



Resisting the Human Need for Enemies, or What Would Harry Potter Do?

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THE DICHOTOMIZING OF EVIL

We are surrounded by enemies. Even a glancing look at the evening news, the movies in the cineplex, or the titles on the best seller list will confirm this statement. But what is it about “the enemy” that so attracts us? In particular, why do we seem to *need* enemies in some basic way? There are likely as many answers to these questions as there are disciplines with which to ponder them. Psychologists note that identity is more easily sustained when there are clear external factors that build limiting boundaries. Sociologists explain that the creation of, and defense against, enemies creates social cohesion and strengthens social identity. Anthropologists describe rituals that use emotions such as disgust and awe to strengthen specific taboos, to affirm that which is “human” and that which is not—the latter all too quickly becoming “the enemy.” Cognitive scientists hypothesize that we remember with greater clarity and detail experiences that occur while the brain is flooded with adrenaline—thus experiences in the presence of an enemy might have especially sharp outlines that stay with us longer. But perhaps the most pertinent

Most mass-mediated popular cultures surround us with enemies, offering up vivid depictions of a world seen as either “for us” or “against us.” Christian faith, on the other hand, draws us towards love even in the presence of hatred. A close look at the surprisingly countercultural world of Harry Potter provides some ways forward in walking the path of love.

argument for the purposes of this journal would be that from the advent of original sin we, as broken human beings, find ourselves continually turning away from our God by creating objects of hatred.

Enemies are such objects. The process of creating identity in the presence of an “other” leads us all too often to defining that other in less than human terms, creating an “object” that we now have permission to hate.

When this very human need to define identity, particularly to reach for security in the midst of chaos, is combined with a media sphere that is driven largely by profit motive, the result is a vast media landscape strewn with productions that create and depict enemies, and then proceed to “bring us along for the ride” as those enemies are confronted and overcome, thus giving us the vicarious pleasure of “victory over.” This process would not be quite so problematic if our media landscape had clear distinctions in genre. If mass-mediated productions lived clearly within specifically delineated categories, we might blithely move forward in consuming them, recognizing and sustaining a sharp distinction between the “enemies” of clearly fictional movies and any opponents we might see depicted on the news. We might be able to distinguish between the “falseness” of fiction and the “reality” of history. Unfortunately, these clear lines of genre definition no longer exist within mass-mediated cultures, if indeed they ever did. Instead, we are living in a time in which the content of the evening news might be just as suspect from an historical standpoint as the late-night teledrama feels real in an emotional sense. Given the additional interpretive challenge of seeking truth in the midst of the intensity of a time of war, we face very difficult conundrums.

These quandaries are being engaged ever more publicly in various media. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for instance, in an op-ed piece in the spring of 2007 wrote:

The cable channels and some print media have found that horror scenarios attract audiences, while terror “experts” as “consultants” provide authenticity for the apocalyptic visions fed to the American public. Hence the proliferation of programs with bearded “terrorists” as the central villains. Their general effect is to reinforce the sense of the unknown but lurking danger that is said to increasingly threaten the lives of all Americans.¹

And Bill Moyers has noted:

These “rules of the game” permit Washington officials to set the agenda for journalism, leaving the press all too often simply to recount what officials say instead of subjecting their words and deeds to critical scrutiny. Instead of acting as filters for readers and viewers, sifting the truth from the propaganda, reporters and anchors attentively transcribe both sides of the spin invariably failing to provide context, background or any sense of which claims hold up and which are misleading.²

¹Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Terrorized by ‘War on Terror’: How a Three-Word Mantra Has Undermined America,” *The Washington Post*, 25 March 2007.

²Bill Moyers, Keynote speech to the National Conference on Media Reform, 15 May 2005, in St. Louis. Available online: <http://www.freepress.net/news/8120>.

Indeed, national leaders regularly contribute to supporting this kind of either/or depiction. Leaders as diverse as President Bush and Senator Hillary Clinton both made remarks shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, along the lines of: “You’re either with us or you are with the terrorists.”³

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Given that our news media and government leaders have found themselves drawn into this need to “declare themselves”—remember that creating enemies helps to strengthen identity by drawing stark contrasts—it is not surprising that entertainment media have followed close behind in this process of dichotomization. Current forms of mass-mediated popular fiction provide rich depictions of worlds in which such either/or characterizations are plausible and in which inevitably the person or community who *should* win, does. Indeed, the “grammar” of Hollywood productions makes it particularly difficult to subvert such expectations (as attempted, for example, in the ending to the HBO series *The Sopranos*⁴). Again, the pleasure of such entertainment is powerful; it helps us to relax, to experience the catharsis of good triumphing over evil, to set aside for a moment whatever might be troubling us in the present. Yet at the same time, more and more of our emotional experiences are being trained in these narratives to expect such resolutions, a training that becomes particularly harmful in contexts that are not so simple.

