

# ***CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON HARRY POTTER Tool of Satan or Christian Parable?***

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This study, focusing on differences between fundamentalist (biblical) and liberal Christian families' perceptions of *Harry Potter*, explores scriptural literalism's influence on parents' decisions to allow their children to read the series. Parents completed quantitative and qualitative measures assessing theme perception, scriptural literalism, and perception of Dumbledore's principled reasoning. Children completed similar measures. Results suggest that liberal and biblical parents view the series through different religious lenses. Compared to liberal children who admired Dumbledore's moral flexibility when allowing the protagonists to break rules, biblical children were more likely to value the result but question the means. Results are presented in light of their implications for moral education in pluralistic societies in which many families hold strong but divergent religious views.

"When compared to the high standards of the Bible—standards all human beings should live by—the entire lot, including Harry, Ron, Hermione ... and even Albus Dumbledore leave a trail of filth and moral stench unworthy of children's literature" (Wohlberg, 2005, p. 154).

*Harry Potter*, J. K. Rowling's international bestseller series, has sparked debate among those believing the series promotes Satan through a magical and moral world leading children to the occult (e.g., Abanes, 2001; Kjos, 2007; Wohlberg, 2005) and those maintaining the series promotes virtues through

opportunities for complex moral reflection and discussion (e.g., Neal, 2001; Whitney, Vozzola, & Hofmann, 2005). Specifically, many fundamentalist Christians express concern that *Harry Potter* desensitizes children to magic, undermines Christian values by exposing children to protagonists who frequently lie, cheat, and break rules, and challenges the Christian worldview as Harry overcomes evil by relying on himself rather than God.

On the contrary, moral educators and researchers generally maintain that the books foster virtues such as courage and friendship

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(e.g., Bridger, 2002; Whitney et al., 2005), creating opportunities for moral instruction as Rowling “places Harry and his friends in ethical dilemmas requiring them to *think* in complex ways about right and wrong” (Kern, 2003, p. 25). Similarly, some Christians suggest that the books are Christian allegory (Granger, 2004; Neal, 2002) and can be used to promote spiritual insights, teaching children Christian values and morality (e.g., Burkart, 2005; Killinger, 2004; Neal, 2001) and serving to “open the door for talking about ... right and wrong, the nature of faith, loyalty, bravery and trust” (Dancy, 2002, p. 134).

Additionally, according to the American Library Association’s list of most frequently challenged books, “parents challenge materials more often than any other group” (American Library Association [ALA], 2007). Texts that many American teachers might consider rich moral education resources top the list, with the *Harry Potter* books listed as the most challenged from 2000 to 2005 (ALA, 2006). Although moral texts often provide symbolic battlegrounds for cultural and religious differences, arguments for removing them from school libraries and curricula tend to be framed along ideological lines rather than on empirical research.

Given the controversy over *Harry Potter* and the importance of moral stories for children’s and adolescents’ moral development (Whited & Grimes, 2002), it seemed valuable to investigate children’s actual understanding of the series’ themes and characters. Considering many children have a religious upbringing and 89% of Americans claim to “probably or absolutely” believe in God (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2006), it also seemed important to explore how a family’s religious worldview influences perception of the series and consider ways to guide children in comprehending the series’ moral messages. Hence, we sought to investigate the relationship between scriptural literalism and parents’ decisions to allow their children to read *Harry Potter*, as well as parents’ perceptions of the series’ more controversial content (e.g., magic). Do chil-

dren’s perceptions of the series’ magic and interpretation of the series’ themes and characters differ depending on whether they were raised in a biblical or liberal family? How would younger children, who usually reason at Kohlberg’s (1984) Stages 1-3, understand Dumbledore’s principled moral reasoning and would those perceptions differ for those raised in biblical and liberal families?

