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INTRODUCTION

A Parental Shift from Alarm to Approval

Doubtless you have your own story about the first time you heard of Harry Potter or read a Harry Potter novel. My story, as it reflects the perspective and consequent insights that became this book, is perhaps the fitting way to introduce *Looking for God in Harry Potter*.

I am what reporters without fail call a “traditional Christian.” Given that they use this description for Christian believers ranging from snake handlers in Appalachia to Tridentine Mass Roman Catholics, the phrase is robbed of much meaning. But as I fall somewhere between the ends of that spectrum (near the *Mere Christianity* of C. S. Lewis), I can accept the tag. My wife and I have seven children, and we consider it our chief responsibility to raise our children in the context of our faith. Without being paranoid or over-sheltering, we have decided that for our family that means church attendance and family prayers, as well as homeschooling and living without television. Mary and I are also pretty careful about what books we choose to read to the children or what titles

we allow them to read. Harry Potter, consequently, was not welcome in my home when I first heard about him.

My concern was less about scaring my children than it was about exposing them to occult elements and forces. I grew up in a time when Dungeons and Dragons was the rage, and I knew a few people whose lives turned around the game for years (and in anything but a healthy way). I also have convictions that, just as there are good spiritual beings, there are harmful spirits as well. Pretending there is no devil is as naive and perhaps as dangerous, if not more so, than seeing demons behind every door. Not being gifted with discernment of spirits, I choose to avoid exposure to anything hinting of the supernatural that is not from a traditional, revealed spiritual path. I observe this simple rule when I buy books for myself as well as when I choose books for my children. This to me is common sense; if it's censorship of a kind, I have to think it's a healthy discrimination—something like reading labels at the grocery store to see if there's a lot of junk in the food.

You should know that because I don't watch television, it's as if I live on one of the moons orbiting the Planet Zeno. I did not hear of Harry Potter until a few months before the fourth volume, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, was published. A woman who worked at a natural foods store where I shopped told me about the books and recommended them to me with some enthusiasm. This friend probably would not be described as a "traditional Christian" by most reporters. With her twiggy frame, razor-cut multicolored (mostly orange) hair, tattoos on her neck and ankle, and several facial piercings, Tiffany didn't look like someone you'd expect to meet at a Baptist church picnic. She told me in a conversation over lunch about "these great books about a boy wizard" that I simply *had* to read to my children.

Now, remember, I am almost media-free. What this meant at

that time was that I was not only unaware of Harry's existence, I also knew nothing about the controversy involving Christian objections to the Harry Potter books. Looking at Tiffany, though, I didn't think I needed guidance from a children's pastor or Focus on the Family; I assumed my friend was something of a Wiccan or goddess worshipper and made a mental note to keep clear of anything to do with Harry Potter.

But this was not to be. My oldest daughter, then eleven, was given a paperback copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by our pediatrician, who happens to be a thoughtful mother of four children and an evangelical Christian to boot. Now that Harry was in my house, I had to figure out what to do with him. I elected to read the book Hannah had been given, if only to explain to my daughter why she wasn't allowed to read it. I wanted to be able to point to specific passages so she could see for herself why we don't read such trash, however popular it may be.

You can guess the rest of the story, I suppose. I read through the night and, ashamed of my judging a book by its readers, bought the other two books then available early the next morning (and apologized to my friend Tiffany!). I began reading the books to my younger children that night and encouraged—nigh on “required”—that the older kids read them.

I tell my story here for a couple of reasons. First, I hope you will remember that red-flag caution was my first response to Harry Potter as a parent and a reader. I am a great admirer of the Harry Potter books and still maintain that caution in book selection is not ignorance or closed-mindedness. Those who are responsible for the shaping of young minds and hearts *should* be properly careful about what books their charges read in the same way they should be discriminating about what they eat for snacks or what they

watch on the television (if they choose to watch it at all). Only the careless or fools equate such prudence with prejudice.

I tell my story, too, in order to begin explaining what is different about *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, namely, the perspective and background I have in reading them. The analyses in this book spring from the same source as my switch from “Harry-resistant” to “Harry-embracing,” even “Harry-enthusiastic”: my classical education and love of the so-called Great Books.

By a few providential circumstances, I was able to study Latin and Greek in high school (though I was no Hermione, believe me, despite our shared surname). I went to a college that is famous for requiring its students to read the Great Books, or at least large parts of the Western canon. I think now it was more pretension than anything else that made me major in Latin and Greek there, but for whatever reason, I spent a good part of my youth reading Cicero, Virgil, and Aquinas in Latin and Homer, Plato, and Sophocles in Greek.

So what? Well, besides meaning I can translate the magic spells used in Harry Potter (most of which are in Latin), my background is very similar to that of Joanne Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books. Her intellectual pedigree is, in fact, much better than mine.

Rowling was at the top of her class in secondary school, passed A-level exams in French, German, and English, and at the University of Exeter, took a double first in French and Classical Languages. This is the rough equivalent of graduating summa cum laude from a prestigious American liberal arts college, say, Middlebury or Wesleyan, in a double major. She is familiar and fluent with the languages, philosophy, and literature of the classical and medieval worlds. Her books reflect an understanding of the truths of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas because she has

read these greats—and read them as attentively as reading them in the original languages requires.

Rowling and I also enjoy the same taste in English and world fiction. She has expressed in hundreds of interviews (in which she is unfailingly asked about her favorite books and authors) that she loves Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, whose *Emma* is her favorite title. She has said, too, that she is a great admirer of C. S. Lewis, to the point of being physically incapable of being in the same room with a Narnia novel and not sitting down to read it. Her Harry Potter novels, not surprisingly, are filled with allusions to these authors, as well as to William Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, George Orwell, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The themes she explores, the structures of the books, the symbols she uses, even the names of her Harry Potter characters come from (as she likes to say) the “compost heap” in her mind of all the books she has read and loved.

