



# The lived theology of the *Harry Potter* series

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This article will argue that the recent turn towards lived theology or religion in practical theology can offer a useful hermeneutic to interpret the impact of the *Harry Potter* series on the spiritual formation and identity creation of adolescents. In practical theology there has been a turn towards lived theology or religion as lived religion has moved out of institutions into social-cultural phenomena as people seek to find meaning and purpose for their lives in alternative places to institutionalised religion.

## Introduction

This article aims to show how the *Harry Potter* series is lived religion or theology and thus by reading it, some adolescents may find spiritual meaning (through glimpsing the Gospels through some of the characters' actions) within this and other fantasies – such as Tolkien's *Lord of the rings* (1991) and Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1980) – that they fail to find within the Church or the Bible.

## The turn to lived-religion in practical theology

In recent years the focus of practical theology has moved from focusing on traditional Church practices towards a hermeneutic of lived religion (Ganzevoort 2009; Gräb 2012; Miller-McLemore 2012b, 2012c, 2012d): 'The face and structure of religion are changing, and theology, even more practical theology, has to respond to those changes' (Ganzevoort 2009). Hence, practical theology has recently moved from being a primarily ministry orientated field, to a field that responds to the social-cultural realities in which communities exist and seek to find meaning for their lives not only from traditional faith communities but, more recently, also from outside traditional faith communities (Ganzevoort 2009; Gräb 2012:80; Miller-McLemore 2012e:111).

## What is lived religion?

Lived theology or religion, according to Miller-McLemore (2012a), is the practice of everyday life that has religious or moral implications with or without a person being conscious of it. Many decisions made by people, says Miller-McLemore (2012a), have been formed by Gospel values (Christian values). In other words, people use within their daily lives (consciously or unconsciously) aspects, metaphors or values that have been directly or indirectly shaped by the Gospels and the Christian tradition. Miller-McLemore's (2010e:103) understanding of lived theology extends beyond the Church and includes social practices where the divine may also be encountered in everyday living and how this may have an influence on theology and how people experience and interpret the divine. Gräb (2012:80–81) agrees with Miller-McLemore, and calls for a practical theology of lived religion that is not only 'limited to church theory, pastoral theology or even methodologically-orientated empirical science (*theologia applicata*)', but also includes an attempt to define socio-cultural 'phenomena as religious through the employment of cultural-hermeneutic'. Ganzevoort (2009) understands lived religion as evaluating the practices of lived religion in the light of the sacred texts and the sacred ideas of a particular religion such as Christianity.

The major question for the hermeneutic of lived religion or theology is the question of normativity, transformation and transcendence. Practical theology, according to Miller-McLemore (2012e) and Gräb (2012), has a normative, transformative and transcendent role to play within society.

According to Ganzevoort (2009), the word 'hermeneutic' signifies 'that we want to understand lived religion from its own characteristics and in light of its own understandings and intrinsic normativity'. Whilst interdisciplinary phenomena may be the starting point, ultimately the point of the investigation is 'religious phenomenon' (Ganzevoort 2009). 'Religious phenomena', argues Gräb (2012:81), should be understood through experiences and life-expressions as religious and,

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therefore, calls for the use of a 'cultural-hermeneutic'. Gräß (2012:81) explains that even though sociocultural expressions of religion may not be 'traditional church theology', they still fulfil people's religious, sacred or spiritual needs, and need to be understood as such. Gräß (2012:87) continues by saying that a hermeneutic of religion does 'not take leave of the church'; instead it shows that the Church needs to adjust to the praxis of sociocultural religion. However, Gräß (2012:81) warns that not all 'normative determinations' of cultural-hermeneutics are 'religious'. Both Ganzevoort (2009) and Gräß (2012:82) argue that this hermeneutic must be based on a particular religion with specific religious themes, for example in Christianity, and the matters that arise in living out a Christian life. But a person may be living a 'Christian' life, and not be aware of it due to the influence of secularisation. Ganzevoort (2009) continues by defining the word 'lived' as the 'actions and meanings operant in the way humans live, interact and relate to the divine'. In other words, do people live out their lives in a Christlike manner on a daily basis? Miller-McLemore (2012e:123) points out that it is also very important when researching and interpreting the 'lived' that the 'values of the lived' be focused on, and this she explains is not always an easy task: 'Practical theology has relevance for everyday faith and life or it has little meaning at all' (Miller-McLemore 2012b:7). This means that religion or faith need to be experienced and lived out on some level on a daily basis to have actual, practical or transformational impact in daily living. In essence, it is about putting into practice the ethos that a person values and using these values to sometimes overcome daily difficulties, or to embrace joys at certain periods in a person's or a community's life. What is important to Ganzevoort (2009) in the term 'religion' is that focus is placed on the praxis or it could not be part of practical theology. Therefore, it is in line with what Miller-McLemore says about lived theology having relevance in how the living out of religion on a daily basis takes place, no matter how small the gesture.

