

## **Harry Potter And The Secular City: The Dialectical Religious Vision Of J.K. Rowling**

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Are the *Harry Potter* books Christian, or at least religious, and is this the underlying secret to their extraordinary popularity? This is precisely the contention of a number of writers who, to varying degrees, have enlisted J.K. Rowling's novels under the banner of Christian literary art (e.g. John Granger, Connie Neal, John Killinger, Francis Bridger). This is a striking development, particularly given the virulent opposition to the books among some conservative Christians (e.g. Richard Abanes, Stephen Dollins, Michael O'Brien), but the trend needs to be seen as part of a larger pattern of appropriation and rejection. While religious critics might celebrate Harry as Christian hero, the books are regularly portrayed as valorizing nonreligious perspectives. Roger Highfield, for example, praises the novels as a tribute to the wonders of science and technology, while Edmund Kern argues that the books serve as primers for a non-transcendent neo-Stoicism. Conversely, fundamentalists like Abanes, who excoriate Harry as occult proselytizer and Potter-mania as Satanic conspiracy, have an almost exact counterpart in secular critics like Jack Zipes and Andrew Blake, who attribute Harry's "irresistible rise" to forces equally invisible and evil: the "dark wizards" of corporate capitalism and the politicians who collude with them. Mainstream literary critics tend to dismiss or occlude religious considerations altogether, analysing the books exclusively in terms of their social and political effects.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to be neutral about Harry Potter. As Suman Gupta has remarked, the reception of the books is sharply (and largely unthinkingly) polarized into obsessed fans and loathing critics, making them simultaneously the best-selling and beloved fiction of our time, as well as the most heartily despised and frequently banned or challenged (Gupta 19-20).

I find this pattern of appropriation and rejection suggestive in several ways that inform the assertions of this essay. First, like most of the writers mentioned above, I take

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<sup>1</sup> These writers tend to fall into two well-trodden categories: those who champion the books as politically progressive, subversive, or radical (e.g. Karin Westman, Rebecca Stephens, Veronica Schanoes) and those (the larger group) who regard them as ideologically confused, "retrolutionary," or regressive (e.g. Zipes, Blake, Suman Gupta, Farah Mendlesohn, Julia Park, Elaine Ostry).

the *Harry Potter* books seriously, assuming that, despite Rowling's aesthetic traditionalism (e.g. her reliance on archetypes and narrative devices from myth, fairy tale, detective fiction, etc.) and the novels' categorization as children's literature, they engage matters of vital contemporary concern. Second, it seems to me that the sharply differentiated religious and nonreligious readings of the novels might be brought into fruitful relation by organizing this discussion around the binary of religion and secularity. The *Harry Potter* novels, I argue, are deeply concerned with the complex inter-relationship between religion/spirituality and secular modernity, though both are explored obliquely rather than explicitly. Third, I am struck by the one-sidedness of many of the arguments mentioned above and the extent to which the writers' ideological affiliations cause them to dismiss or ignore countervailing evidence. This is not to say, for example, that the religious critics are deluded; the *Harry Potter* novels are indeed engaged with spiritual themes and concerns, as I hope to demonstrate shortly. But this emphasis is significantly qualified and dialectically transformed by an equally significant engagement with "secular" issues.

Indeed, it is often difficult to isolate or abstract religion or secularity in the books since Rowling characteristically intertwines or enfolds them within one another. Certainly, the books resist didactic pigeonholing or wholesale appropriation by either religious or secular ideologues.<sup>2</sup> But Rowling's aversion to dogmatism ought not to be read as either bland neutrality or fear of alienating her readers (as if there is much danger of this). Rather, Rowling's approach strikes a powerful chord in readers who recognize both the validity and limitations of religion and secularity respectively. Her overall vision, repeatedly figured in the novels in terms of alchemical imagery and contagious magic, is dialectical: a reconciliation of finite warring contraries, an ultimate unity won at great cost. Since the series is a work in progress, it is difficult to be certain, but Rowling demonstrates that religion and secularity, like Harry and Voldemort who contain aspects of each other's essence, ultimately transcend the condition of antithesis.

Let me explain briefly what I mean by secularity and its relevance to the *Harry Potter* books. Secularity can be defined as a set of socio-political conditions resulting from the progressive disentangling of church and state. A familiar picture results: religion loses its dominance in society, is reduced from an overarching "sacred canopy" to a social subsystem, and largely retreats from the public to the private sphere; society becomes increasingly pluralistic and tolerant toward difference, while individual consciousness is also pluralized, undermining traditional sources of authority and certainty; there is greater emphasis on human agency, freedom, choice, and individuality; there is exponential expansion of the power and responsibility of the nation-state, which adopts a bureaucratic form of administration; economic and institutional life are rationalized, leading to increased efficiency and productivity; science becomes authoritative and technique pervasive. These general conditions could be called "objective" aspects of secular modernity, and, for the most part, J.K. Rowling endorses them or at least assumes their validity. But there are other dimensions of the secular

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<sup>2</sup> As Edmund Kern remarks, the novels are widely popular, embraced by child and adult readers of many different perspectives, precisely because they are interpretively open and therefore unburdened by political and religious orthodoxies (25).

phenomenon to which Rowling evidently objects, particularly at the level of subjective experience. One such dimension is the ideological programme of secularism, which sociologist David Lyon describes as “a set of beliefs and practices committed to the abolition of religion in society” (Lyon 31). In place of a religious understanding of reality, secularists typically advocate philosophical materialism and its attendant premises: the denial of the metaphysical and transcendent, the radical desecularization of nature and society, and the relativity of moral values. Another dimension which Rowling’s novels sharply criticize might be called the unintended consequences of secularity: anomie, alienation, conformity, consumerism, cultural homogenization, disintegration of tradition, loss of community, diffusion of propaganda through the mass media, escalating class and ethnic tensions, and the dehumanizing effects of technocracy.

In reality, of course, it is not easy to keep these objective and subjective effects of secularization distinct, just as it is difficult to account satisfactorily for the role of religion in secularity’s development. Religion has in many ways been the handmaiden to modernity, if not, as Max Weber asserted, its own gravedigger. For example, as a vast literature attests, Protestant Christianity, in its intellectual, economic, and political orientation, prepared the way for the Enlightenment, effectively displacing itself, though it continues to shape, in a subterranean way, the institutions and consciousness of the post-Christian West. Conversely, secular modernity has arguably “produced” or at least shaped the current institutional forms of Christianity. Adequate appreciation of this dialectical, mutually constitutive history seriously undermines the so-called “strong” secularization thesis (i.e. secularization is an inevitable, irreversible, permanent process leading inexorably to the demise of religion). Indeed, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels harmonize in many respects with the “desecularization” thesis advanced by Peter Berger and others. Berger argues that the world is “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” (*Desecularization* 2). In his view, secular modernity has provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization, which, far from constituting a last-ditch defence by organized religionists, are driven by the realization that human experience without transcendent bearings is shallow, “an impoverished and finally untenable condition” (*Desecularization* 13). The *Harry Potter* books make much the same point through the trope of the wizarding world itself, attesting to the strong survival of pre-modern forms of spirituality, tradition, and community which, though not immune from secularizing influences, nevertheless maintain their vitality and viability. The overall decline of institutional “church religion” in the West does not mean that religion and spirituality *per se* are headed for extinction, for, from a global perspective, religious belief is thriving, in the major revealed traditions (e.g. Islamic and Christian fundamentalism, evangelicalism, etc.), in non-traditional and marginal movements (e.g. New Age syncretism, neo-paganism, occultism, “implicit” and “common” religion), and in the phenomenon of resacralization. As Mircea Eliade argues in *The Sacred and the Profane*,

The majority of the “irreligious” still behave religiously, even though they are not aware of the fact. We refer not only to the modern man’s many “superstitions” and “tabus,” all of them magico-religious in structure. But the modern man who feels and claims that he is nonreligious still retains a

large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals. (Eliade 204-205)

Religion and secularity, it seems, are just as intertwined, just as enfolded within one another, as ever.