My compost heap of books read and loved is a lot smaller than Rowling’s, but it has enough common elements that it smells the same. Reading the first of her Harry Potter books, I was astonished by the range and depth of her story, as well as by its power and profundity. Because I share in several important ways the perspective and background of the author, I was able to understand what makes these books different and better than almost everything being written today. Consequently, I was embarrassed by my ignorance when I learned how popular the books were around the world when I finally read them, but “Potter-mania” was not a surprising or confusing phenomenon. *Of course people everywhere love these books, I thought. These stories resonate with the Great Story for which we all are designed.*

What did take me aback was finding out that many segments of the Christian community hated the books. As a Christian daddy, I

understood why parents and pastors would be cautious about books involving magic, but having read the books, I had a hard time finding anything but delight in them. *Christians, of all people, should be celebrating the Harry Potter novels and the attendant Potter-mania.* The Potter books are the most edifying works of fiction written in many years, as any classicist, medievalist, or lover of traditional English plays and novels might tell you.

The problem was that these readers and experts weren't telling anybody this. Maybe they weren't reading Harry Potter or they weren't reading the books closely. Perhaps they thought the work of sharing what Harry Potter is about was beneath them—whatever the reason, I knew that Harry was horribly misunderstood. When I said at a C. S. Lewis Society meeting that these books were within the tradition of great English writing rather than “occult trash,” I was told this was a unique interpretation and was invited to expand my comments into a presentation to that group. Which I did.

One thing led to another, starting with a series of lectures on the Potter novels at the Carnegie Library in Port Townsend. Those talks were filmed for television, and eventually the lectures became *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter* (Zossima Press, 2002).

Seemingly overnight, I became a Harry Potter authority of sorts. Since *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter* was published, I was hired to teach a Harry Potter course for Barnes and Noble University online to students around the world, I have lectured around the United States, I was a featured speaker at the first international conference on the meaning of the Potter books (Nimbus-2003, Orlando, Florida), and I have been interviewed on radio stations from coast to coast. I kept my day job, but it has been a lot of fun talking about these books with Harry's friends and foes alike.

In *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, I state my case for what I see as a profoundly Christian meaning at the core of the series. Because this

is a short book dealing only with essentials, I have left out much that might interest fans and much that might interest Harry haters. The book does not include, consequently, speculations about Rowling's Christian orthodoxy, her debts to specific authors, or even much about what might happen in the remaining Harry Potter books. Rowling is a professed Presbyterian (Church of Scotland) and has said in interviews that her faith is a key to understanding her work. Nonetheless, no one but God and her immediate circle knows whether this is true or not, so I stick to her books. As you will see, they speak volumes about the power of the Christian message, even in—perhaps especially in—a profane culture.

My thesis is essentially this: *As images of God designed for life in Christ, all humans naturally resonate with stories that reflect the greatest story ever told—the story of God who became man.* The Harry Potter novels, the best-selling books in publishing history, touch our hearts because they contain themes, imagery, and engaging stories that echo the Great Story we are wired to receive and respond to. *Looking for God in Harry Potter* is a step-by-step walk through these images, themes, and stories to reveal the core of the Harry Potter books and why they are so popular: they address the need (really an innate need akin to our need for physical nourishment) that we have for spiritual nourishment in the form of edifying, imaginative experience of life in Christ.

Because the Harry Potter books serve this purpose, they are excellent vehicles for parents wanting to share the Christian messages of love's victory over death, of our relationship to God the Father through Christ, even of Christ's two natures and singular essence. Based on our reading of Harry Potter, I have had conversations with my children about heaven and hell, the work of the devil in the world, and our hope in Christ.

C. S. Lewis said that the best books “instruct while delighting.”

Understanding Rowling's artistry requires that we learn some of the "secret code" of English literature (which until the twentieth century was Christian literature almost without exception) that gives Shakespeare's plays, Robert Browning's poems, and Tolkien's novels their power. *Looking for God in Harry Potter* gives you this hidden key so you can unlock the implicit Christian content of the books and share them with others, from children who are fans to skeptical friends.

Looking for God in Harry Potter has two sections and sixteen chapters. The first section explores the themes, structures, symbols, and even the names of characters and titles of the books, which are rich with Christian significance. The second part is a book-by-book look at these elements in each novel, illuminating their remarkable power and close fidelity to classic literary traditions.

I wrote this book to be read from beginning to end, but I think if I were given a copy I would probably skip to the discussion of my favorite Harry Potter novel first and jump around. I hope you enjoy it, however you choose to read it. If you are a "conservative Christian" like me and you have not read the books (or read only one or part of one before giving up on it), I hope you are encouraged by this book to read or reread the novels. If you are a secret Harry Potter fan who has chosen to stay in the closet for fear of criticism from your faith community, I hope this book empowers you to share how Harry's story harmonizes with God's story. If you are a parent, you will soon be able to share with your children some key points of Christian teaching because you will find them imbedded in stories your children love. (I have included an appendix for just this purpose.)

And if you are a Harry Potter fan and not a Christian (maybe one of the many readers who bought the book precisely because so many Christians said that you shouldn't!), my hope is that you will

take seriously the possibility that the reason you love these books is because your heart resonates with the deeper story underlying the surface of Harry's stories. This book is not a Christian tract by any means. It is first and last about the meaning of the Harry Potter books. But because Rowling's novels are as popular as they are and have, as you will see, so much implicit and sometimes almost explicit Christian content in them, it would be stranger-than-fiction, something of a believe-it-or-not, if their meaning were not a cause of their popularity.