Although controversy exists over *Harry Potter*’s value, most agree that moral stories can potentially influence children’s and adolescents’ moral development (Whited & Grimes, 2002). Traditional character education stresses the importance of using moral stories to foster values and character (Lickona, 1991) but often takes a simplistic, nondevelopmental approach, assuming children develop strong character by merely absorbing a story’s moral message (Bennett, 1993; Bryan, 2005; Kilpatrick, 1994). Narvaez and colleagues’ (e.g., Narvaez, 1998, 2001, 2002; Narvaez, Gleason, Mitchell, & Bentley, 1999) work on theme comprehension, the idea that cognitive and moral development level influences the moral themes seen in stories, challenges this view of children as passive readers. In addition to differences in moral development level, text comprehension is also influenced by variations in prior knowledge, reading skill, expertise, and cultural background (Bock, 2006). Differences emerged even when controlling for reading comprehension. Hence, children do not necessarily understand a text in the same way and may glean entirely different moral messages than an author intended.

The current study builds on research on the ethical components of texts. Narvaez and colleagues (Gomberg, Orlova, Matthews, & Narvaez, 2004; Narvaez, 1998) developed the Rating Ethical Content Scale (RECS), which examines how moral development influences moral text comprehension using Rest’s (1986) Four Component Model of Morality (moral motivation, sensitivity, judgment, and action). Based on the RECS, Whitney, Vozzola, and Hofmann (2001) designed the Rating Story Content scale (RSCS) to investigate children’s

moral reading of *Harry Potter*. Using the RSCS, Whitney et al. (2001, 2005) found that children absorbed positive moral messages from the series, with the typical child reader understanding the fictional nature of the magic and perceiving the protagonists as characters modeling virtues such as honesty, compassion, and courage. Additionally, in congruence with Narvaez and colleagues' (e.g., Narvaez, 2001; Narvaez, Gleason, et al., 1999) research on moral theme comprehension, children and adults did not necessarily understand the series in the same way but filtered their understanding of the characters and themes through their moral and cognitive schemas. Similarly, Bacigalupa's (2006) research on children's interpretation of moral stories suggests that although children typically identified the main theme (e.g., honesty), comprehension of the theme was filtered through their moral development level and differed from the typical adult's.

Given this study's focus on how those coming from a deep faith perspective view *Harry Potter*, Narvaez, Getz, Rest, and Thoma's (1999) work on the relationship between moral reasoning and religious orientation was invaluable. Findings suggest an interaction between moral judgment and religious orientation, with religious fundamentalism highest at the midranges of moral judgment (especially Stage 4, where one tends to focus on duty and the need for laws to maintain social order). Similarly, Bunch (2005) found that students at Christian liberal arts colleges transitioned to principled moral reasoning at similar rates as those at secular colleges, but students at conservative Bible colleges were more likely to remain at conventional/Stage 4 moral reasoning. Beliefs that authority/faith should not be questioned may prevent someone from transitioning to post-conventional thinking, characterized by open questioning and discussions (Narvaez, Getz, et al., 1999). Hence, fundamentalist Christians may read and assess *Harry Potter*'s appropriateness through the lens of the orthodox Christian worldview, where God defines morality and moral purity

is obtained by following the divine moral code revealed through Scripture (e.g., Hunter, 1991; Jensen, 1997; Narvaez, Getz, et al., 1999). In contrast, liberal Christians may do so through the lens of the progressive Christian worldview, where, rather than simply adhering to a divine moral code, individuals also have the capacity to define moral truths and make autonomous choices.

Given division within the Christian community regarding *Harry Potter*'s moral messages, this study aimed to compare and contrast fundamentalist and liberal Christian families' perceptions of the series, situating findings within the ongoing cultural debate about appropriate moral education texts in pluralistic societies. Considering the range of denominations and plurality of faith in the United States, researchers have struggled to define and measure religious variables and classify denominations along a liberal to fundamentalist continuum (Alwin, Felson, Walker, & Tufis, 2006; Kellstedt & Smith, 1991; Smith, 1990; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). While fundamentalism stresses a literal reading of the Bible, personal salvation, and evangelism, liberal Christianity is less accepting of biblical literalism, more focused on social/humanitarian change, and more progressive (Smith, 1990). However, the Christian community includes various perspectives and researchers use the terms "fundamentalist," "evangelical," "born-again," "conservative Protestant," "biblical," and "Bible-believing" interchangeably to describe people who believe the Bible to be literal truth (Woodberry & Smith, 1998). The Baylor Religion Survey (Bader et al., 2006) found that many Christians identify themselves as and prefer the term "Bible-believing" to describe their beliefs but it is not clear if this is because they hold a more "fundamentalist" perspective. Hence, in this study, "fundamentalist," "Bible-believing" and "biblical" are used interchangeably to refer to Christians who view the Bible literally.