There has been much criticism, for example, directed at the very popular prime-time drama *24*. This evening serial, which unfolds with one hour’s worth of a counterterrorism unit’s actions during each episode and one day’s worth for the entire season, frequently depicts the main character, Jack Bauer, going to extremes to elicit information that can prevent catastrophic horrors from being unleashed. The show is so popular, and the depiction of coercive interrogation so compelling, that last year a group of uniformed military officers, which included the U.S. Army Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, dean of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and “three of the most experienced military and FBI interrogators in the country,” sought a meeting with the show’s authors “to voice their concern that the show’s central political premise—that the letter of American law must be sacri-

³President Bush spoke before a Joint Session of Congress on September 20, 2001; transcript available online at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>. Senator Hillary Clinton made her remarks on September 13, 2001; an audio transcript is available online at: http://www.wavsource.com/snds_2007-07-27_133768555118938/news/20010911/clinton_pay_price.wav.

⁴A tremendous amount of ink has been spilled recently trying to interpret the final episode of the very popular TV show *The Sopranos*, an episode that ended simply in an abrupt blackout. One representative interpretation from the *New York Observer* is available online at: <http://www.observer.com/2007/tony-s-blackout>.

ficed for the country's security—was having a toxic effect. In their view, the show promoted unethical and illegal behavior and had adversely affected the training and performance of real American soldiers.”⁵

Yet another example of the increasing blurring of the lines between entertainment and news—and the potentially toxic consequences of such blurring—is vividly explored in the recent documentary *Shut Up and Sing*, which explores the experience of the Texas country band *The Dixie Chicks* after their lead singer made an off-the-cuff remark critical of President Bush during a concert shortly after the war with Iraq began.⁶ Whatever one's opinion of the advisability or pertinence of the singer's remarks, it cannot be denied that public reaction—which included death threats against the singers, a nationally coordinated effort to keep their music off of radio stations, and an enormous amount of hate mail—clearly demonstrated the extent to which some segments of the American populace will fight to resist complexity, or anything that subverts the either/or categories that have been so routinely circulated in the last decade.

How are Christians to respond? Jesus' teachings in the gospels clearly conform to an imperative to engage the other in love rather than with hate (Luke 6:29; 10:25–37). Yet there is unrelenting pressure in our mediated world to see people in dichotomous ways, with “the good guys” on one side, and all the “others” relegated to the role of enemy. It is this tendency of human nature to take others and turn them into objects, which we then have permission to hate, that is so dangerous in our current media climate. Finding ways through this dilemma is difficult, but not impossible, and even texts from popular culture can be resources.

WHAT WOULD HARRY POTTER DO?⁷

One particularly vivid example from popular culture resists the objectification that so often leads to hatred, namely, the *Harry Potter* series.⁸ The seventh and final book has recently been released, to stunning sales figures and huge acclaim.⁹ There can be little argument with the claim that J. K. Rowling's book series—and

⁵Jane Mayer, “Whatever it takes, the politics of the man behind ‘24,’” *The New Yorker*, 19 February 2007. Available online at: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/02/19/070219fa_fact_mayer.

⁶Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck, *Shut Up and Sing* (Cabin Creek Films, 2006).

⁷This essay mentions several key plot points across the entire Harry Potter series (including the final book). Those who have not read the books, but plan to, ought not to read further.

⁸These books are not, of course, in any way explicitly Christian, as the love which is spoken of is not in any way named or claimed as embodied in the God of the Christian faith, incarnate in Jesus Christ. My interpretation here grows from my own Christian stance, but ought not to be read as claiming that the stories *must* be understood from this stance. Indeed, many other religious communities have their own very valid interpretive keys for the series.

