Sacrifice and Salvation in Society: The Influence of Harry Potter

Jonathan Scott

The eponymous Harry Potter popular culture phenomenon has ingrained itself on the modern consciousness. Its themes, particularly conveyed through imagery, have a distinctly Christian tone. These overtones thus infuse a staple of popular culture: the novels and films in particular show Christian imagery to a massive audience of youth and to a sizeable cohort of adults. Contemporary youth culture, which places affection upon and relates itself to Harry Potter, thus contains Christian elements. Using Lynch’s fourth approach to studying popular culture,¹ this essay seeks to identify ways in which pop culture uses these texts as a medium for theological reflection. The overt Christ-figure Harry represents and the influence of Christian imagery will be analysed, with reference made to how the literature can serve a theological function, as personal reflection and from a sermonic perspective. This approach will be further informed by Deacy’s discussion of cinema as religious activity.² From the analysis of the Christ-figure, the presentation of Christian images and the reverence with which many youth treat the series, Harry Potter as a means to allow youth an interpretation of Christianity will be found to be an area of theological reflection for not only the Church in a sermonic sense, but also to the modern, North American society that remains, in the words of Flannery O’Connor, “Christ-haunted.”


² “There is a substantial extent to which secular culture has, as it were ‘filled the void’, and taken on many of [religion’s] functions,” writes Deacy, in *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2001), 1-2.
Without question, Harry Potter has emerged as a force in pop culture. J.K. Rowling’s seven novels rival best-selling records for substantially older novels;\(^3\) indeed, “Rowling had been endowed with the status of a pop star, something most unusual for an author.”\(^4\) The films inspired by the septology are runaway box-office successes. Alton writes, the “Harry Potter series has become one of the most popular…intriguing phenomena, of our time. It has been credited for a renaissance in reading for children…despite competition from…videos, television, or the internets, and has already become an integral part of our popular culture.”\(^5\) The reach of the series is broad: universities advertise themselves with reference to Harry’s school, Hogwarts;\(^6\) fan YouTube videos and fiction abounds; Quidditch, Rowling’s invented sport with a fictional following similar to European football, is now played in one form or another in schools.\(^7\) Harry Potter has emerged as a far-reaching aspect of pop culture; indeed, Anatol makes the important connection caused by Harry Potter’s ubiquity: “the future thinkers and leaders of societies worldwide are readily absorbing the social and cultural mores imbedded within the literature.”\(^8\)

---


\(^7\) Debra Black, “McGill falls under Quidditch’s spell” (\textit{The Toronto Star}: 13 Oct 2009), accessed online.

Yet, what are these mores imbedded within the literature, and how are they communicated to the reader and viewer? The subject of morality in the novels inspires much vitriol from the Christian right, particularly in the United States. Many fundamentalist and conservative religious groups have condemned the novels as promoting the occult. Their argument suggests because the novels present magic as not only exciting but decidedly normal, the effect on young fans is to normalise the practice of witchcraft.\(^9\) However, in a lecture about the portrayal of evil in the series, Hart Weed dismisses such concerns: “an objection to a story on the grounds that it includes magic would rule out the writings of Lewis and Tolkien, not to mention the tales of King Arthur, Homer’s \textit{Odyssey}, Cinderella, and the work of Hans Christian Anderson, etc. In my view, that would be a mistake.”\(^10\) Indeed, notwithstanding the use of magic in the series, the depiction of evil is shown to be decidedly Christian.

As Hart Weed suggests, Rowling shows how evil harms an evildoer, invoking the thinking of the medieval Christian philosopher Boethius. If acts of evil are shown to dehumanise and corrupt a person into greater evil, Rowling demonstrates the inverse for her heroes: morally upright actions redeem her characters. As an example, Ron’s act of bravery jumping into a frozen pond in the final novel rekindles his friendship with Harry; his good act has the positive result of reuniting him with his friend, and further carries the weight of a symbolical baptism. Nonetheless, Rowling is careful not to typecast her characters. What is emphasised throughout her series is personal choice: “It is our


\(^{10}\) Ibid., 2.
choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities,”\textsuperscript{11} says Dumbledore, the series’ sage father-figure.