'Religion', Ganzevoort (2009) continues to explain, is closely related to the sacred, and defines religion as 'the transcending patterns of action and meaning embedded in and contributing to the relation with the sacred'. Practical theology, insists Ganzevoort (2009), whether studied from the phenomenon of a certain subject or theologically reflected upon as a phenomenon, always focuses on religion. Miller-McLemore (2012e:143) explains that religion is studied 'at the point where human suffering evokes or calls for a religious response and sometimes at the point where a religious response is given and or experienced'. These experiences are ones that help a person transform and/or answer an ultimate question that may have an effect on how a person values life after this experience. Heimbrock (2010:287–288) points out that lived religion must be in line with the Gospel message of 'salvation, wholeness and brokenness'.

Gräß (2012) calls for an understanding of 'religion' that:

[W]ill give practical theology the chance to show – even in Church activities – how people beyond the Church can relate in and to a Christian-religious view of world and life. (p. 84)

Hence, religion, or the experience of religion, does not stop in the Church, but goes beyond and into the world, and has an effect in shaping people's identity, spirituality and ultimately how they choose to express their values on a daily basis.

## The problem of the Church today: Loss of relevance

The Church, as Moltmann (1974:7) argues, is in an identity and relevance crisis. Is the Church still relevant in a modern or postmodern world? More and more people are leaving traditional churches and seeking meaning and answers to their ultimate questions elsewhere. Particularly the youth (adolescents) struggle to find meaning in the ancient texts of scripture as the metaphors and language of the Bible is foreign to them.

In Western society children do not necessarily grow up with Gospel stories anymore and, therefore, these stories do not become part of their narrative resources with which they construct meaning and purpose for their lives. They are living in a different religious or ideological world – very often in the world of materialism and consumerism. A world where a person's value is measured by what they own and the labels displayed on their clothes.

In this 'secularised' world, organised religion is not relevant. The language is foreign to the ordinary language of everyday and therefore they have lost faith in organised religion (cf. Tracey 2010:67). It is not that youth are not interested in religion, they are not particularly interested in traditional institutionalised religion, but they have a fascination with religion, the uncanny, the unpredictable or the unexplainable. Tracey (2010:92) explains that adolescents' fascination with the sacred (something that goes beyond their immediate 'realities') 'is not primarily anti-religion', nor an objection against the Church, per se, but rather 'a desperate attempt by youth culture to counter advances of the profane and secular society', that they live in.

A return to religion has taken a turn beyond institutional religion and is expressed in popular culture. Beaudoin (1998:21) argues that searching for alternative places for spirituality, such as the arts, literature and music, seems to have become the 'new' symbols of society as a way of replacing traditional systems such as the Church and the clergy, with whom adolescents have become disillusioned. Other adolescents know nothing of religion except for what exposure they have had from the media, where horrific incidents are reported about a particular religion (Tracey 2010:67). Beaudoin (1998:34) goes on to say that even though some adolescents confess not to be religious, they still express spirituality by using the material (with glimpses of the Gospel such as reading material) they interact with within their social context that sometimes inspire them to transform and reshape their spiritual identities. Therefore, although it may seem that adolescents are no longer exposed or influenced by the Gospels, this is not so, as the Gospel

message has shifted from the Bible and the Church to other places. In essence, the Gospels have moved from the Bible to alternative places that adolescents find accessible. This is then not something negative, but it shows that people's spirituality evolves to adapt in accordance with their technology, sociocultural world, and level of comfort within this world, to answer their ultimate questions.