Just as researchers use varying terms to describe "fundamentalists," various techniques have been used to identify fundamen-

talists and to measure variables related to religious orientation (e.g., Kellstedt & Smidt, 1991; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Traditionally, the denominational approach placed denominations on a liberal to fundamentalist continuum (Smith, 1990), but recognition of considerable diversity in beliefs and values within denominations has challenged this approach (Alwin et al., 2006). In response, some measure religious orientation through self-identification as a liberal, mainline, or fundamentalist Christian, while others advocate a combination of approaches including denominational affiliation, beliefs, and self-identification (Alwin et al., 2006; Kellstedt & Smidt, 1991; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Regardless of how religious variables and denominations are conceptualized and classified, most researchers agree that a variable that can be used to differentiate between liberal and fundamentalist Christians is the degree to which one accepts a literal interpretation of Scripture. Greater acceptance of scriptural literalism is associated with fundamentalism, whereas lesser acceptance is associated with liberal Christianity.

An earlier study of fundamentalist families (Senland & Vozzola, 2005) found that parents who allowed their children to read the series were less likely to accept a literal interpretation of Scripture than parents who forbade it. The current study hypothesized that liberal parents would not only score significantly lower than biblical parents on scales of scriptural literalism but would also use different religious spectacles when considering the series and interpreting a general biblical passage prohibiting sorcery. In contrast to biblical parents who forbade their children to read the books and tended to interpret the biblical passage literally when applying it to *Harry Potter*, liberal Christians were expected to interpret the verse more broadly, questioning its applicability to *Harry Potter*.

This study also aimed to consider how the Christian worldview influences children's moral reading of the series. Given some biblical parents' concerns that *Harry Potter* under-

mines Christian values, previous research (Senland & Vozzola, 2005) explored how children from biblical families were conceptualizing the series' magic and interpreting its themes and characters. Findings were consistent with those of Whitney et al. (2005), where children identified courage and friendship as major themes and understood the fictional nature of the magic. Based on these findings, liberal children were also expected to identify courage and friendship as major themes and understand the fictional nature of the magic.

In light of Kohlberg's (1984) moral development theory, previous research explored how children were interpreting the principled moral reasoning and actions of Dumbledore, the wisdom figure of *Harry Potter*'s world and headmaster of the fictional Hogwarts (Senland, 2004). Whited and Grimes (2002) maintain that Dumbledore, who is ultimately responsible for enforcing school rules, consistently employs Kohlberg's Stage 5 or 6 reasoning when he allows or encourages Harry, Ron, and Hermione to break school rules, recognizing that a higher moral law, such as justice, is at stake. Moral development research and theory suggest children can generally understand moral reasoning one stage above their own but cannot fully comprehend reasoning several stages beyond their current functioning. Somewhat surprisingly, a pilot study (Senland, 2004) suggested that children appear to have some insight into Dumbledore's principled moral reasoning, with approximately 84% explicitly stating that rules could be broken to save a life, help someone, or serve a higher good.

Given the Christian emphasis on obedience (Hunter, 1991; Jensen, 1997; Narvaez, Getz, et al., 1999) and controversy over whether *Harry Potter* endorses rule-breaking, previous research (Senland & Vozzola, 2005) investigated how biblical children were interpreting Dumbledore's moral reasoning. Whereas children from previous research (Senland, 2004) focused on Dumbledore's courage and strength when allowing Harry and his friends to break rules, biblical children were more

likely to stress how his actions were unfair to others (Senland & Vozzola, 2005). Given a more progressive worldview, where liberal families might stress discovering truth and making choices, this study hypothesized that liberal children would be less concerned than biblical children about Dumbledore's allowing Harry and his friends to "break rules."