### **Gimme That Ol' Time Religion**

Are the *Harry Potter* books religious, and, if so, in what ways? It has frequently been observed that the novels contain no explicit references to God or religious doctrines, that none of the characters attend church or pray, and this absence has been interpreted by some critics as proof that the books are secular in outlook. But this unwarranted conclusion is based on two misunderstandings. First, these critics assume that the content of religion is exclusively propositional, institutional, and moral, rather than mythical, symbolic, and experiential. Second, they fail to recognize that Rowling's books adhere to a tradition of fantasy literature in which theology is sometimes "smuggled" in through allusion and symbol; there are, for example, no explicit references to God or religion in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* or Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, but no one seriously doubts that these books are deeply imbued by the Christian faith of the writers.

Certainly, many aspects of Rowling's fictional or secondary world are mythic and religious in orientation. In Mircea Eliade's terms, the religious vision of life pivots on *hierophany* or the manifestation of the sacred, a "wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (Eliade 11). Hierophany reveals a fixed point or centre, often a kind of cosmic pillar or sacred temple touching both earth and sky, where a sacred order of existence is differentiated from the chaotic homogeneity and relativity of profane space (Eliade 21-22, 37). In Potterworld, this fixed point is undoubtedly Hogwarts Castle, "Perched atop a high mountain... its windows sparkling in the starry sky" (*Stone* 83). Hogwarts, with its ceiling bewitched to appear like the sky (As Harry notes, "It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens" [*Stone* 87]), its vast subterranean vaults and dungeons, and its archetypal juxtaposition of mountain, forest, and lake, connects heaven and earth, nature and supernature, providing an opening toward the transcendent. Moreover, its architectural and decorative characteristics reify the underlying ontology and metaphysics of the magical world:

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the

portraits kept going to visit each other and Harry was sure the coats of armour could walk. (*Stone* 98)

Evidently, this is a sacred order predicated on hiddenness, irregularity, asymmetry, unpredictability, caprice, and historical nostalgia, its incalculable complexity greatly increased by the fact that “inanimate” things have minds and wills of their own. This inclusive ontology is further extended by the inhabitants of Hogwarts and its environs (Hogsmeade village and the Forbidden Forest), the many wizards, witches, ghosts, elves, giants, hags, mermaids, trolls, goblins, gnomes, werewolves, vampires, centaurs, unicorns, dragons, etc. which suggest the plenitude of being in the magical world. Harry and others gain access to the wizarding world by means of various thresholds which, in Eliade’s terms, serve as the limit or boundary between sacred and profane (i.e. magical and Muggle) modes of being, making movement between these worlds possible and repeatable (Eliade 25, 30): portkeys (ordinary-looking objects through which wizards can be transported from one location to another), the Knight Bus (taking stranded wizards anywhere in England, jumping a hundred miles at a time), the Leaky Cauldron pub (secret entrance to Diagon Alley, a magical shopping district in the heart of London), and, pre-eminently, platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  at King’s Cross Station (where students catch the Hogwarts Express at the start of the school term). The sacred or hierophanic nature of Hogwarts is indicated as well by its own cosmogonic or world-making myth: the founding of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by Salazar Slytherin, Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff *circa* 1000 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

Hogwarts School becomes Harry’s spiritual home, the locus of objective reality, power, efficacy, and new life (Eliade 28). The existence of the magical world is first manifest to Harry by means of an apodictic sign that “introduces an absolute element..., puts an end to relativity and confusion,” and indicates “an orientation or determined a course of conduct” (Eliade 27): the arrival of hundreds of Hogwarts acceptance letters

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<sup>3</sup> The details of this myth, particularly the rift between Slytherin and Gryffindor over the pure-blood doctrine of the former, is elaborated and extended throughout the series and shapes the lives of the present-day characters in a variety of ways. For example, Hogwarts students are “sorted” into houses (named for the founders) according to their dominant characteristics (i.e. Slytherins are ambitious and cunning, Gryffindors courageous, Ravenclaws intelligent, and Hufflepuffs loyal and hard-working), fixing to a degree their identities and destinies. The most prominent example of this determinism is the prophecy that the heirs of Slytherin and Gryffindor, Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter respectively, are destined to resolve their ancestors’ hostility in a climactic struggle in which “*either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives*” (*Phoenix* 741). Indeed, the details of the Harry-Voldemort conflict, particularly Voldemort’s mortal attack on the infant Harry, the Dark Lord’s subsequent loss of power, and the lightning-shaped scar of “the boy who lived,” attain sacred and mythic status within the wizarding world, adding a messianic and apocalyptic dimension: “Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord’s power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sir” (*Chamber* 134). Harry is himself a kind of living myth, as Professor MacGonagall says: “He’ll be famous – a legend – I wouldn’t be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in future – there will be books written about Harry – every child in our world will know his name!” (*Stone* 15).

(hundreds because Harry's Uncle Vernon keeps confiscating them), delivered by owls. The sacred order at Hogwarts is mediated in a variety of ways, primarily ritual (e.g. the Sorting Ceremony, Quidditch, the House Cup, the Tri-Wizard Tournament), a festal calendar which basically follows the Christian pattern (feasts at the beginning and end of the year, Halloween, Christmas, and Easter). Through these rituals and other magical means – e.g. Tom Riddle's enchanted diary, the Time-Turner, the Pensieve – Harry and the other students are able to escape the dominance of profane, linear time and participate in sacred, primordial time (Eliade 70). The sacred order is also communicated by rites of initiation and passage, both the customary ones authorized by the school – e.g. standardized testing in the upper forms (OWLs and NEWTs) – and the annual ordeals by means of which Harry's heroism is tested and confirmed: e.g. finding the Philosopher's Stone; fighting the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets; battling a resurrected Voldemort in the graveyard, etc.. Each of these is an instance of initiatory death and rebirth, precipitating a psychic crisis leading to Harry's spiritual growth.

So, yes, the books are, broadly speaking, religious in orientation, but are they Christian? The critics mentioned at the outset – Neal, Bridger, Killinger, and Granger – make a convincing collective case that Rowling's novels strongly resonate with Christianity in their implied theology, morality, metaphysics, and symbolism, though their opinions differ on whether the Christian echoes are inadvertent and merely parallel, or intentional and explicit. Granger's two books, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter* and *Looking for God in Harry Potter* (the latter basically a refinement of the former) make the most aggressive case for a Christian reading. Granger's basic argument is that the *Harry Potter* books are profoundly Christian, written consciously in the symbolist Inklings tradition (Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams) and sharing its signature interests and emphases: fantasy literature as a "baptism of the imagination" through Christian imagery, training in virtuous "stock responses" (bravery, sympathy, perseverance, obedience, loyalty, sacrifice, etc.), and an assault upon the "materialist heresy" dominant in the secular West (Granger, *Key* xi, 79-80, 82, 149-150, 189). He argues that the symbolist perspective offers an alternative to naturalism because it allows for correspondences and points of access between the natural world and contra-natural realities (*Key* 104-106, 143). Rowling's magical world reflects our own world "diagonally," in order to reveal eternal qualities symbolized in the material world, thereby casting a much-needed "counter-spell to the enchantment of modernity" (*Key* 188, 337). Perhaps Granger's most valuable contribution is his extended discussion of Rowling's imaginative use of alchemy, which he defines as a "path to spiritual perfection: purification, illumination, and divinization *within a revealed tradition*" (*Key* 95, 99-100).

