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Harry Potter and the Baptism of the Imagination

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Replete with Christian symbols, patterns, and allegories, the Harry Potter series baptizes the reader's imagination into the essence of the Christian story. Just under the surface of the narrative, the heart of our redemption—victorious resurrection through the sacrifice of love—is experienced time and time again. For millions of readers, the Harry Potter series is a compelling introduction to Christianity.

Since its first publication in 1997, books in the Harry Potter series have been linked to spiritual concerns. Claims regarding the series' spiritual significance range from the visceral to the ethereal and are almost as well known as Harry himself. In the U.S. especially, some Christians have decried the series as a dangerous promotion of the occult and moral relativism, a subversion of authority, and just plain frightening. Others have taken the opposite view, defending the Harry Potter series as not only compatible with Christian spirituality but actually evangelistic in effect. In between these extremes are writers who plead for peace and cautious acceptance of the good that Harry Potter offers. The preponderance of these commentaries coupled with the series' unprecedented international popularity leads one to believe that Harry Potter and his creator, J.K. Rowling, are indeed having an effect on children's (and adults') spirituality.

Besides the religious responses, Harry Potter has inspired a growing and diverse body of nonreligious commentary.¹ Social critics examine the class structures of Hogwarts and the world of the Muggles from Marxist and feminist perspectives, constructing Harry Potter as an artifact of hegemonic historical and cultural influences. Psychological theorists identify Jungian archetypes and Freudian

1. Collections of critical essays include Giselle Liza Anatol, ed., *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), and Elizabeth E. Heilman, ed., *Harry Potter's World: Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003).

images. Literary critics explore the books for evidence of generic patterns, including myth, fairy tale, mystery, fantasy, *bildungsroman*, and the English boarding school novel. Negative critics argue that the popularity of Harry Potter is an indication not of its quality (which they denigrate) but of its marketing power and appeal to the lowest common denominator of popular culture.

Beyond the world of academia, however, and in the world of the Christian church, the predominant question about Harry Potter concerns the books' spiritual value. As one who believes that the series "prepares the young for their later conscious life in the Church and steels those already Christian in their faith,"² I will demonstrate how the Harry Potter books promote Christian thinking, or, to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, baptize the imagination.

HARRY POTTER AND THE CHRISTIAN CRITICS

Although J.K. Rowling is a member of the Church of Scotland, she has made few comments on her personal religious beliefs and commitments. Nevertheless, the comments she has made are intriguing. In 2000, she was asked, "Are you a religious person? Does your spirituality come from a certain place?" She replied, "I do believe in God. That seems to offend the South Carolinians [a particular group of Christians who spoke out against Rowling's books] more than almost anything else. . . . They have more of a problem with me believing in God than they would have if I was an unrepentant atheist." When the interviewer asked her to pin down her spiritual views a little more concretely, he asked, "Are you a churchgoer?" She replied, "Mmm hmm (nods). Well I go more than to weddings and christenings. Yes, I do." When asked if she believes in magic as well, she answered in typical cryptic Rowling fashion:

Magic in the sense in which it happens in my books, no, I don't believe. I don't believe in that. No. No. This is so frustrating. Again, there is so much I would like to say, and come back when I've written book seven. But then maybe you won't need to even say it 'cause you'll have found it out anyway. You'll have read it.³

In another interview, Rowling was asked if she is a Christian, and she replied with a definite, "Yes, I am." She continued,

Every time I've been asked if I believe in God, I've said yes, because I do, but no one ever really has gone any more deeply into it than that, and I

2. John Granger, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter* (Port Hadlock, WA: Zossima Press, 2002) 148.

3. Evan Solomon, "J.K. Rowling Interview," *CBC Newsworld* (2000), available at http://www.cbc.ca/programs/sites/hottype_rowlingcomplete.html.

have to say that does suit me, because if I talk too freely about that I think the intelligent reader, whether 10 or 60, will be able to guess what's coming in the books.⁴

Rowling implies rather strongly that there is something impending in the series that will give away her faith, and vice versa, that her faith could give away the well-kept secrets of the yet unpublished Harry Potter books.⁵ Taken at face value, these interviews would seem to support the premise that Rowling may yet reveal herself as a Christian writer.