Because of all the sound and fury in the popular media and coming from many pulpits, it may seem incredible to you that Harry Potter is not contrary to Christian faith but a series of books nurturing faith, especially when their Christian and literary antecedents are understood. Are you ready to test this remarkable world-turned-upside-down hypothesis? Just turn the page and let me tell you why this classicist and Christian dad celebrates the existence of the Harry Potter novels.

I

MAGIC, FANTASY, AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

*The “sorcery” in Harry Potter supports
biblical teaching, not practice of the occult.*

More than any other book of the last fifty years (and perhaps ever), the Harry Potter novels have captured the imagination of the reading public worldwide. Hundreds of millions of copies have been sold to date. However, although the books have been wildly successful, no one as yet has been able to explain their popularity.

The Harry Potter books, in case you too have lived on the Planet Zenon since 1997 or have recently come out of a coma, recount the adventures of an English schoolboy as he advances from grade to grade at Hogwarts School. Hogwarts is no ordinary boarding school, however, and Harry Potter is no typical student—the former is a school for witchcraft and wizardry, and Harry is not only a wizard-in-training, but the target of attack by the worst of evil wizards, Lord Voldemort, and his followers, the Death Eaters. Each book ends with a life-or-death battle against

Voldemort or his servants and enough plot twists to make you dream of saltwater taffy.

I am convinced that the fundamental reason for the astonishing popularity of the Harry Potter novels is their ability to meet a spiritual longing for some experience of the truths of life, love, and death taught by Christianity but denied by a secular culture. Human beings are designed for Christ, whether they know it or not. *That the Harry Potter stories “sing along” with the Great Story of Christ is a significant key to understanding their compelling richness.* I take hits from both sides for daring to make such a declaration—from Potter fans who are shocked by the suggestion that they have been reading “Christian” books and from Potter foes who are shocked by the thought that there could be anything “Christian” about books with witches and wizards in them.

As the magical setting of the books has caused the most controversy, I’ll start with the setting and several formulas Rowling observes in every book.

MAGICAL SETTING

Some Christians object to Harry Potter because Christian Scripture in many places explicitly forbids occult practice. Though reading about occult practice is not forbidden, these Christians prudently prefer (again in obedience to scriptural admonishments to parents) to protect their children because of the books’ sympathetic portrayal of occult practice. These Christians believe that such approving and casual exposure to the occult opens the door to occult practice.

Other Christians, whether Harry fans or sideline observers of the controversy, point out the books are “only stories” and that many stories beloved by Christians (usually the Narnia or Lord of the Rings books are invoked as examples) have portrayed witches and wizards in a positive light.

These two groups square off with compare-and-contrast sessions about Frodo, Aslan, and Harry—arguments as much about taste and prejudice as about substance. Both responses miss the mark, I think. With a clear lack of charity, both camps have made Harry Potter into something of a litmus test—of fidelity to principle on the one hand and of human intelligence on the other.

Given this impasse, I think it pays to note three observations:

- 1. Occult practices are universally denounced by major world religions.** Every major religion—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (not to mention animism)—prohibits invocational sorcery and individual (or unguided) exploration of the spirit world. Why? Calling down occult forces and demons is dangerous, and the world's traditions protect their own by condemning it. Invocational magic and sorcery never work according to human plans (the dark forces always have a different agenda for the sorcerer and his community). Being concerned about the occult is not a silly, parochial Christian concern restricted to “ignorant fundamentalists”; it is a prudent *human* concern evident in the faiths of the whole world.
- 2. Scripture itself contains material about occult practices.** The Bible nowhere forbids reading material with occult elements in it. As there are witches, soothsayers, and possessed prophetesses in the Bible (almost all negatively portrayed), it would be more than odd if Holy Writ spoke against itself. If anything, the New Testament slams those who charge the righteous with sorcery (see Matthew 12:24-28 and Mark 9:38-40). I know devout Christians who hate Harry as well as many who love him; both groups read their Bible daily *and* enjoy fantasy stories with occult elements and magic in them—stories as diverse as Shakespeare's

The Tempest, L. Frank Baum's Oz stories, Lewis's Narnia and Ransom novels, and Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy.

3. **Whether or not to read Harry Potter from the logical, human view, then, is a question of whether reading Harry fosters a curiosity in the occult or in a rewarding spiritual life.** Scripture forbids occult practice and tells us to “train a child in the way he should go” (Proverbs 22:6). The much debated question, then, is not whether we are *allowed* to read these books but whether the depiction of magic in them lays the foundation for future involvement in New Age “spirituality.” The issue boils down to this: Does Harry foster an interest in the real world occult or doesn't he?

Despite initially having forbidden my children from reading the Rowling books, reading them myself has convinced me that the magic in Harry Potter is no more likely to encourage real-life witchcraft than time travel in science fiction novels encourages readers to seek passage to previous centuries. Loving families have much to celebrate in these stories and little, if anything, to fear.

I say this without hesitation because the magic in Harry Potter is not “sorcery” or *invocational* magic. In keeping with a long tradition of English fantasy, the magic practiced in the Potter books, by hero and villain alike, is *incantational* magic, a magic that shows—in story form—our human thirst for a reality beyond the physical world around us.

The difference between invocational and incantational magic isn't something we all learned in the womb, so let me explain. *Invocational* means literally “to call in.” Magic of this sort is usually referred to as sorcery. Scripture warns that “calling in” demonic principalities and powers for personal power and advantage is dan-

gerously stupid. History books, revealed tradition, and fantasy fiction (think *Dr. Faustus*) that touch on sorcery do so in order to show us that the unbridled pursuit of power and advantage via black magic promises a tragic end. *But there is no invocational sorcery in the Harry Potter books.* Even the most evil wizards do their nasty magic with spells; not one character in any of the five books ever calls in evil spirits. Not once.

