Harry Potter

How should wise Christian parents look at the Harry Potter phenomenon? Chances are your kids or grandkids are clamoring to read these incredibly best-selling books. And since only the first of the four books (out of a planned total of seven) is out in paperback, buying these thick hardback books requires a considerable cash outlay as well.

There is a lot to be said in favor of these books:

- They are very well-written fantasy, and a pleasure to read. Even adults enjoy reading them to children—and to themselves. (In England, there is an edition produced especially for adults who are embarrassed to be seen reading a children's book!)

- Because they are written for young boys, they captivate the imagination of almost *all* children.

- They tap into the poignancy of the powerlessness of children, which is a painful part of being young.

- They are full of real-life situations, ranging from the embarrassing to the hurtful to the scary to the satisfying, that real-life kids experience.

- They pit good against evil, with the good guys really being the *good* guys.

- They are getting hundreds of thousands of kids excited about reading.

But there's one substantial difficulty with the Harry Potter series. They make sorcery and witchcraft enticing to the reader. And that is not consistent with a Christian worldview, where we are called to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ"{1}. God gives us very strong and clear commands about witchcraft: it is a sin,{2} it is an

abomination before God,{3} and the Old Testament penalty for sorcery or witchcraft was death.{4} The proscription against the practice of magic is continued in the New Testament.{5}

When Christians and other conservative people make this complaint against the Harry Potter books, one often hears a condescending dismissal about the evils of censorship. No mention is made of the substance of the concern with witchcraft itself, which is a reasonable one.

Fantasy vs. Real-World

Many people impatiently respond, "But it's *fantasy!* It's only make-believe! Nobody's going to really *believe* that this stuff is true!" But the author J.K. Rowling revealed in *Newsweek* that she gets "letters from children addressed to Professor Dumbledore [headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the books' setting], and it's not a joke, begging to be let into Hogwarts, and some of them are really sad. Because they want it to be true so badly they've convinced themselves it's true."{6} She answers those letters herself.

I think it's important to point out that there is an important difference between the fantasy magic of the world of Harry Potter, and the real-world magic that is condemned in the Bible. The fact that J.K. Rowling doesn't believe in witchcraft except as presented in the centuries-old British myths is important; she honestly isn't hoping to draw children into the world of the occult (from everything I have read about her). Unfortunately, that doesn't mean it won't happen. Some people are going to be more sensitive to the draw of the occult, just as some people's bodies are going to be more sensitive to alcohol. The only responsible choice for both kinds of people is complete abstinence.

Connie Neal has written a book, *What's a Christian To Do with Harry Potter?*. I really liked the way she explains the distinction between fantasy magic and occult (real-world)

magic to kids: The magic in *Harry Potter* is make-believe, but the real-world magic in our world ALL falls in the category of "Dark Arts" magic, and those who play with it or pursue it are making themselves vulnerable to a very real evil spirit like Lord Voldemort. There is no such thing as everyday or good magic. Supernatural power that doesn't come from God is all evil. Kids can understand those kinds of boundaries.

Some people have likened the Harry Potter books to C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. While they are both fantasy literature, one is designed to create a thirst for Jesus and for heaven, and the other may create a thirst for power and manipulation. C.S. Lewis writes from a strong Christian worldview; J.K. Rowling writes from a naturalistic worldview that includes magic as a fact of life but excludes God. And by making witchcraft and wizardry so appealing, Harry Potter may be an alarmingly attractive door to the occult for some readers.

Can Harry Potter Be OK?

Is it possible to read the Harry Potter books without stumbling? If one's discernment filter is well-exercised and in place, yes. But is it wise? That depends on the individual—and it should definitely be a decision each parent makes for his or her own children. If we can watch *The Wizard of Oz* with our kids and not conclude that the presence of a couple of witches will send our kids into the occult, then we can practice the same discernment about Harry Potter.

Hoping the Harry Potter phenomenon will just go away is about as practical as wishing away Christmas. You know your child; for some children, trying to keep them away from the books will only tempt them to read the books on the sly. In some cases, I believe it would be wiser for a parent or teacher to intentionally use them as a teaching tool to help develop children's "discernment muscles."

