
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

MARGARET MASSON

The Harry Potter Debate

Further to Andrew Goddard's article in this issue on the ethics of the Harry Potter books, Margaret Masson offers a brief comment on the wider debate the books have aroused among evangelical Christians. She argues that much of the negative reaction to the stories is misplaced, and that the moral universe they contain is fundamentally sympathetic to a Christian understanding.

Like Andrew Goddard, who also writes in this issue of *Anvil*, I have greatly enjoyed the Harry Potter books. But gripping as the books themselves are, I have found even more fascinating the furore they have provoked amongst some groups of Evangelicals, largely in the United States, but also in Britain. Many have been highly suspicious of a series of books whose hero is a young boy learning to be a wizard. Is this not encouraging children to dabble in witchcraft? The most serious charges accuse the Harry Potter books of openly blaspheming Jesus and God and promoting Satanism. They suggest that children who read them will be – at least subliminally – encouraged to experiment with the occult because of the way in which these books, supposedly, glamorize magic and make it look like fun. In response to these fears, a number of Christian School Boards and Christian book shops in the United States have banned them, parents have tried to prevent their children being subjected to readings of Harry Potter at school, and web-sites and e-messages denouncing Harry Potter have abounded. What are we to make of all this?

As Andrew Goddard has argued in his article, the charges against Harry's world can hardly be moral ones. Indeed, given that very little contemporary children's literature is explicitly Christian, one could argue that the world of Harry Potter offers a moral universe much more sympathetic to the Christian one than much of what is on offer. How sensitive are we as Christians to the morality of, say, Barbie? Are we concerned about the messages about Christianity sent out by the seemingly unremittingly pathetic vicar in Postman Pat? As Goddard implies, it is very hard for Christians to argue against the virtues so clearly commended in Harry Potter's world: honesty, loyalty, bravery, generosity, friendship, and, most powerfully of all, self-sacrificial love.

One of the things that interests and puzzles me is why Christians who appear quite happily to accept witches and other supernatural beings, both good and evil, in the world of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, object so strongly when it comes to Harry Potter. Why the radically different reaction? Is it because Lewis and Tolkien are known to be Christian and are therefore deemed to be on the right side, to be somehow 'safe'? In Tolkien, to be sure, there is the sense of Christian truth deeply

woven through the stories although it is never explicit. Lewis's stories are allegories, their Christianity usually fairly obvious and near the surface. Perhaps some feel more at home with this, the fiction clearly serving the purpose of adorning doctrinal truth, more obviously didactic. Or again, perhaps the Narnia books feel safer because the children in them are not invested with any supernatural powers; they are not being taught to use magic but remain safely childlike, comparatively helpless in the world into which they accidentally fall through. Again, is this kind of innocent child-likeness more appealing to Evangelicals?

Evangelicals have had a longstanding suspicion of literature, the arts and the imagination, a tendency to be literalistic in their reading habits, whether of Bible or world or literature. The imagination has tended to be seen as presenting us with problems, with the capacity to lead us astray rather than to lead us to God. Fortunately, this attitude is much less widespread today than it used to be, but the remnants of this suspicion – particularly in the United States – are still clearly evident. Literature is at best seen as a waste of time, an indulgence, at worst, as a series of various kinds of untruths, fictions, some of which are dangerous. It is this historic failure to understand the world of imaginative literature, this basic literalism that has not been taught how to read at a variety of levels, that has also contributed to the sometimes hysterical reactions to the Harry Potter books.