The magic by spells and wands in Harry Potter is known as incantational wizardry. *Incantational* means literally “to sing along with” or “to harmonize.” To understand how this works, we have to step outside our culture’s materialist creed (that everything in existence is quantitative mass or energy) and look at the world upside down, which is to say, God-first.

Christianity—and all revealed traditions—believes creation comes into being by God’s creative Word, or his song. As creatures made in the image of God, we can harmonize with God’s Word and his will, and in doing so, experience the power of God. The magic and miracles we read about in great literature are merely reflections of God’s work in our life. To risk overstating my case, the magic in Harry Potter and other good fantasy fiction harmonizes with the miracles of the saints.

C. S. Lewis paints a picture of the differences between incantational and invocational magic in *Prince Caspian*. As you may recall, Prince Caspian and the Aslan-revering creatures of the forest are under attack from Caspian’s uncle. Things turn bad for the white hats, and it seems as if they will be overrun and slaughtered at any moment. Two characters on the good guys’ side decide their only hope is magic.

Prince Caspian decides on musical magic. He has a horn that Aslan, the Christlike lion of these books, had given to Queen Susan in ages past to blow in time of need. Caspian blows on this divinely pro-

vided instrument in his crisis.¹ By sounding a note in obedience and faith, Caspian harmonizes with the underlying fabric and rules of the Emperor over the Sea, and help promptly and providentially arrives.

Nikabrik the dwarf, in contrast, decides a little sorcery is in order. He finds a hag capable of summoning the dreaded White Witch in the hope that this power-hungry, Aslan-hating witch will help the good guys (in exchange for an opening into Narnia). Needless to say, the musical magicians are scandalized by the dwarf's actions and put an end to the sorcery lickety-split.

In the Narnia stories and other great fantasy fiction, good magic is incantational, and bad magic, which is contrary to Scripture, is invocational. Incantational magic is about harmonizing with God's Word by imitation. Invocational magic is about calling in evil spirits for power or advantage—always a tragic mistake. The magic in Harry Potter is exclusively incantational magic in conformity with both literary tradition and scriptural admonition. Concern that the books might “lay the foundation” for occult practice is misplaced, however well intentioned and understandable, because it fails to recognize that Potter magic is not demonic.

Perhaps you are wondering, *If Harry Potter magic is a magic in harmony with the Great Story, why are the bad guys able to use it?* Great question.

Just as even the evil people in “real” life are certainly created in God's image, so all the witches and wizards in Potterdom, good and bad, are able to use incantational magic. Evil magical folk choose of their own free will to serve the Dark Lord with their magical faculties just as most of us, sadly, lend a talent or power of our own in unguarded moments to the evil one's cause. As we will see, the organizing structure of the Potter books is a battle between good guys who serve truth, beauty, and virtue and bad guys who lust after power and private gain.

Some fans of Lewis and Tolkien contrast their use of magic

with Rowling's, arguing that, unlike the world of Harry Potter, the subcreations of these fantasy writers had no overlap with the real world. They suggest that this blurring of boundaries confuses young minds about what is fiction and what is reality.

But Lewis and Tolkien blurred boundaries with gusto in their stories—as did Homer, Virgil, Dante, and other authors whose works regularly traumatize students in English classes. Certainly the assertion that Middle Earth and Narnia are separate realities is questionable, at best. Middle Earth *is* earth between the Second and Third Ages (we live in the so-called Fourth Age). Narnia overlaps with our world at the beginning and end of each book, and in *The Last Battle* is revealed as a likeness with earth of the heavenly archetype, or Aslan's kingdom. Singling out Rowling here betrays a lack of charity, at least, and perhaps a little reasoning chasing prejudice.

That the magical world exists inside Muggledom (nonmagical people are called “Muggles” by the witches and wizards in Harry Potter), however, besides being consistent with the best traditions in epic myth and fantasy, parallels the life of Christians in the world. I don't want to belabor this point, but C. S. Lewis described the life of Christians as a life spent “in an enemy occupied country.”² What he meant is that traditional Christians understand that man is fallen, that he no longer enjoys the ability to walk and talk with God in the Garden, and that the world is driven by God-opposing powers. Lewis's Ransom novels illustrate this idea.

Christians believe that their resistance to the occupying powers and their loving service to God qualify them as a peculiar people who are “in the world” but not “of the world” (John 17:13-16). Though the church has left the catacombs (except in some Muslim and totalitarian countries in which Christians still worship in secret and at risk of their lives), Christians true to their revelation and tradition understand that they serve a different Lord than the lord of the world.

The magical and secret world inside Muggledom is not cause for concern so much as it is a parallel to celebrate. I am not offering the magical world as an allegory (shudder) for the church; Rowling satirizes every institution—media, government, courts, schools, hospitals, families—and most human foibles in her subcreation. But I do think that her secret world within our world coincides with rather than contradicts the worldview of Christians.

Which brings me full circle. I started by saying that understanding incantational magic requires turning the modern worldview on its head, putting God first rather than last. I hope you see that the *magic by spells and wands requires that we understand our world as a created world dependent for its existence on God's creative Word.*

We live in a time in which *naturalism*, the belief that all existence is matter and energy, is the state religion and belief in supernatural or contra-natural powers is considered delusion. The incantational magic in Harry Potter, because it requires harmonizing with a greater magic, undermines faith in this godless worldview. And by undermining the materialist view of our times, it can even be said that the books lay the foundation not for occult practices but for a traditional understanding of the spiritual life.

