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# Harry Potter and the Paganization of Children's Culture

By Michael O'Brien

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The realm of human imagination is a God-given gift, a faculty of the mind that is intended for the expansion of our understanding by enabling us to visualize invisible truths. In the modern era this zone of man's interior life has moved to the forefront of his experience. With the advent of film, television, and now the near-virtual reality of special effects videos and other electronic entertainment, the screen of the imagination is stimulated to a degree (both in quantity and kind) more than at any other period in history. This has prompted an ongoing debate over what constitutes healthy nourishment of the imagination and what degrades it.

In his essay "On Fairy Stories" J.R.R. Tolkien pointed out that because man is made in the image and likeness of God he is endowed with faculties that reflect his Creator. One of these is the gift of "sub-creation"—the human creator may give form to other worlds populated by imaginary peoples and beasts, where fabulous environments are the stage for astounding dramas. The primal desire at the heart of such imagining, he says, is the "realization of wonder." If our eyes are opened to see existence as wonder-full, then we become more capable of reverential awe before the Source of it all. "Fairy stories may invent monsters that fly the air or dwell in the deep," he wrote, "but at least they do not try to escape from heaven or the sea." However fantastic the sub-created world may be, if it is a product of the "baptized imagination" it will be faithful to the moral order of the universe. Tolkien cautions, however, that because man is fallen the creative faculty is always at risk of veering away from its true objective. We are all quite capable of taking God-given gifts back in the direction of idolatry.

Even the most cursory glance at what is available in children's literature and entertainment offers ample evidence that the paganization of the imagination is well underway. In the late 19th century there appeared in children's fiction a trickle of books that began the process of redefining Christian symbols and the presentation of occult themes in a favorable light. Until then, witches and sorcerers, an important element of traditional fables and fairy tales, were

consistently portrayed as evil. With the advent of the occult revival (which entered the West primarily through certain British writers involved in esoteric religion) more and more material appeared that attempted to shift the line between good and evil. The characters of the "white witch", the pet dragon, and the wise wizard became familiar figures. During the last quarter of the twentieth century the trickle became a torrent, and by the final decade before the Millennium it entered the mainstream of culture, powerfully augmented by the interlocking mechanisms of television, film, video, marketing techniques and spin-off industries, and applauded by a class of critics who told us that this was all a long-overdue broadening of our horizons.

In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman describes how television has reshaped our society. In the past, when Western man moved from an oral culture to the print-dominated or "typographic" culture, significant changes resulted in our capacity to absorb experience and abstractions. The volume of information fed to the mind increased while the mind's ability to sort and evaluate the influx of data did not always keep pace. With the advent of television another quantum leap occurred. Flooded with powerful stimuli that bypassed the mind's normal faculties for filtering and interpretation, both the rational and the imaginative aspects of our minds became increasingly passive. As a result, Postman warns, our ways of perceiving reality itself are becoming fundamentally distorted. We now imbibe a massive amount of impressions in small bites that demand of us neither sustained attention nor truly critical thinking, thus rendering us vulnerable to manipulation. We are dangerously close, he says, to that condition described by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*—no longer conscious of our bondage we are soothed by endless entertainments.

For in the end he [Huxley] was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking." (*Amusing*

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*Ourselves to Death*, Viking Penguin, New York, 1985, p.163)

How does this warning apply to books that promote a pagan view of the world? Surely, it is argued, their popularity heralds a return to a more literate culture. Is not their success a positive sign, demonstrating that the human imagination can never be fully satisfied by electronic media? At first glance, it would seem so. But a book is not necessarily always better than a video simply because it is a book. While it is true that media-technology tends to overwhelm the viewer, and books usually pay some respect to the integrity of the reader (sparking the imagination but not displacing its creative powers), much of contemporary fantasy for the young is actually closer in style to television than to literature. It overwhelms by using in print form the visceral stimuli and pace of the electronic media, flooding the imagination with sensory rewards while leaving it malnourished at the core. In a word, thrills have swept aside wonder.

If the purpose of wonder is to lead to reflection on the splendor of existence, and reflection to clear thought about its meaning, what has been lost? And why has it been lost? Postman warns that the power over our minds exercised by constantly changing images is now so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it has become invisible. We are fast losing our ability to recognize that we have lost anything at all, let alone the ability to ask why it has been lost.

There is no more disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution than this: that the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre. For the loss of the sense of the strange is a sign of adjustment, and the extent to which we have adjusted is a measure of the extent to which we have been changed. Our culture's adjustment to the epistemology of television is by now all but complete; we have so thoroughly absorbed its definitions of truth, knowledge and reality that irrelevance seems filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane. And if some of our institutions seem not to fit the template of the times, why it is they, and not the template, that seem to us disordered and strange. ( Postman, pp.79-80)

## **The Harry Potter Phenomenon**

If the fragmenting and leveling of consciousness distorts how we perceive the world, it will necessarily distort our assessment of cultural material. A case in point is the publication of Joanne K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels, which during the past four years have met with a deluge of favorable reviews and an astonishing sales response. Some 76 million copies have been sold, there are translations in 42 languages, and three of the titles are now concurrently on the *New York Times* best sellers list. Because the series presents the world of witchcraft and sorcery in a positive light, it has also sparked a minority reaction ranging from outright alarm to sober analysis. Some critics say the books are flawed but essentially harmless fantasy, filling a real need; others decry them as the next stage in the ongoing degeneration of culture. In either case the books invite an appraisal, for they are going to be a major influence in the values and perceptions of the coming generation.