Just as we would never send children out to play in the street alone, it's a different story when we take their hands to walk them across the street, teaching them about safety in the process. In the same way, I would suggest that handing a Harry Potter book to a child to read on his own is the spiritual equivalent of sending a child out to play in the street. Or worse, sending her out into a minefield. However, it can be an invaluable experience for a parent to read the book out loud, stopping to ask questions that will help a child recognize the spiritual counterfeits that comprise witchcraft.

For example, there are several incidents of conjuring, where witches and wizards wave a magic wand and instantly produce things like food for a banquet. Conjuring is a counterfeit of the way God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. Casting spells, such as speaking the word "Lumos!" to make one's magic wand become a light source, is a counterfeit of God's ability to speak things into existence.{7} Bewitching cars to make them fly and ceilings to twinkle like the night sky is a counterfeit of Christ's ability to do miracles like walking on water and feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes. Harry's invisibility cloak should be pointed out as make-believe, but God is always and true-ly with us even though He's invisible.

Despite the witchcraft in the Harry Potter books, there are clear moral lessons that can be discussed. Children can understand the painfulness of discrimination as they are encouraged to think through the emotions of being despised simply because one's parents are non-magical Muggles. They can identify the ugliness of arrogance and pride displayed by Harry's Muggle family and his school tormentor, Draco Malfoy. The author has done a magnificent job of portraying the evil of Harry's arch-nemesis, Lord Voldemort, and children can be encouraged to talk about what makes evil, evil. This would provide an excellent opportunity to teach them that God has a plan to put an end to evil forever, and He proved it by

disarming Satan at the cross.

A Final Warning

The Harry Potter books have a lot going for them, but there is potential spiritual danger in the way they make witchcraft so appealing to some people. There is not a clear-cut answer to this question because it is a modern-day "disputable matter." (See 1 Cor. 8 and Romans 14.) Some people will have freedom to read the books and see the movie without it violating their conscience; others cannot do that. I think it's important for those with freedom not to boast about their freedom or look down their noses at those who choose not to get into Harry Potter, and it's equally important for those who have been led to avoid Harry Potter not to judge those who haven't been led that way.

Notes

1. 2 Corinthians 10:5
2. 1 Samuel 15:23
3. Deuteronomy 18:10-11
4. Exodus 22:18
5. Galatians 5:20
6. "The Return of Harry Potter!" *Newsweek*, July 10, 2000, p. 58.
7. Genesis 1:3

© 2001 Probe Ministries International

Film and the Christian

How should a Christian view films? Todd Kappelman, a longtime film critic, calls us to exercise discernment in distinguishing between art and mere entertainment, without

damaging our spiritual vitality.

The Convergence of High and Low Culture

An examination of the history of our century will reveal the importance of viewing and studying film for any individuals who wish to understand themselves and their time and place. Film is essential because the distinction so many make between so called “high” and “low” culture has in fact disappeared (if it ever existed in the first place).

Approximately one hundred years ago the dawn of electronic technology, beginning with the invention of the radio, gave birth to mass media and communications. The increase in leisure time and wealth fostered the birth and development of an entertainment industry. The decline in the quality of education and the explosion in the popularity of television sealed the union between what was traditionally considered “high” art and popular culture. Western society is now defined more strictly by the image, the sound, and the moving picture than by the written word, which defined previous centuries. Seldom does anyone ask, “What have you read lately?” One is much more likely to hear the question, “What have you seen lately.” We have become, for better or worse, a visually oriented society. Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture which we live in than do the giants of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series.

The church as a body has a long standing and somewhat understandable tradition of suspicion concerning narrative fiction, the concepts of which apply here to our discussion of film. A brief examination of positions held by some Christians from the past regarding written fictional narratives may help us to understand the concern some have with involvement in fictional narratives as recorded on film.

Alcuin, an influential Christian leader of the ninth century was extremely concerned about the worldliness he saw in the church. One of the things that troubled him the most was the monks' fondness for fictional literature and stories about heroes such as Beowulf and Ingeld. Writing to Higbald, Alcuin said: "Let the words of God be read aloud at the table in your refractory. The reader should be heard there, not the flute player; the Fathers of the Church, not the songs of the heathen. . . . What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"{1}

Tertullian, the father of Latin theology, writing six centuries earlier voiced a similar concern about Christians involved in secular matters when he said: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"{2} Specifically, Tertullian believed that the study of pagan philosophers was detrimental to the Christian faith and should be avoided at all costs.