Without the well-established Christian pedigrees of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who also wrote fantasies filled with magic, Rowling's spiritual authority and motivations are subject to suspicion. For instance, Sennett declares, "Rowling is not a Christian, not a serious one, anyway."⁶ Richard Abanes warns that "unbiblical spiritual involvement"⁷ pervades the Harry Potter books. He also notes that Harry frequently lies and breaks school rules and recommends Percy Weasley as a better role model than Harry. (This, of course, was written before Percy's apparent renouncement of his family in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.) Similarly, John Andrew Murray of Focus on the Family advises that the Harry Potter books are "terrifying to young children" and that they portray "occult practices as 'good' and 'healthy,' contrary to the scriptural declaration that such practices are 'detestable to the Lord.'"⁸

In her analysis of the Christian criticism of Harry Potter, Stephens offers that the reason why the books have been rejected by so many Christians is not the magic, for other books that employ magic—specifically the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis and the Lord of the Rings trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien—are accepted and even admired by many of the same writers. Rather, the objection is caused by the apparent absence of authority in Harry's world. There is no obvious God or Christ, such as the Emperor Over the Sea or Aslan in Narnia. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore bears similarities to the Christian God; at the least he is a powerful and trustworthy authority figure, but he also appears to

4. Max Wyman, "You Can Lead a Fool to a Book but You Can't Make Them Think: Author Has Frank Words for the Religious Right," *Vancouver Sun* (October 26, 2000).

5. Three books in the series had been published at the time of this interview. To date, five books have been published, and two more are promised. [Note: by press time of this article, the sixth book is out.]

6. James F. Sennett, "From Narnia to Hogwarts: A Christian Perspective on Fantasy Literature," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 7.1 (Fall 2004) 50.

7. Richard Abanes, *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace behind the Magic* (Camp Hill, PA: Horizon, 2001) 63.

8. John Andrew Murray, "The Trouble with Harry," *Citizen: A Website of Focus on the Family*, available at <http://family.org/cforum/citizenmag/coverstory/a0019032.cfm>.

be fallible and limited. Nor does Harry enjoy any parental authority, only horrible foster parents who are not worthy of respect. He is counseled and aided by well-meaning adults, but they are kept at a distance by various circumstances. Even Hogwarts, which Harry considers to be his home, provides little supervision and liberal freedom for its young students. Because conservative Christian institutions tend to emphasize the value of authority—divine, parental, and institutional—Harry’s world appears to be morally unsound.⁹

We have no explicit evidence that the Harry Potter books are designed to promote the occult, wanton disobedience, or the subversion of authority. Rather, these objections are based on interpretations of Harry Potter. They are valid only if the interpretations are sound. I will present a brief explanation, then, of three ways in which the Christian critics’ interpretations are amiss.

The first and perhaps most significant mistake has to do with understanding Harry Potter’s literary form. The books contain elements of many genres—adventure, mystery, myth, fantasy, and, as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien use the term, fairy tale. The most prominent fairy tale element in Harry Potter is, of course, the use of magic. The setting, the characters, and the plot are all distinguished by their involvement with magic, the use of which serves a literary purpose. The point of magic in Harry Potter is not to promote interest in the occult, as some Christian critics would claim. Instead, magic serves to set apart the Harry Potter stories from stories of the real world, just as it did for Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. When Lucy Pevensie walks through the wardrobe into the snowy woods of Narnia, we predict that magical things will be happening to her. When Bilbo Baggins disappears in front of his birthday party guests, we anticipate magical adventures. When dozens of emerald green envelopes—addressed to “Mr. H. Potter, The Cupboard under the Stairs, 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey”—force their way into the Dursley’s front hallway, we expect that the story will be a magical fairy tale. Even young readers know not to take these things literally.

J.K. Rowling has not publicly divulged her thoughts on the interpretation of her books, choosing, one would assume, to let the stories speak for themselves for now. With the passing of time, however, Lewis and Tolkien provided commentaries that explain their choice of the fairy story. Lewis writes in “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” that his first thoughts of Narnia came to him in images:

a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lionAs these images sorted themselves into events (*i.e.*, became a story) they

9. Rebecca Stephens, “Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority,” in Anatol, *Reading Harry Potter*, 51–65.

seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. But the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale.¹⁰

For Lewis the fairy tale simply fit the bill for the story he wanted to tell. Upon reflection, however, Lewis realized that a fairy tale may be the best way to convey important Christian truths, precisely because traditional Christian “stained glass and Sunday-school” trappings are absent in fairy tales.¹¹ Tolkien wrote that the creation of a fantasy world is a “sub-creation” that echoes God’s creation of the world. If a fantasy is created well, the essential truths of God’s creation and redemption can be seen as “a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world.”¹² For Lewis and Tolkien, fantasy is a form that provides a literary experience of the essence of God’s work in the real world, including his creation, redemption, and sanctification of humankind.