The four novels published to date are so rich in characters and ornate sub-plots that it would be impossible to describe all of them in a single article. However, at this point a sketch of the structure of the series may serve to set the context for themes I will discuss further on.

In volume one, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, we are introduced to the world of sorcery and the boy who plays the pivotal role in the struggle between good and evil as it is defined in the series. The story begins with the murder of Harry's parents, a witch and wizard who are destroyed by another wizard named Voldemort, chief of all the wizards who have gone too far into practice of the "Dark Arts"—the "evil side of sorcery". Baby Harry survives the attack for some unexplained reason, and Voldemort flees, much reduced in power. We later learn that the sacrificial love Harry's mother has for her baby son deflected Voldemort's curses onto himself, with the result that Voldemort has become no more than a barely human shadow of his former self. Harry is rescued by witches and wizards who take him to a suburb of London to be raised by his aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley. The Dursleys are "Muggles"—the wizard term for ordinary humans who have no magic powers. A thoroughly despicable couple, they are unrelievedly cruel to Harry, opinionated, conceited and full of malice for anything to do with magic. Harry knows nothing about his background.

On his eleventh birthday, he begins to discover that he has some mysterious powers. He soon meets

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witches and wizards who harass the Dursleys with magic in order to obtain their permission for Harry to attend Hogwarts, a school of witchcraft and wizardry. At Hogwarts castle Harry meets the headmaster Professor Dumbledore who is also the unofficial chief of the “good wizards” in the world. The wizard world coexists with the world of the Muggles, but it is so enchanted that ordinary humans are blinded to its existence. When occasionally the lines are crossed through the “misuse of magic”, the Ministry of Magic steps in to cover it up and to erase the memories of Muggles who happen to discover the great secret.

In the plot of the first volume, Harry makes new friends and enemies (all of whom are aspiring young witches and wizards), meets the various professors at the school (Divination, Potions, Spells, Herbology, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and other disciplines within the world of arcane occult knowledge). He makes special friends with fellow students Ron and Hermione, and together the trio experiences many adventures throughout the four novels written to date. In this first novel Harry comes to understand that the Dark Lord—Voldemort himself—seeks to return to full life, recapture his old magical strength and seize power over the world. One of the professors, a wizard named Quirrel, is secretly loyal to Voldemort and tries to help him by striving for two goals: to steal the Philosopher’s Stone (containing the “elixir of eternal life”) which is safe in Dumbledore’s keeping, and to drain the life from Harry in order to restore Voldemort’s own life. If he can achieve this, Voldemort intends to kill Harry, for Harry is the only one ever to have resisted his killing curse. In the attempt, Voldemort possesses Quirrel and lures Harry into a confrontation where he tries to seize the stone and kill the boy. But the power latent in Harry is too strong for him; Voldemort flees and Harry collapses, remaining unconscious for three days before he revives.

Volume two, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, chronicles Harry’s second year at Hogwarts. The plot revolves around mysterious events connected to a secret chamber in Hogwarts castle. Supposedly, an evil presence lurks there and has been released to roam about the school, terrorizing students and killing as it pleases. Students and some of the professors suspect that the famous Harry Potter may be the cause, and it is rumored that he has become a practitioner of the Dark Arts. After all, it is argued, even as a baby he was more powerful than the Dark Lord, the most powerful evil wizard in the world. Isolated and despised, Harry begins to doubt himself, suspecting that he might be destined to become evil. Dumbledore reassures him that this is not so. Eventually Harry discovers a secret passageway to the underground chamber, and enters it to save a little witch girl named Ginny who has

become entranced by Voldemort. He does not realize that Voldemort has used her as bait. Inside the chamber Harry kills the Basilisk, a giant snake that is associated with Voldemort, then uses a fang of the snake to stab a magic dialoguing diary that was the method Voldemort used to entrance Ginny. When Harry destroys the diary, Voldemort is banished a second time.

In volume three, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry is embroiled in an old conflict between his “godfather”, a wizard named Sirius Black, and a wizard named Peter Pettigrew, and other magicians who are at odds with each other due to some mysterious ancient feud. Black has been thrown into the wizard prison of Azkaban on a charge of murdering Pettigrew for betraying Harry’s parents to Voldemort, causing their deaths. The truth is that

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Pettigrew faked his own death, thus framing Black for his murder, then transformed himself into a rat named Scabbers (the sleepy pet of Harry’s friend Ron), in which disguise he has been hiding out for twelve years while Black remained in prison.

