

I

MAGIC, FANTASY, AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAGICAL SETTING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some fans of Lewis and Tolkien contrast their use of magic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 GOD’S ARMY VERSUS THE SERVANTS OF SATAN?

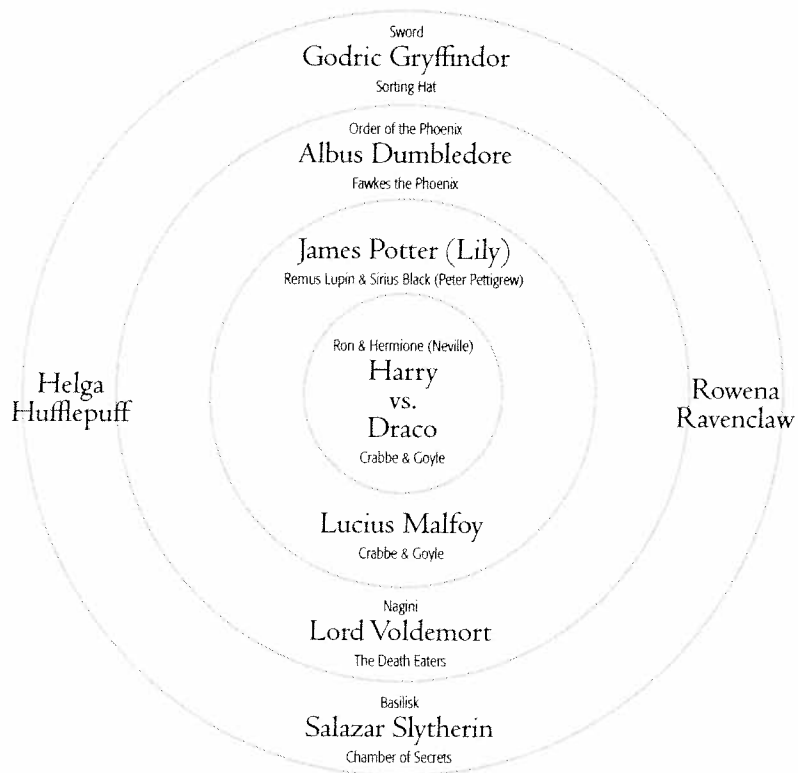
*The Harry Potter novels revolve around
the central conflict of good and evil.*

However fascinating—and to some, distracting and disturbing—the magical backdrop is in Harry Potter, it is only a part of the setting and structure of these stories. A strong case could be made that the magic in these books is one of the less important aspects. Harry isn’t an especially accomplished wizard (like the other Gryffindors—except Hermione—he is known for being a bit dull in the classroom) and his magical aptitude isn’t what saves him in his battles with the Dark Lord and his minions.

Having argued that the magic in Harry Potter is at the very least consistent with a Christian worldview, let’s turn to the other parts of the setting that receive much less media attention than the magic to understand what part of the Great Story each reflects and, in this, to see if they pass a litmus test for conformity to Christian tradition. In a simple list that will be the subject of the next several chapters, these parts include:

- Gryffindor/Slytherin opposition
- The hero's journey
- Alchemical "Great Work"
- Doppelgänger

THE HOUSE OF GRYFFINDOR VERSUS
THE HOUSE OF SLYTHERIN



One of the novelties of the Harry Potter books is that, while each book is an exciting story in itself, there is a larger story that is the context of these separate adventures. Every book lets the reader in on another part of the puzzle that clarifies the relationships of the major players. The relationship map on page 12 allows the reader to understand at a glance who is on whose side, who opposes whom, and who does not fit neatly into a relationship slot.

If you begin on the map's periphery, you see the founders of Hogwarts School: Salazar Slytherin, Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff. The two defining figures of this quartet are Slytherin and Gryffindor, whose disagreements and characters bleed into the remaining rings. Look for Gryffindor at the top and Slytherin at the bottom, just as their respective dormitory houses are in a tower and a dungeon.

The next ring in, we find Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix on the Gryffindor end of the ring and Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters on the Slytherin end. Voldemort, we learn in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, is Slytherin's heir, and he and his Death Eaters labor to create a world ruled by pure-blooded wizards. Hagrid mentions in *Sorcerer's Stone* that nearly all the wizards who joined with Voldemort were from Slytherin House.