However, Rowling also reveals prophecies about Harry’s confrontation with Lord Voldemort, the series’ antagonist. Okapal and Donaher suggest this “prophecy and the way events unfold suggest that…Harry does not choose his actions, but that his actions are mere effects of some preordained cosmic plan”.\textsuperscript{12} Hopkins disagrees; instead, he suggests Rowling places her emphasis on free will, arguing, “a belief system heavily dependent on destiny and predestination”\textsuperscript{13} is not in keeping with Rowling’s emphasis on individual choice, an emphasis communicated most prominently by Dumbledore. As Dumbledore explains to Harry in the fifth novel, notwithstanding a prophecy about the boy and Voldemort, the choice to act rests with Harry. Hopkins sees this distinction between a prophecy’s existence and the subject’s agency to act as a Christian theme: Christ was prophesised to die; nonetheless, he still faced the choice to worship Satan in the desert, or to deny his cross and seek rescue from angels. Thus, as Harry moves to face his death in the final novel, Hopkins sees a Christian theme and the choice of Gethsemane reflected in that “despite his past, Harry still has a choice, and, Aslan-like, it is because he exercises that choice that he ultimately escapes death, in Rowling’s equivalent of…[Lewis’] Deep Magic reversing the workings of more superficial magic.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} J.K. Rowling, \textit{Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets} (Toronto: Raincoast Publishing, 1999), 333.

\textsuperscript{12} Patricia Donaher and James M. Okapal “Causation, Prophetic Visions, and the Free Will Question in Harry Potter” in \textit{Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays} (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 47.

\textsuperscript{13} Lisa Hopkins, “Harry Potter and the Narratives of Destiny,” 67.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 69.
Sacrifice and Salvation in Society: The Influence of Harry Potter

Jonathan Scott

The aforementioned scene, the series’ very climax, presents a Christic parallel. Hopkins relates “Harry’s lone walk to a death that is ultimately negated by the workings of a deeper magic” to Lewis’s Christ-figure, Aslan, who, like Harry, sacrifices himself willingly to save another.\footnote{Lisa Hopkins, “Harry Potter and the Narratives of Destiny,” 66.} Behr notes, “Harry cannot survive with his integrity intact by avoiding death: he must embrace it…Rowling, therefore, closes her series by referring not to a classical understanding of death but to the Christian one of death overcoming death.”\footnote{Kate Behr, “Philosopher’s Stone to Resurrection Stone: Narrative Transformations and Intersecting Cultures across the Harry Potter Series, in Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter, 269.} The literary references to Aslan’s death scene, which itself is recognised as an allegory of Christ’s passion,\footnote{Overwhelming consensus exists to demonstrate Lewis meant Aslan to be viewed as Christic. Lewis himself described the lion character to be a “supposal” of what Christ would be like in an imaginary world.} tie Harry’s sacrifice to the Passion. Indeed, Rowling “has said that the New Testament verse quoted in the final book – ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’ – is the theme” of her series.\footnote{Suman Gupta, Re-Reading Harry Potter: second edition (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 32.} Harry’s death scene recalls Christ’s through very clear motifs: he carries the resurrection stone towards his rendezvous with death; stands silently before his enemy,\footnote{Christ, likewise, “gave no answer…Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge” (St Matthew 27:13-14).} waiting to be killed; he is subjected to the \textit{cruciatus} curse (the word being Latin for “crucifixion”); Narcissa Malfoy’s crimson nails pierce Harry’s skin; and, perhaps most directly, in the moments between his death and resurrection, he imagines himself in King’s Cross station, a name recalling the sign placed over Jesus’ cross: King of the Jews.\footnote{J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Toronto: Raincoast Publishing, 2007), 631.}
Unlike other examples of sacrifice in the novels, “Harry’s sacrifice is different: he has to think, to go willingly and deliberately to his death with no thought of gain.”

Likewise, “Although [Christ’s] crucifixion represents a supreme act of evil, an unjust and fearfully painful death…the spirit in which Jesus accepted his suffering on the Cross was…of selfless acceptance.” On the cross, Jesus is described as taking on the sins of the world, and, in his resurrection, conquering sin and death by death. Voldemort seeks to kill Harry but instead kills the evil portion of his own soul he had latched onto Harry.

By Harry’s death, evil is purged and destroyed; however, because of Harry’s selfless sacrifice and his love for his friends, he is able to return to life. Thus, through death, evil is destroyed in the Christic and Potter scenarios. Moreover, because of their sacrifice and their love, both men are resurrected, manifesting how death will be overcome by death: “By His wounds we are healed.”