As the story begins, Black has broken out of prison, and both the wizard world and the Muggle world (where he is believed to be a mass murderer) are trying to track him down. The wizard world thinks Black is searching for Harry in order to kill him. Into the tale comes Romulus Lupus (who is also a werewolf) the new teacher of Defense-Against-the-Dark-Arts at Hogwarts. We discover that Lupus, Black, Pettigrew and Harry’s father had once been fellow students at Hogwarts and were a foursome of friends during their youth. The situation is further complicated by Professor Snape the Potions Master, who hates Harry, and who was also associated with the foursome. Harry has a difficult time untangling the web of deception and intrigue: who betrayed whom, who can be trusted, who is telling the truth about the past? None of them are what they appear to be. Harry’s assumptions (and the reader’s) about who is good and who is evil are constantly flipping, and only in the last chapters do we discover that Scabbers the rat is in fact the real villain. In a final confrontation Scabbers is transformed back into his human form (as Pettigrew) by the commanding spells of Lupus and Black, who are about to administer justice by killing him. Harry asks them to be merciful and to send Pettigrew to Azkaban Prison. But

Pettigrew escapes and flees in search of his old master Voldemort.

Volume four, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, is about Voldemort's elaborate plan to ensnare Harry through the services of Pettigrew, to take some of the boy's blood and make a potion that will restore the Dark Lord to his former powers. Indeed, the latter hopes to obtain more power than he has ever known, for Harry's powers are greater than his, though as yet undeveloped. The plot revolves around a year-long competition in wizardry that involves the student-champions of the three great schools of sorcery. Harry is one of the champions for his school, and in feat after daring feat he overcomes terrifying obstacles (usually by putting the good of others above his own desire to win). He emerges the victor of the competition, only in the end to be tricked into Voldemort's hands. The Dark Lord takes some of Harry's blood, makes the potion and is restored to his full powers. Harry rallies, resists Voldemort's killing curse with the power of his will and magical commands, then flees to Hogwarts. The book concludes with a stirring speech from the headmaster Dumbledore, who praises Harry for his virtues, and calls the students and professors to unity in the face of the overwhelming danger that now looms over the world.

### **Materialist Magic and the assimilated imagination**

Pro-Harry commentators say that Rowling's sub-creation is witty, thought-provoking, entertaining, expands the child's imagination, and even retains a certain morality. Furthermore, she has succeeded in introducing an electronically addicted generation to the world of reading. All of this is true. The stories are packed with surprises, delights of the imagination that few readers will fail to be enchanted by. Talking chess pieces argue with the players about the advisability of moves, ingenious toys and devices abound, mythological beasts run in and out of scenes, owls deliver mail, a lovable giant hatches dragon eggs and breeds new species of creatures, elves serve dutifully, wise-cracking ghosts play tricks, and of course there is Quidditch—a combination of rugby, basketball, and polo played on flying broomsticks.

But the charming details are mixed with the repulsive at every turn: Ron seeks to cast a spell that rebounds on himself, making him vomit slimy slugs, the ghost of a little girl lives in a toilet, excremental references are not uncommon, urination is no longer an off-limits subject, rudeness between students is routine behavior. In volume four especially these trends are in evidence, along with the added spice of sexuality inferred in references such as

“private parts” and students pairing off and “going into the bushes.”

Student witches and wizards are taught to use their wands to cast hexes and spells to alter their environments, punish small foes, and defend themselves against more sinister enemies. Transfiguration lessons show them how to change objects and people into other kinds of creatures—sometimes against their will. In Potions class they make brews that can be used to control others. In Herbology they grow plants that are used in the potions—the roots of the mandrake plant, for example, are small living babies who scream when they are uprooted for transplanting, and are grown for the purpose of being cut into pieces and boiled in a magical potion.

The wizard world is about the pursuit of power and esoteric knowledge, and in this sense it is a modern representation of a branch of ancient Gnosticism, the cult that came close to undermining Christianity at its birth. The so-called “Christian Gnostics” of the 2nd century were in no way Christian, for they attempted to neutralize the meaning of the Incarnation and to distort the concept of salvation along traditional Gnostic lines: man saves himself by obtaining secret knowledge and power. The figure of Christ was just one of many “myths” which they attempted to graft onto their worldview. At Hogwarts, holidays such as Christmas and Easter are stripped of Christ, rendered down to no more than social customs and absorbed into the “broader” context of the occult symbol-cosmology. Halloween is the great feast of the year. Rowling's wizard world, gnostic in essence and practise, neutralizes the sacred and displaces it by normalizing what is profoundly abnormal and destructive in the real world.

The objection is sometimes raised: surely this is permissible because it is a sub-creation, and as such its author has free rein to establish its own laws, its interior coherence and consistency. This is to overlook the fact that Rowling's wizard world is interactive with the real world and violates the moral order in both. The story takes place in contemporary London and the English countryside. The witches and wizards are the gnostic cabal whose secret knowledge must be hidden from ordinary people and revealed only to initiates. The students and professors of Hogwarts are like personalities one would meet in any British boarding school; their difference is only in their extraordinary powers and bizarre activities. Some, like Harry, are likable; others are snobs and bullies. This is *our* world, but one in which supernatural powers are redefined as human faculties, needing only the proper learning in order to be used rightly.