The challenge for the Church is to translate the message of the Gospels into a language that can be relevant to the challenges of today. The fantasy genre seems to be a genre well suited for this task as many fantasy authors weave into their narrative the Christ discourse in varying degrees, in a language that people 'get'. Examples of authors who have used the Christ discourse in their work in the past are Tolkien's *Lord of the rings* (1991) and Lewis's *The chronicles of Narnia* (1980) and, more recently, Rowling with her *Harry Potter* series.

## Fantasy genre as a response to the relevance crisis of the Church

For Tolkien, faerie tales were stories about the faerie world, a realm where faeries and 'many things besides elves and fays' exist (Tolkien 1979:16). Sometimes the characters in these realms use magic secretly or in the open, and these narratives are always about the battle between good and evil. The good is usually represented as the alternative sacred story, whilst the evil represents one of the dominant discourses (sacred story) from the reader's actual world. The *Harry Potter* series is about a young boy and his friends (who look after one another through a strong fellowship with values similar to the Christ discourse) who have to destroy a powerful and evil wizard that is threatening to destroy the wizarding world.

Fantasy writers create alternative worlds whereby children can explore everyday realities from a different or alternative perspective. The alternative world or 'Sub-Creation' can be, as Tolkien (1979) explains, a:

[S]udden miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is Evangelium, giving fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant grief. (p. 68)

This means that the fantasy world is at its most 'potent' where the reader may witness 'Joy', but this 'Joy' can sometimes only occur through deep sorrow. This sorrow then allows the reader to bring into their world the 'Joy' of Evangelium (Gospel) from the alternative or 'Sub-Creation' world.

Fantasy fiction is often accused of teaching children to escape reality (O'Keefe 2004:16). But that is not so, as fantasy is, as Tolkien and Lewis both agreed, based on reality, otherwise it cannot exist.

Ganzevoort (2009) explains how no text is 'without ideas or praxis behind it, in it and evoked by it; no idea without sources and repercussions in praxis; nor, praxis without

sources and inherent ideas'. This is true for the *Harry Potter* series as the series did not come out of nowhere. When Rowling's mother died at a young age, Rowling sank into deep depression. Rowling had started dabbling with writing the *Harry Potter* series, but continued to write as a way of coping with the loss of her mother. Rowling acknowledges that either the series would never have been completed, or the spiritual quest of love and death that the series became so focused on would not have been the core issue of the series, had it not been for the death of her mother (Ray 2010). Rowling used the values of the Gospel that she had grown up with, and still follows, to work her way through her ultimate journey.

On the surface fantasy seems impossible. Tolkien (2008:27) shows how these narratives are filled with 'all manner of beasts and birds ... beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as a sword'. But at its core, fantasy tries to expose the reader to the dominant discourses that we exist in; for example, Lewis wanted to wake people up from the 'evil enchantment' of the corruption of the everydayness of our lives, through the fantastic. Rowling wants to awaken the reader to the selfish discourse of Western consumerism that saps the consumer of their humanity, and then shows them an alternative discourse that is about a shared give and take between people and, how fellowship is a gift of love.

Zipes (1979:141) explains how fantasy 'plays upon the imagination not to open it up to escape into a never-never land but to make a greater contact to reality'. Taylor (2002) explains how, when reading *The lord of the rings* (1991), he never escaped reality:

I found myself going along on the journey, dealing like the nonheroic, comfort loving hobbits with weariness, fear, uncertainty, and agonizing choices. With them I felt terror when confronted with undisguised evil and enormous gratefulness for unexpected good. (p. 422)

So it is with the *Harry Potter* series: the reader is confronted with choices from the 'Muggle' world, the world that non-magical people live in and 'Sub-Creation' (the wizarding world) that Rowling creates. The two worlds present the reader with two different *sacred* stories (Jones's versus wizards) echoing the choices of the early Church (Caesar versus Christ). Rowling does this by exposing the reader not only to their everyday reality (consumerism and/or materialism), but creates an alternative interpretation, another reality where the reader is in a position to choose between consumerism or liberation from consumerism and fellowship.

