle for the fate of humanity happens, occurring partial victories and defeats and the hero saves the day in the end. By being retold, this narrative is enriched by elements of today’s context, whether inserted as an ornament (a photo of President Barack Obama in a scenario) whether entered as main elements of the story (stories about Sept. 11th, for example). In any case, the same conflicts, anxieties, fears, values (with some deletions, changes and additions) usually appear. There is a constant tension between past and present, history and reality.

Finally, there is an **ideological proximity** between super adventure and theology. This ideological proximity does not refer here to the inclusion of axiological elements, but to the intentionality that exists in super adventure and theology, perhaps, more in theology and especially in Liberation Theology than in the super adventure stories. In a general way, theology and super adventure are expressions of human ability or need, as identified by Durkheim “to conceive the ideal and add it to the real”. However, while super adventure seeks a palliative salvation, theology craves for a permanent, perennial salvation. It has not to do to the abolition of disasters, threats and killings, but to the introduction of a new social order. This is the idea of the Kingdom of God. It is a promise and also the establishment of a reality in which violence

and suffering are no more. The super adventure, in turn, also seeks to bring the ideal for their representations, although it is often limited to reiterate the structure as it is. In any case, both theology and super adventure want to impose a new reality through the conception and expression of an ideal.

Conclusion

The journey so far indicates how much human beings are linked to stories that they inherit and receive, read and listen, watch and tell and how super adventure participates and is an expression of this process. And it also shows how much theology, while human activity that seeks a sense, meddles and can be expressed in many different artistic and cultural productions that involve and are the result of human life. Moreover, it indicates how much theology as human knowledge can be expropriated, manipulated and even deformed in fictional stories. In particular, it was possible to realize that theology and super adventure deal with the values that are precious to human beings, with the mythical structure and the human faculty of conceiving the idea and adding it to the real. For the theological thought, it reveals an incursive possibility here, because it has nothing to do with realizing the degree of teologicity in certain artistic and cultural productions as usually has been done in the correlation method. It has rather to do with realizing the complexity, nuances, the vicissitudes and the tessiture that shape and color the daily life, where theology is also present.

At the end of this path, it is important to have in mind that the reading of comics must find a healthy balance between innocence and fatalistic criticism within the tension between apocalyptic and integrated as identified by Umberto Eco or within the tension between the producer of myth such as identified by Roland Barthes. There will always be tensions between intentionality and representation in narratives, in drawings, in cases of expropriation or inflection of religious, political, social, cultural elements. It requires the ability to question the naturalization and inflections expressed in the multiple realities of comics, but at the same time it requires sensitivity to understand the full association between concept and image and that an artistic production never completely runs out all possibilities of representing. The comics and super adventure genre should neither be treated with innocence nor be discarded. The fact is that comics can be a reflection of reality as much as an expression of dreams and ideals that are not true. And human intention, at the end of everything, will always not live in the fantasy of these utopian representations, but make them real in the context they live, paraphrasing here Rubem Alves. If people dream of flying and hope-giving superheroes, who fight hatred, violence, hunger, this does not mean that they want to live in that represented world, but that this represented world (where violence, hate, hunger are being fought) may become a reality in the world in which they live.

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