Interestingly, perhaps the other clearest Christic image arises from making reference to the aforementioned Biblical quotation. Although largely unaddressed in current scholarship, a scene in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets shows the Christic imagery of the suffering of another producing life, of suffering overcoming death. Rendered with poignancy in the film, Harry is rescued from death by the suffering of another: alone and wounded deep below ground, Harry is healed by the tears of the

21 Behr, “Philosopher’s Stone to Resurrection Stone,” 269.

22 Christopher Deacy, 75.

23 Rowling, Hallows, 633.

24 Isaiah 53-5.
phoenix, Fawkes. The phoenix is an ancient Christian-appropriated symbol for Christ’s resurrection.

Moreover, it is significant Harry finds himself confronting evil underground; in each of the first six novels, he must figuratively descend into hell – an underground dungeon, a hidden chamber deep below a lake, a secret passageway below ground leading to a haunted house, a graveyard, a subterranean “Department of Mysteries” and, finally, an underground lake that recalls Dante’s *Inferno* – and there, facing death, be resurrected in some manner. In the first novel, he is gravely injured, and awakes after three days in hospital; the second sees the phoenix healing; the third novel narrates Harry emerging from an underground passageway and being saved by an image of his father conjuring a white stag\(^25\) to save his soul; again, in the fourth novel, he is saved by his mother and father seeking to remove him from the presence of evil; and, in the fifth novel he is saved by his older protectors. Indeed, in the fifth novel, his protector, Dumbledore, is saved himself from a killing curse by the phoenix, who takes death into himself and emerges resurrected; in the sixth novel, while in the underground lake, Dumbledore conjures a ring of fire to save himself and Harry. The Christian imagery of a descent into hell and some form of Christian-themed rescue from this hell is intriguing in that it further links Harry to the Christ-figure.

---

\(^{25}\) The white stag is significant to the Christian tradition in that it is associated with the legend of St Eustace, who saw a vision of a suffering Christ between the antlers of a white stag and converted to Christianity, knowing that he would have to suffer for his faith; the image also relates to the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail as the presence of the animal was known to herald the beginning of the quest for immortality – a story Rowling echoes in her invented motif of “the deathly hallows.” As Hopkins suggests, “The silver doe that leads Ron and Harry to the sword [hidden within a pond in the final novel] recalls the mystic white hart that in Arthurian legend appears to herald the start of a quest: at first the sword in the pool looks to Harry like a cross.”
Although Kozlovic, in his essay “The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure,” presents a series of rather rudimentary criterion for how a character may qualify as a Christ-figure\(^{26}\) (rudimentary in the sense that such criterion are largely debatable in their authority to baptise a character as Christic when taken separately), Harry falls into his major categories. Harry qualifies under the first five of Kozlovic’s criterion: he is central to the story, an outsider to the world of magic and thereby possesses something of an alter ego as Harry the orphan; he also possesses, by nature both of Dumbledore’s tutelage and Trelawney’s prophecy, a “divinely sourced and tasked” mission.\(^{27}\) Furthermore, Harry has “special normal” characteristics as a wizard, and even extraordinary powers; he leads at least twelve disciples through his leadership of “Dumbledore’s Army;” he begins his quest to vanquish Voldemort having reached “the Holy Age;”\(^{28}\) he has a female companion – in Harry’s case his love, Ginny Weasely – and a “betrayer associate” in Snape. Harry also has both a “pointing prophet” in Trelawney, *The Daily Prophet* and Dumbledore, and a baptism rite, insofar as Harry is rescued from the depths of water by a ring of fire conjured by Dumbledore immediately before Dumbledore’s own murder, which thereby gives Harry a sense of mission to fight Voldemort.

Continuing along Kozlovic’s criterion, Harry does have a decisive death and resurrection; a willing and innocent sacrifice; a cruciform pose exemplified through the *cruciatius* curse and, significantly, in the pose he assumes in the fourth movie when he is bleeding and tied up to a tombstone; elements of triumphalism; clear cross associations;


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 16.
and he is clearly identified with what can be termed miracles and signs (including actions extraordinary to even a magical world, such as the ability to speak to snakes or the seemingly miraculous ways in which young Harry overpowers Voldemort). Finally, to complete the tally along Kozlovic’s list, Harry is raised in poverty and, ostensibly, he dresses in stereotypical Christ-like garb (at least for the purposes of satisfying Kozlovic’s criteria) in that he wears a robe, and has the moniker of “Christ” attached to him when he is called “the Chosen One.” The only departures from this list are that Harry has green, not blue, eyes, which is an artistic decision to distinguish him from Voldemort’s red eyes and to delineate the colour of the two antagonists’ favoured curses.29