Granger is surely right to insist that Rowling's implicit theology and symbolism are substantially Christian. The overarching theme of the novels is the power of love to conquer death, a central theme of the New Testament to be sure. In *Stone*, Harry learns from Professor Dumbledore, Hogwarts's sage-like Headmaster, that his miraculous survival of Voldemort's attempts to murder him are the result of his mother's sacrificial death, that her love has left its protective mark in his "very skin" (*Stone* 216). Sacrificial love, it seems, is the oldest, deepest, and most potent magic of all in Potterworld. This point is underlined in another conversation with Dumbledore at the end of *Phoenix*:

There is a room in the Department of Mysteries...that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature....It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has not at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you. (*Phoenix* 743)

Because the Potter novels are not overtly didactic as a rule, such occasional metaphysical and theological affirmations possess even more weight and prominence. Aside from the efficacy of sacrificial love, Rowling's other major religious/philosophical emphasis is the immortality of the soul, a message expressed more explicitly in each succeeding novel (*Stone* 215; *Chamber* 236; *Prisoner* 312; *Goblet* 578-579; *Phoenix* 761).

There are symbolic motifs as well in the novels that one might call 'irreducibly religious' and contextually Christian. The most significant of these are the pervasive references to the protective and atoning properties of blood.<sup>4</sup> The most explicit and theologically inflected use of the motif comes in *Order of the Phoenix*, where Dumbledore explains to Harry the reason he placed him as an infant with the loathed Dursleys:

[Your mother] gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother's blood. I delivered you to her sister, her only remaining relative... Your mother's sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you....While you can still call home the place where your mother's blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge. (*Phoenix* 736-737)

Another potent religious symbol in the novels is Fawkes, Dumbledore's pet phoenix. The phoenix, as Granger reminds us, was associated in the medieval bestiaries with Christ for obvious reasons: the property of bursting into flame and rising new-born from the ashes is a suggestive parallel for resurrection (*Looking* 93-94). Rowling reinforces this background association by giving Fawkes a crucial, salvific function in several of the books. In *Chamber of Secrets*, for example, Fawkes appears in the climactic scene as a kind of theophany, bringing Harry the Sword of Gryffindor, dashing out the eyes of the Basilisk, healing Harry's wounds with his tears, and then ascending from the subterranean Chamber carrying Harry and his companions (*Chamber* 233, 235, 237,

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<sup>4</sup> In *Stone*, for example, Voldemort forces Quirrell to drink the blood of a "pure and defenceless unicorn," dooming him to "a half life, a cursed life" (188), while in *Goblet*, when the blood of an enemy is required to resurrect him, Voldemort chooses Harry's, both for the sake of revenge and "the lingering protection his mother once gave him" which will now reside in his veins as well (570).

239).<sup>5</sup> As reminiscent as these actions are of Christian soteriology, even more compelling is the effect of the phoenix's song, described as "eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly," making Harry's heart "feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size" (*Chamber* 232).<sup>6</sup> A force which is simultaneously immaterial, personal, and efficacious, Fawkes's music strongly suggests the presence of God.

I concur with many of Granger's observations, yet I can't help feeling that he and other Christian critics often read too much theological significance into the available evidence. For one thing, Granger seems to have a rather monolithic conception of secularity (e.g. the insistence that naturalism is the *de facto* worldview in the contemporary world) and underestimates the degree to which the writings of a Lewis or a Rowling are produced by modernity and rely on it as a kind of imaginative resource. Another factor he underestimates is Rowling's syncretism; she draws together elements from many cultural, mythological, literary, and religious traditions – e.g. Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Celtic, Gnostic, Hermetic, etc. – not just Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Nor is it an accident that, in his favorite sport of Quidditch, Harry plays the position of Seeker, a term, argues Lyon, that epitomizes contemporary religious attitudes: "open-mindedness, individuality, and the private and polymorphous nature of belief are felt to be more important than the actual content of belief" (Lyon 89). Harry's "spirituality" is not creedal, propositional, or institutional, but experiential, and his most transcendent experiences are intuitive, such as riding a broomstick for the first time and discovering "in a rush of fierce joy...he'd found something he could do without being taught" (*Stone* 111).<sup>8</sup>

Further, Harry's experience of the numinous is often poised ambivalently between the transcendent and the mundane. Consider, for example, the climax of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. Harry and his friends are attacked by a hundred Dementors, ghastly hooded creatures who feed on human happiness (clearly a symbol of depression) (*Prisoner* 280-282). Harry attempts to repel them by conjuring a Patronus, a kind of protective animal

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<sup>5</sup> Harry has witnessed Dumbledore's removal from office and also heard Dumbledore's cryptic final words before leaving, "you will find that I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it" (*Chamber* 195), a phrasing that implies theological conceptions of presence and grace. Harry finds these words puzzling, but faced with Tom Riddle (a young version of Voldemort) and the monstrous Basilisk in the Chamber, his show of loyalty does indeed "call" Fawkes to the scene. The motif of Fawkes's healing tears is repeated near the end of *Goblet* (606), and his protective role at the end of *Phoenix* (716).

<sup>6</sup> For more on phoenix song, see *Goblet* (576, 603).

<sup>7</sup> The sign above Ollivander's store in Diagon Alley is telling – "*Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC*" (*Stone* 63) – as is the list of famous wizards depicted on Chocolate Frog trading cards: Agrippa, Ptolemy, Morgana, Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelcus, Merlin, Clidna (*Stone* 77-78); Rowling clearly wishes the magical world to transcend particular cultural and religious traditions.

<sup>8</sup> Similar moments include speaking Parseltongue (snake language) to a serpent without ever having learned the language and seeing the creature "miraculously, inexplicably" slump to the floor (*Chamber* 145), as well as destroying Tom Riddle by plunging the Basilisk fang into the enchanted diary, "without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along" (*Chamber* 237).



spirit, concentrating on a happy memory and projecting the emotions of hope or happiness (*Prisoner* 176). But Harry's attempt fails, and he nearly succumbs to the Dementors' Kiss, a gruesome mouth-to-mouth encounter in which the victim's soul is sucked from his or her body. Harry's teacher Remus Lupin explains:

You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self any more, no memory, no...anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just – exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is just gone for ever...lost. (*Prisoner* 183)

At the last possible moment, however, a brilliant, silvery Patronus appears and drives off the Dementors (*Prisoner* 282). When Harry looks across the lake to see who conjured it, he sees what appears to be his father, who has been dead for twelve years. Hours later, Harry has the opportunity to travel back in time, and, intent on seeing his father again, he waits by the lake and watches himself and the others being attacked:

'Come on!' he muttered, staring about. 'Where are you? Dad, come on –'

But no one came. Harry raised his head to look at the circle of Dementors across the lake. One of them was lowering its hood. It was time for the rescuer to appear – but no one was coming to help this time –

And then it hit him – he understood. He hadn't seen his father – he had seen *himself* –

Harry flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand.

'EXPECTO PATRONUM!' he yelled.

And out of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. (*Prisoner* 300)

As the Patronus returns to him, Harry realizes that it is a projection of his father in the form of the stag Prongs (Harry's father James was an Animagus, a wizard who could transfigure himself into animal form), and Dumbledore later confirms this, asserting, "Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that *particular* Patronus? Prongs rode again last night" (*Prisoner* 312). Harry, asked why he was able to conjure the Patronus in the second instance but not the first, replies, "I knew I could do it this time...because I'd already done it...Does that make sense?" (*Prisoner* 303).

The sequence presents mixed messages about the provenance of the sacred and the profane. Granger tries to render it intelligible by invoking multiple Christ-figures and an interpretive framework based on the Gospel of John, though the result is rather strained:

That Harry's father appears in the form of a Christ symbol (the stag), and that Harry's deliverance (as son) comes at his realization that he is his father (in appearance and will), are poetic expressions of the essential union of Father and Son for our salvation.