The magic in Harry Potter is consistent with and even fosters a worldview affirming spiritual realities because

- it is incantational rather than forbidden invocational magic;
- it illustrates the right and wrong uses of power and talents;
- its world inside Muggledom parallels the Christian worldview;
- it reinforces the Christian view of the world as a creation rather than a natural accident devoid of meaning.

Have you heard stories of children being sucked into witches' covens because they want to be like Harry? Reports of rising mem-

bership in occult groups since these books were published inevitably turn out to be generated by proselytizing members of these groups. People who track the occult for a living explain that, despite Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Harry Potter, membership in these groups in Europe and the United States are minuscule and are in decline despite a decade of Harry, Buffy, and occult milieu entertainment.³ Your child is far more likely to become a Hare Krishna or member of a Christian cult than a witch or wizard.

And even if children *were* being seduced into the occult because of their desire to do spells, I have to hope this would be understood by thinking people as a shameful, tragic aberration, more indicative of the child's spiritual formation than a danger in the books. The Dungeons and Dragons craze in the sixties and seventies and its attendant occult paraphernalia sprang from an unhealthy fascination and perverse misunderstanding of *The Lord of the Rings*, an epic with clear Christian undertones. If we were to avoid books that could possibly be misunderstood or whose message could be turned on its head, incidents like Jonestown would logically suggest we should not read the Bible.

What about the title of the first book in the Potter series? If there's no sorcery in these books, how come the first book and movie are titled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*? Well, because that isn't the title of the first book. Arthur Levine, under whose imprint the books are published by Scholastic in the United States, changed the title from *Philosopher's Stone* to *Sorcerer's Stone* because he was sure that no American would buy a book with *philosophy* in the title.

An Orthodox Christian bishop has noted that Harry haters "have missed the spiritual forest for the sake of their fixation on the magical imagery of the literary trees."⁴ If there is anything tragic in this misunderstanding of Harry Potter by well-intentioned Christians, it is the tragedy of "friendly fire." Just as foot soldiers

are sometimes hit by misdirected artillery fire from their own troops, so Harry has been condemned by the side he is serving. Because we mistake fictional magic for sorcery, we misconstrue a well-aimed blow at atheistic naturalism as an invitation to the occult. This only serves to attack a new and valuable ally in the spiritual warfare against our common enemy.⁵ If the “magical trees” in Harry Potter are of any help in retaking ground lost to those who would burn down the spiritual forest, then Rowling has done Christian communities everywhere a very good deed.

II

THE PURIFICATION OF THE SOUL

*Christian keys to Harry Potter
and the Sorcerer's Stone*

The first ten chapters of this book include discussions of the elements that run through all the books with an eye toward the Christian meaning of these themes, structures, and symbols. In the next five chapters, we'll look at each book, not, I hope, to repeat what has already been said about love and death and specific Christian symbols, but to reveal the several parts of these books that have "jumped off the page" in terms of Christian meaning.

Much of the first book's meaning is about alchemy. The original title, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, cues us to that. As we'd expect, knowing the alchemical formula, Harry moves through the black stage (the Dursleys, Snape), the white stage (Dumbledore), and the red stage (Rubeus, crisis event). The last is the red-hot crucible scene, in which Harry dies and rises from the dead in the presence of a symbol of Christ (here, the philosopher's stone he pulls from the Mirror of Erised).

In addition to alchemy, there are two other striking parallels with the Christian journey in *Sorcerer's Stone*: the drinking of unicorn blood and the consequences for Quirrell when he tries to kill Harry.

Perhaps the scariest scene in the first book (and certainly the most misunderstood) is the detention in the Forbidden Forest where Harry and Draco see the Dark Lord drinking unicorn blood. "The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood."¹

Harry is saved by Firenze the centaur, who explains to Harry why someone would drink unicorn's blood:

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

"No," said Harry, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing to slay a unicorn," said Firenze.

"Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."²

As we saw earlier, the centaur is a symbol of a perfect man and an imaginative icon of Christ riding into Jerusalem. Here, this centaur is talking about another symbol of Christ: the unicorn. That the blood of the unicorn will curse those who drink it unworthily, and that it has life-giving power, echoes Paul's discourse on the unworthy reception of Communion, which is the blood of Christ:

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.
(1 Corinthians 11:23-29, KJV)

Christians have disputed amongst themselves what eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ means, especially in regard to doing it “in remembrance.” Men of good will, however, would be hard pressed to feign confusion about what happens to the Christian who does this “unworthily.” They’re damned, sure and simple.

Now, when Firenze the centaur explains to Harry that anyone who selfishly drinks the life-saving blood of the unicorn is “cursed” from the moment the blood touches his lips, he does everything but read from I Corinthians, chapter and verse.

Less explicit but just as important are the smuggled theological points in Harry’s journey to the Mirror of Erised and Quirrell’s fate in serving the Dark Lord and attacking Harry.

As we’ve already seen, alchemical work can be described as a salvation journey, using the terms *purification*, *dissolution*, and *recongealing*. The end result of alchemy is a soul that has turned or “transmuted” from lead to gold, from base desires and concerns for individual advantage to Christlike love and freedom.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is largely an exposition of the alchemical method shown through human character reagents. It is centered on Harry's spiritual purification so that he might be worthy of the Stone at the book's end; this requires his purification, dissolution by contraries, and philosophic congealment.

In chapter 8, we saw that change is a key theme in *Harry Potter*. In this first book, Harry changes from an orphan in a Muggle home into a wizard hero capable of saving the world from Voldemort's return. This happens in stages as the various character reactants distill the Muggle out of him. His final trials to get the Stone are symbols of his soul's journey to perfection.