**The problem is not the presence of magic in a book, but how magic is represented.**

While Rowling posits the “good” use of occult powers against their misuse, thus imparting to her sub-creation an apparent aura of morality, the cumulative effect is to shift our understanding of the battle lines between good and evil. The border is never defined. Of course, the archetype of “misuse” is Voldemort, whose savage cruelty and will to power is blatantly evil, yet the reader is lulled into minimizing or forgetting altogether that Harry himself, and many other of the “good” characters, frequently use the same powers on a lesser scale, supposedly for good ends. The false notion of “the end justifies the means” is the subtext throughout. The author’s characterization and plot continually reinforce the message that if a person is “nice”, if he means well, is brave and loyal to his friends, he can pretty much do as he sees fit to combat horrific evil—magic powers being the ideal weapon. This is consistent with the author’s confused notions of authority. In reality, magic is an attempt to bypass the limitations of human nature and the authority of God, in order to obtain power over material creation and the will of others through manipulation of the supernatural. Magic is about taking control. It is a fundamental rejection of the divine order in creation. In the first book of Samuel (15:23) divination is equated with the spirit of rebellion. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls divination and magic a form of idolatry.

All practices of *magic* or *sorcery*, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one’s service and have a supernatural power over others...are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion. (n.2117. See also n.2110–2116 and n.2138)

In Rowling’s wizard world, children are taught to manipulate undefined forces, and to submit themselves to no higher law than the wizard authorities who will help them exercise their powers “wisely”. However, the authorities themselves are divided, imparting to the impressionable reader the certainty that the best person to decide what is or is not a “proper use of magic” is the young witch or magician himself, guided only by the occasional intervention of a Dumbledore or some similar guru figure. The Ministry of Magic attempts to regulate the use of magic, but it is as bumbling and riddled with compromise as ordinary human governments. The author repeatedly sets up the straw man of legalism and knocks it down with unsubtle blows. The Dursleys are a parody of staid conservatism, “touchy about anything even slightly out of the ordinary.” Ron’s brother Percy, the most unattractive

**Supernatural powers, Lewis repeatedly underlines, belong to God alone, and in human hands they are highly deceptive and can lead to destruction.**

member of his family, is a caricature of the fastidious clerk, “fussy about rule-breaking.” Nasty Professor Snape mouths the platitudes of the hypocritical legalist. In Hogwarts, although it is organized along a system of rules pretty much like an ordinary boarding school, Harry’s disobedience is frequently overlooked and even rewarded by the school authorities. After all, he is a special boy, gifted, hated by evil incarnate, and destined for greatness. Moreover, his daring and resourcefulness (combined with a sense of fair play toward “good” fellow students) are always pitted against “bad” characters.

But is Harry really all that good? He blackmails his uncle, uses trickery and deception, and “breaks a hundred rules” (to quote the mildly censorious but ultimately approving Dumbledore). He frequently tells lies to get himself out of trouble, and lets himself be provoked into revenge against his student enemies. He “hates” his enemies. The reader soon finds himself forgiving Harry for this because the boy’s tormentors are vindictive and mocking. In a consistent display of authorial overkill Rowling depicts such “bad” characters as ugly in appearance. She does a good deal of sneering at the Dursleys for being fat, and ridicules the oafish bodies of the students who oppress Harry. In these details and a plethora of others throughout the series, the child reader is encouraged in his baser instincts while lip service is paid to morality. In fact, nowhere in the series is there any reference to a system of moral absolutes against which actions can be measured. In a word, this is materialist magic, magic as a naturalized human power.

When the meaning of the human person is reduced to a strictly natural definition, evil will be considered no more than erroneous abstractions or problems in the dynamics of the psyche. In his book, *An Exorcist Tells His Story* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1999), Fr. Gabriele Amorth, the chief exorcist of the archdiocese of Rome, warns that modern men are losing their sense of the reality of supernatural evil. As a result, he says, many have made themselves more vulnerable to the influence of evil spirits who seek to corrupt and destroy souls.

I can state that the number of those who are affected by the evil one has greatly increased. The first factor that influences the increase of evil influences is Western consumerism. The majority of people have lost their faith due to a materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle...it is a well-known fact that where religion regresses, superstition progresses. We can see the proliferation, especially among the

young, of spiritism, witchcraft, and the occult.

Amorth does not hesitate to say that cultural influences such as film, television, music and books play no small part in the lowering of spiritual vigilance. “I was able personally to verify how great is the influence of these tools of Satan on the young. It is unbelievable how widespread are witchcraft and spiritism, in all their forms, in middle and high school. This evil is everywhere, even in small towns.” (pp. 53, 54)

Speaking of the growing phenomenon of diabolical possession and other forms of bondage to evil, Amorth points to sorcery as the most frequent cause. (p. 57) He warns that ultimately there is no real difference between “white” and “black” magic. Every form of magic is practiced with recourse to Satan, he says—either knowingly or unknowingly, the practitioner of magic exposes himself to diabolic influence. (p.60) “Scripture warns us that witchcraft is one of the most common means used by the devil to bind men to himself and to dehumanize them. Directly or indirectly, witchcraft is a cult of Satan.” (p. 143)

The spread of occult activity, and the resulting increase in the number of exorcisms performed by Catholic priests, has been noted by secular commentators as well. Articles on the subject have recently appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. An article in the November 28, 2000, edition of the *New York Times* reported a ten-fold increase in the number of official exorcists in the United States during the past decade. These, however, are still few in number, and a majority of dioceses have yet to implement the directives of a 1999 Vatican document that instructed every ordinary in the world to appoint an exorcist for his diocese. Fr. Amorth laments that many bishops still do not realize the scope of the problem. If he is right about this, it is no wonder that many lay people also consider the danger to be so remote that it has no bearing on their lives.