Deep down we know that Narnia and Middle Earth are not real places, alternative realities, or parallel universes, even as we reach through the coats in an old wardrobe half-hoping to find the snowy woods of Narnia or test the barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten at King’s Cross Station in London half-hoping to reach Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Why do we test the borders between the real and the imaginary? It is because these fantasies compel us to enter an imaginary world in which we can identify with heroes who are clearly involved in the battle against evil, where love and forgiveness prevail in the end, where right choices and right actions are recognized as right, and where God’s redemptive plan is just under the surface. Tolkien recalls of his childhood, “Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability.”¹³ He asks, “Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?”¹⁴ For readers who are bound to the real fallen world of sin and suffering, fantasy offers an escape to a world in which things are set right. Our longing is not to step literally into Narnia, Middle Earth, or Hogwarts, but to experience a world in which injustices are set right, difficult questions are answered, and we are redeemed in the end. In short, we are looking for the happy ending that has not yet been attained in our real lives.

10. C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays & Stories* (ed. C.S. Lewis; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966) 36.

11. *Ibid.*, 37.

12. J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (ed. J.R.R. Tolkien; New York: Ballantine, 1966) 71.

13. *Ibid.*, 40.

14. *Ibid.*, 60.

Understanding Harry Potter as a fairy tale in the same tradition as *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Lord of the Rings*, we no longer expect literal correspondence between Harry's world (created by J.K. Rowling) and our world (created by God). The magic in Harry Potter is fairy tale magic, not contemporary occult or Wiccan practice. Other elements of the books are released from the bond of reality as well. Albus Dumbledore, for instance, reminds us of the Christian God, from his uncanny knowledge of things Harry thought were secrets, to his status as the greatest wizard who ever lived, and his role as Harry's savior in the climax of each book. Even Dumbledore's physical description as an old man with a long white beard is typical of visual depictions of God in Renaissance paintings. Dumbledore, however, does not appear to be *all-knowing* and *all-powerful*; neither is he expected to be immortal, although he is unnaturally old. Dumbledore's human frailties do not suggest, however, that our real God is being characterized as limited and fallible. On the other side of the magical spectrum, the Dursleys, Harry's nonmagical foster family, are horrible and cruel. This characterization should not be taken to indicate that real nonmagical people (you and I) are in any way inferior to "real" magical people. Harry Potter is a fantasy, so the details of that fantasy world are not intended to reflect the details of the real world. It is the *essence* of the Harry Potter fantasy that reflects the real world, in particular God's redemptive work—the human struggle, suffering, and confusion giving way to forgiveness, understanding, and joy through the sacrifice of love.

The second interpretive mistake is to confuse the *is* of Harry and his world with the *ought* of his world and ours. It is true that Harry is not a model compliant child. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry saves his friend Ginny Weasley from certain death, yet Professor McGonagall feels compelled to comment that his efforts involved "breaking a hundred school rules into pieces, by the way,"¹⁵ and Dumbledore noted, his mustache quivering (presumably in a smile), that Harry has "a certain disregard for rules."¹⁶ Harry, for the most part though, makes the right choices in the end, that is, until *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, where we sadly see Harry at his lowest. Self-absorbed and resentful, Harry rejects the instructions of Dumbledore and other trustworthy adults and peers, stubbornly refusing to study and practice Occlumency, the protection of one's mind from external penetration.¹⁷ The consequences of his choice are tragic. Harry is not an idol but a sinner. We identify with Harry, in

part because the books are written from Harry's perspective, but mostly because we, like Harry, are sinners. In telling a lie, breaking a school rule, or making a gravely poor choice, Harry tells the truth about us.