Let's look at these trials. They begin with Fluffy, the giant three-headed dog that guards the trapdoor hiding the Stone. Hagrid purchased Fluffy from a "Greek chappie" in a bar—which makes sense, because the dog clearly refers to Cerberus, who played a role in several Greek myths as the monster guarding the gates of hell. Orpheus got past Cerberus by lulling him to sleep with a lyre, and that is Fluffy's weak point as well. Quirrell uses a harp (much like a lyre), and Harry uses Hagrid's gift flute.

Cerberus, the otherworldly canine, is at the gates guarding the gauntlet of trials to the Stone (or spiritual perfection), because the first step in spiritual life and alchemical work is renunciation of the world. This is the first rung on the "ladder of divine ascent" and the most difficult.³ The power-obsessed Quirrell/Voldemort struggles with the Fluffy obstacle above all others, which is why it takes him so long to enter through the trapdoor.

Renunciation is the better part of purification, and it is not until Harry throws off earthly concerns (the house cup, detentions, being expelled, life itself) that he is able at last to enter the trapdoor. In a heroic scene, he dismisses Ron and Hermione's concerns

about school and family before the prospect of the return of Voldemort and takes the plunge.⁴

The trials the trio goes through to get to the Stone aren't arbitrarily assigned. We saw in chapter 9 how Hermione, Ron, and Harry are actually living symbols of the powers of the soul: Mind, Body, and Spirit (or Mind, Desire, and Heart). This Platonic doctrine of the soul (after its baptism and correction) became the teaching of the church. The trials, though, aren't from Plato but from Aristotle.

Each trial Harry faces in his race to get the Stone, believe it or not, reflects a faculty or kind of soul in the Aristotelian model. The path to the Stone is an obstacle course symbolizing the soul's qualities and powers as presented in Aristotle's *On the Soul* and adapted by medieval theologians. To reach perfection (the philosopher's stone), Harry must necessarily show himself to have surpassed each obstacle within himself.

The Scholastic model, following Aristotle and Aquinas, is that there are three kinds of soul: vegetative, sensitive, and intellective. The powers or faculties closely tied to each kind are: (1) nourishment and reproduction with the vegetative; (2) discrimination and will with sensitivity to data; and (3) the rational and spiritual with the intellective kind.⁵ What do Harry, Ron, and Hermione find when they jump through the trapdoor? They descend "miles under the school" into a netherworld crucible where their worthiness will be tested. Then, in sequence from carnal to spiritual, this trio of the soul's powers pass through tests for their purification.

First is the test for the vegetative kind of soul, by means of the vicious plant "devil's snare." Then comes discrimination, or choice.⁶ The team has to find the single winged key that fits the locked door at the opposite end of the Chamber, out of hundreds of flying keys. The right "key" here means both "answer unlocking

a problem” and “musical note” perceived by the Heart. Desire or Mind cannot hear, find, or catch the right key except in obedience to Heart. Next test, please.

To pass the magical chessboard test, they must become players and win the game. Ron is in charge here, because this is the ultimate test of the willing, or desiring, faculty he embodies. Of course, Ron chooses the passionate, erratic knight and assigns the linear, analytical Hermione the rook (which only moves in straight lines). Harry, the Heart or spiritual center, becomes—what else?—a bishop.

Why is the chess game—what Americans think of as an egghead sport—the test for will and the last or highest test for Ron, our desiring part? Because to win this game, Ron must sacrifice himself. There is no greater challenge for the passionate faculty than to forego its selfish interest and focus on the greater good. Ron transcends himself in selfless sacrifice, and the test is passed. On to the next test. Don’t forget to jump over the troll.

“Pure logic!” Snape has left a word puzzle beside seven bottles of potions that will kill or liberate. This is Hermione’s exam, of course, and Mind solves the puzzle without trouble. But this is the end of the road for Hermione; the last test is only for the highest faculty of soul, and she retires, deferring to Harry.

And this test? It’s our old friend the Mirror of Erised. Quirrell/Voldemort are standing in front of it, trying to find the Stone, and all Quirrell can see is himself giving it to Voldemort. After the test Dumbledore tells Harry why this is: “You see, only one who wanted to *find* the Stone—find it, but not use it—would be able to get it, otherwise they’d just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life.”⁷

Quirrell/Voldemort is clueless in front of the Mirror, but not Harry. Because of Dumbledore’s coaching about the Mirror months before, and his understanding that the happiest man in the

world would see only his reflection, Harry knows what he will see—it won't be his family. After the trials of purification he has just passed through, Harry knows he will see himself only wanting the Stone for itself.

*What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, he thought, is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the Mirror, I should see myself finding it—which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up to?*⁸

The authentic and accomplished alchemist is able to produce the Stone because of his spiritual achievement. It is a *by-product* of that perfection, as are immortality and the riches of transcending the world, rather than the *end* or goal of it. We know Dumbledore and Flamel are of this perfected type because they destroy the Stone at book's end.

Dumbledore has set up the final hurdle to getting the Stone in poetic fashion; the Mirror reflects the spiritual quality of whoever stands before it. To produce the Stone from the Mirror, the seeker must be passionless, which is to say, not desiring any private gain or advantage. One's worthiness to hold or find the Stone is a *reflection* of the quality of one's desires. Quirrell, consumed by Voldemort and his own lust for power, cannot get the Stone—but Harry, of course, sees himself put the Stone in his own pocket.

This is all very interesting, I hear you saying, but what do alchemy, Aristotle, and this Mirror/Stone puzzle have to do with Christianity? Good question. The answer is “quite a bit,” although it's not as obvious as the unicorn blood.