Paul, the apostle, writing to the Church at Corinth, said: "What partnership does righteousness have with iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?"{3}

Conclusion: The objections raised against the arts, both past and present, do have merit and should not be dismissed too quickly. Christians have a right and a responsibility to make sure that entertainment and art are not used in a manner that is damaging to their spiritual welfare. It is often a difficult call. For example, many Christians objected to the work of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman in the fifties and sixties, yet men such as Francis Schaeffer thought that it was necessary to pay attention to what these individuals were saying and why.

The Nature of Film and the Opportunity for Christians

Properly understood film is a narrative medium, a kind of "visual book" with a beginning, middle, and ending that

contains some degree of resolution. All film is not created equal; some movies are made with the express purpose of providing diversionary entertainment, while others represent the sincere efforts of artists to make works of art that reflect human emotions and call people to a more reflective existence. This second category of film should be considered an art form and is therefore worthy of the same attention that any other art such as the ballet, sculpture, or painting receives.

Art is the embodiment of man's response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality.{4} Man has always and will continue to express his hope and excitement, as well as his fears and reservations about life, death, and what it means to be human through the arts. He will seek to express his world through all available means, and presently that includes film. Schindler's List, a recent film by Steven Spielberg, is an excellent example of film's ability to express man's hopes and fears.

As a picture of reality, film is able to convey an enormous range of human experiences and emotions. The people one encounters in films are frequently like us whether they are Christian or not. Often the people we see in the better films are struggling with some of the most important questions in life. They are attempting to find meaning in what often appears to be a meaningless universe. These people are often a vehicle used by a director, producer, or writer to prompt us to ask the larger questions of ourselves.

Film is not and should not be required to be "uplifting" or "inspiring." Christians should remember that non-Christians also have struggles and wrestle with the meaning of life and their place and purpose in the universe. Christians and non-Christians will not and should not be expected to come to the same conclusions to the problems they face in the fictional universe of film. The Scriptures indicate that Christians and non-Christians are different, and this should be a point of

celebration, not alarm, for the Christian audience.

T. S. Eliot, speaking about literature, but with much that can be applied to film, had this advice for the Christian:

> Literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint…. It is necessary for Christian readers [and film goers by extension], to scrutinize their reading, [again film by extension], especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.{5}

Therefore, Christians should take their worldview with them when they attend and comment on any film. They should be cautious about pronouncing a film that does not conform with Christian beliefs or their particular notion of orthodoxy as unfit for consumption or undeserving of a right to exist as art.

Conclusion: The need for participation in film arises from not only the diversity of material with which the medium deals, but also from the plurality of possible interpretations concerning a given film. Christians have an opportunity to influence their culture by entering the arena of dialogue provided by film and contending for their positions and voicing their objections with sophistication, generosity, and a willingness to hear from those of opposing beliefs.

Some Concerns about Christian Participation in Cinema{6}

Christians are often concerned about the content of certain films and the appropriateness of viewing particular pieces. This is a valid concern that should not be dismissed too quickly and certainly deserves a response from those who do view objectionable material. The two primary areas of concern leveled by the many detractors of contemporary culture as it pertains to film are found in the categories of gratuitous sex

and violence. It is crucial that Christians understand the exact nature of sex and violence, gratuitous and otherwise, and how it may be employed in art. Taking only violence as the representative issue of these two concerns, we must ask ourselves what, if any, redeeming value does it have, and can it be used and viewed under some circumstances?

We might turn to the use of gratuitous violence in literature in order to better understand the role of violence in film. If the former is understood and embraced (albeit with reservation), the latter may also be understood and embraced (again with caution) as a means of expression employed by a new image-driven culture.

The image of gratuitous violence in modernity has one of its first and most important articulations in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Recall that in the poem the sailor shoots an albatross for absolutely no reason and is condemned by his fellow sailors, who believed the bird was a good omen, to wear the dead body around his neck. The ship is ravaged by plague, and only the cursed mariner survives. After many days of soul searching on the ghost ship, the mariner pronounces a blessing upon all of creation and atones for his wrongs. A sister ship saves the man, and he begins to evangelistically tell his story to anyone who will listen.