The third interpretive mistake is to rush to judgment. After all, two more books are promised. Although each book can stand alone, the overall plot of the series gradually unfolds with each volume. Rowling plants subtle clues in earlier books about events that take place in later books, posing mysteries that remain unsolved until a later installment and surprising readers with unexpected turns of plot, revelations of true identities, and hidden motivations.¹⁸ For instance, after reading the third book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, readers question Dumbledore's judgment in hiring Sybill Trelawney as professor of divination. Almost all the students think she is an "old fraud." Hermione Granger, the best student in the year, dramatically walks out of class in disgust and drops the course altogether.¹⁹ Trelawney's incompetence appears to be a poor reflection on Dumbledore's wisdom. However, by the end of the fifth book, we find that Professor Trelawney plays a crucial role in the fight against evil, as it was she who prophesied the birth of the one boy who could grow up to defeat Voldemort. This prophecy at least partially answers one of the greatest mysteries of the series: why Lord Voldemort, the most evil of all wizards and the ultimate villain of the series, targeted Harry for death when he was just a baby. It also clears up the question of Dumbledore's hiring practices.

Furthermore, the books are written from Harry's perspective. The reader knows something only if Harry knows it. As a growing adolescent, Harry becomes more aware of his world each year, and it is safe to say that important knowledge is still unknown to Harry and to us at the end of the fifth book. Many questions about good, evil, power, death, and choice have been posed, but the answers remain to be seen. It would be premature to assume the answers and denounce the books on the basis of these assumptions.

HARRY POTTER AS CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

It may be equally premature to embrace the series at this point. Yet the five books so far are replete with a preponderance of symbols, clues, and patterns that distinguish Harry Potter as a Christian symbolist work. This claim implies that Rowling has intentionally created Christian literature, although no proof exists for this inference. As stated earlier, Rowling has made no straightforward,

15. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, 1999) 328.

16. *Ibid.*, 333.

17. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003).

18. See Galadriel Waters, *Ultimate Unofficial Guide to the Mysteries of Harry Potter* (Niles, IL: Wizarding World, 2003).

19. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (New York: Scholastic, 1999).

irrefutable statement that she is purposefully writing Christian literature, as Lewis and Tolkien eventually did. In making the case for the Christian value of Harry Potter, this article will rely not on the author's exegesis of her work but on the patterns and themes that are evident in the works themselves. If it is true that one can know the tree by the fruit it bears, perhaps it is also true that one can know something about the author by the books she writes.

On the first reading, the books appear to be all about the adventures of young witches and wizards. However, J.K. Rowling has said that she writes books "that the reader won't necessarily get completely on the first reading."²⁰ What, then, is under the surface? John Granger has identified a host of traditional Christian symbols, allusions, and allegorical elements in the books. Christ symbols, in particular, abound: Dumbledore's pet phoenix, the red lion on the crest of Gryffindor (Harry's school house), the unicorns and the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest, Hagrid's pet hippogriff, the stag (the magical animal form of Harry's father), and the philosopher's stone, which grants eternal life and wealth.²¹

At the end of each volume, the reader lives through a vicarious death and resurrection experience with Harry, who is a symbol of the Christian-Everyman. For instance, at the climax of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry boldly prevents Voldemort from acquiring the philosopher's stone but is knocked unconscious in the fight. He awakens in the school's hospital wing three days later in the presence of Dumbledore.²²

The most compelling resurrection allegory takes place at the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. The younger sister of Harry's best friend has been taken by a basilisk, a giant serpent, and a message written in blood appears on the wall: "Her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever!"²³ Harry descends into the Chamber of Secrets and finds Ginny, but she is unconscious and will not wake. The young Lord Voldemort magically appears to Harry and explains that he has possessed Ginny through a magical diary and forced her to release the basilisk on the school, nearly killing several students. He is now growing stronger as Ginny weakens, feeding on her life. Harry declares that Dumbledore, not Voldemort, is the greatest wizard who ever lived, and immediately Harry hears unearthly music.