### **The psychology of perception**

With occult themes now a part of mainstream culture, the Potter series is juxtaposed between a growing amount of blatantly diabolical material for the young on one hand, and on the other a tide of cultural material that redefines good and evil in subtler ways. Thus, it appears as a healthier specimen of what has been more or less normalized all around us. As Postman warned, the strange and disordered no longer strikes us as such. Our society is saturated in the false notion that a lesser evil (in this case, “good sorcery”) is preferable to the great evil of Satanism, a message further reinforced by the books’

condemnation of the extremes of diabolical behavior. What we so often forget is that the “lesser evil” concept is a classic adversarial tactic in the great war between good and evil—the *real* war in which we are all immersed. The evil spirits seek to attract us to evil behavior by first offering us evil thoughts disguised as good. In opposition to these, they set up great evils from which we naturally recoil, and offer the lesser

**Rowling portrays Harry’s victory as the fruit of esoteric knowledge and power. This is Gnosticism. Tolkien portrays Frodo’s victory as the fruit of humility, obedience, and courage in a state of radical suffering. This is Christianity.**

evils as the antidote. If the lesser evil is presented with a little window-dressing of virtue or morality (or the modern term “values”), we can turn to it assuming we are making a choice for a good. This dynamic can be observed in the way film classification has gradually altered our judgements and consequent viewing habits. We have come to assume that a film rated PG is better than an X rated film, forgetting that what is now called PG would have been completely objectionable a generation ago. This is Postman’s “adjustment.” This is reality-shift. This is, to put it simply, loss of discernment.

Children are dependent on adults to make careful discernments in the area of culture because they do not have the advantage of age and experience. They are in a state of formation, absorbing impressions about the nature of reality at a fundamental level, and few things in life are as powerful as culture for defining reality—for defining good and evil. In the case of the Harry Potter series discernment has been difficult for many people because these novels seem at first glance to reject evil by dissociating magic from the diabolic. Yet in the real world they are always associated. We must ask ourselves if they really can be separated without negative consequences. If magic is presented as a good, or as morally neutral, is there not an increased likelihood that when a young person encounters opportunities to explore the world of real magic he will be less able to resist its attractions? Of course, children are not so naïve as to think they can have Harry’s powers and adventures; they know full well the story is make-believe. But on the subconscious level they have absorbed it as experience, and this experience tells them that the mysterious forbidden is highly rewarding.

What long-term effects do fictional heroes and heroines have on the mind’s ability to distinguish truth from falsehood? A novel about a boy who

regularly skips along a tightrope across Niagara Falls without falling is no real threat to one's child, because he instantly recognizes the absurdity of the notion. The danger is immediately perceived and the practise rejected. But a novel about a boy who skips along a tightrope across an eternal abyss *is* a real threat, for the danger is difficult to recognize without knowledge of moral absolutes and a developed sense of the immediacy of spiritual combat. Parents' warnings about abstract dangers can pale in a child's mind when compared to tales packed with potent images that have lodged deeply in his imagination.

Regardless of how few or many children are prompted to venture into occult activity after reading the Potter series, it will have a strong effect on most, in the sense of what educators call the *propaedeutic*—preparing the ground for later developments. If the natural and spiritual guard has been lowered in a child's mind, if his concept of morality has been skewed and authority undermined, what other kinds of disordered interests and activities will follow as he makes his choices later in life? This is no longer an academic question. A recent search of the internet for Harry Potter references yielded more than 500,000 "hits" or sites where the books are being discussed, including those of major libraries. Selective searches turned up more than a hundred high-profile websites devoted to the series, many of which offer cross-links to advanced occult websites under titles such as "Learn More about the Secrets of the Occult" and "How to Become a Witch." In an interview with *Newsweek*, a spokesman for the Pagan Federation in England reported that he receives an average of 100 inquiries a month from young people who want to become witches—an unprecedented phenomenon which he attributes in part to the Potter books. An article in the December 17, 2000, issue of *Time* magazine reports that a similar organization in Germany deals with an increasing number of inquiries, which it also credits to the Potter factor. Rowling herself has expressed surprise at the volume of mail she receives from young readers writing to her as if Hogwarts were real, wanting to know how they can enter the school in order to become witches and wizards.

Librarians in diverse social settings report that children in increasing numbers are requesting material from the occult sections of their collections. Kimbra W. Gish, a librarian at Vanderbilt University who specializes in children's and young adult's reading, discusses the controversy in the May/June 2000 issue of the librarians' journal *The Horn Book Magazine*. Gish writes, "For many librarians, teachers and parents, the world of children's literature and that of the Bible represent different kingdoms whose

border continues to be debated as parents and others raise questions about the appropriateness of certain titles. This is a passionate issue: few things stir the heart like one's true faith or one's love for sharing books with children."