Every time this poem is read in a class or other group there is invariably some person who is fixated on the act of violence and emphasizes it to the point of losing the meaning of the entire poem. The story is about a mariner who realizes the errors of his ways, repents, and comes to a restored relationship with creation and other men. For Coleridge, the act of violence thus becomes the vehicle for the turning of the character’s soul from an infernal orientation to the paradisal. Other authors have used similar methods. Dante, for example, repeats a similar pattern when he explored the spiritual realms in his poetic chronicle *The Divine Comedy*.

First, he takes his readers through the harshness, pain, and misery of the Inferno before moving into Purgatory and finally into the bliss and joy of Paradise. Dostoyevsky composed four novels that begin with the heinous crime of Raskolnikov and develop to the salvation of the Karamazov brothers.

Conclusion: The writers mentioned here and many serious, contemporary film makers often explore the darkness of the human condition. They don't do it simply to posture or exploit, but to see deeply and lay bare the problems and tensions. But, they also do it to look for answers, even the light of salvation/Salvation. The picture is not always pretty, and the very ugliness of the scene is often necessary to accurately portray the degree of depravity and the miracle of salvific turns in fiction. By virtue of their full acquaintance with the dark side of the human condition, when they propose solutions, these solutions appear to be viable and realistic.

Biblical Examples of Gratuitous Violence

The prohibition against and objections to the use of violence in film may be understood better through an examination of the use of violence in the Bible.

One example found in Scriptures is in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Isaiah. In verses fifteen and sixteen the prophet is forecasting the particulars of the future Assyrian military invasion and the conditions the people of Israel and the surrounding countries will experience. He writes:

> Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished (Isaiah 13:15-16).

The prophet is talking about the impaling of men by the conquering armies, the willful smashing of infants upon the

rocks, and the raping of women. In an oral and textual based society, those who heard the words of Isaiah would have been able to imagine the horrors he described and would have made mental images of the scenes.

In an image-driven society if this scene were to be part of a movie, a scriptwriter and director would have actors and actresses play the parts, and the violence would be obvious to all. Recall the scene in The Ten Commandments where the Egyptian armies attempted to follow Moses across the Red Sea. One sees horses and soldiers trapped under tons of water. Their bodies go limp before they can get to the surface. And those who can make it to the top face certain death trying to swim back to shore. In spite of these, and other horrific scenes, this movie is often held to be a "Christian classic" and deemed to be a good family film by many.

A second and even more disturbing example of gratuitous violence in the Bible is found in the twentieth chapter of Judges. Here a Levite and his concubine enter the house of an old man from the hill country of Ephraim to spend the night. While they are there, some wicked men in the city want to have homosexual relations with the Levite traveler and demand that the old man hand them over. The evil men take the man's concubine, rape and kill her, leaving her dead body in the doorway. The traveler is so distraught that he cuts his concubine into twelve pieces and sends the body parts back to his fellow Israelites. The Israelites then form a revenge party and go into battle with the Benjamites who will not turn over the evil men for punishment.

Again, if this story were to be translated into a visual medium the scenes of rape and later dismemberment of a body, even if they were filmed in standards from the forties or fifties, would be very disturbing.

Conclusion: The purpose of the violence in these examples may be that the details in each passage provide information which

serves as a reason for a latter action. Or, the information provided shows us something about the nature of God and the way He deals with sin. If both these examples show a difficult, but necessary use of violence in telling a story, then perhaps violence may be used (portrayed) for redemptive purposes in fictional mediums such as film. This is not an airtight argument, rather the issue is raised as a matter for consideration while keeping in mind that Christians should always avoid living a vicariously sinful life through any artistic medium.

Weaker Brother Considerations in Viewing Film

Paul's great teaching concerning meat sacrificed to idols and the relationship of the stronger and weaker brothers to one another is laid out in 1 Corinthians 8. We should remember that Paul clearly puts the burden of responsibility on the stronger brother. It is this person who should have the interest of the weaker brother in mind.

Persons who exercise rampant Christian freedom when watching films that are objectionable to some others does not necessarily mean that they are strong Christians. It could indicate that these people are too weak to control their passions and are hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother. Do not urge others to participate in something that you, as a Christian, feel comfortable doing if they have reservations. You may inadvertently cause the other person to sin.

There are basically three positions related to Christians viewing film.

The first of these three is prohibition. This is the belief that films, and often television and other forms of entertainment, are inherently evil and detrimental to the Christian's spiritual well being. Persons who maintain this

position avoid all film, regardless of the rating or reputed benefits, and urge others to do the same.

