



“Love Is Fierce as Death”

What do Alfred North Whitehead and J. K. Rowling have in common? At least this: both know, with the Song of Songs, that “love is fierce as death” (Song 8:6 NJPS).

As we move toward the end of the Harry Potter saga, we learn from the “lost prophecy” that the one born to vanquish Voldemort “will have the power the Dark Lord knows not,”¹ which, as we will come to see, is “just love.”² Both Harry and the reader will have to wrestle with this, because it seems so little, so weak, so inadequate to deal with the terrors of the evil that surrounds Voldemort and with the Lord of Death himself. Indeed, some critics of the novels have found Rowling better able to describe the darkness than the hope. Which makes sense: it’s the Terminator versus the chick flicks, chaos versus calm, present life-and-death wand duels versus always disappearing pictures of a once happy past—which sometimes threaten to dissolve into mere sentimentality. Of course, terror will win the ratings; that’s where all the special-effects budget goes. But Rowling won’t give in—Harry has something Lord Voldemort will never know and will not be able to overcome: love.

Whitehead comes at this from a different perspective, to be sure, but arrives at a similar place. After describing the three main understandings of religion in Western culture (the religion of empire that divinizes power, the ruthless religion of the moralist, or the philosophical religion of the unmoved mover), Whitehead writes:

There is, however, in the Galilean origin of Christianity yet another suggestion which does not fit very well with any of the three main strands of thought.... It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. It does not look to the future, for it finds its own reward in the immediate present.³

The trouble is that, like Harry, we are never quite sure we can trust the quiet operation of love. As Whitehead notes, when the Western world accepted Christianity, it was Caesar who actually conquered: “[T]he deeper idolatry, of the fashion-

¹J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003) 841.

²J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Scholastic, 2005) 509.

³Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) 343.

ing of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.”⁴

We are still plagued by that idolatry, for it is the one that makes the better movies, stirs all our juices, and scares more people into church—and it is the one that requires enemies. Enemies are so real, so strong, so terrifyingly delicious; but the Bible keeps wanting to take us somewhere else, to the same simple secret that Dumbledore revealed to Harry: “just love.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” said Jesus, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth....Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:3–9).

Easier said than done, of course, because there are real enemies with real power who will revile and persecute those who love. But Jesus offers a solution: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt 5:43–45).

Now, to be sure, the Bible has other scenes as well, with just as many special effects as Harry Potter—scenes of fierce wars with cataclysmic battles, leaving blood and body parts scattered around in full display. But these are pictures of the kingdoms of this world, the kingdoms of darkness—the various conflicts, party-spirits, tribalisms, and outright attacks that have divided human communities throughout history, inside and outside of the religions (Christianity included). They are so alluring, because they make us feel so righteous, standing up for the true faith, the embattled flag, and genuine virtue: “Onward, Christian soldiers,” and all that. Where do I sign up? But the Bible keeps inviting us to another place: to the kingdom of God, where swords are beaten into plowshares and wolves lie down with lambs.

Naive? Of course! Not yet? Admittedly. Still, now and then, could we not give up the idolatry of power, and practice even now that kingdom of peace and love that Jesus announces? Finally, not a love that is weak and sentimental, but a love that is precisely “fierce as death”—for it is the love of God, and trust in that love makes us strong as “a green olive tree in the house of God” (Ps 52:8).

F.J.G.

⁴Ibid., 342.