Dumbledore is linked with Gryffindor by artifacts and personal history. He "owns" the Sorting Hat that belonged to Godric Gryffindor and the sword of Godric Gryffindor that Harry pulls from it in *Chamber of Secrets* ("sword-in-hat"—get it?). His office has a griffin door knocker, and more importantly, his life has been spent resisting evil wizards, from the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945 to Lord Voldemort in the present.

The Order of the Phoenix is a counterbalancing group of wizards under Dumbledore's influence (the "old crowd" he tells Sirius

Black to bring together at the end of *Goblet of Fire* and whom we meet in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*), offsetting the Death Eaters under Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore's glorious pet phoenix, Fawkes, is mirrored in a horrible contrast on the dark side by Voldemort's giant black snake, Nagini.

Moving toward the center, one ring in, we meet the parents of Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy, a loyal Death Eater and former member of Slytherin House, lines up, of course, on the Slytherin side of the map. I put Crabbe's and Goyle's names here both because we learn that their fathers are Death Eaters and for symmetry with the center ring (where they are inseparable from Draco Malfoy, the son of Lucius and Narcissa).

Harry's father, James, aligns with Gryffindor and Dumbledore. James was in Gryffindor House, lived in Godric's Hollow before his death, and had a close relationship with Dumbledore (close enough that after James died, Dumbledore acted as executor and protector of his son). His opposition to Voldemort, his murderer, is total. Though we learn in *Order of the Phoenix* that James was quite a jerk at fifteen, we know from the great respect shown to him by all but Professor Snape that he was a hero in the war against the Dark Lord.

James's two close friends from school, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, join him in the ring with parenthetical inclusion of their sidekick and hanger-on, Peter Pettigrew. They balance Crabbe and Goyle and foreshadow Harry's close friends Ron and Hermione—with Neville Longbottom as their hanger-on, similar to Pettigrew (whom he resembles; see *Prisoner of Azkaban*, chapter II).

In the center ring we find Harry Potter and his great rival, Draco Malfoy. Each lines up ring by generational ring with his respective parents, patron, and house founder. Each has friends who echo in number and character the friends of his parents. Each despises the

other and lives for the pleasure of seeing the other fail. Their opposition becomes more open—and violent—with each book.

The major characters, then, fall into place on the Gryffindor/Slytherin axis. The other characters? Hagrid, the Weasleys, and Professor McGonagall are in the Order of the Phoenix, and we have to suspect strongly that Ludo Bagman, the Minister of Magic, and Rita Skeeter (among others) are at least collaborators with Lord Voldemort.

But there are a few question marks. Most importantly, on whose side is Professor Severus Snape? As the master of Slytherin House and an alumnus of the same; an open enemy of Harry Potter, his father, and his father's friends; and a Death Eater with the Dark Mark tattooed on his arm, isn't it obvious? No, not really. Snape haunts Professor Quirrell/Voldemort in *Sorcerer's Stone* and does everything he can to keep him from winning the Stone. He saves Harry's life in the same book and has Dumbledore's trust because he acted as a double agent for the Gryffindor side in the last war with Voldemort. At the end of *Goblet of Fire* and all through *Order of the Phoenix*, Professor Snape returns to Lord Voldemort at Dumbledore's request and at obvious risk of his life. Whose side is he on? He seems to be on his own side, which is to both sides of the map and neither side. By not being able to place Snape, the map highlights his role as a critical or swing character.

Does this Gryffindor/Slytherin opposition have a greater meaning than, say, the struggle between two football teams? Yep.

We need to note that the Slytherins are notoriously vicious and unapologetically focused on getting more power. The Gryffindors, though not incapable of some over-the-top behaviors and recklessness, do not torture Muggles for jollies or harass magical folk because they can. The battle between Gryffindor and Slytherin is a battle between good and evil—I will even argue, believe it or not,

that it is a reflection of the battle between those who serve Christ and those who serve the evil one.