At that moment, Dumbledore's pet phoenix appears from flames, singing and bearing the school's Sorting Hat (an ancient hat that belonged to Godric

Gryffindor, one of the school's founders). The phoenix lands protectively on Harry's shoulder. Voldemort calls out the basilisk and commands it to kill Harry. The phoenix defends Harry, pecking out the eyes of the basilisk and depriving it of its fatal stare. Harry puts on the Sorting Hat in desperation and pleads "Help me, help me, . . . someone—anyone,"²⁴ and the sword of Gryffindor falls out of the hat onto his head. The basilisk sinks its venomous fang into Harry's arm, but Harry slays the beast with the sword. As Harry lies dying and Voldemort gloats his victory, the phoenix comes near to Harry, crying. Its tears fall on Harry's wound, and he is healed. Harry then defeats Voldemort by plunging the basilisk's fang into the magical diary. Ginny awakens, and the two of them ascend out of the chamber, hanging on to the tail feathers of the phoenix. Ginny is returned to her family, and Harry to Dumbledore, who declares "I think all this merits a good *feast*."²⁵

Granger translates the allegory in the above story as follows (interpolations mine):

Man [Harry], alone and afraid in the World, loses his innocence [Ginny, symbolizing virgin purity]. He tries to regain it but is prevented by Satan [Voldemort], who feeds on his fallen, lost innocence. Man confesses and calls on God the Father [Dumbledore] while facing Satan, and is graced immediately by the Holy Spirit [the phoenix song] and the protective presence of Christ [the phoenix].

Satan confronts man with the greatness of his sins [the basilisk], but Christ battles on Man's side for Man's salvation from his sins [the phoenix pecking out the eyes of the basilisk]. God sends Man the Sword of the Spirit [the sword of Gryffindor] which he uses to slay his Christ-weakened enemy. His sins are absolved [the basilisk dead], but the weight of them still mean Man's death [Harry dying from the basilisk's venomous fang]. Satan rejoices. But, behold, the voluntary suffering of Christ heals Man [the phoenix tears healing Harry's wound]! Man rises from the dead, and, with Christ's help, Man destroys Satan [Harry plunging the fang into the diary]. Man's innocence is restored [Ginny wakes], and he leaves the World [the chamber] for heaven [Hogwarts above ground] by means of the Ascension of Christ [hanging on to the tail feathers of the phoenix]. Man, risen with Christ, lives with God the Father in joyful thanksgiving [the feast].²⁶

Granger concludes that "using only traditional symbols . . . the drama takes us from the fall to eternal life without a hitch."²⁷

20. Waters, *Unofficial Guide*, ix.

21. John Granger, *Looking for God in Harry Potter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2004) 91-100.

22. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1997).

23. Rowling, *Chamber*, 293.

24. *Ibid.*, 319.

25. *Ibid.*, 330.

26. Granger, *Hidden Key*, 135-136.

27. *Ibid.*, 136.

Once again, the identification of these literary events and elements as Christian symbols is based on reason, not on J.K. Rowling's explicit exegesis. There is no proof that Rowling is deliberately writing Christian literature, but the pervasive pattern of Christian symbolism is strong enough to support the claim that Harry Potter is Christian symbolist literature.

HARRY POTTER AND THE BAPTISM OF THE IMAGINATION

Replete with Christian symbols, patterns, and allegories, the Harry Potter series is a powerful introduction to essential Christian truths. Most readers do not consciously understand it as such, however, considering the responses of the Christian critics. Rather, the *essence* of Christian truth—victorious resurrection through the sacrifice of love—is experienced time and time again in reading Harry Potter. These experiences, with or without conscious understanding, are what baptize the imagination.

As a young man, C.S. Lewis had such an experience upon reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. He coined the phrase "baptism of the imagination" to describe what had happened:

It must be more than thirty years ago that I bought—almost unwillingly, for I had looked at the volume on that bookstall and rejected it on a dozen previous occasions—the Everyman edition of *Phantastes*. A few hours later I knew that I had crossed a great frontier. I had already been waist-deep in Romanticism; and likely enough, at any moment, to flounder into its darker and more evil forms, slithering down the steep descent that leads from the love of strangeness to that of eccentricity and thence to that of perversity. Now *Phantastes* was romantic enough in all conscience; but there was a difference. Nothing was at that time further from my thoughts than Christianity and I therefore had no notion of what this difference really was What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize . . . my imagination. It did nothing to my intellect nor (at that time) to my conscience. . . . The quality which had enchanted me in his imaginative works turned out to be the quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live. I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantastes* was goodness.²⁸

The phrase *baptism of the imagination* has since been applied to the effects of Lewis's own fantasy works as well as to the fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien and the other Inklings.²⁹ As we read of the sacrifice of Aslan to save Edmund from

the White Witch and Aslan's subsequent resurrection, we share in Susan and Lucy's mourning at Aslan's death and rejoicing at his rising. In this imaginative experience, our imaginations are introduced to the foundational Christian doctrine of Christ's death and resurrection for salvation.