Fantasy, whilst entertaining, also helps human development through hope:

While the fantasy is *unreal*, the good feelings, it gives us about ourselves and our future *are real*, and these real good feelings are what we need to sustain us. (Bettelheim 1976:12)

In the last book, *The deathly hallows* (2007), when Harry 'dies' and he meets Dumbledore at Kings Cross, Harry asks Dumbledore



if the conversation they are having is real: 'Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?' Dumbledore answers him as follows: 'Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?' (Rowling 2007:579). Even though the reader may go beyond the text to experience hope in their imagination, it does not mean that it is not real. Fantasy shows the reader that there is hope to chaotic events and human beings have the ability to put order to chaos by making other choices. By using the fantasy genre to offer the reader an alternative interpretation to the dominant discourse that the reader confronts on a daily basis, the author tries, through the alternative reality that they propose, to liberate the reader from the captivity the dominant discourse holds over them (crucifies dominant discourse of materialism). In Rowling's case, the reader has to choose between being a 'Muggle' who tries to live up to and fit in to their social context, or to be a wizard who through love and grace is liberated from consumerism and thus is reborn a new liberated self, free of the desire to please someone or something so they can be liked and loved.

Children's literature, and especially the fantasy genre, deals with the questions people ask from childhood. Fantasy narratives ask not only the questions we ask in developing our identity and spirituality (i.e. who?, why?, what? and where?), but these narratives also try to give answers to these questions in an enchanting manner. Fantasy narratives have the ability to engage the reader's imagination by producing a safe place wherein the reader can try on other identities and play out different life scenarios (re-imagining their lives).

Many fantasies also utilise spiritual experiences, allowing the reader to imagine and perhaps even experience moments of wonder and awe that go beyond what the text intended. In a successful 'Sub-Creation', the writer creates something 'pure' and 'free from greed' that does not try to delude the reader (Tolkien 2008:64). Rather, through the fantastic the writer tries to make the reader sensitive to the dominant discourse and how it is degrading to human beings, and then gives an alternative discourse that may be chosen to the one that they exist in (usually a life that includes glimpsing the Christ discourse indirectly): 'Uncorrupted, it does not seek delusion, nor bewitchment and domination; it seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves' (Tolkien 2008:64). This pure narrative enables the reader to enter through her or his imagination into an alternative world where the fantastic exists to achieve 'Secondary-Belief', accepting the created world as real whilst visiting this alternative world and the rules that govern it (Tolkien 2008:64). Consequently, whilst in the 'Secondary World', the writer should be able to shape the created world in such a solid manner that the reader is released from their world to temporarily re-imagine themselves as a person who is liberated from their dominant discourse, free and willing to take up the journey of fellowship. O'Keefe (2004) explains how fantasy connects the human, the natural and the supernatural:

[A] totality, a pattern, a network of connection in a fictional world that provides the satisfaction. Even when the total world presented is a grim one, its fullness is a revelation and a comfort. (p. 18)

Tolkien and Lewis were using the story of the Gospel to 'baptize the imagination' (ed. Lewis 1947:21) with the discourse of Christ and making the alternative 'Sub-Creation' a choice between Christ or corruption. Lewis (1960:218) explained how fantasy can 'baptize the imagination' by exposing the reader to a 'real though unfocused gleam of divine truth'. Through 'baptizing the imagination', Lewis (1947:21) was aiming to make it 'easier for children to accept Christianity when they meet it in later life'. Thus, fantasy has the ability to 'baptize the imagination', to embrace an alternative interpretation of reality, and to live a new life. Through glimpsing the 'source-reality' in a 'Sub-Creation' the reader may become more open to the possibilities or choices created from an in-front-of-text-reading, allowing the reader, as Ricoeur (1981:112) points out, to project his or her 'ownmost possibilities' on this world, freeing the reader to imagine themselves acting or living in an alternative manner with an alternative identity and spirituality (lived theology). As the reader is challenged in their dominant discourse (with its specific sacred stories) the reader then looks for alternative answers to their ultimate questions.

