

In Theory: Interpreting the Harry Potter series

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Q. With the Harry Potter movies wrapped up, a blogger has published an article calling the main character “one of the most Christian symbols of modern pop culture.”

Writing on RelevantMagazine.com, Ryan Hamm argues that, for all the criticism of the Harry Potter books and films claiming young fans would become interested in witchcraft and the occult, the series has consistently promoted strong Christian values such as loyalty, friendship, love, belief in good, and a “constant support for the oppressed, the downtrodden and those without a voice.” Author J.K. Rowling has admitted that Christianity features strongly in the novels, and the Church of England even published a guide advising youth workers on how to use the Potter books to spread the message of Christianity.

But others still believe the Potter books are a gateway to the occult. In an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, author Richard Abanes says there is nothing in the series that is Christian, and that Wiccans and other pagan groups are using the series' popularity to “to lure kids toward real-world occultism.”

Are the Potter books a good life lesson? Do they promote Christian ideas, or are they really a gateway to the occult?

Answer:

My experience of the Harry Potter books and films — having read all seven books and seen all eight movies — is that the furor about their detrimental influence on our youth is far out of proportion to reality. One of the major themes in the books and movies is that those characters who use their skills for evil purposes are viewed negatively and do not ultimately win.

Harry and his two closest friends, Hermione and Ron, are depicted as positive role models for young people because they use their powers for good and come out on top in this archetypal conflict between good and evil.

I am concerned that many who seem not to have read or seen the books and movies are willing to denigrate them in a kind of knee-jerk reaction because they deal with witchcraft. Books about witchcraft and the occult have been a part of fantasy literature for centuries and haven't drawn in large numbers of people to perpetrate evil deeds. In fact, practically all the atrocities in our history have been caused instead by people who were convinced that they alone were right, including the Inquisition, the Holocaust in Europe and the Salem Witch Trials in the 17th century in our country.

But my major difficulty with this question is not about Harry Potter. It is that values such as “loyalty, friendship, love, belief in good and a constant support for the oppressed, the downtrodden and those without a voice” — those qualities extolled by Ryan Hamm in his article for Relevant Magazine — are put forward as being only Christian ideals. Those same values are basic to virtually all the major religions of the world, something that is pointed out by Karen Armstrong, the world-famous British author of 12 books on comparative religion, in her most recent book “Charter for Compassion.” As she writes, people of faith, whatever their religious tradition, need to focus on those values advocated by the “Golden Rule,” stated in various ways by Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Perhaps then our world would be a more compassionate place for us all.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills, La Crescenta

I consulted some children I know about this, and they said, “Ummm, noooooooooo, we don’t know any kids who have become witches or wizards because of Harry Potter.” They looked at me with quizzical pity when I asked, and they answered with the gentle, patient tone that good children use to address daft old folks. They were too polite to say: “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.”

Children understand what “pretend” means. Even if the Harry Potter series had no other redeeming value, kids would get that it’s only a story, a beautiful alternative vision of coming of age, offering a therapeutic escape from the kids-can-be-cruel hallways they walk every day.

And of course, Christian themes abound in Harry Potter.

There are definite connections between Harry and Christ: With no insult intended to Mary and Joseph, you might say that Jesus was raised by Muggles (non-wizard or, in Jesus’ case, non-divine parents), and that his true parentage was key to his destiny.

Jesus’ ministry began with a wilderness encounter with personified evil (as Harry met Voldemort while still in his crib), and was then punctuated by battles with demons, the Gospel plot line drawing him toward an ultimate battle with evil and death, just as Harry’s story does.

Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Harry Potter agonizes before the final battle. Like Jesus (spoiler alert!) Harry wins the battle only by dying and coming back to life. And like Jesus, Harry Potter, through his victory, breaks the power of death forever (snapping the Elder wand) and, standing on the symbolic bridge of a new world, ushers in a new era of life for all people.

Harry Potter’s lessons are Christian lessons: All around us, and within us, the limitless world of the Spirit is alive and well; a world in which Life is more than life, and Love has healing power, and Goodness never dies.

