

TheNational

The latest challenge of 'The 99' superheroes is tackling a fatwa

By Naif Al-Mutawa

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Seven years ago, The 99, a superhero cartoon series I created based on the 99 attributes of God, was granted publication approval in Saudi Arabia.

It began as a suspicious relationship. I did not expect approval to begin with, and the suspicion of the Saudi authorities over the (to them) subversive nature of the content meant we were at loggerheads. It turned out that the solution was simple. I had to first get approval from a religious authority for my superheroes to fly in the Kingdom.

I was especially sceptical about getting approval in the beginning because The 99 was still an abstract idea. I was worried I would be limited by the imagination of the person I spoke to. But by 2006, The 99 was no longer an abstraction. It was as real as the air I breathed and I could get an opinion regarding my creation, then in comic book form. The most practical solution was to seek a round of financing from a Saudi-owned Islamic investment bank.

The bank, Unicorn, was intrigued but the process was not easy. We were scrutinised as to what was Islamic (to them) and what was not. They had an illustrious Sharia board, whose approval would be a stamp of legitimacy. Media content that is Sharia-compliant are few and far between. The space is coveted. The game is all about mindshare. Whoever gets the most adherents to his philosophy wins. And there are lots of philosophies within Islam – it is just that some are not as well funded as others.

We had to sell an asset at a loss due to its non-Sharia compliance. The asset in question was Cracked Magazine, and only a moron would argue that Cracked had value to Islam (or any civilisation that existed outside of a boys' locker room for that matter). So it came to pass that we were put under the scrutiny of a Sharia microscope and remained compliant thereafter.

The journey with The 99 has been long and arduous, but, ultimately fulfilling and certainly impactful. Today, 11 years after The 99 was born, we have completed our mission and created an internationally recognised award-winning concept with close to 50 comic books worth of content (including a series where they work with Batman and Superman) and 52 half-hour episodes (the prize number all producers seek to get to) of an animated series.

Season 1, the first 26 episodes, has been showing on television in excess of 70 countries from the United States to China and most places in between for over two years.

Not only did we become the first media property from our region to go global, we were basing it on values that Muslims share with the rest of humanity to boot and competing with the negativity that all too often is used to reflect our culture. We were giving children alternative role models whose values were universal in nature yet rooted in Islam. We were making a difference. And, finally, the global media was taking notice and reporting on the good within Islam.

So you can imagine my surprise to wake up last month to a fatwa from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia himself, along with the rest of the Higher Council of Clerics calling my work “evil”.

I couldn’t believe it. Why? And more specifically, why now? Why six years after The 99 began selling in Saudi Arabia – with, let us not forget, the full support and approval from the Saudi ministry of information – and two years after The 99 started showing on Saudi television? And, especially, why now, months after the last episode went out in the Kingdom. Why would the Grand Mufti ban a show that was no longer on television?

One of the lessons my mother taught me was that your enemy is never the person who talks about you behind your back. Your enemy is the person who brings you that information. Context is key. And the intent of the message bearer is tantamount to how the information is spun.

In this case my enemy and the Grand Mufti’s enemy is one. It is the person who purposefully took misleading information to him for him to base a fatwa on. It might surprise you that I actually agree with the contents of the fatwa. It is Islam 101.

The question asked of the Mufti was couched in negatives and misstatements – perhaps purposefully and maliciously, perhaps out of ignorance. For example, it was alleged that I had created 99 characters all of whom had one of Allah’s divine attributes to the extent that Allah had them and they were going to get together to become a deity and that this would confuse children and take them away from the unity of God. If I had done that, it would indeed be blasphemous.

But there are less than 40 members of The 99 and in the first interview I gave about the superheroes in The New York Times in 2006, I specifically said that it is doubtful we would get close to 99 as some of the attributes are simply not applicable to humans. Some of the superheroes are based on attributes of God that can be possessed by humans, such as strength. But there are other attributes that belong to God alone.

It was also said that MBC3 was still broadcasting the show. This was untrue as they had stopped months before. Lastly the accusers said there was music in the TV shows. Of that I am guilty. I like music. A lot. So of the three parts in the question posed to the Grand Mufti, the only truth was that there was music.

What is being attributed to The 99, by the person who asked for the advice of the clerics, is simply untrue. All anyone would have to do is watch the show or read the comics to see that.

But people have been judging books by their covers long before ink was created. It is truly disappointing that after years of hard work, The 99 was judged as an abstraction, as an idea, rather than as a body of work that has had global impact. Yet I understand that that is the nature of the beast. When asking for a fatwa, the seeker asks a question, and the clerics answer based on the wording of that question.

So now it is my turn to seek a fatwa from the higher council of clerics. And here are my questions.

Your Eminences, what is your ruling on a concept that has created positive role models for children all over the world, using Islam as a base for its storytelling?

What is your ruling on a concept that is based on values that are human manifestations of less than 40 of God's 99 attributes, like generosity and mercy, and others that human beings can have in lower doses and that good citizens of the world should aspire to?

What is your ruling on an Islam- inspired series that has gained favour in the living rooms of millions of children from China to the United States? What is your ruling on a series that has inspired major media companies to launch their own Muslim Superheroes, instead of the Muslim Super Villains that was so often the case before The 99? What is your ruling on a series that has changed the face of how Islam is represented in global media by highlighting the tolerant, liberal sides of the faith and making (some) people more accepting of Islam?

The Prophet Mohammed states in a hadith that all work is judged by its intent. My intent has been clear, consistent and open since I started. But there have always been those who have been suspicious of me. That is their right. Having a healthy dose of doubt is needed in life. But like everything else in life, moderation is important. To those who doubt the intent of The 99 and choose to do so without watching the series or reading a comic book I leave with you with these words from the Quran: "Oh you who believe! Avoid most of suspicion, for surely suspicion in some cases is a sin." May God reward us all based upon our intentions.

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