Pierce (1993:50) points out that fantasy urges the reader to keep asking questions, nagging at their subconscious to look for answers. Hence, even though we may not have a satisfactory answer right now to a particular question, it does not mean we should stop asking that question. Fantasy shows the reader that certain questions have many answers, unlike the dominant *sacred* story that gives or allows for only one answer. Fantasy also shows the reader that there are alternative answers and ways of existing and that the answers can change over the course of a lifetime to the same question as we evolve as people, taking in different narratives.

The act of creating fantasy is, according to Tolkien (2008), a noble act, the highest form of creativity and a tribute to God when done successfully:

Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only are we made: but made in the image and likeness of the Maker. (p. 66)

The Gospels, Tolkien (2008:246) insisted, were fairy-stories: '[T]hey contain marvels, peculiarly artistic, beautiful and moving ones: "mythical" in their perfect self-contained significance, and yet symbolical and allegorical as well'. For Lewis (1944:270), the Gospels are myth, but a 'myth become fact'. Lewis did not demythologise Christ, as in Christ 'the essential meaning of all things down from the "heaven" of myth to the "earth" of history, without ceasing to be myth' (Lewis 1944:270). As Christians we must agree to both the historical fact of Christ, and at the same time to the imaginative myth of Christ, as we do with all myth. For Lewis, fantasy has the ability to capture profound experiences, retrieving 'all mistakes, head you off from false paths' (Lewis 1943:10). This



experience that has the ability to draw the reader into a world that 'wakes you up' to your dominant tainted surroundings. The writer then shows the reader an alternative world that is free of this tainted surrounding and enriches the reader with a dominant discourse that has glimpses of the divine.

For Tolkien (2008:246), stories that contain glimpses of the 'Truth' have the ability to go beyond the 'Secondary World' and into the 'Primary World'. Fantasy has the ability to interact in such a manner with the reader to go beyond the text to allow the reader to glimpse the 'Joy' of the resurrection. In the Gospels, particularly, 'the greatest artistry has "come true", affecting the reader in their own world' (Tolkien 2008:246). This means that the reader may then use what they have glimpsed in the 'Secondary World' and apply it to their lives, directly impacting their identity and, thus, spirituality.

## Why is *Harry Potter* lived religion?

The world or 'space' that is created in front of the text, between the reader and the *Harry Potter* series, becomes a 'church' where adolescents are exposed to glimpses of Christ, in a language that they can identify with. This 'church space' of the imagination challenges adolescents to rethink their identities with its glimpses of a Christlike life. Millbank (2005:2) explains that in the 'post Christian phase', where there is a decline in institutionalised religion, fantasy seems to have the ability to give glimpses of the Gospel, allowing the story of Christ to 'persist in the echo of the public value'. Therefore, the Gospel has moved from the Bible to the fantasy genre in a secularised world, and become a religion that some people live out. Thus, Christ persists to challenge society, not from the Bible, but from within social mediums that many people find valuable and feel comfortable with, such as the fantasy genre. Fantasy writers such as Tolkien, Lewis, and in a contemporary world, Rowling, use glimpses of the Gospel in their work to expose and challenge the effects of the dominant discourses of their societies that they see as fragmenting and hurting people's identities and binding them to material things. These writers use the Christ discourse as an exposing and transforming tool to show people the effect of the dominant discourses. If, as Ganzevoort (2009) argues, practical theology is the study of 'lived religion in a hermeneutic mode' that attends 'to the most fundamental processes of interpreting life through endless conversations in which we construct meaning', then this includes conversations with 'our fellow human beings' and the 'traditions that model' our lives. By 'traditions' Ganzevoort (2009) means the Bible and the Church, 'with all its interpretative power and normative claims', eventually aiming 'at a more profound and more adequate spiritual life'.

