

In Rowling We Trust

Finally, after two years of waiting and a long night of nail-biting, stomach-twisting anticipation at the local Borders, the moment has arrived. We are seated apprehensively on pillows in a circle, most of us still wearing our robes and hats from the evening's ceremonies, all of us staring intently at the covetous, sacred text placed ominously in the center. I open with a short prayer, a salute to the thousands of others worldwide who will share our experience tonight. Oh great Creator, may all of our waiting be fulfilled and all of our utmost wishes come true. Amen. And Alohamora.

J.K Rowling's dynamic Harry Potter series is a religion for many readers. The novels incorporate spiritual themes that are similar to those in traditional religions, including a struggle between good and evil, a guide to moral decisions, and an explanation of the unknown. Furthermore, Harry Potter's religious aura can be confirmed by analyzing its global popularity and the reactions it elicits from traditional religions like Catholicism.

Over the past decade, Harry Potter's unique theology has charmed an international audience into dedicated, adoring fans. The books have been read by citizens of almost 200 countries and translated into at least 62 languages. They are the world's second most widely-read texts, following only the great bestseller *The Bible*. To rebut Harry Potter's spirituality is to deny its massive popularity and its enormous impact on the media and the economy.

Yet most widespread trends in literature and pop culture receive little or no attention from traditional religious leaders. However, in response to Harry Potter, many faiths were quick to criticize or condemn the books, especially their use of magic. By saying that the books "distort Christianity in the soul before it can grow properly" (Pope Opposes), Pope Benedict forced the Vatican to release an official position on the Potter series. Christian Evangelists have

openly protested the books' use of witchcraft, and pagans are quick to prove that many Harry Potter creatures and names derive from mythology or primeval legends. Obviously, Harry Potter is not purely secular in nature.

But what makes Harry Potter spiritual? What differentiates Harry Potter from cultural obsessions such as celebrities, sports, or the lottery? Why are traditional religions threatened by its power?

Whether readers realize it or not, the Harry Potter novels wield considerable spiritual influence through their use of conventional religious topics. Like other faiths, Harry Potter focuses on the fundamental struggle between right and wrong; between a positive super-human (traditionally God or Harry in this faith) and a negative super-human (the devil or Lord Voldemort). In order for Harry to fulfill the role of "positive super-human," he must possess extraordinary talents. In his prodigious childhood, Harry stood out as a savior of the wizarding world – the sole survivor of the Avada Kedavra killing curse and the only one able to defeat the dark Lord Voldemort. Since then, Harry has battled Voldemort in each book and survived every encounter, thus clearly exemplifying the fight for goodness in the books.

While Harry's battle against the evil forces is usually black-and-white, he often encounters complicated moral situations requiring him to "make a choice between what is right and what is easy" (*Goblet of Fire* 724). For these ethical decisions, Harry's actions reveal the correct behavior to the reader. He demonstrates ideal conduct for various social situations such as fights with friends, liking girls, having family troubles, and being nervous before an important sporting event. Because these examples are familiar to what most children encounter while growing up, readers can easily relate to Harry's circumstances and imitate his decisions.

J.K. Rowling's explicit description of Harry's character allows dedicated fans to consciously strive for personality traits that Harry values like loyalty, bravery, and companionship. For example, each Hogwarts house embodies unique qualities, such as the Ravenclaw students, "whose intelligence is surest, and only those of sharpest mind were taught" (*Order of the Phoenix* 205). By placing Harry in Gryffindor, the reader understands that that house's characteristics of "daring, nerve, and chivalry" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 118) are the most admirable. If any reader was confused about Harry's apparent lack of intelligence in comparison to his friend Hermione Granger, the reader only has to look to the end of the first book, where she explicitly says "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery," (287). Also, because Harry is constantly sacrificing himself for others, many fans strive to imitate his selfless leading and unconditional love. Readers understand that if they too battle the great evils in their lives, they will become wildly envied, powerful, and popular. Therefore, like almost all religions, any reader looking to better himself or herself must only study the hero's (Harry's) talents and behavior.

Harry Potter takes on a second role of traditional religion by attempting to justify the unexplainable aspects of the reader's life. Often scenarios in the wizarding world explain phenomena in the muggle world – the reader's world. For example, the Prime Minister of Great Britain learns from the Minister of Magic that Dementors, formidable creatures from the wizarding world, are "spreading despair and hopelessness in his voters" (*Half-Blood Prince* 15). For thousands of years, religion has attempted to elucidate unanswerable experiences such as the creation of the world, the existence of human suffering, or the cause of thunderstorms. Harry Potter also provides stories to explain various unknowns. The series even caters to the reader's most primitive doubt – what is death? Dumbledore explicitly provides that answer to Harry and

the reader: “to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 297). While most readers probably do not adopt these explanations as holy truth, the novels do fulfill the reader’s fundamental desire for an answer to the unknown.

Thus, whether intentional or not, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series imitates the texts of traditional religions like the Torah, the Quran or the Bible. These books describe the fight of right versus wrong, provide moral exemplars, and elucidate the mysterious aspects of life – just like Harry Potter. Consequently, reading Harry Potter books can certainly be a religious experience, of course on different levels for different readers. Just as traditional religion is interpreted and debated, some Harry Potter readers will view the series as children’s novels while others will go so far as to adopt Harry Potter as a religion. These zealous believers will fanatically read the Harry Potter books and actively engage in Harry Potter culture. For them, it does not matter that magic wands and wizards do not exist in the real world or that Harry Potter is a fictional character; like all religions, they are enlightened and motivated by his mere spirit.

Works Cited

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