As Tolkien explains, fairy stories

contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and at the same time powerfully symbolic and allegorical; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable *eucaastrophe*. The Birth of Christ is the *eucaastrophe* of Man's history. The Resurrection is the *eucaastrophe* of the Incarnation.³⁰

This mythical power of fantasy, at best, is "a real though unfocussed gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination."³¹ In Tolkien's *Return of the King*, as Aragorn marches up to the Gates of Mordor with his small and weakened army, Sauron gloats his imminent victory. Yet at that moment, the One Ring is returned to Mount Doom, and Sauron's power is destroyed. Along with all Middle Earth, we celebrate Sauron's final defeat. The essence of this fantasy *eucaastrophe*—the victory of good over evil through suffering—is the same in essence as the true *eucaastrophe*—the victory of Christ over Satan through Christ's voluntary suffering. In reading these fantasies, our imaginations are baptized into the essence of Christian beliefs.

Another way to describe this unconscious initiation into Christian truths is through the metaphor of alchemy, a structure used often in English literature. Granger has uncovered many alchemical patterns in Harry Potter. He explains that the medieval practice of alchemy was much more than it is commonly understood to be—turning lead into gold, creating the philosopher's stone, and securing immortality through the elixir of life. Rather, the essence of alchemy was the transformation of the alchemist's sinful soul into a pure soul. As the Christian sacraments are channels for God's grace, so is the process of alchemy "for the purification and perfection of the alchemist's soul in correspondence with the metallurgical perfection of a base metal into gold."³²

events and personal matters. An overlapping group met in local pubs, most famously the Eagle and Child, in Oxford. They had in common an interest in literature, Christian faith, and an association with Oxford University. The most regular literary participants were C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Dorothy Sayers.

30. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," 71-72.

31. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947) 161.

32. John Granger, "The Alchemist's Tale: Harry Potter and the Alchemical Tradition in English Literature," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 16.9 (2003), available at <http://www.touchstonemag.com/docs/issues/16.9docs/16-9pg34.html>.

28. C.S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1946) xxxvii-xxxviii.

29. The Inklings were a group of friends who gathered weekly in C.S. Lewis's or J.R.R. Tolkien's rooms at Oxford University. They read and critiqued each other's literary work and discussed current

Hidden in Harry Potter is a well-developed system of alchemical symbols and patterns that connect the story elements both to each other and to the greater essence of Christian spiritual truths.³³

Briefly put, each of the Harry Potter books is an alchemical purification of Harry's soul. This purification begins with the black stage of dissolution, which happens to Harry every miserable summer at the Dursley's and in the dark dungeons of the potions master, Severus Snape. Second is the white stage of purification, accomplished through Albus (Latin for *white*) Dumbledore and various other "white" characters such as Harry's mother Lily, Professor Remus Lupin (prematurely gray, moon connotations), and Harry's new friend in the fifth book, Luna Lovegood (blonde, also moon connotations), as well as the shiny white patronus spell which protects against the dark dementors, the ghostly prison guards that "glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them."³⁴ The third stage is the red stage, where the spirit and body are united in resurrection. This happens to Harry at the end of each book in the alchemical crucible of a climactic battle against evil, "in which Harry always dies a figurative death and is saved by love in the presence of a Christological symbol," such as the climax of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, summarized earlier.³⁵

This pattern is becoming evident in the series as a whole as well. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is a difficult book for many to read, not because of its length, but because of the changes in Harry's character. No longer a pleasant and hopeful child, Harry becomes a sullen and angry adolescent. Granger explains that this book represents the black stage, beginning with the darkness of dementors invading Little Whinging, Harry's muggle neighborhood, and the escape to the House of Black, and ending in the death of Harry's godfather, Sirius Black.³⁶

In between these events, Harry's concept of himself is dissolved. No longer is he the Quidditch star (Harry is banned from playing Quidditch, the most popular wizard sport, for life.), superior to his friends (Ron and

Hermione are chosen as prefects over Harry, and Ron wins the Quidditch cup for Gryffindor.), his father's admiring son (Harry discovers that his father was an arrogant bully as a Hogwarts student.), Dumbledore's favorite (Dumbledore avoids Harry throughout the school year.), or hero (Harry's attempt to save his godfather results in tragedy.). Harry is not even in control of his own mind, troubled by irrepressible dreams and visions that he finally realizes are not his own but invasions of Voldemort's desires and emotions. Only at the end of the book, when the prophecy regarding Harry and Voldemort is revealed, does Harry understand his essential identity: the only person (except Harry's classmate Neville Longbottom, perhaps) who can possibly defeat Voldemort.