In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry at last comprehends his likeness with his father. By this knowledge he is able to summon a Christ figure as his salvation, in hopeful, almost certain, and joyous expectation of deliverance. (*Looking* 145-146)

But this allegorical reading flies wide of the mark, not least because the late James Potter is a rather poor stand-in for God the Father and Granger himself strenuously denies that Harry himself functions as a Christ-figure in the novels (*Looking* 114). Certainly, the passage has religious implications, affirming that human beings have souls distinct from their bodies and that the dead are present in the living. Yet these affirmations are assimilated to a crudely corporeal metaphysic – e.g. souls can be “sucked” out of one's mouth and eternally lost as a result of an arbitrary physical encounter – and juxtaposed with clichés from pop psychology: e.g. the power of positive thinking, battling depression with happy thoughts, encountering the archetype of the father within oneself, etc.. Granger reads the passage as an allegory of divine deliverance emanating from a transcendent realm, but surely the narrative gestures in the other direction: when Harry realizes that no salvation is coming from “above” or “beyond,” he saves himself and the others. This could be read as a figure for divine immanence – “The Kingdom of God is within you” – but there is no particular indication that one should interpret it that way. That is, the passage hovers ambivalently between religious and humanistic interpretations, especially if one privileges the psychological and takes “soul” as a figurative expression for personality. As to the ongoing presence of the dead, Rowling employs a standard formula broadly acceptable to both religious and secular readers: immortality as memory and genetic continuity.

### **The Way Of The World**

What then of the presentation of secularity in the *Harry Potter* books? This is a more difficult question to answer for a couple of reasons: first, secularity is commonly formulated merely as a negation of the religious, but given the irreducible religious element of the novels, Rowling clearly does not conceive the secular in this light; second, the fantasy premise of the Potter books automatically implies a critique of the mundane which is easily misconstrued as anti-modernism. I would argue that Rowling reflects on secularity in some of the following ways: a) certain aspects of secular modernity, such as the status of technology, are explored through the structural contrast between the Muggle world and the wizarding world; b) other key issues in modernity (e.g. political culture and the role of ideology in identity formation) are reflected through the wizarding world as a society in itself; c) stereotypically “secular” modes of cognition, such as rationalism and skepticism, are foregrounded in the narrative. What should be apparent from the

preceding observations is that Rowling's engagement with secularity cuts across structural lines; no single figure, set of characters, or institution can be identified as the locus of secularity. Secularity, like religion, is a pervasive reality in the novels, yet in Rowling's presentation, it is never autonomous, never fully dissociated from religion.

One of the main issues Rowling emphasizes is the status of technology, as exemplified in the structural contrast between Muggledom and the magical world. At a superficial first glance, the wizarding world seems totally pre-modern and pre-technological, a rejection of hyper-technological modernity. Hogwarts, located in a medieval castle in a remote corner of Scotland, has no telephones, televisions, computers, or electrical appliances of any kind. It is heated by fireplaces and lit by candles and torches, while its inhabitants wear robes, write on parchment with quills, and send letters by means of trained owls. But on closer inspection, many instances of technological application emerge: Hogwarts' washrooms have toilets, not chamber pots; students travel on the Hogwarts Express, a steam engine (just one example of Rowling's fetish for all-things-Victorian); the Ministry of Magic building is equipped with art-nouveau elevators, complete with golden grilles and rattling chains; wizards listen to the wireless and read newspapers like *The Daily Prophet*; and, under special circumstances, they drive cars, motorcycles, and buses. Rowling, then, is not constructing a Luddite utopia but an alternative world in which technological application has taken a different course than in the secular West, thus giving us a vantage point from which to evaluate modern technique, from outside rather than inside.

The wizarding world playfully inverts the claims of the Enlightenment; magic is sensible and "scientific," while Muggle science is an arcane and defective "substitute" for magic (*Goblet* 476); similarly, Muggle technology is often represented as primitive, slow, or inconvenient compared to the instantaneous results effected by magic.<sup>9</sup> Magic fulfills wishes and abrogates undesirable consequences (e.g. instant repair of broken bones and objects); moreover, characters are able to do things in the wizarding world – fly, become invisible, transfigure themselves – that, because they are impossible in a materialist universe, appeal to archetypal human desires. Rowling employs this convention for several purposes. First, it strikes a blow against technological hubris and sacralization, demonstrating that current technologies, even when judged solely in terms of instrumental rationality, are limited and sometimes inadequate.<sup>10</sup> Second, Rowling's method interrogates the direction of current technological applications. Wizard inventions are extraordinarily useful in ways Muggle technology is not, meeting an alternative range of human needs: consider, for example, the Pocket Sneakoscope which detects untrustworthy people (*Prisoner* 13), the clock in the Weasley house whose nine hands

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<sup>9</sup> The wizard characters often marvel at how Muggles manage to live without magic or criticize the barbarity of Muggle techniques. For example, at St. Mungo's Hospital, when Harry asks if the hospital personnel are doctors, Ron responds indignantly, "Those Muggle nutters that cut people up? Nah, they're Healers" (*Phoenix* 428), while Mrs. Weasley is scandalized that anyone, even Muggles, would be so stupid as to close up a wound with stitches (*Phoenix* 448-449).

<sup>10</sup> Hermione, for example, allows Madam Pomfrey to magically shrink her prominent front teeth rather than carry on with the protracted method of braces, a decision which undoubtedly hurts the professional pride of her Muggle parents, both of whom are dentists (*Goblet* 353).

indicate the location (and well-being) of each member of the family (*Goblet* 135), or the Pensieve, a shallow basin into which a wizard can deposit thoughts and memories for the purpose of concealment, relief, or the analysis of patterns and links (*Goblet* 518-519). Third, the retro style of wizard applications suggests a desire to preserve the best of older technologies alongside the new and to arrest the pace of change. Traditional technologies are often perfectly adequate, producing objects that are aesthetically beautiful and designed on a human scale.<sup>11</sup> Wizard instruments, for example, are almost invariably delicate products of advanced metallurgical craftsmanship: “The instrument tinkled into life at once with rhythmic clinking noises. Tiny puffs of pale green smoke issued from the miniscule silver tube at the top” (*Phoenix* 415).

Rowling clearly relishes this critique of technology, but she also introduces complications which undermine its one-sidedness. For one thing, the magical and Muggle worlds interpenetrate one another in many ways, and Rowling delights in blurring the lines by bringing one order into contact with the other: “The Knight Bus kept mounting the pavement, but it didn’t hit anything; lines of [Muggle] lamp posts, letter boxes and bins jumped out of its way as it approached and back into position once it had passed” (*Prisoner* 32). Moreover, magical techniques are by no means universally superior, and magical mishaps provide a major source of humour in the novels. For example, by means of Floo Powder and the Floo Network, wizards can travel almost instantaneously from fireplace to fireplace, but Harry finds the method capricious and hazardous:

‘You must speak clearly, dear....And mind you get out at the right grate...  
 ‘Now, when you get into the fire, say where you’re going –‘  
 ‘And keep your elbows tucked in,’ Ron advised.  
 ‘And your eyes shut,’ said Mrs Weasley. ‘The soot –‘  
 ‘Don’t fidget,’ said Ron. ‘Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace –‘  
 ‘But don’t panic and get out too early.’....

It felt as though he was being sucked down a giant plug hole. He seemed to be spinning very fast...the roaring in his ears was deafening...he tried to keep his eyes open but the whirl of green flames made him feel sick...something hard knocked his elbow and he tucked it in tightly, still spinning and spinning...now it felt as though cold hands were slapping his face...squinting through his glasses he saw a blurred stream of fireplaces and snatched glimpses of the rooms beyond....he fell, face forward, onto cold stone and felt his glasses shatter.

Dizzy and bruised, covered in soot, he got gingerly to his feet. (*Chamber* 41-42)

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<sup>11</sup> The wizarding world is emphatically a print culture, part of the “Gutenberg Galaxy,” and Rowling shows a bibliophile’s delight in the contents of the Hogwarts Library and Flourish and Blotts’ bookstore: “...the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these”(Stone 62).

