

Let me off the Bandwagon to Hogwarts

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Harry Potter is the biggest event in popular culture since the Beatles, and will eclipse even Elvis for cultural influence. The diminutive magician of Hogwarts has already sold more than 113 million books in an astonishing 200 languages. And now the recently released Potter movie looms as one of the biggest events in cinema history, with more than \$250 million in box office receipts after only 20 days. At this rate *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* will rival the \$425 million plus mark set by the second and third of George Lucas' *Star Wars* films. Harry is big, really big—and all indications are that he's destined to get bigger. Can Harry sink even *Titanic*, the greatest blockbuster of them all?

Of course, the Potter phenomenon has also raised considerable controversy. Religious groups in particular have condemned the focus on witchcraft and magic. But a vast cohort of Potter defenders has responded that such criticism lacks merit. The Harry Potter books are no different from, say, C.S. Lewis' beloved *Chronicles of Narnia*, another phenomenally popular children's book series that casts British children in supernatural scenarios. Others note that the Potter books are simply imaginative works in which the perennial struggle between good and evil is played out once more. And, numerous commentators have argued that Harry Potter's ability to draw the pre-pubescent crowd away from video games and into literature is an accomplishment akin to converting America's college fraternities to vegetarianism.

Well, fun's fun, but some characteristics inherent to Potter's world make me hesitant to jump on the bandwagon to Hogwarts. For the past several years I have been doing research on a wide range of spiritual movements that promote what I call "the magical worldview." In the magical worldview, individuals in possession of cosmic secrets enjoy extraordinary insights and power, and human beings answer to no higher authority. J. K. Rowling's wildly popular fictional works return us to such a cosmology. And, for those who contend that these are "just stories," it is important to remember that it is through stories that we propagate religious and cultural values. I have two concerns about Harry Potter.

My first is that the Potter worldview embraces spiritual elites—small groups claiming to possess secret knowledge and unusual personal capacities that bring them great power originating in an unseen realm. Rowling's protagonist Harry belongs to a hereditary line of magicians, a caste of select individuals specially equipped to master deep secrets that control these unseen forces. Both the secrets and the power they unleash are inaccessible to the common run of humanity. Ordinary folks are known in Potter's world by the suspiciously stupid-sounding label, Muggles. Spiritual movements embracing the magical worldview often employ similarly derisive names for us mere mortals.

Alas, Harry Potter's captivating world does have a dark side, and it's not just Lord Voldemort. "Potterism" condemns most of us to the status of Muggles, magically challenged individuals incapable of mastering the great secrets of the craft. A few Muggles transcend Muggledom, and are handpicked to join Hogwarts. But, ordinary Muggles need not apply to this school for the magically gifted. There is no way around it—Potterism incorporates spiritual elitism.

My second concern is more personal, and I suppose reflects my own worldview. Harry's charming universe lacks a loving God. Sure, there are supernatural powers in the Potter cosmos, but there is no sovereign Lord, no forgiving God, no one to whom one may pray. There are, instead, lordly magicians seeking to control whatever hidden forces make the world go round. This kind of universe is, to my way of thinking, spiritually empty and hopeless. What hath Hogwarts to do with Jerusalem?

Harry Potter may prove to be the greatest entertainment phenomenon of all time. But, it is important to ask what is occurring behind the scenes and between the lines of our sources of diversion. Stories are powerful persuaders in part because we don't suspect them of trying to persuade us at all. C. S. Lewis, among our greatest storytellers, recognized this fact. Concerning the Christian worldview implicit in his 1939 science fiction classic, *Out of the Silent Planet*, he wrote that "any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds...without their knowing it" when skillfully hidden in a good story. I'm not sure I'd call the Potter cosmology a theology, but Lewis' point is clear.

So, I am content to let Harry and his gifted friends explore the deeper reaches of the unseen world in search of whatever powers may lurk there. I prefer a cosmos in which I may pray to a loving God who makes no distinctions among people.

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