Granger predicts that the sixth book will represent the white stage, involving Dumbledore as a purifying agent, and the last book will represent the red stage, possibly revolving around the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Rubeus (red) Hagrid, who also began Harry's story by rescuing him from the rubble of his home when Harry was a baby.

The literary power of alchemy complements what Lewis experienced in reading *Phantastes*. As that was a baptism of the imagination, literary alchemy is the dissolution, purification, and resurrection of the imagination. We identify with Harry as he suffers through the black stages, is purified in the white stages, and is resurrected in the red stages, and we vicariously experience the same transformations.

The transforming power of literature is familiar to those who already think in literary terms. However, to those who tend to think of personal transformation in terms of psychological or developmental concepts, these images may prove more confounding than enlightening. In this case, the work of Greenspan may be of help. From his extensive work with developmentally disabled children, he has argued that the roots of intelligence lie not in language or reasoning, but in emotional experience. For instance, the newborn develops a concept of mother from emotional interactions with her mother. The toddler learns the comparative concepts *more* and *less* from emotionally laden experiences such as getting more cookies when he asks for them or getting less ice cream than he wants.

Adults generalize knowledge from one situation to another by reflecting on the emotionally experienced events in the past. For example, reflection on mistakes and successes in my previous teaching experience informs my planning for my next class. Even abstract thinking is based on the combination of "lived emotional experiences and reflection on that experience."³⁷ (Incidentally, knowledge

33. Critics have argued that since religions besides Christianity include a historical connection with alchemy, the presence of alchemical symbolism in Harry Potter contradicts the claim that Harry Potter is a Christian symbolist work. The alchemical symbolism in Harry Potter, however, is the same alchemical tradition alluded to in other works of English literature, which is the Christian alchemical tradition, Christianity being the traditional religion of England. It would be inconsistent and highly improbable for literature which is so soundly seated in the English literary tradition to incorporate, say, Hindu or Confucian alchemical symbolism.

34. Rowling, *Azkaban*, 187.

35. Granger, "The Alchemist's Tale."

36. Granger, *Looking*, 159-169.

37. Stanley I. Greenspan, *The Growth of the Mind and the Endangered Origins of Intelligence* (New York: Basic Books, 1998) 113.

learned by rote or in decontextualized emotionally stripped settings tends to be the knowledge that one most quickly forgets.)

As fictional characters, Harry and his friends live through more emotionally charged experiences than most of us would ever wish for. By sharing these symbolically significant adventures, we are introduced to the essence of Christian truth as lived emotional experience. We know what it feels like to be saved from certain death by someone more powerful than ourselves. We know what it feels like to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice for our friends. We know what it feels like to love and be loved. These literary emotional experiences, symbolic of life in Christ, baptize not only the imagination, but the emotions as well, providing material for reflection and laying a foundation for later conscious consideration of explicit Christian truth.

One may wonder why books that are heavily Christian symbolist novels would enjoy unprecedented sales literally around the world. The theological answer is that humans, created in the image of God, were created to yearn for the truths of God. As Augustine wrote, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”³⁸

Surprisingly, the field of cognitive psychology may provide a model for how this yearning may work. Jerry Fodor, a philosopher and psycholinguist, proposed that the human mind is best thought of as divided into two parts: perception and cognition.³⁹ Perceptual modalities operate quickly and automatically. If my eyes are open and working correctly, and a dog runs in front of me in the daytime, I cannot help but see it. Furthermore, perceptual modalities seek input; we are *compelled* to look, listen, and touch. Along with these sense perceptions, Fodor included language in the perceptual category, which serves to explain how quickly and effortlessly humans acquire very complicated language skills.

Cognition, on the other hand, is slow, reflective, integrated, and creative. To use Fodor’s model, spirituality can be conceived of as a perceptive modality that seeks input from the environment. That would explain why cultures around the world and throughout time develop spiritual beliefs just as commonly as they develop language. It would also explain why children and adults around the world are reading and rereading Harry Potter in unprecedented numbers: we are attracted to spiritual truths in a very basic way.