The *Harry Potter* series is lived religion or theology, as the Christ discourse presented by Rowling may open a way for adolescents to live transformed lives that are inspired by the implicit story of Christ; sacrificial love towards an alternative fellowship. This implicit Christ-narrative challenges the adolescents to choose between seeking identity in materialism or rather in friendship and fellowship and sacrificial love. In that sense, the implicit

Christ-narrative becomes normative for their newly chosen identity. Rowling uses the *Harry Potter* series to offer glimpses of the Christ discourse; to be able to interpret the lived religion or theology of the *Harry Potter* series, we need to be able to read it together with the Gospels (as a normative text). It is then on the basis of the normative text of the Gospels that it can be argued that the *Harry Potter* series offers glimpses of the Gospels. Secondly, those glimpses of the Christ-narrative can be transformative as they offer an alternative to adolescents' dominant discourse of their 'realities'. This links back to what Miller-McLemore (2012a) explains about people forming their values from the Gospels (Christian values), and incorporating it within their daily lives, even though they may not be aware that these are Gospel values that are shaping their lives.

The 'cultural-hermeneutic' of the *Harry Potter* series phenomenon is worthy of critical analysis, as the series offers an alternative discourse to those of the dominant Western discourses that could be having damaging effects on people's identity and spirituality. The alternative sacred discourse presented by Rowling may allow the reader to experience transformation and the possibility to choose to follow the ethos offered by the book which echoes the values of the Gospels (Christ discourse). People look for answers to the ultimate questions in their sociocultural worlds, and by doing so they push the boundaries of where the *sacred* can be experienced. The *Harry Potter* series is one such sociocultural phenomenon. Phenomena such as the *Harry Potter* series sometimes 'take churches ... by surprise', explains Heimbrock (2010:120), as the Church's interpretation of the Gospels are re-interpreted from outside the Church. But this does not mean that it is a bad thing; rather, practical theologians need to adjust how they practice theology.

Rowling's wizarding 'Sub-Creation', although it gives a very similar choice to those of Lewis and Tolkien (the choice between Christ and corruption), does not make the Christ discourse the only choice (Rowling makes this one of two choices). Rather, Rowling gives the reader a gift by telling them that there is more to people than what they possess, as is so often understood in the Western dominant discourse. The Christ discourse places value in fellowship and does not require for people to have any possessions to be loved by those that they are in fellowship with. What is required of them is things that cannot be bought such as love, loyalty and honesty; in other words, qualities that do not try to delude a fellowship. Harry shows adolescents that by caring more about others than himself, the centre of his life is not within him or about him (selfish Western consumerist sacred discourse), but rather the centre of his life is outside of him, in the form of his friends and community (Christlike behaviour). Thus, this shows readers that it is not material possessions and selfish behaviour that are important, but rather the quality of life Harry experiences with his friends and wizarding community that help shape his identity and spirituality in a life that echoes the Gospel values. Therefore, Rowling deconstructs Western reality's materialism and consumerism, rebuilding readers' reality with the alternative ethos of the Gospels.



In her *Harry Potter* series, Rowling addresses the dominant discourse of consumerism and materialism that have taken religious dimensions through her depiction of the 'Muggle' world, with the Dursleys as her prime examples of people who try to 'fit in' with their society through their belongings; she then offers an alternative to this way of life with the Christ discourse. It is typical of the fantasy genre to challenge dominant discourses through a fantastic narrative with an alternative spirituality or religion with an appropriate ethos. Rowling puts emphasis on people, family and fellowship and community as the most treasured occurrence that a person can experience in their lives, as opposed to the latest material things. Rowling's pitting of fellowship against consumerism (with all its downfalls), opens a space for transformation that may allow adolescents to be liberated from the never ending vicious cycle created by consumerism and materialism. Consumerism and materialism directly causes problems in people's lives, obliging people to 'fit in' to their sociocultural world by acquiring what the market is telling them they need to have in order to fit in.

## Conclusion

As the *Harry Potter* series has the Christ discourse threaded in its sacred story, it allows the reader glimpses of the values of the Gospels from an everyday perspective and that makes the series function as lived theology. In other words, some of the characters from the wizarding world live out on a daily basis, values from the Gospels, no matter how stressful a situation may be. These situations are impregnated with ethos (normative) and create the possibility of transformation and transcendence and, therefore, serve as examples of lived theology for the reader, who may then carry these experiences into their realities ('Primary World').

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### Authors' contributions

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