Magical methods, we are often warned, are risky, especially for the inexperienced or incompetent.<sup>12</sup> More often than not, there are built-in limitations or inefficiencies, leaving the desirability of the technique in question. For example, Madam Pomfrey, the matron at Hogwarts, can cure colds with Pepperup potion, “though it left the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours afterwards” (*Chamber* 94), and, although she can miraculously replace missing bones with Skelo-Gro, it is a “nasty business” which causes the patient stabbing pains (*Chamber* 131-132); apparently wizards have not yet discovered pain-killers. Nor is wizard technology as imaginative or original as first appears. Some gadgets, like the Omnioculars which allow the Quidditch fan to watch instant replays in slow motion (*Goblet* 86), do little other than mimic Muggle technology. In fact, many of the ‘magical’ objects in the novels are simply Muggle inventions that have been modified by wizards.<sup>13</sup> So pervasive is this practice of bewitching objects that the Ministry of Magic requires a Department of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts (*Chamber* 28).

The imperfection and derivative nature of wizard technology shifts the ground under the reader’s feet. Without sacrificing her critique, Rowling manages to celebrate as well as question contemporary technological achievements. Mr. Weasley, who collects plugs, batteries, and other objects (*Goblet* 44-45), is fascinated by the Muggle artifacts which he, as a Ministry official, confiscates and stores in his shed at home: “*Ingenious*, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic” (*Chamber* 37). His wife Molly, though less enamoured, admits after riding in the Ford Anglia, “Muggles do know more than we give them credit for, don’t they?” (*Chamber* 53-54). For some wizards, the Weasley children in particular, the magical is mundane compared to the exotic world of Muggles. Ron’s favorite comic is *The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle* (*Chamber* 35), while Fred and George find “Muggle tricks” like unlocking doors with hairpins invaluable in their pursuit of mischief (*Chamber* 25). Implicitly, contemporary technological achievements constitute a “magic” of their own which is worthy of respect and celebration; arguably, they can be seen as the expression of the religious activity of cosmogenesis: the human spirit striving to turn its environment into a *cosmos* or meaningful world.

Yet, while the structural contrast between Muggles and wizards persists throughout the series, it becomes progressively less important than the magical world itself which undergoes massive metonymic elaboration. And while this world remains an alternative or parallel reality, it shares many characteristics with secular modernity. The wizarding world, for example, is racially and culturally pluralistic. Rowling’s fullest representation of this occurs in *Goblet of Fire* at the Quidditch World Cup:

Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire,

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<sup>12</sup> Mr. Weasley, for instance, tells the story of a couple who “splinched” themselves – left half their bodies behind – while trying to Apparate (*Goblet* 63).

<sup>13</sup> Some examples are the triple-decker Knight Bus, Hagrid’s flying motorbike, the flying Ford Anglia in which the Weasley brothers rescue Harry in *Chamber*. So pervasive is this practice of bewitching objects that the Ministry of Magic requires a Department of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts (*Chamber* 28).

while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents which read: The Salem Witches' Institute. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the inside of tents they passed, and though he couldn't understand a single word, the tone of every single voice was excited. (*Goblet* 76)

Wizards, it would seem, share a national identity (as well as language, customs, dress, etc.) with their Muggle counterparts, each wizard population constituting a kind of self-governing sub-culture. On the other hand, as the Quidditch World Cup suggests, they participate in a kind of global wizarding culture.<sup>14</sup> This diversity is characteristic of the main setting as well; Hogwarts, despite its old-fashioned public school trappings, is co-educational and ethnically "mixed," with students like Cho Chang, Parvati Patil, and Lee Jordan. While there are no indications of Muggle-type racial prejudice (e.g. European vs. Asian), the complex and often dysfunctional relations among the various magical races (e.g. wizards, elves, giants, werewolves, centaurs, etc.) indicate that the wizarding world, like our own, can be fiercely intolerant. Rowling persistently presents a world fractured by prejudice; members of magical minorities and "half-breeds" are persecuted not only by the quasi-fascist Death Eaters but also by well-meaning bigots like Ron Weasley. The wizard world is also divided along class lines, both in terms of the pure-blood/"Mudblood" (i.e. part Muggle) distinction among wizards, but also in terms of wealth. Like late capitalist secular society, the wizarding world is governed by bureaucratic institutions and oriented toward consumption. Public opinion is largely formed by a propagandistic mass media, which focuses on celebrity culture more than serious political discourse.

While any of these characteristics could be explored in detail, I will focus on political culture and ideology because they provide the most compelling reflections of secular modernity. British wizards are ruled by the Ministry of Magic, whose basic mandate is to keep the presence of magical society from Muggle knowledge (*Stone* 51).<sup>15</sup> The Ministry is whimsically divided into entities like the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, the Goblin Liaison Office, and the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee through which Rowling satirizes the Byzantine complexity and self-importance of big government, not to mention its ludicrous aspirations to control complex supernatural phenomena through a mundane organizational structure. The early books paint the Ministry as merely bumbling and inefficient. Ministry officials busy themselves with minutiae (e.g. standardizing cauldron thicknesses) and coin politically correct euphemisms like "non-magical community" (for Muggles) and "memory modification" (for magical brainwashing). The novels also satirize bureaucratic culture through the depiction of Ministry personnel, like the archetypal civil servant Barty

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<sup>14</sup> The major European wizarding schools are international in scope. Durmstrang, the German school, is located at some undisclosed location in the "north" but draws students like Victor Krum from Bulgaria, while Hogwarts students come from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

<sup>15</sup> There are numerous exceptions to this rule, including the Dursleys (Harry's relatives), Muggles like the Grangers whose children attend Hogwarts, and the British Prime Minister who, apparently, has full knowledge of the magical conspiracy (*Prisoner* 33).

Crouch Sr., with his “narrow toothbrush moustache [that] looked as though he trimmed it using a slide-rule” (*Goblet* 83) and the aptly named Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge.<sup>16</sup> Yet, as the series progresses, the Ministry’s dubious aims and weak leadership take on increasingly sinister implications<sup>17</sup> and its methods become increasingly invasive, draconian, and totalitarian.<sup>18</sup> *Goblet*, for example, is rife with Ministry corruption and injustice, from the *Crucible*-like interrogation of Winky the house-elf and the multiple erasures of Muggle memories, to the deals struck by former Death Eaters for “naming names” and the rank abuses of office by senior official Barty Crouch.<sup>19</sup>

Although the foregoing sketch may seem to suggest that the books are anti-government and anti-modern, this reading is too one-sided. Certainly there are recognizable parallels between Rowling’s portrait and the behaviour of contemporary politicians; Rowling even fancifully recounts an incident when the murder of twelve Muggles by a wizard is covered up by the British government as a gas explosion (*Prisoner* 35). But one could just as easily enumerate the differences; indeed, the Ministry of Magic’s flaws could be interpreted as a back-handed affirmation of the functionality and justice of most liberal democracies. As Susan Hall points out, the wizard bureaucracy is a deeply conflicted political structure, grossly deficient in its application of the rule of law (Hall 147-148). One basic problem is that there is no

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<sup>16</sup> Fudge’s surname which signals both his incompetence and his propensity for “fudging the truth,” covering up damaging developments and issuing prepared statements full of misinformation and “spin.” When questioned by Harry about inconsistencies in magical law enforcement, a flustered Fudge replies, “Circumstances change, Harry... we have to take into account... the present climate” (*Prisoner* 39). Later, when Fudge refuses to accept the truth about Voldemort’s return, we see the dark side of bureaucratic culture: “[Harry] had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little pompous, but essentially good-natured. But now a short, angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world” (*Goblet* 613). Dumbledore puts it even more starkly: “You are blinded... by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius!” (*Goblet* 614).

<sup>17</sup> For example, when Harry receives an official warning for violating the regulations for under-age magic in the Dursley home (though Dobby, not Harry, performs the spell) (*Chamber* 21), we perceive that the Ministry regularly combines Orwellian levels of surveillance with staggering ignorance.