But what about the magic? Isn't this the main objection to J. K. Rowling's creations? Aren't Christians right to be worried about this? No doubt they are. Any dabbling with supernatural, occult powers is certainly foolhardy and dangerous, and although, like any Christian, I find even the idea, let alone the practice of Satanism to be deeply disturbing, the magic in Harry Potter seems worlds away from this, of a different order, about a different kind of thing. Despite some of the wilder charges against it, nowhere do these books blaspheme God and promote Satanism. By implication, they do precisely the opposite. Rowling has created an alternative imaginative universe in which, as Andrew Goddard and Alan Jacobs argue, her magic is much more akin to technology than it is to anything spiritual. It just so happens that the rules of reality in this alternative universe are different from the ones we take for granted in the 'real' world. But then, this kind of playing with the rules of reality is a part of all fiction, it is part of what makes it enjoyable, part of what appeals to our imaginations. It is most obviously part of the expectation in science fiction, but is an essential component of any work of art. Even stories deemed 'realistic' are written according to a set of conventions and invite us to suspend for a while our belief or disbelief in the 'real' world we actually inhabit. It is this opportunity to imagine other worlds with other rules and assumptions that is what makes fiction fiction.

If we think about it, children's literature is full of such magic: the magic of fairies and talking cats and girls through looking glasses who get larger and smaller, of dragons and talking lions and whole worlds hidden behind ordinary wardrobes. Such magic appeals to our human curiosity with its fascination in the endless possibilities of things. It is part of our God-given creativity, our human inventiveness. That this kind of magic is so prevalent in children's literature suggests that children, acutely

aware of their powerlessness in an adult world, are fascinated with power and being able to imagine what it might be like to do and be extraordinary things.

And it is this power that is perhaps the real issue about magic. In the real world of principalities and powers, the Christian calling is to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds. To submit to any alternative power is idolatry. Aligning oneself with the world of the occult and Satanism is, presumably, the most overt way of consciously and deliberately rejecting any allegiance to God and seeking to overturn His power. It is choosing to support an alternative power, a malign power which is committed to evil and not good. It is because Christians are aware of the seriousness of this that they are rightly alert to anything that seems to hint at or lead to such allegiance. And no doubt it is this kind of concern that has led to the outcry over Harry Potter. The danger is, however, that if Christians read such power struggles in very literalistic ways, if they see the battle between good and evil, between God and all that works against God, largely in ways that are only ever defined in the dramatic fight between supernatural beings (as, say, in the stories of Frank Peretti), then they may fail to see, to read, to discern how the battle is being played out in all its breath and scope, in the flesh and blood world of politics and economics and technology and all the manifold structures of oppression and injustice in our world[1].

In this context, the Christian hysteria about Harry Potter seems like a tilting at windmills. It is unleashing its fear, its suspicion, its anger on the wrong target. It demonstrates a failure to read beyond the surface (even, in some cases, to read at all?), an over-quick tendency to respond to certain triggers (magic, wizards) and perhaps to cede unthinkingly the responsibility to discern to certain authority figures. The magic in Harry Potter is not occult magic. It is not the kind of magic practised by Satanists. It is much more like the magic we find in any work of literature, the kind of magic that enjoys playing with the 'what ifs' of alternative worlds that work by different rules. However the moral rules, the spiritual rules – which are presumably where Christians should be really attentive if they want to discern what is edifying or corrupting – are, in the world of Harry Potter, likely to be remarkably sympathetic to Christian readers. They commend a path to virtue that is powerful partly because it is subtle. Children like it because it commends being good in a way that is unpatronizing. Its forces for good (and this is a real achievement in literature) really are much more attractive than its forces for evil, and yet these are imagined in ways that evoke very convincingly the feel and the shape and the texture of evil. And its deepest truth – that dying to save another is the most powerful force against evil that we know – has inescapable Christian echoes.

To be sure, Christian parents will want to talk with their children about the magic in Harry Potter, and may need to alert them to some of the dangers of the occult

1 See Walter Wink's work on The Powers. The first in his trilogy is *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1984.

magic they may be exposed to elsewhere. But hopefully, they will be able to explain to them the difference between the two, teach them how to read with discernment as well as pleasure, and, by introducing them to books such as J. K. Rowling's, help them, by the grace of God, to grow into imaginatively rich, morally mature, discerning young people who will be the better equipped to love God and fight evil in the cause of Christ's kingdom.

Dr Margaret Masson is a part-time lecturer in the Department of English, University of Durham.