You may have read critics of the Potter books who assert that Harry's world is morally ambiguous because the white hats need cleaning and the black hats demonstrate sufficient loyalty to one another not to be "jet black." This is silly. As W. H. Auden explained in his defense of Tolkien (yes, he was charged with this type of ambiguity, too), the difference between the good and bad guys in fiction comes down to the choices each makes. Bad guys don't do the wrong thing after struggling with a decision; they almost automatically do what most advances their individual or group advantage without regard for principle. Good guys often are tempted to do the wrong thing—may even *do* the wrong thing—but they either choose the right or repent of their error in light of right and wrong.¹ This is exactly the situation between the Gryffindor white hats and Slytherin black hats. The Gryffindors (most often the lead players: Harry, Ron, and Hermione) choose to do the right thing—usually after some hand-wringing and soul-searching—though doing the right thing will probably mean their death. The Slytherins do the wrong thing without reservation or restraint.

This defining conflict of the series reflects every Christian's battle with the flesh, the world, and the devil. The meanings of the house names, their respective house symbols, and even the title given to Lord Voldemort all point to a parallel with Christianity and the reality of life on earth.

Gryffindor is named for its founder, Godric Gryffindor, whose first name means "godly" or "worshipful." David Colbert, author of *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter*, tells us that *Gryffindor* is French for "golden griffin" (griffin d'or) and that the griffin is commonly used as a symbol of Christ. Sound like a reach? Hardly. Remember

from your fairy tales that a griffin is half lion and half eagle. Lions are considered the kings of the terrestrial animal world, and eagles are considered kings of the sky. An animal that is two-natured, one in essence, and king of heaven and earth? More about symbolism and griffins in chapter 9, but the main point here is that the Gryffindor/Slytherin matchup is a lot bigger than a Cubs/Red Sox slugfest.

Oddly enough (on the surface at least), the house animal on the Gryffindor banners is not a golden griffin but a red lion. This is a clear tip of the hat to Lewis's Aslan, the Christlike lion of the Narnia books, although Lewis didn't invent this symbolism. The red lion as an emblem for Christ is part of traditional and alchemical imagery. The phoenix, sometimes called the "resurrection bird," is also a symbol for Christ and a natural title for Dumbledore's (adult) army in *Order of the Phoenix*. Not enough? Well, how about those Slytherin nasties then? Their connection with the devil is remarkable. Their mascot is a serpent, their founder's name—Salazar Slytherin—is full of hissing serpentine sounds and suggests the motion a snake makes on the ground (slitherin'; see Genesis 3:14), and their leader is the Dark Lord. I don't think this is coincidental. That Voldemort's intimates are called "Death Eaters" is just icing on the cake. (The opposite of Death Eaters is "Life Eaters"—and those who eat the body and blood of God, who is the way, the truth, and the *life*, are Christians.)

Readers familiar with the Bible will recognize Saint Paul's understanding of the world as being fallen (Romans 8:22) and ruled by the devil (2 Corinthians 4:3-4), against whom everything and everyone good is at war—and whose rule and corruption God became man to destroy (Colossians 2:13-15; I Corinthians 15:24-27; 15:54-57). Christians consciously battle against the principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12) that subject all men who do not

seek to know and resist the devil's thoughts (2 Corinthians 2:11). The central conflict of the Harry Potter books is the antagonism between the descendants of Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin, a conflict that is consistent with the Christian view of the world as a battleground in the cosmic war between good and evil. The many clues in names and words in the stories point to Gryffindor House as being much like God's army and Slytherin as Satan's servants. We learn more in each book about their battles inside and outside of Hogwarts and the eerie parallels across generations. My hope in this short chapter was to show that this central conflict is both consistent with the Christian worldview (which is to say, an apt description of the world as it really is) and even supportive of this understanding. Given the many clues in names, words, and events that Rowling has given us to point to Gryffindor House as God's army and Slytherin as Satan's servants, we can be assured this is edifying reading for Christians.

As Perry Glazer of Baylor University has written, "Children need more than a set of virtues to emulate, values to choose, rules to obey, or even some higher form of reasoning to attain. They long to be part of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. And that's why children want to read Harry Potter."² I would only add, that is why Harry Potter makes excellent reading for children *and* adults; the books both satisfy and support our God-implanted longing to resist evil and serve the good. Can we reasonably ask anything more of our entertainments?