<sup>18</sup> In *Chamber*, for example, Fudge arrests Hagrid and sends him, without evidence or trial, to Azkaban prison, because as Minister he has “got to be seen to be doing something” (*Chamber* 193). In *Prisoner*, we see Buckbeak the Hippogriff unjustly executed and learn that Sirius Black was sentenced to life imprisonment, without a trial, for a crime he didn’t commit; when he is captured, Fudge orders that Black receive the Dementors’ Kiss, even though his protestations of innocence could presumably be corroborated by employing Veritaserum (truth potion). In *Phoenix*, the Ministry appoints a senior civil servant, the sadistic Dolores Umbridge, to fill the vacant Defence Against the Dark Arts position, ostensibly to ensure that “Ministry-approved curriculum” is introduced, but it soon becomes apparent that she is there to spy on Dumbledore and suppress any discussion of Voldemort’s return. Umbridge is quickly appointed High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, issuing Educational Decrees, opening private mail, and appointing an Inquisitorial Squad (composed of Slytherin students) to assist her in her reign of terror.

<sup>19</sup> At the end of *Goblet*, Fudge clumsily destroys evidence for Voldemort’s return and then denies it has occurred, calling the integrity of Dumbledore and Harry into question; this willful blindness leads to a parting of the ways between Dumbledore’s loyal circle and the wizard bureaucracy.

differentiation between the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government; the Ministry subsumes all of these functions (Hall 149). There are seemingly no mechanisms of democratic or legal accountability, no checks and balances other than a generalized fear of public opinion. Inequality, slavery even, is sanctioned and institutionalized, the violation of human rights customary. These systemic flaws lead to corruption and chaos: the Ministry has enormous difficulty enforcing its own laws and ends up serving the interests of Voldemort, its ostensible enemy.

Arguably then, Rowling, through an implied contrast with the hyperbolic failures of the Ministry, affirms the desirability of strong political institutions; indeed, she has been accused by left-leaning critics like Gupta and Mendlesohn of being overly supportive of hierarchical structures of authority. Certainly Hogwarts itself is an example of a traditional hierarchy which functions well because it is ruled by benign authority-figures like Dumbledore and MacGonagall. Rowling advocates neither radical reform nor the demolition of authority structures *per se* but their renewal through inspired leaders who are just, merciful, and tolerant. Unless those in authority are committed to liberal values, it is all too easy, in political crises, to justify repression. During Voldemort's initial rise to power, for example, Barty Crouch Sr. imposes a kind of martial law, killing and imprisoning suspected Death Eaters without trial: "Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark side" (*Goblet* 457). For Rowling, then, the ultimate failure of political institutions is not primarily systemic but personal and moral. At the end of *Goblet*, Dumbledore shows implicit faith that the Ministry of Magic can be a force for good, provided that Fudge provides courageous, inspired leadership:

I tell you now – take the steps I have suggested, and you will be remembered, in office or out, as one of the bravest and greatest Ministers for Magic we have ever known. Fail to act – and history will remember you as the man who stepped aside, and allowed Voldemort a second chance to destroy the world we have tried to rebuild! (*Goblet* 614-615)

In Potterworld, political life is never autonomous; its force and direction derive from the ethical and religious values of political leaders.

Clearly, we are edging here toward the role of ideology in both political culture and the formation of subjectivity. The exposure of ideology is a hallmark of secular modernity, but Rowling puts this motif to some unconventional and equivocal uses. Magical identities are sometimes represented as "constructed" and determined by socio-political environment and ideological conditioning; Barty Crouch Jr., neglected son of a power-hungry bureaucrat is a good example of this, as is the bitter house-elf Kreacher who, says Dumbledore, "is what he has been made by wizards" (*Phoenix* 733). Even Voldemort, the closest thing to the personification of evil in the novels, seems to be a by-product of dysfunctional class and race relations; born to a poor witch mother (who died in childbirth) and a wealthy Muggle father who refused to acknowledge him, he grew up in a Muggle orphanage, murdered his father in revenge, and embarked on a quest for absolute power (*Chamber* 231; *Goblet* 561). But environment and early ideological



conditioning hardly suffice as global explanations for identity formation in the novels, especially in the case of Harry, whose abusive upbringing by the Dursleys in a Muggle-centric world (remarkably similar to Voldemort's background), could hardly be expected to produce such a virtuous and heroic individual. Clearly other factors are involved. Rowling suggests that Harry is at least partly what he is because of the two-sided phenomenon of "blood": both his genetic inheritance from his parents and the protective sacrifice of his mother. But this explanation, which can easily take deterministic and fascist forms, is supplemented by an insistent emphasis on choice, which is also two-sided. Harry, as Dumbledore reminds him, is the sum of his choices, which "show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*Chamber* 245). But he is also unquestionably "chosen" and "singled out" from birth (*Stone* 66), "a marked man" (*Phoenix* 754) whose scar proclaims him the equal and nemesis of the Dark Lord. Choice, in the latter sense, implies a transcendent chooser and therefore a metaphysical and theological framework. Identity then, for Rowling, consists of many strands, the secular and religious intertwined once again.

Rowling, a former Amnesty International worker and an influential advocate for AIDS research and single parents, is undoubtedly a political liberal, and her books express a liberal perspective on the politics of race, exposing the insidious "pure-blood" ideology that motivates the "Death-Eaters" (followers of Lord Voldemort), who all possess a pathological contempt for Muggles and Mudbloods. In fact, Rowling comes close to defining racism as the secular equivalent of original sin, for, aside from the sheer lust for power, pure-blood ideology is the defining characteristic of all the villainous and unsympathetic characters. Conversely, virtually all of the sympathetic characters – Harry, the Weasleys, Dumbledore, Hermione – espouse tolerance toward other magical races and species. Yet Rowling's novels demonstrate the limitations of liberal ideology itself,<sup>20</sup> most pointedly in Hermione's campaign to liberate the house-elves. Hermione struggles valiantly against the complacency of both her fellow students and the elves themselves who, with the single exception of Dobby, happily accept their lot in life as natural slaves. To her credit she recognizes that the political (and almost literal) invisibility of house-elves is ideologically driven:

It's people like you, Ron...who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they're too lazy.... (*Goblet* 112)

It's all in *Hogwarts: A History*. Though, of course, that book's not entirely reliable. "A Revised History of Hogwarts" would be a more accurate title. Or "A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School"... Not once, in over a thousand pages, does *Hogwarts: A History* mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves! (*Goblet* 209-210)

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<sup>20</sup> Liberalism in the contemporary world may take the most saccharine and inane forms, such as Gilderoy Lockhart's confession of faith: "my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples...[and] my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions" (*Chamber* 78).

Although Hermione is well-intentioned and “correct” in her assessment, she is curiously blind to the limitations and excesses of her liberal activism; indeed, her choice of acronym -- SPEW (Society for the Protection of Elfish Welfare) – is a vivid example of her myopia. Hermione badgers and bullies her fellow students with self-righteous zeal, steamrolling over their objections or indifference. Her quasi-religious “faith” in the efficacy of activism is both touching and, in the context of the political culture of the magical world, extremely naïve:

Our short-term aims...are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand-use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they’re shockingly under-represented. (*Goblet* 198)

Rowling portrays intransigence and inflexibility on all sides: oppressors, victims, and activists. She implies, quite rightly, that there are no simple, “magical” solutions to problems like social inequality, which resist both systemic refinements and the benign intentions of do-gooders.