In explaining Christian concerns about the Potter series, she outlines how the books repeatedly portray in a positive light the very activities that are condemned in both Old and New Testaments in the strongest possible terms. She cites Deuteronomy 18:9-12, a passage in which enchanting, divination, charms, consulting with familiar spirits or a wizard or a necromancer are described as an "abomination" in the eyes of God, and must be driven out. She notes numerous other passages forbidding the practice of witchcraft and wizardry or consultation with mediums or diviners (Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 27; Isaiah 8:19, 19:3; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 21:8; 2 Kings 21:6, 23:24; 2 Chronicles 33:6. See also the confrontation between St. Paul and a magician in the Acts of the Apostles 13:6-12).

Gish points out that modern culture can desensitize people to the corruptive nature of such activities, through "casual exposure to the occult through media sources such as television, movies, games and books." While some parents are alarmed by *any* portrayal of occult practices in children's fiction, she says, others feel that context is the key: "Is the witch portrayed positively, negatively, or ambivalently? Is the practice shown as an acceptable or enjoyable thing to do, or something stupid or dangerous?" Like many reflective literate people who love both children and children's literature, Gish favors the latter approach. She comes down firmly against J. K. Rowling's Potter series, and enthusiastically for fantasy in the line of J.R.R. Tolkien's and C.S. Lewis's sub-creations. For her, as for many Christian parents, the problem is not the presence of magic in a book, but how magic is represented.

**Man will continue to search in the realm of the quasi-mystical as long as the vacuum of genuine spirituality spreads.**

### **Christian use of magic in fantasy literature**

Both Tolkien and Lewis use magic in a way fundamentally different from Rowling. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the first volume of Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, the corruption of Narnia begins when an elderly Londoner dabbles in occult activity, and opens the doors between worlds. The ensuing struggle for the restoration of Narnia to its original order is the direct result of the very activities the Potter books portray as forces for good. Lewis depicts them as forces allied with chaos, disruption, bondage, and violation of the dignity of creatures. Throughout the Chronicles witches are

portrayed in classic terms, as malevolent, manipulative, deceiving and destructive—not the least of whom is a character called the White Witch.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, a selfish boy who has no understanding of the supernatural meets a dragon. Entering its lair he seizes its treasure hoard and is changed into a dragon. He is liberated from this condition—“undragoned”—only by the intervention of the Christ figure, Aslan, who alone has the authority, the “deep magic”, to undo what evil has done. Supernatural powers, Lewis repeatedly underlines, belong to God alone, and in human hands they are highly deceptive and can lead to destruction.

In *The Silver Chair*, the crown prince of Narnia has been kidnapped and brainwashed by a witch, and the children in the tale embark on a quest to rescue him. The witch captures them and seeks to enthrall them by reprogramming their minds while at the same time lulling their natural defenses to sleep. They are close to utter enslavement when the brave Marsh-wiggle deliberately burns himself in order to shock his mind back to reality. When he does so and challenges the witch, she reveals her true nature by taking the form of a powerful serpent, thus alerting the children to their peril.

In his great fantasy epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien also portrays magic as deception. Supernatural powers that do not rightly belong to man are repeatedly shown as having a corrupting influence on man. While it is true that Gandalf, one of the central characters, is called a “wizard” throughout, he is not in fact a classical sorcerer. Tolkien maintains that Gandalf is rather a kind of moral guardian, similar to guardian angels but more incarnate. (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1981) In letters 155, 156 and 228 he explains his depiction of matter and spirit, and the distinction between good magic and evil magic. In essence Tolkien’s “good magic” is not in fact what we think of as magic in the real world. Gandalf’s task is primarily to advise, instruct, and arouse to resistance the minds and hearts of those threatened by Sauron, the Dark Lord of this saga. Gandalf does not do the work for them; they must use their natural gifts—and in this we see an image of grace building on nature, never overwhelming nature or replacing it. Gandalf’s gifts are used sparingly, and then only so far as they assist the other creatures in the exercise of their free will and their moral choices.

The central character, Frodo Baggins, is asked by Gandalf to bear a ring of magical power to a volcanic mountain in a region ruled by Sauron, in order to destroy the ring in the volcano’s fires and thus weaken the grip that Sauron has over the world. Frodo agrees to undertake the journey but soon realizes that the ring has a seductive hold on him. As

he carries the very thing that could ruin the world, he is constantly tempted to use it for the good. But he learns that to use its supernatural powers for such short-range “goods” increases the probability of long-range disaster, both for the world and for himself.

Supernatural powers, Tolkien demonstrates repeatedly, are very much a domain infested by the “deceits of the Enemy”, used for domination of other creatures’ free will. As such they are metaphors of sin and spiritual bondage. By contrast, Gandalf’s very limited use of preternatural powers is never used to overwhelm, deceive or defile. Even so, the author mentions more than once in the epic that these powers must pass away from the world as the “Old Age” ends and the “Age of Man” (and by inference the Age of the Incarnation) approaches.