Abstinence is the second position. This is the belief that it is permissible for Christians to view films, but for personal reasons this person does not choose to do so. This may be for reasons ranging from a concern for the use of time or no real desire to watch film, to avoidance because it may cause them or someone they are concerned about to stumble. Willingly abstaining from some or all films does not automatically make one a weaker brother, and this charge should be avoided! One should avoid labeling a fellow Christian "weaker" for choosing to abstain from participation in some behavior due to matters of conscience.

Moderation is the final position. This is the belief that it is permissible to watch films and that one may do so within a certain framework of moderation. This person willingly views some films but considers others to be inappropriate for Christians. There is a great deal of disagreement here about what a Christian can or cannot and should or should not watch. Although some of these disagreements are matters of principle and not of taste, Christian charity should be practiced whenever one is uncertain.

Conclusion: There is a valid history of concern about Christian involvement in the arts and fictional and imaginative literature. This issue extends to the medium of film and manifests similar concerns about film and Christians who view film. However, because film is one of the dominant mediums of cultural expression, film criticism is necessary. If Christians do not make their voices heard then others, often non-Christians, will dominate the discussion. All films contain the philosophical persuasions of the persons who contribute to their development, and it is the job of the Christian who participates in these arts to make insightful, fair, and well-informed evaluations of the work. Not everyone feels comfortable in viewing some (or any) films and the

Christian should be especially mindful of the beliefs of others and always have the interest of fellow believers as well as non-believers in mind. While “film,” the artistic expression of the cinematic medium has been the focus and not “movies,” the entertainment based expression, much of what has been said of the former is applicable to the later.

Appendix

Christians should be aware that the freedoms exercised in participation in the film arts are privileges and should not be practiced to the point of vicarious living through escape into fictitious worlds. In 1 Corinthians 10: 23-31 (and 6:12) the Apostle Paul writes that “everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive.”

He is addressing the issue of meat sacrificed to idols in chapter 10 and sexual purity in chapter 6. This may serve as a guide for Christians who are concerned about their involvement in film and a caution against construing what is written here as a license to watch anything and everything. The Apostle is very careful to distinguish between that which is permissible and that which is constructive, or expedient. What Paul means is that, in Christ, believers have freedoms which extend to all areas of life, but these freedoms have the potential to be exercised carelessly or without regard for others, and thus become sin. The guiding rule here is that Christians should seek the good of others and not their own desires. This would mean that anyone who is participating in film that is objectionable should have the interests of others, both believers and non-believers, in mind. We live in a fallen world and almost everything we touch we affect with our fallen nature, the arts notwithstanding. If we are to be active in redeeming the culture for the glory of God, then by necessity we must participate in the culture and be salt and light to a very dark and unsavory world. It is imperative that Christians who are active in their culture and interested in participating in the ever growing “culture wars,” remember

Paul's admonition in Philippians that we "work out our salvation daily with fear and trembling." Anything less would be flirting with spiritual disaster and would not bring glory to God.

Parents concerned for the spiritual and psychological welfare of their children would do well to offer more than a list of prohibitions against what films can be viewed. As with anything that involves issues of Christian freedom, maturity in individual matters must be taken into account. The example of a young child's first BB gun may serve as an illustration. In some instances a child may be ready for the first air rifle at age twelve or thirteen. Other children may not be ready until they are eighteen, and some may best served if they never possess the gun in question. Parents should realize that film is a narrative medium which often contains complex philosophical ideas. To continue to absorb films at the current rate and not offer thoughtful criticism on what we are watching is equivalent to visiting museums and announcing that the Picasso or Rembrandt retrospective is "cool" or "stupid." If we are concerned parents, and wish to gain the respect of our children, we can and must do better than this.

Notes

1. "Letter to Higbald," as quoted in Eleanor S. Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne* (New York:Macmillan, 1951), 209.
2. Tertullian, *On the Against Heretics*, chap. 7.
3. Paul, 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.
4. John Dixon, Jr., *Nature and Grace in Art,* as quoted in Leland Ryken's *The Liberated Imagination*, p.23.
5. T. S. Eliot, *Religion and Literature.*
6. Much of the material for this section was first articulated by Jeff Hanson, my co-editor, in the March/April issue of *The Antithesis,* vol. 1, no. 2, 1995.

©1997 Probe Ministries