⁹The *Wall Street Journal* reports that “within 24 hours of the release of the Harry Potter series finale, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows*, over 8.3 million copies of the book had been sold in the U.S., according to Scholastic, the publishers of the Potter novels. That's only a fraction of the Potter franchise: the five films have grossed over \$3.5 billion world-wide, the seven books have sold more than 57 million copies, and the three DVDs all debuted at the top of the sales charts.” (WSJ online: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118557388707180774.html?mod=googlenews_wsj).

the movies, electronic games, fan fiction sites, etc., that have accompanied it—have captured more global attention than any other work of fiction in recent decades. In that sense the books are an interesting marker of people’s interests across a vast array of differing contexts and languages.¹⁰

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Unlike the prevailing sentiments I have just been tracing, however, the books actually succeed in creating quite a lot of ambiguity and ambivalence, specifically in regard to what constitutes and characterizes “an enemy” and how the main characters are to engage them. From the very first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1997), there is one very clear enemy—“He who must not be named” or Voldemort. But that enemy exists to some extent at the margins of the story, driving the plot, but not immediately present to the main characters. Instead, they struggle with a host of more “ordinary” enemies, among them children with pretensions to arrogance (Draco Malfoy) and teachers who wield power unjustly (Severus Snape). As the story continues in a majestic narrative arc over seven books, the three main characters (Harry, Ron, and Hermione) struggle with a series of increasingly difficult challenges. The children learn that evil can take up residence in individual persons (as it does with Professor Quirrel), can reach out through books (the horcrux diary of Tom Riddle),¹¹ can create and fuse groups of followers (the Death Eaters), and can invade even national governments (the Ministry of Magic with its anti-muggle campaigns). At the same time, they also begin to learn that evil is not autonomous, instead it requires assistance from humans. One of the more striking revelations of Albus Dumbledore, shared with Harry prior to his death, is his remark that Tom Riddle instigated his own downfall through deliberately creating Harry as his own enemy, doing so by drawing on Harry’s blood.

Intimately connected to the children’s growing understanding of the ways in which evil works, drawing people into its snare, is their recognition of their own brokenness and potential attraction to evil as well. The books have been described as a “coming of age” story, and there is a certain element of truth in such a description, with the hormones that so jostle emerging adults in their adolescence lending a vigor and authenticity to the ambivalence and ambiguity of these characters. Even at the heart of the beloved Weasley family, Ron’s brother Percy is drawn off into the machinations of the Ministry of Magic. Evil there may be, but who constitutes “an enemy”? And by what means might you recognize them?

¹⁰To date the books have been translated into 65 languages, and sold more than 325 million copies worldwide. See *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 July 2007, available online at: <http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,,22103790-5001026,00.html>.

¹¹A “horcrux” is a tangible object in which part of a person’s soul has been placed through very evil magic.

In book five, *Harry Potter and Order of the Phoenix* (2003), this question resounds deeply at the heart of the narrative, for Harry's love for his godfather Sirius Black is the bait that leads Harry and his friends into a dangerous ambush at the Ministry of Magic. The trap is sprung, and Sirius is killed. It is Harry's passion for making a difference, for going to the aid of people in need, that causes his downfall here. The final scenes of book five are particularly bleak, with Harry only narrowly escaping death himself. Human love has brought him to this abyss, but love also provides the only hope—a small, glimmering hope—at the end of the book, because it is Voldemort's inability to tolerate being in touch with real love that allows Harry to escape death.

As the story continues in book six, Harry must face his increasing doubt about Headmaster Dumbledore's integrity and actions over the past years and in the process recognize that adults—even those he most trusts and respects—make mistakes. The penultimate book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (2005), is primarily caught up in tracing the life of Tom Riddle, the boy who becomes Lord Voldemort. Harry takes independent lessons with Albus Dumbledore, lessons that focus primarily on seeking understanding of the boy Tom Riddle who grows into the man Voldemort. At first Harry cannot fathom why Dumbledore, in the face of the increasing success of the Death Eaters, and the precious time remaining to counter them, would want to delve into the earliest history of Voldemort. But it is precisely in entering into this world that Harry discovers that Voldemort is, in reality, only Tom Riddle—a human being who has grasped for horrible power, but a fallible and mortal human being nonetheless. At one point Harry is surprised to discover that he can even feel pity for this person. On the other hand, in this same book six, the careful agnosticism that Rowling has maintained through the earlier books on the topic of Severus Snape's true alliance comes crashing down in the final scenes, as Professor Snape kills Professor Dumbledore and escapes. Is the teacher evil? And Lord Voldemort human? The ambiguity and ambivalence is powerfully drawn.

There is no denial in the books that evil exists and that it seeks incarnate form in the broken corners of human hearts—Tom Riddle, of course, being the clearest example of a human in whom evil has sought such a refuge. But there is also a particularly compelling series of scenes in book seven in which Harry, Ron, and Hermione discover the consequences of carrying a horcrux close to one's heart, and thus the depths to which despair or anger can take one. For a time, even Ron succumbs to anger and despair, leaving Harry and Hermione to continue on their daunting quest alone. In contrast to the tendency I was tracing at the beginning of this essay, where I noted the ways in which enemies make for strong markers of identity, the *Harry Potter* series actually draws the reader directly into the ambiguity of evil. Is Severus Snape evil? Is Harry Potter good? By the end of book seven the answer to both questions is yes *and* no. Severus Snape, it turns out, had nursed a lifelong love for Harry's mother Lily, and that love has empowered him into the

deepest form of betrayal of Voldemort, a betrayal that while causing both Dumbledore's death and finally Severus's own, has also, we learn, provided keys to defeating Voldemort.