So take a breath, religious hand-wringers, and pick up where Harry Potter leaves off: Teach your children that an enchanted world of Holiness does exist, for those who have eyes to see.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George’s Episcopal Church
La Cañada Flintridge

When the first Harry Potter installment made its debut, I went solo and viewed the film with the intention of being a responsible parent who also happened to pastor a church with parishioners concerned about exposing their younger children to a story where witchcraft was presented as a moral good.

Biblically, witchcraft is a moral bad. It’s a pagan affront to God and is condemned repeatedly as idolatrous spirituality. Both Testaments command us not to engage in witchcraft because it is detestable, sinful and damnable (Deuteronomy 18:9-14; Galatians 5:19-21). The Potter series presents witchcraft as good, and non-practitioners as “muggles” (bad, foolish, ignorant, etc). This opposes God’s perspective, so it should immediately concern anyone who thinks moral ideas matter. Accordingly, God declares “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Isa 5:20).

While any media may be used for the purpose of reinforcing theology, it's untrue that Harry Potter essentially teaches Christianity in Halloween guise. With the recent Deathly Hallows, one might draw upon the resurrection of Harry and make connection to Jesus, as was done with Neo serving as mankind's dying savior in Matrix Revolutions, but neither script is "Christian" despite periodic nods to Bible verses and terms.

Positive traits like loyalty and sacrifice are displayed by Potter characters, but such are also found in Greek mythology and even the most un-Christian of tales where it's good guys versus bad. People like their heroes to save the weak, to right injustice, and maybe even get in a little revenge, but we wouldn't necessarily exhibit them in Sunday school. Virtues are inherent to human beings since we are all made in God's image, but the image is defaced, and consumers witness vice (lying, stealing, disobedience, etc.) from the Potter heroes with parallel frequency to whatever good may be perceived.

To enjoy the Potter romp, moral antennae require temporary lowering to allow special effects and other-worldly adventure the reign of time spent. So done, it would behoove Christians to immediately afterward meditate on how this, like any other worldly production, does or does not truly glorify God.

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose

Like all good literature, the clever story of Harry Potter draws us into believing in another world and caring about or disliking imaginary people. Through J. K. Rowling's entrancing, imaginative prose, the Harry Potter series treads the same ground as a lot of fiction for young people — being young and doing some growing up.

Harry Potter made my daughters into readers, not as assigned, but willingly, for pleasure. I also adore JKR for giving families, ours included, years of joy — reading the books together at first, then racing each other to finish or nagging each other to hurry, depending on how many copies we had. Finally we waited in line to see the midnight showings of all the movies.

Hearing a sold-out theater of children cheer a book title flashing on the screen never failed to gratify me. The enjoyment of literature is the life lesson that I hope children get from reading these books.

JKR's own story of taking her baby's stroller into warm tea shops to write illustrates the good values of a welfare state whose social safety net supported a single mom on the dole while she created.

I think the series is on good moral footing and transmits healthy values. Does it promote Christian values? We need to deal with the implication of that question, which is that "loyalty, friendship, love and belief in good" are particularly Christian values. I think that these basic human urges predate Christianity and are certainly not exclusively Christian now.

Conversely, does every iteration of Christianity throughout history practice "constant support" for the oppressed and downtrodden? Would that it were so.

Does the series foster interest in the supernatural? And would that be any more threatening than the Church of England using Harry Potter to "lure" readers into the message of Christianity? Note how using that word

colors the idea.

In any case, I doubt that kids seeing the last Harry Potter movie with me entered a gateway to the occult through the lobby of the Pacific Theatres Glendale 18 at the Americana at Brand.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose

My candid reaction to people on both sides of this Harry Potter “debate” is: Let’s get real! The Harry Potter stories are simply a form of very good entertainment. In my view, they neither promote positive religious ideals nor encourage practices of the occult. I feel that it is extremely silly and counter-productive to read too much into these books (pun intended).

I believe it is detrimental to spiritual growth to rely on cryptic, mysterious wording in a Harry Potter book for religious direction. If we are seeking ways to inspire ourselves or our youth, there are many books out there — including the Bible — that provide clear guidance on how to lead a good life and build a solid foundation of moral values.

