

Dualities steeped in religion

The new *Daredevil* series is richer for its Catholic themes, says **Maddy Fry**

It's hard to imagine that less than ten years ago there were only a handful of Marvel TV shows. Even then, only two were worth talking about: *Daredevil*, which followed the antics of lawyer-by-day, vigilante-by-night Matt Murdock, and *Jessica Jones*, about a super-strong PI with a troubled past and a fondness for whiskey-sodden vengeance.

Daredevil gained the bigger following, despite the first scene with the title character taking place in a confession booth. The central theme of the show flowed from there: redemption versus damnation, and what role violence plays on the road to both. *Jessica Jones* skilfully dealt with the aftermath of trauma, but rarely asked if violence could be cleansing. *Daredevil* flirted with whether it was, asking us to consider if, in a fallen world, extrajudicial bloodletting could be the only way to defend the voiceless. It was more Scorsese than Stan Lee.

Catholic superheroes aren't unheard of – Nightcrawler from the *X-Men* franchise eventually became a priest – and the original *Daredevil* comics saw Catholicism play a core role in Matt Murdock's personality. Yet it was a surprise to see a churchgoer in a leading role, one with such mass appeal, and not even in spite of his faith.

Perhaps this was because the show trod a delicate line, rarely too reverential towards Catholicism while steering clear of any cheap shots. Some of the most interesting scenes in *Daredevil* came from Murdock's conversations with Fr Paul Lantom, his childhood priest who managed to lure him away from crossing the final line into righteous murder.

They debated the existence of Satan, the effectiveness of prayer and the difficulty of finding moral absolutes. His Catholicism was an effective tool for probing some big questions about the gory and contradictory nature of his calling. As Fr Lantom reminded us: "Even Lucifer was once an angel."

Sr Maggie Grace, the nun who dragged Murdock back from the brink after a crisis of faith, was also a refreshing example of someone in a wimple who wasn't ditzy or venal, neither Maria von Trapp nor *The*



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Magdalene Sisters. Season 3 of *Daredevil* rubbed shoulders with the “hot priest” era of *Fleabag*; perhaps it spoke to a TV audience that was ready to see Catholics as fully-fleshed people, to grapple with a superhero always on the verge of giving up on God (or sensing that God might have given up on him) and to consider why that mattered.

Daredevil also dared to promote the Gospel diktat of the last coming first: Murdock’s perceived weakness – his blindness – morphed into his greatest strengths, physical and emotional, without ever being trite.

Given popular culture’s obsession with Lycra-clad vengeance-mongers running around outside of the law, by extension the audience were invited to ask what role violence can and should play in how we govern our world – and who gets to mete it out. Do superheroes offer escapism, or feed a much darker yearning?

In other words, *Daredevil* managed to be

both deeply Christian and deeply universal.

A new version of the show, *Daredevil: Born Again* (with Disney+ at the helm instead of Netflix) came out last month. It premiered with two episodes, with a new one due to be released each week; it seemed appropriate that during Lent we were discouraged from bingeing. The first episode ushers us in with an angelic chorus. Typically, it’s then followed by bloody carnage. Not for the first time, Murdock is unable to save someone close to him. The impact is devastating, and he swears that his days as *Daredevil* are done.

A year later, and we see Murdock in his lawyer’s attire, with “Into My Arms” by Nick Cave on the record player. “I don’t believe in an interventionist God,” it howls, asking whether Murdock’s deity is one who might finally have abandoned him.

With Fr Lantom having been murdered back in Season 3, there’s a question of who Matt’s moral compass now is. We don’t see him wondering into churches so much whenever he’s tormented about the true nature of his calling. He hovers outside and listens in. Religion is in the foreground rather than at the centre. Whether he’ll cross the threshold, in every sense, remains to be seen. There’s no doubt that his murkier side – the one that wants to commit murder – is still present, although he insists it’s under lock and key. Yet can that ever be true without his best friend or his confessor to pull him back towards the light?

He’s not simply asking this question of himself. Gangster Wilson Fisk is back, and wants to become mayor of New York – supposedly out of duty, rather than bloodlust. Murdock mentions being raised to believe in grace, that being touched by the divine can transform people for the better, even those with a violent nature. He says he wants to believe Fisk can change. It’s unclear how genuine his belief is.

Fisk and Murdock: which is the angel, and which is the devil? Can one exist without the other? Is violence more redemptive than grace? Who is the final arbiter of justice – the law or something bigger? *Daredevil*’s dualities are steeped in religion. It was a brave move giving a character like him such a high profile, which has made for a much richer show. Let’s hope it continues. **CH**

Maddy Fry is an author and journalist. Daredevil: Born Again is on Disney+