## METHOD

### Participants

Families with children ages 9 to 18 who had read one or more *Harry Potter* books were recruited in the northeastern United States from three liberal Congregational churches known for their social justice commitment. Three liberal families with college students also participated, along with one family with younger children who had already considered the series. During a previous phase of research, the pastor and children's director referred 38 biblical families from a Bible-believing Baptist church in northeastern United States. As a relatively new church, its composition includes Catholic converts and those new to

the faith, as well as long-term biblical Christians. Six families from other east coast Baptist or Lutheran Brethren churches also participated.

The adult liberal sample consisted of 27 women and 6 men of whom 97% had directly experienced the series by either reading at least part of a book or seeing one of the movies (see Table 1). Two additional parents volunteered but were eliminated from the data pool because they completed the survey together. The adult biblical sample from previous research consisted of 40 women and 11 men of whom 68.6% had directly experienced the series. Two additional parents volunteered but were eliminated from the data pool because they completed less than half the survey.

The liberal child sample consisted of 16 girls and 16 boys who had read at least one *Harry Potter* book. One additional child volunteered but was eliminated from the data pool because he came from a liberal family but attended a biblical church. The biblical child sample from previous research consisted of 14 girls and 10 boys who had read at least one book in the series. As seen in Table 1, the children were overwhelmingly White with a small

TABLE 1  
Characteristics of Liberal and Biblical Adults and Children

	<i>Liberal Adults (n = 33)</i>	<i>Biblical Adults<sup>b</sup> (n = 51)</i>
Allowed child to read <i>Harry Potter</i>	100%	53.8%
Read themselves	72.2%	39.2%
Read <i>Harry Potter</i> or saw film(s)	97.0%	68.6%
English as first language	93.0%	98.4%
Caucasian	96.7%	98.4%
Range of church attendance	Once/mo.–several times/wk	Weekly–several times/wk
Range of education	Some college to PhD	High school grad to PhD
	<i>Liberal Children<sup>c</sup> (n = 32)</i>	<i>Biblical Children<sup>d</sup> (n = 24)</i>
Read at least 1 <i>Harry Potter</i>	100%	100%
Caucasian	93.75%	100%
English as first language	100%	-no data-
Range of church attendance	Holidays–several times/wk	Once/mo.–several times/wk

<sup>a</sup>Liberal adults were 38–58 years old,  $M = 46.27$ ; <sup>b</sup>Biblical adults were 31–60 years old,  $M = 45$ ; <sup>c</sup>Liberal children were 9–18 years old,  $M = 11.94$ ; <sup>d</sup>Biblical children were 11–17 years old,  $M = 14.3$ .

percentage (6.25) of the liberal children self-identifying as Asian.

### **Measures**

#### *Rating Story Content Scale (RSCS), Adult Adaptation*

This study used sections of Whitney et al.'s (e.g., 2001, 2005) Rating Story Content Scale (RSCS), including those on background information (e.g., age, sex, primary language, etc.), general information on which *Harry Potter* books participants had read, and perception of the series' themes (e.g., "Did you notice any of these themes in the *Harry Potter* book(s)? Check all that you noticed: Courage, friendship, obedience, etc."). Parents who had read and not read the series filled out similar versions. For those who had not read the series, questions about themes were eliminated and there were slight changes in the wording of directions (e.g., "While we realize you have not read *Harry Potter* ..."). Participants also responded to claims made about *Harry Potter* in the media and general culture such as, "*Harry Potter* reflects Christian values" and "*Harry Potter* is the work of the devil." Non-readers who felt uncomfortable responding to the claims without having read the series were asked to respond based on what they had heard that sounded most credible to them.