Alchemy was not its own religion or spiritual path—it only existed as a discipline within revealed traditions. To Christians, the alchemical process was symbolic of the way to spiritual perfection,

and the philosopher's stone, as the end result of this process, was a symbol for Christ.

Having completed a trial by fire and spiritual purification, Harry is able to see and receive this symbol of Christ, because he has no desire to use it for his own advantage but seeks it in loving service to others. Only the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8), and the Mirror reflects the heart's desire.

The purified Harry sees and receives the Stone (Christ), then flees from the two-faced evil of Quirrell/Voldemort—and something fascinating happens. The two-headed monster is unable to touch or have any contact with Harry without burning, quite literally. Dumbledore saves Harry in the end and (after Harry's three-day resurrection) explains what happened:

"But why couldn't Quirrell touch me?"

*"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."*⁹

If there is a single meaning to the Potter books, as we saw in chapter 7 on love and death, it is that love conquers all. And of all loves, sacrificial love is the most important, because it has conquered death. Harry's protection against the assault of the evil one is the love shown years ago by someone who made the greatest sacrifice for him. His bond with that sacrifice and the love it demon-

strated permeates his person and repels all evil. Voldemort cannot touch him because of Harry's worthiness to receive the Stone (Christ), and because of the Christlike love and sacrifice that shield him.

Let me take this a step further. Another echo of Christian teaching in the end of Quirrell/Voldemort is in the burning of Quirrell's hands and skin when they make contact with Harry; Quirrell burns and dies in agony. Rowling tells in graphic story form here the traditional Christian doctrine concerning God's judgment and the nature of heaven and hell. One Christian theologian explains it this way:

God is Truth and Light. God's judgment is nothing else than our coming into contact with truth and light. In the day of the Great Judgment all men will appear naked before this penetrating light of truth. The "books" will be opened. What are these "books"? They are our hearts. Our hearts will be opened by the penetrating light of God, and what is in these hearts will be revealed. If in those hearts there is love for God, those hearts will rejoice seeing God's light. If, on the contrary, there is hatred for God in those hearts, these men will suffer by receiving on their opened hearts this penetrating light of truth which they detested all their life.¹⁰

Another theologian explains:

God himself is both reward and punishment. All men have been created to see God unceasingly in his uncreated glory. Whether God will be for each man heaven or hell, reward or punishment, depends on man's response to God's love and on man's transformation from the state of selfish and self-centered love, to God-like love which does not seek its own ends. . . . The primary purpose of Orthodox Christianity, then, is to prepare its members for an experience which every human being will sooner or later have.¹¹

Back to Harry and Quirrell. Professor Quirrell is possessed by the evil one. He stands before the judging Mirror, looking at the quality of the desires reflected from his heart. It sees what possesses him: a selfish and self-centered love apart from God. He is unworthy of the Stone/Christ and the ensuing Elixir of Life, so these are kept from him. When he touches someone blanketed by the sacrificial love of a savior (here, of course, Harry's mother) and worthy of having Christ in him, the love of God therein burns Quirrell. His judgment reflects the judgment of hell that rejecters of hell will experience.

So what is *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* about? Written in the symbolism of alchemy and traditional Christian doctrine, it is an ode to the purification and perfection of the soul in Christ and his saving, sacrificial love. The perfected soul at death will experience the glory and love of God as joy; the soul that has not transcended, that has consumed itself with pursuit of power and love of self apart from God, will experience the same glory as agony and fire.

Let me close here with a story. When I first read this book aloud to my children, my then eleven-year-old daughter Hannah (who had read the book with my permission already) was in the room. I asked her why she thought Quirrell couldn't hold Harry. She explained matter-of-factly that Harry was protected by his mother's love and that love burns people with hard hearts "just like heaven and hell being the same place." I was amazed that she'd made the connection on her own. I guess the world will always underestimate the wisdom and courage of its eleven-year-olds.

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 1

¹ See C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, chapters 7 and 12. Readers of the Narnia books remember from *The Magician's Nephew* that Aslan created that world with his song—as does the divinity in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 51.

³ “Fundamentalism Afoot in Anti-Potter Camp, Says New-Religions Expert: Popular Culture Enjoys an Autonomy, Explains Massimo Introvigne,” *Zenit News*, December 6, 2001, http://www.cesnur.org/2001/potter/dec_03.htm.

⁴ Bishop Auxentios, *Orthodox Tradition* 20, no. 3 (2003): 14–26.

⁵ See C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair* for this modern tragedy told in story form. *The Silver Chair* is a vibrant story of the confusion and modern enchantment with materialism or “life underground.” Is there any Narnia moment greater than Prince Rilian's victory over the Emerald Witch in chapter 12?

CHAPTER 2

¹ Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 147.

² Perry Glazer, “The Surprising Trouble with Harry,” *Touchstone* (November 2003): 13.

named Harry Potter. Many readers thought of James Potter, hero of Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*.

Better than these examples, Netflix released two mock-horror, B-movie gems, *Troll* (1986) and *Troll 2* (1992), in which the family resisting Torok the troll's attempt to take over the world is led by a dad and son both named Harry Potter. Harry Potter Sr. and Harry Potter Jr. were all over the movie and HBO screens for two or three years; how meaningful was that? (Not very.) Thanks to Dan Rees of Joplin, Missouri, for Harry's first encounters with trolls.