Furthermore, although reading books on good moral behaviors and traditions is important, the surest way to teach a life lesson is to lead by example. Our children watch us very closely and quickly learn how to emulate our ways. If we adults lead exemplary lives, are tolerant of others and act charitably toward our fellow human beings, then chances are our children will do the same. If, on the other hand, all we do is preach the ideals of love, tolerance and charity while in the real world acting otherwise, then it's only a matter of time before our youth stumble into the same hypocritical trap.

Let us enjoy the Harry Potter books and films, and simply take them at face value. They offer escapism and entertainment. To learn the true lessons of life, we should turn to reputable, time-tested sources on moral and religious standards.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
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Do the Harry Potter books and movies promote Christian ideas/values, the occult, a combination of both or neither? For that matter, does this question deserve more than a short answer?

Our family has read all seven books and has seen all seven movies. We found the books and movies to be imaginative and entertaining fiction. Like many fictional stories, Harry Potter has both good and bad guys and describes the struggle between both groups.

For me, it is a stretch to seriously consider that Harry Potter teaches Christian ideas/values, even in light of the author’s suggestion that she incorporated Christian ideas into the books. If I want Christian ideas and values, I will turn to the source, the Bible. At the same time, I don’t believe that Harry Potter is a gateway to the occult. Some individuals may think that this is the case, but, then again, some of those individuals believe that if you don’t follow their particular view of religion you are evil. Harry Potter is simply enjoyable fiction.

What actually gives me concern is the impact that television (especially cable), movies, video games, music and the Internet can have on our youth. I will readily acknowledge that there is good to be found in these media sources, but they also can have a powerful negative influence. Such media can and is changing our culture and social norms.

Before my children started to read and see Harry Potter, I checked out the first Harry Potter book to determine its character and quality. Once satisfied that it was appropriate for them, I allowed them to read and see Harry Potter. With all types of media, not just Harry Potter, parents have to help their children make good and informed decisions as they venture into and through the world of entertainment.

Rick Callister
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I have to admit, I was disappointed when my niece received a set of Harry Potter books several years back. I was a pastor at the time, and anything that seemingly promoted the occult or witchcraft was a big “no-no” in my book. This was mostly based on the system I was a part of at the time. I had seen one movie and read excerpts of books. I was convinced this series was contrary to Christianity.

Fast forward many years, the transitions of my own life, Fuller Seminary providing a wider worldview of how God works in and through life, and add to that the coincidence that I saw the latest Harry Potter movie last week. It was the only movie available at the time we went to the movies, and I had just read an interview with J.K. Rowling in which she pointed out the parallels of Christianity. She has been extremely clever in bringing the message of redemption through a powerful cultural inroad.

God uses the foolish things of this world to create a context to get the message of Christianity out there. As culture changes, so do the methods. And this is how I view this epic series. Rowling used her voice to do her small part of God’s work through an influential source. Through the Harry Potter series Christian values and a redemption message were promoted through a brilliant means.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian
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I haven’t read any of the Harry Potter books so I can’t address any of their laudable or unworthy traits. But I believe that a few guiding principles will help the discerning reader of faith determine whether any particular work, including Rowling’s, would be beneficial to read or recommend to others.

First, we understand that every good thing comes from God, including the virtues of love, friendship and compassion. So any work that includes these has in effect borrowed from him, intentionally or not. The reader of faith will see these as examples of divine traits, while the humanist will only praise man instead. In some sense you take from it what you bring into it.

Second, it’s helpful as we read to discern the world view in which the writer presents his work. Is God mentioned at all, directly or indirectly through the events portrayed? Do the characters acknowledge him? If God is completely absent, we should discern the underlying atheistic or humanistic assumptions of the author and judge the author’s thesis accordingly.

Helpful, too, is any knowledge we might gain personally about the author. Does he or she acknowledge Jesus Christ as son of God and personal savior? If not, we cannot expect them to reliably teach Christian truth.

Finally, as we read we should compare any work's moral assertions and theological claims with the one book that has a perfect author — the Bible. Scripture is the perfect standard, the pure light that exposes all darkness. The tested and true words of the Bible, treasured in our hearts and minds, will either affirm or deny the worthiness of any human work we will ever read.

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