#### *Hogge and Friedman's (1967) Scriptural Literalism Scale (SLS)*

Hogge and Friedman's (1967) Scriptural Literalism Scale (SLS) is a 16-item Likert scale designed to assess the degree to which an individual accepts a literal interpretation of Scripture. The split-half reliability ranges from 0.91 to 0.96 (Hogge & Friedman, 1967; Jennings, 1972). Participants responded in terms of how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "Most of the writing in the Scriptures should be taken literally" (1 being *strongly disagree* and 6 being *strongly agree*). During the liberal family phase of the study, one item ("Life originated differently than is

suggested by the Scriptures") was eliminated because participants expressed both verbal and nonverbal confusion over its reverse wording and provided responses that were inconsistent with the rest of their answers. Scores for biblical and liberal participants were recomputed for a 15-point scale and Hogge and Friedman's (1967) original mean scores were adjusted for a 15-point scale. The adjusted mean scores were 24.33 (Baptist), 5.09 (Methodist), and -26.98 (Unitarian).

#### *RSCS, Child Adaptation*

The children's quantitative measure used sections of Whitney et al.'s (e.g., 2001, 2005) RSCS, including those on background information, general information on which *Harry Potter* books the child had read, perception of the series' themes, and views of magic (i.e., "After reading the *Harry Potter* book(s), do you think that there are some people who can do the sort of magic you read about in these books?").

#### *Qualitative Adult Measure*

While this study focused on aspects of the qualitative measure investigating parents' decision-making processes in regard to *Harry Potter* and their responses to a key biblical passage, the measure also asked participants to evaluate Dumbledore's moral reasoning when he allowed the protagonists to break rules (see Appendix A). When opposing the series, many critics have cited Deuteronomy 18:10-11, which states, in part, "Let no one be found among you who ... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells ... Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord..." After reading this Scripture, participants were asked whether it influenced their decision about *Harry Potter* and whether it referred to the kind of magic in the series.

#### *Qualitative Child Measure*

The child measure provided several passages directly from *Harry Potter* clearly dem-

onstrating times when Dumbledore allowed the breakage of rules (see Appendix B). Children were asked why they thought Dumbledore allowed Harry and his friends to break rules (e.g., when Dumbledore allowed the children to use the time-turner to save innocent lives, even though this was against wizardry laws), if they thought this was fair to others, and whether they admired or looked down on Dumbledore for this.

### **Procedure**

Written consent was obtained from a parent of each child; adult participants filled out the consent form independently. Biblical families were interviewed in person, over the phone, or through the mail, depending on a family's comfort level. With one exception, liberal families were interviewed in person. Parents completed the qualitative measure independently or chose to have an interviewer read the measure and transcribe answers. An interviewer read the questions to children under 12 years old and older children who seemed more comfortable with the verbal method. If there was any indication that participants were unclear about a question's meaning, the interviewer would attempt to clarify this before continuing. The adult measure took approximately 1 hour; the child measure about 30 minutes.

### **Data analysis**

Quantitative data was entered into SPSS to obtain group means, frequency counts, and percentages. *T*-test analyses were completed to determine if biblical and liberal parents differed in their acceptance of scriptural literalism. Chi-square analyses were performed to determine if biblical and liberal children differed in their perceptions of whether some people can do the magic they read about. Frequency counts were obtained for themes perceived in the series.

Using Marshall and Rossman's (1995) guidelines for analyzing qualitative data, themes were identified and categories of

meaning were obtained. Frequency counts and percentages were obtained for parents' open-ended responses to Deuteronomy 18:10-11 and children's open-ended responses to Dumbledore's moral reasoning. Chi-square analyses were performed to determine if parents differed in their perceptions of whether the passage referred to Harry Potter's magic and its influence on their decision about the series.

## **RESULTS**

### **Adult Quantitative/Qualitative Results**

Compared to Hogge and Friedman's (1967) adjusted Scriptural Literalism Scale (SLS) mean scores for Baptists (24.33), a more conservative/fundamentalist denomination, Methodists (5.09), a more mainline denomination, and Unitarians (-26.98), a more liberal denomination, fundamentalist participants in the current study had a mean score of 41.32 and liberal participants had a mean score of 4.76. Significant differences were found in SLS scores, with liberal parents less likely to accept a literal interpretation of Scripture ( $t(83) = 12.25, p < 0.001$ ). Liberal parents were also significantly less likely to accept the SLS item that "most of the writing in the Scriptures should be taken literally" ( $t(83) = 11.03, p < 0.001$ ). However, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances also suggests significant differences within the fundamentalist and liberal groups for the total SLS score ( $t(83) = 33.15, p < 0.001$ ). In contrast, Levene's Test for the Equality of Variances found no significant within group differences when evaluating responses to the individual SLS item asking whether Scripture should be taken literally, ( $t(83) = 0.05, p > 0.05$ ).