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At the same time, to whatever extent Harry's narrative arc traces a Christlike passion, it remains that of a martyr, never a Christ, with Harry's brokenness very visibly on display as he hurls one unforgivable curse after another at his enemies. Still, it is not such a curse that finally brings down Voldemort—rather, it is Voldemort's own curse rebounding that kills him. Evil is everywhere, finding its home even in the corners of our own hearts, yet it can be overcome through love, particularly love as experienced in a community, for finally it is the community that comes together to defeat Voldemort. Harry could never have done it by himself.

Indeed, an interesting factor in the final book is the way in which Harry and Tom Riddle share so much in common. This pairing is repeated in other ways in the book—readers learn of ambiguities in the life of Dumbledore and his early friendship with the evil Grendelwald; Snape looks both more human and more consistent when contrasted with the fear of love that incites Lupin's despair and his desire to run away from Tonks and a yet-to-be-born child. In each of these pairs there is that which is similar and that which is different; there is good and there is evil, the ambiguity lending strength to the story.

To sustain that degree of ambiguity over such an extensive narrative arc flies in the face of much current mass-mediated popular culture. Yet at the same time, the series clearly holds a remarkable power for people hungry for more than simple answers and for hope that is grounded in realism.

Towards that end, parallel to the growing recognition of the power of evil, the books also trace a growing conviction that love and trust can overcome evil. In book one Harry learns that he is not alone, as Ron and Hermione become his close friends. In book two he learns that loyalty is possible beyond friendship. In book three he learns that family love does not need to be biological and can extend through time. And so on through the entire series. Perhaps most striking amidst the terror and gloom of book seven are the joy-filled epiphanies of love. Tonks and Lupin, Charlie and Fleur, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny—one after another the pairings come. But it is not just the love for partner, but also the transcendent sense of love for creation, that moment of pure awareness of how beautiful each petal of each flower, each blade of grass on the ground can be, that is described in this book. And the friendship and community of larger groups deepens throughout the book as well, with Luna and Neville taking up the standard of Dumbledore's Army and even the ghosts and statues of Hogwarts joining the resistance by the end.

Several important plot points turn on the ability of the main characters to resist the temptation to objectify and demonize. In book seven Kreacher the house elf plays a crucial role that is only possible because Harry, Ron, and Hermione have reached beyond both prejudice against house elves more generally, and their own antagonism for Kreacher more specifically. The goblin Griphook helps in retrieving one of the horcruxes from Gringott's Bank, in part, we are led to believe, because he has quietly observed the care with which Harry, using his own hands and not magic, has laid Dobby to rest in a grave by the sea. Even Draco's family plays a role, with Malfoy's mother, Narcissa, protecting Harry through her deceptive report of his death, a deception made possible because Harry can confirm that Draco is still alive—and of course, Draco is alive because earlier Harry, Ron, and Hermione had rescued him from the fiery consequences of a spell gone wrong.

This theme of the power of love to overcome evil is the central element of the seven-book series. It shines forth most vividly in Harry's own walk to Gethsemane in book seven, when he follows a path deep into the Forbidden Forest to what he knows will be certain death, accompanied only by the ghostly remnants of his parents, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin, all four drawn into misty corporeality via the Deathly Hallows resurrection stone.

Contrary to the dynamics of much mass-mediated popular culture, the *Harry Potter* series draws us into a world in which courage, love, and trust can overcome evil, despair, and perhaps even death. Yet the stories do so not through simplistic dualisms, but rather with the ambiguity and ambivalence that accompanies life in the twenty-first century.

WHAT HAVE WE TO LEARN?

What can *Harry Potter* teach us, as Christians? What might we draw from this vivid set of stories as we walk the path of Christ?

Clearly there are several practices that Christian communities could seek to foster in our midst. First, we ought to be attending to biblical texts that push into paradox (parables, for instance). Too many communities of faith are responding to people's innate need to have enemies—and the attendant fears they bring into church—with either/or dualities that merely deepen and confirm the “us” vs. “them” socialization of the wider culture. If the success of the *Harry Potter* series teaches us nothing else, it affirms that people can be grasped by a narrative that introduces ambiguity and ambivalence, that reaches beyond easy categorizations and demonization into empathy for others. We do *not* need to water down the biblical narrative somehow to make it more accessible to people.