In many ways, these perspectives are brought together in *Phoenix*, where the Fountain of Magical Brethren becomes a kind of comprehensive symbol for wizard political culture. The monument is the centerpiece of the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, an image of the ideals which supposedly animate its activities:

A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard. Glittering jets of water were flying from the ends of their wands, the point of the centaur’s arrow, the tip of the goblin’s hat and each of the house-elf’s ears. (*Phoenix* 117)

The fountain is the quintessential expression of wizard ideology, representing fraternity among the magical races, though not equality: the human figures are clearly dominant over the nonhuman, and the male over the female. On one level, the fountain as a public symbol tells the truth: most wizards do wish for peace, and they also desire hegemony. But the fountain, as Dumbledore later states, also tells a lie, occluding the long history of neglect, indifference, and abuse that have actually brought the magical world to the brink of civil war and violent revolution: “We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward” (*Phoenix* 735). Significantly, during Dumbledore’s fight with Voldemort, the statues in the fountain are all damaged or destroyed (e.g. the wizard at the top is actually decapitated) (*Phoenix* 715-717), symbolically denuding the ideology they reify. And yet, even in this gesture, Rowling resists one-sidedness. During the duel, the statues are brought to life by Dumbledore and come to his aid, imprisoning the Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange and shielding Harry from harm. Rowling suggests that perhaps the ideology expressed in the fountain,

properly shorn of its hegemonic bias, can be can reanimated in the battle against a common enemy.

### The Pales And Forts Of Reason

As I have tried to demonstrate, Rowling's fictional world is only superficially pre-modern or anti-modern; the challenges, interests, and outlook of her characters coincide substantially with those of her contemporary readers. In most respects, the characters negotiate the world in accordance with the analytical categories, values, and cognitive modes characteristic of secular modernity. At the same time, Rowling often reveals in this secular outlook a submerged religious dimension.

Rationalism and skepticism, hallmarks of the Enlightenment, are normative cognitive modes in the *Harry Potter* books. It is remarkable, given the everyday familiarity of "mysterious" forces, how superstitious and credulous wizards can be.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most universally-held superstition is the aversion to saying Voldemort's name; he is called "You-Know-Who," "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," and "The Dark Lord" by virtually everyone (including his own followers) with the exception of Dumbledore and Harry. Dumbledore, in his explanation to Professor MacGonagall, epitomizes a kind of normative rationalism:

My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this "You-Know-Who" nonsense – for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: Voldemort... It all gets so confusing if we keep saying "You-Know-Who". I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort's name. (*Stone* 14)<sup>22</sup>

In turn, Harry and his friends succeed in the books largely because they are able to master their irrational impulses and approach apparent "mysteries" in a hard-headed rationalistic spirit, the juvenile mystery format of the books reinforcing this drive toward demystification. Encountering Snape's riddling protective spell over the Philosopher's Stone, Hermione exclaims, "This isn't magic – it's logic – a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here for ever" (*Stone* 207).

Nowhere are rationalism and skepticism given greater prominence than the satirical treatment of Divination and its attendant forms: palm reading, crystal balls, tarot cards, tea leaves, horoscopes. Hogwarts' Divination teacher, Sybill Trelawney is the epitome of

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<sup>21</sup> Ron says disgustedly of Hogwarts students, "People here'll believe anything" (*Chamber* 116), yet Ron himself has a number of superstitions, including the Grim, a death omen in the shape of a black dog (*Prisoner* 85).

<sup>22</sup> Later in the book Dumbledore commends Harry for persisting in using the name rather than the euphemisms: "Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself" (*Stone* 216).

New Age flakiness, while her classroom, located at high in the North Tower, has all the smoke-and-mirror theatrical trappings of the fortune-telling charlatan (*Prisoner 79*).

Rowling has a great deal of fun mocking Trelawney and the divinatory arts, which MacGonagall euphemistically describes as “one of the most imprecise branches of magic” (*Prisoner 84*) and Hermione calls “very woolly” and “a lot of guesswork” (*Prisoner 85*). Indeed, Hermione, normally a model of application and deference, is uncharacteristically outspoken in her criticism of Trelawney’s Divination class, dropping it halfway through her third year to focus instead on “sensible” disciplines like Arithmancy. Just before Hermione walks out of the class, Trelawney sneers, “I don’t remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly Mundane” (*Prisoner 220*). The lines are clearly drawn here between mysticism and rationalism/skepticism: if Hermione, the most intelligent student at Hogwarts, is intellectually “mundane,” then so too are the author and the reader.

Once again, however, Rowling undermines what looks like a simple formula as she assiduously rehabilitates the supernatural. Even the most skeptical characters don’t rule out the possibility that oracular foresight exists, maintaining that, as the no-nonsense MacGonagall says, “True Seers are very rare” (*Prisoner 84*). This possibility for authentic “seeing” is realized when Trelawney herself, apparently for only the second time in her life, unconsciously delivers a genuine prophecy:

...a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

*‘It will happen tonight.’*

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair, her eyes were unfocused, and her mouth sagging.

‘S-sorry?’ said Harry.

But Professor Trelawney didn’t seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll....She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure....Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own.

*‘The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight, the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant’s aid, greater and more terrible than ever before. Tonight...before midnight, the servant...will set out...to rejoin...his master...’*

Professor Trelawney’s head fell forwards onto her chest. She made a grunting noise. Then, quite suddenly, her head snapped up again. (*Prisoner 238*)

Rowling doesn't explore the obvious question of what or who is speaking through Trelawney (strangely, the tone of the prophecy seems pro-Voldemort), but the passage nevertheless trumps secular rationalism and skepticism. Similarly, while astrology is generally mocked throughout the novels, Rowling treats the star-gazing race of centaurs with comparative dignity. Firenze the centaur, who considers human fortune-telling "self-flattering nonsense" about "trivial hurts, tiny human accidents...unaffected by planetary movements" (*Phoenix* 531), nevertheless affirms that an authentic astrological science exists:

Centaurs have unraveled the mysteries of these movements over centuries. Our findings teach us that the future may be glimpsed in the sky above us.... I... am here to explain the wisdom of centaurs, which is impersonal and impartial. We watch the skies for the great tides of evil or change that are sometimes marked there. (*Phoenix* 531)

Both prophecy and astrology, then, are subjected to a form of rational skepticism, not to discredit them entirely, but to distinguish genuine manifestations of the supernatural from a mass of deceptions. Rowling's skepticism, I would argue, is Cartesian rather than nihilist or existentialist; the aim is freedom from illusions, not wholesale Weberian "disenchantment."

Rowling goes further yet, countering her satire on *faux* mysticism with an insistence on the limitations of rationalism and skepticism themselves. In certain circumstances, rationalism can be folly, a mask for presuppositional prejudice or closed-mindedness, and this sort of conflict plays out repeatedly in the novels.<sup>23</sup> In *Phoenix*, Luna Lovegood hits a nerve when she counters Hermione's dismissal of her belief in Heliopaths: "There are plenty of eye-witness accounts. Just because you're so narrow-minded you need to have everything shoved under your nose before you [believe] –" (*Phoenix* 308). When the two clash again in the Department of Mysteries, the limits of rationalism are brought out even more pointedly. Harry is drawn to an ancient stone archway on a raised dais, "hung with a tattered black curtain or veil which...was fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched" (an obvious and traditional symbol of death) (*Phoenix* 682), certain he can hear whispering and murmuring voices behind it:

‘I can hear them too,’ breathed Luna, joining them around the side of the archway and gazing at the swaying veil. ‘There are people in there!’

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<sup>23</sup> This certainly appears to be the case with Professor Binns, the History of Magic teacher. In response to Hermione's query about the Chamber of Secrets, Binns replies testily, "I deal with *facts*, Miss Granger, not myths and legends," dismissing it as arrant nonsense because learned witches and wizards have searched the castle but found no empirical evidence for the Chamber (*Chamber* 113, 115). But Binns is wrong: the Chamber in question does exist, as we discover in the climactic scene. The irony is rendered even more delicious by the fact that Binns, committed "to solid, believable, verifiable *fact*" (*Chamber* 115), is himself a ghost; clearly, one person's fact is another's myth.

‘What do you mean, “in there”?’ demanded Hermione, jumping down from the bottom step and sounding much angrier than the occasion warranted. ‘There isn’t any “in there”, it’s just an archway, there’s no room for anybody to be there. Harry, stop it, come away –’

She grabbed his arm and pulled, but he resisted. (*Phoenix* 683)

The scene is a beautifully structured clash between profane and religious perspectives. Hermione, usually reliable and brilliant, takes the materialist standpoint but is clearly wrong: the voices that Harry and Luna hear are real, just as they can both see the horse-like Thestrals (invisible to the vast majority of students), because, having seen death intimately, they are sensitized to spiritual realities.