Yet, what is the significance of this imagery to modern society, aside from being an intriguing layer to a pop culture phenomenon? Kozlovic cites Simmons’s assertion, “For many people today, especially the young, popular culture is culture, and theology, to remain true to its calling, must take such cultural expressions seriously.”30 Indeed, Lynch’s suggestion citing “popular cultural texts and practices as a medium for theological reflection” is an intriguing thought when brought to bear with the Christian flavours in these novels and movies.31 For the purpose of this discussion, “theology” will be taken to mean, as Lynch defines it, “the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth, goodness, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in the context of

---

29 Again, a Christian reference emerges because red and green are traditional Christmastime colours.

30 Ibid., 2.

31 In view of Lynch’s demand for “ethical patience, in which the theologian does not make hasty judgements…or try to impose their pre-existing concepts on to popular culture” (63), this essay has first sought to demonstrate the ways in which Harry Potter fits into a Christic framework, before then proceeding to outline the corresponding cultural significance.
particular social and cultural situations.”\textsuperscript{32} Much like Jewett sought to provide “an ‘interpretative arch’ between film and biblical text,”\textsuperscript{33} there is much to be gleaned from juxtaposing Harry Potter’s account of a death and resurrection with the Biblical account. Furthermore, one can take the inverse route, as described by Kreitzer, who seeks to “‘reverse the hermeneutical flow’ and to read the Bible in light of contemporary film.”\textsuperscript{34} If Harry Potter details a fictional, sacrificial death and resultant resurrection, this story can aid in one’s understanding of Christ’s Passion, and, moreover, affords substantial sermonic potential and the corresponding possibility of pastoral motivation, particularly for youth.

Many contemporary youth identify with Harry Potter. Indeed, the constant need for the modern university to justify its features in view of the Hogwart’s School aesthetic provides a cursory view of this significance. How much more, then, does the account of Harry’s fictional death and resurrection afford a means for theological understanding? Perhaps significantly, the account of this sacrificial story affords youth a view of what the Christian story has sought to tell for millennia. Indeed, as Ostwalt notes, “religion is being popularized, scattered and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions.”\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, Deacy makes the important point that “the representation of values in contemporary culture may be seen to occur most prominently not in the church or the

\textsuperscript{32} Deacy, 36.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

Thus, for many youth, the lessons of Harry Potter – sacrifice and salvation caused by love – are communicating ancient Christian teaching through popular novels and cinema.

Deacy suggests modern cinema places emphasis on the sentiment that “Although it may be a largely futile and hopeless endeavour, there is nevertheless an acknowledgement that…the possibility of redemptive grace still exists, where there is recognition that evil – though pervasive – is not inherently insurmountable.” This lesson in modern cinema is clear in the Potter films; indeed, the novels contain words quite similar, suggesting, “Only then can evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated.” Thus, the Potter films and novels have a theme in keeping with the moral lessons common to modern cinema; taken together with the theory that cinema constitutes some form of religious exercise, the films can impart a moral message with a grounding in a traditional religion, as communicated in what Ostwalt sees as a modern, quasi-religious institution, namely the theatre.

The significance of this moral message being communicated in such a fashion is to broadcast, by literary and symbolic means, the message behind the Passion: that Christ’s example has given people “‘strength of character’” and helped them to “‘in crises…become competent to help others.’” The Potter novels and early films, created in the context of global upheaval following terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001,

---

36 Deacy, 4-5.
37 Ibid., 53-54.
39 Deacy, 75.
present Harry as an “exemplar” and reflect “modern liberal theology, with the focus residing on…the role played by human beings themselves as they endeavour to reach perfection within themselves, by following the moral and spiritual example set by Christ.”  

This type of reader or audience member perhaps searches for “a functional equivalent of Christ who performs the Christ-like role of undertaking a process of redemption…the benefits of which may be passed on and imparted to other human beings.” Kozlovic notes how such a representation of Christ occurring in the context of Harry’s sacrifice should be taken seriously because, “For many Christians, these pop culture representations of Jesus Christ are important holy subtexts…that have to be taken seriously because of their sacred subject matter and undeniable cultural pervasiveness.”

Harry’s Christic actions have significance as they impart an exemplar for youth on how to act in trying situations: with self-sacrificial love. The implications of this understanding of the Potter narratives are profound and profitable for the modern preacher since using Harry as a means for theological reflection presents a clearly understandable model for youth to relate to Christ. Viewing Harry as a Christ-figure and recognising the congruency of Deacy’s second and fourth method presents a lens for youth to view Christ anew in the modern era.

---

40 Ibid.

41 Kozlovic, 76.

42 Ibid, 2.
Works Cited


The Holy Bible. New International Version (books of Isaiah, St Matthew and the First Epistle of St Peter).