HARRY POTTER AND THE SLEEPING DRAGONS

If this attraction exists, then, why are people all over the world not devouring Christian theological treatises and devotional tracts? That may have to do with what Lewis calls the “watchful dragons” that guard against anything that smacks of religion. Lewis writes that after he chose the fairy tale as the most appropriate form for his images of Narnia, he began to realize other benefits:

I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.⁴⁰

Fantasies such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Harry Potter are able to steal past the watchful dragons that guard the hearts of many readers who are deliberately avoiding or simply uninterested in Christian truths. Lewis knew this from his own early resistance to Christianity, and he took advantage of it in his writing. In a letter “To a Lady,” Lewis referred to the reviews of his recent publication, *Out of the Silent Planet*. He noted that only two out of sixty reviews recognized the biblical allusion in the “fall of the Bent One.” He continued, “I think that this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelisation of England; any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”⁴¹

The crest of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry includes the school’s motto *Draco dormiens numquam titillandus*, or *Never tickle a sleeping dragon*. On the surface, the motto seems to represent nothing more than the humor of randomness, reminiscent of Dumbledore’s announcement at the sorting feast in *Sorcerer’s Stone*, “I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!”⁴²

I would venture, however, that the motto of Hogwarts is not random at all but an allusion to Lewis’s notion of stealing past the watchful dragons,

38. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. by R.S. Pine-Coffin; New York: Dorset, 1961) 21.

39. Jerry Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983).

40. Lewis, “Fairy Stories,” 37.

41. Warren H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1966) 167.

42. Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 123.

instructing in Christian doctrine while delighting. It would be as if the motto of Hogwarts were also Rowling's motto. In writing a Christian symbolist work disguised as an attractive adventure set in a fantasy world of magic, Rowling sneaks past the watchful dragons, careful to avoid tickling them into wakefulness. Furthermore, in disguising Harry Potter as a series about witches and wizards, Rowling has lulled the dragons into deeper slumber, for a story which raises so many Christian hackles would appear to be a most unlikely venue for Christian teaching.

However, Harry Potter has awakened other guardians, those whose purpose it is to protect Christian minds against dangerous ideas. Seeing only the disguise, Christian critics have missed the underlying message of Harry Potter. This may be fortunate. If Harry Potter were widely known as a Christian work, its worldwide readership would certainly be diminished. As it is, the watchful dragons slumber on, and many readers who would pass over a book with Christian overtones are devouring Harry Potter, a series of books with Christian undertones. Stealing past the watchful dragons, J.K. Rowling is introducing Christian doctrine to millions of readers throughout the world, baptizing their imaginations into the essence of Christianity.^{SCJ}

Can the Prophets Shed Light on Our Worship Wars? How Amos Evaluates Religious Ritual¹

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Disagreements today about worship often are generated by limiting it to "experiencing God." This article proposes that worship recognize its role in shaping Christian identity and preparing the people of God for its mission in the world. Interpretive anthropology helps clarify the function of worship and serves as an introduction to the prophetic perspective. The book of Amos teaches that worship must be willing to question reigning ideologies, deal with the realities of life, and nurture a commitment to justice.

Debates over worship content and style are not new to the Christian church. Tensions have always existed concerning how best to define the proper relationship between innovation and tradition, between cultural meanings and expressions and what is understood to be the unchanging core of the faith. These debates have become particularly acute in recent years in this United States, where we are told that we now are in the midst of a "worship war." We hear many competing individual voices, churches, and denominations line up across a wide spectrum of views and practice. A recent publication juxtaposes arguments for six different worship formats, with each case passionately presented and countered.²

The impasse partly may be due to how worship and its purpose are defined. In his introduction to the aforementioned book, Paul Basden says that there is one "underlying commonality" as to what worship is. All the contributors share the conviction that worship is "our response to God's holy name and redemptive acts."³ This sentiment is correct as far as it goes, and many biblical

1. Presented as a guest lecture at the Fourth Annual Stone-Campbell Journal Conference, April 15-16, 2005, at Cincinnati Bible Seminary—Graduate Division of Cincinnati Christian University.

2. Paul A. Basden, *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

3. *Ibid.*, 13.