This is not to say that Rowling simply valorizes mysticism or spiritualism. Rather, she advocates a balance between credulity and skepticism, a dialectic between religious and secular modes of understanding. This is the perspective championed by Dumbledore, Harry, and, surprisingly, the centaur Firenze. Having extolled the value of studying heavenly bodies and observing symbols in fume and flame, he ends his first class on a note of intellectual caution and humility:

...it was foolish to put too much faith in such things, anyway, because even centaurs sometimes read them wrongly. He was nothing like any human teacher Harry had ever had. His priority did not seem to be to teach them what he knew, but rather to impress on them that nothing, not even centaurs’ knowledge, was foolproof.

‘He’s not very definite on anything, is he?’ said Ron... (*Phoenix* 532)

Firenze’s lack of certainty, combined with his openness toward transcendence, represents, I believe, Rowling’s own position: true rationality, though never credulous, is receptive to divinity and mystery. In this sort of cognitive framework, Trelawney’s admonition no longer sounds out of place: “Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” (*Prisoner* 81).

### **Knowing Your Enemy**

In *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity*, sociologist Peter Berger writes movingly of his aspiration “to reconcile a religious quest with an honest recognition of [his] contemporary social context” (20), to avoid the orthodoxies, both secular and religious, which claim to relieve one of the burdens of modernity. The *Harry Potter* novels, I believe, aspire to such a dialectical *rapprochement* between the claims of religion and secularity. We see this figured in the central symbol of the Potter novels: the lightning-shaped scar Harry receives from Voldemort as an infant. As Dumbledore says, “Scars can come in useful” (*Stone* 17), and certainly Harry’s scar proves both a blessing

and curse (*Phoenix* 742), a source of intense physical and emotional pain, as well as a valuable warning device. The scar's shape signifies power; inadvertently, Voldemort transfers some of his own extraordinary powers to Harry. He also appears, through contagious magic, to "infect" Harry with aspects of his own nature – e.g. ambition, determination, disregard for rules and limits – just as Harry's blood presumably infects the resurrected Voldemort with unspecified virtues conferred by his mother's sacrifice. For Harry, Voldemort is not external and other; he is Harry's shadow and, as *Phoenix* demonstrates, an aspect of Harry's own "pluralized" consciousness. The scar further symbolizes Harry's destiny as Voldemort's nemesis. According to Trelawney's first prophecy, Harry is "*the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord*" whom "*the Dark Lord will mark...as his equal*" (*Phoenix* 741), chosen, in fact, says Dumbledore, because Voldemort sees a reflection of himself in the infant.

Voldemort and Harry are connected in another way that indicates an intertwined destiny: the magical feathers in the core of their wands come from the same phoenix, Fawkes. Just as their wands are "brothers" (*Stone* 65), Harry and Voldemort have something of a fraternal relation: both are born to greatness.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, when the two wands are used against each other in *Goblet*, a strange phenomenon occurs:

A jet of green light issued from Voldemort's wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's – they met in mid-air...a narrow beam of light was now connecting the two wands, neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold...The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered: though the wands remained connected, a thousand more offshoots arced high over Harry and Voldemort, criss-crossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light. (*Goblet* 576)

The passage suggests, not just the equality of the two wands and their owners, but their affinity as well, their mutual participation in a larger, transcendent design. Reluctant to destroy its counterpart, Harry's wand instead forces Voldemort's to regurgitate its most recent spells (i.e. the ghostly forms of four people he has murdered), to "recant," so to speak, its evil deeds. Indeed, the novels suggest that a figurative process of alchemical purification and transformation underlies each encounter between Harry and Voldemort, leading, presumably, toward some kind of golden perfection.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, even though the prophecy stipulates that "*either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live*

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<sup>24</sup> The clever, handsome Tom Riddle was "the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen" (*Chamber* 242), while Harry is certainly the most courageous. Mr Ollivander, the maker of both wands, says, "I think we must expect great things from you, Mr Potter...After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named did great things – terrible, yes, but great" (*Stone* 65), while the Sorting Hat considers placing Harry in Slytherin House because they could "help [him] on the way to greatness" (*Stone* 91).

<sup>25</sup> In *Phoenix*, argues Granger, Harry undergoes the alchemical *nigredo*; he is broken down to "a formless condition akin to the prime matter of the alchemists" (Granger, *Looking* 162-163), and Voldemort is certainly an essential agent in this refinement process.

*while the other survives*” (*Phoenix* 741), there are oblique hints that Voldemort too may ultimately be transfigured by the conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Although I am not arguing that Rowling’s books are a sustained allegory of the conflict between religion (i.e. Harry) and secularity (i.e. Voldemort), it may be worthwhile, in conclusion, to consider briefly the merits of such a reading. As I have shown, Harry’s role, experience, and standpoint in the novels are consonant on many levels with religious faith, while Voldemort articulates a radically relativistic and materialist creed: “There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it” (*Stone* 211); “There is nothing worse than death” (*Phoenix* 718). Harry, possessing a “*power the Dark Lord knows not* (i.e. love)” (*Phoenix* 741), naturally finds himself in conflict the Dark Lord, yet their antithesis is never absolute. Like religion and secularity, the two are mutually constitutive, marked as warring siblings, and “infected” with one another at the level of consciousness. In *Phoenix*, when Dumbledore realizes this, he insists that Harry study Occlumency, the defence of the mind against external penetration. But curiously Harry does not study, leaving his mind open to Voldemort’s influence. The result is painful in some ways but illuminating in others. Harry falls for Voldemort’s deception, but he also achieves his heart’s longing: to enter the Department of Mysteries, a restricted section of the Ministry of Magic where “Unspeakables” study the great mysteries of existence such as the Mind, Death, Love, Time, and the Future. In all of their interaction, Harry never ceases to be what he is: he never becomes Voldemort. But he cannot achieve his destiny without knowing Voldemort fully, both as an external enemy and as an aspect of himself.

As a religious response to secularity, then, the *Harry Potter* books occupy a position in between the poles of accommodation – conforming religious faith to a secular mould – and rejection – the “Occlumency” of religious conservatives who would close their minds to all worldly influences. Without the transcendent vision and values of religion, the secular condition, like Voldemort, can easily degenerate into nihilism and murderous expediency. Conversely, a religious vision which does not embrace that which is great and intrinsically valuable in secularity predictably degenerates as well. At best, the anti-modernism of radical sectarians is inauthentic and illusory; at worst, as we sadly witness in our world, religion becomes irrational and destructive. To frame the issue more positively, like Harry’s relation to the Dark Lord, religious faith cannot know itself *qua* faith without secularity, without the painful but necessary rupture between church and state. As Peter Berger argues, modernity’s subversion of certainty and religious consensus actually opens up grand new possibilities for faith: “It allows an individual in quest of religious truth to make something of a fresh start” (*Glory* 127). The *Harry Potter*

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<sup>26</sup> Some of these hints include the fact that Harry has saved the life of Voldemort’s servant Wormtail, indebting the latter (*Prisoner* 311); the “gleam of something like triumph in Dumbledore’s eyes” when he learns that Voldemort has been reborn in a cauldron containing Harry’s ‘sanctified’ blood (*Goblet* 604); and Dumbledore’s insistence on addressing Voldemort as Tom, reminding the Dark Lord of his very human origins (*Phoenix* 718-719).



books, I would argue, are themselves a kind of “fresh start,” a re-articulation of the quest for religious truth in contemporary terms. Like Jesus’s parable of “The Wheat and the Tares” (Matt. 13.24-30, 36-43), they compel us to accept a world in which the religious and the secular must necessarily grow up side by side, often indistinguishably, separable only by the angelic reapers at the end of the age.

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