When asked whether specific Bible verses or teachings guided their decisions about *Harry Potter's* appropriateness, biblical parents tended to mention specific verses touching on witchcraft, sorcery, or staying focused on godly things; whereas, liberal parents typically referred to how the series reflected the

TABLE 2  
Differences in the Perception of Claims Made about *Harry Potter*:  
Percentages of Participants Rating Claims as True

Claim	Religious Orientation		$\chi^2$
	Biblical	Liberal	
Reflects Christian values	10.64	72.73	32.36***
Undermines Christian values	50.00	3.03	20.40***
Is Christian allegory	3.92	59.50	17.20***
Is the work of the devil	32.61	0.00	13.29***
The magic is fantasy	77.55	96.97	5.96*
The magic represents the occult	57.14	6.06	22.17***
Encourages dabbling in the occult	54.17	15.15	12.60***
Teaches themes of love, courage, and friendship	70.45	96.97	8.91**

Note: Items left blank or marked as both true and false were excluded from the data analysis.  
\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

TABLE 3  
Differences in Interpretation of Deuteronomy 18:10-11: Percentage of Participants Rating Statements as True

Statement	Religious Orientation		$\chi^2$
	Biblical	Liberal	
Deuteronomy 18:10-11 influenced [my] decision about whether <i>Harry Potter</i> was appropriate for children	49.02	3.03	19.83**
Deuteronomy 18:10-11 refers to the kind of magic in <i>Harry Potter</i>	81.25	27.27	23.62**

Note: Items left blank or marked as both true and false were excluded from the data analysis.  
\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.001$ .

biblical message or Christian values. For instance, one liberal mother claimed, "*Harry Potter* demonstrates the overall biblical message and the theme of good versus evil. When you stay the course, good will win. It's a lesson on keeping your faith."

When asked to respond to claims made about *Harry Potter* in the general culture, liberal and fundamentalist parents viewed the series through different religious lenses, with liberal parents significantly more likely to see the series as reflecting Christian values and as Christian allegory (see Table 2). In contrast, biblical parents were more likely to see the series as undermining Christian values and as being the work of the devil. Whereas liberal

parents tended to perceive *Harry Potter*'s magic as fantasy, biblical parents tended to view it as the occult.

Both groups also differed significantly when interpreting Deuteronomy 18:10-11 (see Table 3). Biblical parents were more likely to claim the passage's influence on their decision about *Harry Potter*'s appropriateness and to perceive its proscriptions against "sorcery" and "witchcraft" as referring to the type of magic in *Harry Potter*. When explaining whether the passage influenced their decision, 54.2% of biblical participants fell into the category that "Yes [the verse influenced my decision], because God's principles are black and white," while none (0%) of the liberal partici-

pants used such reasoning. Biblical and liberal parents indicating that the verse had not influenced their decision took its context into account, focusing on the series' fictional nature and the fact that readers were not engaging in such practices. Some liberal parents also stressed that Scripture was just one basis for decisions and a large subset (42.4%) indicated they were unaware of the passage.

When asked whether Deuteronomy 18:10-11 refers to the kind of magic in *Harry Potter*, biblical and liberal responses tended to fall into three main categories including, "Yes," "Yes, but," and "No." The majority of the fundamentalist parents (58%) agreed that the passage referred to the series' magic. For example, one parent stated, "Yes ... the Potter series refers to and uses *real* witchcraft, *real* demons, *real* names, and *real* spells ..." Fundamentalist parents who fell into the "yes, but" category (23.3%) agreed that the passage referred to the kind of magic in the series but qualified their answers by explaining that the series was fantasy, and readers were not engaging in these practices. In contrast, most liberal parents (75.8%) argued that the verse did not refer to *Harry Potter's* magic. While some responded similarly to biblical parents who focused on the series' fantasy nature, others claimed they did not believe in magic or suggested a broader meaning for the verse. For example, "No, the passage refers to relying on aspects other than God as the spiritual center of your life."