Second, we ought to recognize that part of the richness of the *Harry Potter* series draws on even deeper archetypes that are at the heart of the Christian narratives. We do not need to accept an all-too-easy conflation of Harry Potter with Jesus Christ. That is neither the intent nor the effect of Rowling's stories. But the tears that readers shed as Harry walks into the Forbidden Forest can be prayers that

invite readers into renewed consideration of the Jesus story. Rather than decrying as wicked certain elements of the series—as far too many Christians have done—we ought to be inviting our communities into deeper appreciation of both the similarities and the contrasts between the stories and our Christian faith. To what extent is the children’s attempt to build Dumbledore’s Army, for instance, like and unlike the earliest groups seeking to follow Jesus? What might we learn anew from the book of Acts that could help us meet the challenges we face in our contemporary attempts to avoid objectification and demonization?

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Third, we ought to be creating environments of trust, respect, and outreach that help to make concrete the learning to know others that is invited in the *Harry Potter* series. If the *Harry Potter* series is an exception to media culture’s penchant for either/or characterizations, what other exceptions can we lift up and share? How do our own communities embody trust, respect, and embrace of difference? Rather than using the *Harry Potter* series once again to create an “in” group and an “out” group, how can we create a holding environment in which ambivalence can be endured through commitments to love and trust?

Fourth, in some very simple ways, we ought to be naming the dynamics present in our popular cultures, helping people to see them and to frame religious experience beyond them, not simply to stay embedded in them. Just as Professor Dumbledore teaches Harry that not calling Voldemort by his name strengthens people’s fears, not naming the deceptive practices of the profit-oriented media landscape we inhabit only strengthens the deception. Here the challenge is particularly pressing with regard to our news media. Anyone who spends even some time outside of the United States news climate will discover that our news is shaped very clearly by profit incentives. That is not to claim that there is not useful information present in such formulations, but it *is* to note, for instance, as commentators are finally beginning to do, that our perilous rush into the conflict in Iraq was driven far too often by misleading and even deliberately deceptive news practices. Just as Dolores Umbridge and the Ministry of Magic overrun by Death Eaters seek to demonize muggles, so, too, has the US news media sought to demonize information coming from overseas news outlets, amateur blogging, and a whole host of other information outlets. Communities of faith ought to be helping their participants take an advocacy stance toward the news—constantly searching for what has been left out and what has been told from only the perspective of the powerful.¹²

¹²A particularly powerful exploration of this process in the US news media is the PBS *Bill Moyers’ Journal* episode, “Buying the War,” first aired in the spring of 2007; available online at: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/btw/watch.html>.

Fifth, but not finally—as I am sure that any group of *Harry Potter* readers could propose several more!—we ought to be asking what our members are reading, what they are enjoying, what they are consuming in popular culture, and using the answers as raw material for further theological reflection. When a so-called children’s book series has more to offer by way of thoughtful reflection on evil than does a full range of adult media, we ought to be seeking such material avidly. Increasingly there are rich resources for engaging pop culture media in theological reflection. Pungente’s use of the St. Ignatian exercises set to popular movies; the Benedictine practice of *visio divina*; the *Lights, Camera, Faith* lectionary series—there are more and more opportunities for engaging popular culture as rich sources for theological reflection.¹³

So why do we need enemies? Perhaps because the process of creating enemies is fundamental evidence of our broken human nature. But as Christians, we are also paradoxically set free from that brokenness, to live in and into a world graced by God. Rather than accepting the dichotomies that lately fuel the profit-driven cycles of our popular culture, we can reach for Paul’s words in Gal 3:28, and live in the recognition that because of God’s great love for us, because of Christ’s entrance into our lives, there is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female, but rather a community built on love and pouring forth God’s love into the world. To the extent that mass-mediated popular culture constrains our imagination, demanding that we accept the demonization and objectification that creates enemies, we need to look to the biblical narrative to expand our imagination. At the same time, we can also revel in pop culture fictions that delight us by challenging us to learn about “others,” and we can use such mass-mediated productions to draw us even further into the biblical narrative. The *Harry Potter* series is a most vivid and recent example of such popular culture. ⊕

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¹³John Pungente and Monty Williams, *Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies* (Toronto: Novalis Press, 2004); Peter Malone and Rose Pacatte, *Lights, Camera, Faith: A Movie Lectionary*, Cycle A, B, and C (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2001, 2002, 2003); St. John’s Bible Project *visio divina* at http://www.saintjohnsbible.org/participate/visio_divina.htm.