Much of the neopagan use of magic is the converse of this. It is frequently used to overwhelm, deceive and defile. In the Harry Potter series, for example, Harry resists and eventually overcomes Voldemort with the very powers the Dark Lord himself uses. Harry is the reverse image of Frodo. Rowling portrays his victory over evil as the fruit of esoteric knowledge and power. This is Gnosticism. Tolkien portrays Frodo’s victory over evil as the fruit of humility, obedience and courage in a state of radical suffering. This is Christianity. Harry’s world is about pride, Frodo’s about sacrificial love. There is, of course, plenty of courage and love in the Harry Potter series, but it is this very mixing of truth and untruth which makes it so deceptive. Courage and love can be found in all peoples, even those involved in the worst forms of paganism. The presence of such virtues does not automatically justify an error-filled work of fiction. In Potter-world the characters are engaged in activities which in real life corrupt us, weaken the will, darken the mind, and pull the practitioner down into spiritual bondage. Rowling’s characters go deeper and deeper into that world without displaying any negative side effects, only an increase in “character”. This is a lie. Moreover, it is *the* Satanic lie which deceived us in Eden: You can have knowledge of good and evil, you can have Godly powers, and you will not die, you will not even be harmed by it—you will have enhanced life. There is so much that dazzles and delights in Rowling’s sub-creation, the reader must exercise a certain effort to see these interior contradictions and mixed messages.

#### **Defense against the Dark Arts—Are we prepared?**

In his widely acclaimed 1993 study of the current state of organized religion, *Unknown Gods*, sociologist Reginald Bibby notes that fascination with mystery has in no way diminished along with the decline of church-going. It is increasing proportionally, and he suggests this is due to an

innate spiritual hunger in human nature. Man will continue to search in the realm of the quasi-mystical as long as the vacuum of genuine spirituality spreads. As the Christian churches lose their evangelical strength, the allurements of preternatural and supernatural phenomena will continue to displace the world of the sacred transcendent.

Traditionally, the signs, sacraments and rituals of the Christian world were a means of encountering God, and a way for man to find his place in the hierarchy of being—a hierarchy leading all the way up to the throne of his Father-Creator. The spread of rationalism (both in secular and religious forms) has produced what Peter Berger, in his book *Rumor of Angels*, (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1969), describes as “a shrinkage of the scope of human experience” that constitutes a profound impoverishment of man’s sense of identity and destiny. The “denial of metaphysics”, he says, is directly related to the “triumph of triviality.” While this is obviously true of the unbeliever, who has lost his connections to the transcendent sacred realm, we must ask ourselves if the trivialization of the great drama of existence has affected a majority of believers as well. In other words, have most Christians in the developed nations become practical materialists? It would seem so, if we are little more than consumers of religious experience, rather than adorers and obedient servants of the living God.

Philosopher Thomas Molnar in his seminal work on the rise of modern Gnosticism *The Pagan Temptation*, writes, “Today the occult penetrates the lowered defenses of Christian tradition, and those whom it persuades are the masses of men and women who miss the sacred symbols that used to be present everywhere as identifying signs of their civilization....the entire symbology of Christianity yields to other, sometimes older, symbologies with their underlying creeds and doctrines.” (p.167)

But why has it become so difficult for us to discern the penetration? Psychiatrist Paul C. Vitz, in his *Psychology as Religion: the Cult of Self-Worship*, discusses the psychology at work in our lack of resistance:

...the heterogeneity of American culture, with its increasingly complex mosaic of different religions and cultures, is a social-structural analogue to the intellectual world of New Age. Just as the act of rejecting a person because of his or her beliefs is considered antisocial or undemocratic, so also to reject religious or spiritual understandings is interpreted in the same way....When tolerance is the primary accepted social virtue, commitment to a particular faith is viewed as fundamentally

antisocial and even threatening. (2nd edition, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994)

**It is now almost universally taken for granted that we can absorb a certain amount of immoral entertainment without being adversely affected by it.**

Other eminent thinkers of diverse beliefs and loyalties are agreed on this point: religion’s compromise with secular culture has produced not so much an atheistic or agnostic culture as it has an *irreligious* culture, one that pays lip service to religion, but mutates it in the service of what are considered to be higher “values” such as tolerance or self-fulfillment. This is a broad generality, of course, and one could find numerous exceptions to debate their position, but the truth is, the continuing spread of what Pope John Paul II calls “the culture of death” has been made possible because Christians have not lived as signs of contradiction to the rise of neopaganism. Indeed we have cooperated with it extensively, consuming its products and funding it generously, while authentic Christian culture has been left comparatively undeveloped.

The inevitable outcome is that with each passing generation the exigency of God’s laws continues to fade in our minds as the power of a Mammon-driven culture increases. Indeed, the secularization of consciousness now intrudes very far into the life of most Catholics in the developed nations. The pressing questions of existence are dealt with by turning to the physical and social sciences and the humanities. Even the person of strong Christian principles suffers the effects of living in a milieu dominated by the separation of faith and reason. To some degree, most if not all of us function with bipolar overemphasis on either one or the other. Indeed, the meaning of the word “faith” can too easily be reduced to a set of beliefs assented to by the intellect. If the beliefs are orthodox Catholicism, that is well and good. But it is not enough.