My favorite instance of Harry sightings pre-Rowling comes from Monty Python. In a send-up strangely echoing the beginning of *Sorcerer's Stone*, we hear Harry is about to be attacked: "It was a day like any other and Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Brainsample were a perfectly ordinary couple, leading perfectly ordinary lives—the sort of people to whom nothing extraordinary ever happened, and not the kind of people to be the centre of one of the most astounding incidents in the history of mankind. . . . So let's forget about them and follow instead the destiny of this man. . . . (Camera pans off them; they both look disappointed; camera picks up instead a smart little business man, in bowler, briefcase and pinstripes.) . . . Harold Potter, gardener, and tax official, first victim of Creatures from another Planet." See <http://www.ibras.dk/montypython/episode07.htm>. I learned of this early Python sketch from Kia, a friend of Linda McCabe's.

⁹ Saint Dorotheos, "On the Fear of God," *Dorotheos of Gaza* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977), II0–III.

CHAPTER II

¹ Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, chapter 15.

² Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, 258.

³ See chapter I of Saint John Climacos, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988).

⁴ Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, chapter 16.

⁵ See Aristotle's *On the Soul*; William Wallace, *The Elements of Philosophy* (n.p.: Alba House, 1977), 62; and the relevant articles on "soul" in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

⁶ See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 3, chapter 4.

⁷ Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, chapter 17.

⁸ Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, chapter 16.

⁹ Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, chapter 17.

¹⁰ Alexandre Kalomirois, *River of Fire* (Montreal: Monastery Press, 1982), 18.

¹¹ Ioannes Romanides, *Franks, Romans, Feudalism, and Doctrine* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982), 46.

In *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, John Granger doesn't just offer apologies for Christians to sneak around and read Harry Potter books behind the barn. Instead, he boldly claims these books for Christ, showing example after example of the Christian message they proclaim. John leads all readers, whether Christian or not, to delight in the richness of the books, while at the same time revealing the reason why the stories resonate with so many people: because the Harry Potter stories, filled with love and redemption and the struggle to uphold what is good and right, tell the stories of our own longings and hopes. *Looking for God in Harry Potter* is a must-read for all Harry Potter fans, regardless of their faith.

STEVE VANDER ARK

Editor, *The Harry Potter Lexicon*

Are the Harry Potter books worthy of sustained scholarly attention? Yes, and then some, argues John Granger. "Serious" thinkers who shun Harry Potter are denying themselves a serious intellectual and scholarly challenge. Christian thinkers who eschew the Potter series because they find it grates on their theology miss the opportunity to take up once again the daunting question of evil. Wisdom often comes through the eyes and thoughts of children and, in this case, "children's books."

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

Professor of Social and Political Ethics, The University of Chicago

Author of *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*

John Granger's thorough knowledge of classical literature, combined with a beguiling writing style, make this study of Harry Potter's hidden themes not only enjoyable but persuasive. Parents will find here a useful tool, and any Christian curious about Harry will find much to think about.

FREDERICA MATHEWES-GREEN

Columnist for Beliefnet.com and author of *The Illumined Heart: The Ancient Christian Path of Transformation*

John Granger calls upon his gifts as a classicist, a student of Scripture and Christian literature, a teacher, a parent, and a detective to answer the question, Why are the Harry Potter books so popular? He develops a thorough case that the Harry Potter books are essentially Christian fantasy, and their popularity can be attributed to human longing for the Christian truths that hide just beneath the surface of the stories. Mr. Granger presents a preponderance of evidence from the text itself, translates advanced literary concepts with ease, and addresses sensitive issues with forthrightness and clarity. Christians who love the Harry Potter books will love them more; Christians who oppose them will have a lot to think about.

CARRIE BIRMINGHAM, PH.D.

Pepperdine University

John Granger has emerged in recent years as one of the most important voices in the literature concerning J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. *Looking for God in Harry Potter* offers Granger at his most accessible and compelling. His careful

analysis provides an exceptional guide to the content and meaning of the Harry Potter novels, as well as practical suggestions on how to approach the books in a meaningful way with children. Those who know and love the Harry Potter series will find that this volume adds a new dimension to their understanding and reading enjoyment. Those who are new to or undecided about the series will gain a great appreciation for what Rowling accomplishes in her novels and for the larger religious tradition that informs her stories. Granger writes with clarity and conviction, and his work is both a joy and an education for the reader. All of those interested in the ways that fiction and faith intersect owe it to themselves to read this book.

AMY H. STURGIS, PH.D.

Liberal Studies Program, Belmont University

Author of various books and articles, including "Harry Potter is a Hobbit: Rowling's Hogwarts, Tolkien's Fairy-Stories, and the Question of Readership"

No one puts the case for Harry Potter better than John Granger. This book is full of wisdom and insight. . . . The Potter books are much deeper, and a great deal more wholesome, than the critics realize. If Granger is right, J. K. Rowling is writing in the same tradition as the Inklings. Probably millions of Rowling fans knew it all along, but even longtime readers of Harry Potter will find their appreciation deepened by this eye-opening analysis.

STRATFORD CALDECOTT

Author of *Secret Fire: The Spiritual Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien*

John Granger says a "Great Book" must do three things: (1) ask the big questions about life, (2) answer the questions correctly (in harmony with Christian tradition), and (3) support the answers artistically. According to these guidelines, the Harry Potter books can be celebrated as great fiction. Granger's engaging application of literature, language, and the logic of Christian belief in his book *Looking for God in Harry Potter* may likewise be celebrated as great commentary. Readers will discover in these chapters the essential truth of J. K. Rowling's fictional world—that Love conquers all, even death!

ROBERT TREXLER

Editor, *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*

Joanne Rowling is the greatest international "smuggler" in history. She is smuggling thousands of pages of Christian theology into the hearts and minds of millions of people, both young and old. John Granger's book leaves no doubt whatsoever that this is the case. Will Ms. Rowling be unhappy that John has let the cat out of the bag?

DON HOLMES

Retired Christian bookstore owner and distributor