### ***Child Quantitative/Qualitative Results***

Both biblical and liberal child readers identified courage (biblical 100%, liberal 100%) and friendship (biblical 96%, liberal 100%) as major themes. For example, one biblical child explained, "The power of friendship, love, and trust is a lot greater than evil," while a liberal child claimed, "I learned that no matter what, good friends will always stand by your side." There were no significant differences in the number of times the biblical and liberal children had read any of the books or seen the first

two *Harry Potter* movies. The third movie had just come out when the biblical children were interviewed so comparisons could not be made.

Additionally, there were no significant differences between the percentages of biblical and liberal children who thought that some people could do the magic they read about in *Harry Potter* (biblical 12.5%, liberal 21.9%). However, of those who thought that some people could do magic, biblical children were more likely to agree that "it is against a lot of religious rules to use magic" (biblical 100%, liberal 0%). Additionally, biblical children who thought that some people could do magic tended to refer to such magic in relation to the devil. For example, a biblical reader explained, "people can do it [magic] but they do it for evil ... the devil makes them do it." In contrast, liberal children who thought that some people could do magic tended to associate magic with the nonreligious. For instance, "Yes [people can do magic], in very remote parts of the world like the Asian part of Russia, where cannibals live...."

Biblical and liberal children evidenced similar perceptions of Dumbledore's moral sensitivity, motivation, action, and judgment using the RSCS. Analysis of the open-ended responses suggests that most biblical and liberal children perceived that Dumbledore allowed the children to break rules to save a life, help someone, or serve a higher good (biblical 79.2%, liberal 93.8%). When asked whether it would have been fairer to other students if Dumbledore punished Harry, Ron, and Hermione when they broke school rules, approximately the same percentage of biblical and liberal children focused on the unfairness of his actions, concentrating on his favoritism and the ideal that all students should be treated the same (37% liberal, 43.5% biblical). Similarly, approximately the same percentage thought that Dumbledore's actions were fair because they allowed Harry, Ron, and Hermione to serve the greater good (43.8% liberal, 39.1% biblical). Additionally, compared to liberal children who admired Dumbledore's

moral courage and judgment when he allowed the breakage of rules, biblical children were more likely to see value in the result (saving a life) but question the means used to achieve it (breaking rules). For instance, one biblical reader replied, “I don’t respect him for breaking rules—or look down on him because he had reasons for it.”

## DISCUSSION

In this study, biblical families tended to view *Harry Potter* through the lens of the orthodox Christian worldview where God defines morality and moral purity is obtained by following the divine moral code revealed through Scripture. In contrast, liberal families tended to view the series through the lens of the progressive Christian worldview, where individual Christians have the capacity to define moral truths and make autonomous choices. These results replicated Narvaez’s (e.g., 2001, 2002) previous finding that individuals understand moral stories differently, depending on what is meaningful to them.

As expected, liberal Christian parents were significantly less likely to accept a literal interpretation of Scripture than biblical parents were. Although significant differences also emerged on SLS scores within liberal and biblical congregations, this is consistent with Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999) and Smith (1990), who found not only differences between congregations on measures tapping biblical literalism but also variation within congregations.

As hypothesized, liberal and biblical parents used different religious spectacles when interpreting Deuteronomy 18:10-11. In response to whether specific Bible verses or teachings influenced their decision about *Harry Potter*, liberal parents’ tendencies to elaborate on how the series reflects the overall biblical message suggest a “thou shalt” schema, with a focus on a positive potential for discovering Christian messages of love, helping others, and goodness. In contrast, biblical

parents’ tendencies to respond with specific verses discussing the dangers of witchcraft suggest a “thou shalt not” schema, with a focus on avoiding anything, such as witchcraft, that might draw one away from the faith. Similarly, when asked to respond to media claims about *Harry Potter*, liberal parents were significantly more likely to see *Harry Potter* as reflecting Christian values, as Christian allegory, and as teaching positive themes than biblical parents, who were more likely to see the series as undermining Christian values, being the work of the devil, and encouraging children to dabble in the occult. Such leanings are consistent with McNeel and Thorsen’s (1985) discussion of the Christian faith, which suggests that for “the dogmatic ... individual, the need to ward off threat takes precedence over the need to know and understand” (p. 211).