For example, it is now almost universally taken for granted that we can absorb a certain amount of immoral entertainment without being adversely affected by it. We simply assume that if we have sufficient rational faith, we will be able to sift through good and bad material without being harmed by it, ignoring the bad, savoring the good. We numbly watch the graphically dramatized murders of many human beings every week, but would be upset if a dog were to be kicked on screen. We are entertained by television programs based on the occult worldview, such as *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, and comedy

programs such as *Cheers*, *Friends*, and *Seinfeld*, deriving enjoyment from the wit but little realizing how a diet of laughing at what is profoundly unfunny will over time alter our ability to understand the gravity of immoral acts. In short, we have accepted the normalcy of corruption.

**Why, then, have we accepted a set of books which glamorize and normalize occult activity, even though it is every bit as deadly to the soul as sexual sin, if not more so?**

On a higher level of culture—the realm of serious thought—the application of academic templates (including literary criticism) to religious questions now functions as a kind of alternative magisterial authority, even among orthodox Catholics. While it is true that social sciences and the humanities can help explain a part of man’s struggle to find his place in the great chain of being, they are limited tools. The danger inherent in secular models of analysis (even in the hands of faithful Catholics) is that the tool all too easily redefines the very thing it is designed to serve. The part dominates what rightly belongs to the whole. The supra-rational—that which cannot be comprehended by reason alone—is all too easily dismissed as irrational. Thus, the worth of cultural material is rarely assessed with the entire range of Christian charisms. What is forgotten is that when the supra-rational is denied, the result is not necessarily a more rational approach to life, but the virulent growth of the irrational. As G. K. Chesterton once pointed out: when men cease to believe in God they do not then believe in nothing. They then become capable of believing anything.

Books and films which three generations ago would have been instantly recognized as unhealthy for our children, are now considered acceptable, and those who oppose them alarmist or “hysterical.” Why is this so? I believe it is due to distortions in the psychology of perception, among believers no less than among non-believers. In other words, real threats to our children’s well-being are now being interpreted as harmless. Molnar points out that it is precisely this dynamic which is corrupting us.

The belief in the presence of the supernatural—always a mediated, veiled presence—does not weaken without reawakening the latent temptation of paganism. The pagan myth—the occult, the magical, the idolatrous love of nature, immanentist philosophies—begins to awaken among the masses by exerting an imperceptible influence on the unconscious;

only then does it make its appearance in consciousness and rationalist systems. (p.79)

When the reference points of Scripture and Tradition are rendered ineffectual by over-reliance on individual reason, we risk entering the end-phase of assimilation by paganism. Chesterton once pointed out, tongue-in-cheek, that the madman is not one who has lost his reason; rather he has lost everything *but* his reason. In other words, intelligence is no reliable measure of truth, for when intelligent people are subjective they are subjective in a highly articulate fashion.

The hard question we must ask ourselves at this point in history, is to what degree have our judgments been influenced by “imperceptible influences on the subconscious.” The record of our hits and misses in the area of discernment offers something of an answer: For example, reasonable Christian parents would not permit their children to read a series of enthralling books depicting the rites and adventures of likable young people involved in drug-dealing, or premarital sex, or sadism. We are still capable of recognizing the falsehood in glamorizing torture, because physical pain is a reality in everyone’s life and anyone unjustly inflicting pain is instantly recognized for what he is—an enemy. We would not give our children fiction in which a group of “good fornicators” struggled against a set of “bad fornicators”, because we know that the power of disordered sexual impulse is an abiding problem in human affairs, the negative effects of which we can see all around us. Why, then, have we accepted a set of books which glamorize and normalize occult activity, even though it is every bit as deadly to the soul as sexual sin, if not more so? Is it because we have not yet awakened to the fact that occultism is in fact a clear and present danger?

When literary experts tell us that fantasy such as the Potter series is a laudable expansion of the imagination, an enrichment of mind and soul, that it is, well, “literature”, our antennae should quiver a little. We should ask ourselves why evil concepts, if they are wrapped in the aura of “culture”, now enjoy a special exemption from the normal rules of discernment? Moreover, we should take note of the fact that in our sensually dominated society the habit of acting out fantasy is becoming a cultural norm. It varies from voracious consumption of expensive “toys” for all age groups to trading in one’s spouse for a new one found on the internet, from clubs devoted to immoral activity to high school murders. Why, then, do we presume that a sensually powerful series of children’s books will not affect a young reader’s interests and activities? Why have we come to assume that such novels have no consequences, that the experience of plunging the imagination into

that alternative, and ultimately false world, will remain sealed in an airtight compartment of the mind? We must ask ourselves how we arrived at a position where we allow our children to absorb for hours on end, in the form of powerful fiction, activities that we would never permit them to observe or to practise in real life.

*Michael D. O'Brien*

*Recommended Reading:*

*Catholics and the New Age*, by Fr. Mitchell Pacwa, S.J., Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1992.

*A Landscape With Dragons: The Battle for Your Child's Mind*, by Michael D. O'Brien, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA, 1998.

*The Power of the Occult*, by Terry Ann Modica, Magnificat Press, Avon-by-the-Sea, N.J., 1990.