An earlier study of fundamentalist families (Senland & Vozzola, 2005) found that biblical parents who allowed and those who forbade their children to read *Harry Potter* reached slightly different conclusions about Deuteronomy 18:10-11’s specific applications. A literal interpretation of the verse suggests that one needs to avoid anything relating to witchcraft. Biblical parents who forbade their children to read *Harry Potter* tended to interpret such proscriptions as absolutely binding, regardless of circumstance or medium. In contrast, biblical parents who allowed their children to read *Harry Potter* seemed to reconcile their actions/beliefs by agreeing with the verse but refuting its applicability to works of “fantasy” such as *Harry Potter*. As hypothesized, in the current study, liberal parents took a broader and less literal interpretation of the verse, questioning its applicability to *Harry Potter*. Many were unfamiliar with the verse, while others noted that it was irrelevant because they did not believe in magic. As Kern (2003) argues, Christians debate *Harry Potter* in part because they disagree about witchcraft’s reality. Christians tend to perceive *Harry Potter*’s magic as fantasy when they either do not believe in magic or believe in magic but not within the context of fantasy. On the contrary, when

Christians believe that magic is real and can lead children to the occult regardless of whether it is fantasy or reality, they emphasize how *Harry Potter*'s magic refers to the magic in Deuteronomy (Kern, 2003). Given that adherence to the Scriptures is key to moral purity in the orthodox Christian worldview, biblical parents who operate from a more literal perspective would reach a different conclusion about the series than parents who believe in magic but think that the books are harmless fantasy or liberal parents who do not believe in magic.

As hypothesized, findings for liberal and biblical children are consistent with those of Whitney et al. (2005), where children identified courage and friendship as the series' major themes and understood the fictional nature of the magic. Both biblical and liberal children seemed to recognize that a higher principle is at stake when Dumbledore allows the children to break rules. Consistent with the liberal Christian worldview, where adherents focus on one's capacity to discover moral truths and make choices, liberal children were more likely than biblical children to admire Dumbledore's moral courage, judgment, and wisdom in allowing the children to break rules. In contrast, consistent with an orthodox Christian worldview, which emphasizes obedience to divine standards, biblical children were more likely to value the result but question the means to achieve this (e.g., breaking rules). Similarly, biblical children who thought the series' magic could occur in real life tended to attribute its origin to the devil (or God) and endorse the claim that there are a lot of religious rules against magic. In contrast, just as liberal parents did not necessarily believe in magic or seem concerned about the series' magical elements, liberal children who believed in the magic they read about attributed it to far-away lands and seemed unaware of religious rules against magic. During the interview, one liberal child did say, "*Harry Potter* makes me more of a believer because now I want to believe that magic is real and it opens my mind to more possibilities" suggest-

ing that future qualitative interviews might be helpful in better understanding the trend for the books to open some readers to magic (albeit white magic).

Although the differences between fundamentalist and liberal Christian families' perceptions of *Harry Potter* are intriguing, this study has also revealed limitations to address and further avenues to pursue. Researchers' struggle to define and measure religious variables and classify denominations along the fundamentalism/liberalism continuum has led to the use of a variety of approaches and measures to investigate and classify key aspects of religious experience, including biblical literalism (Alwin et al., 2006; Kellstedt & Smidt, 1991; Smith, 1990; Woodberry & Smith, 1998). Previous research (Senland & Vozzola, 2005) found that conservative Christians were not a monolithic group in opposition to *Harry Potter*, but rather, appeared to make individual decisions about the series' appropriateness. Biblical parents who allowed their children to read the books were significantly less likely to accept a literal interpretation of Scripture than parents who forbade it. Simply comparing liberal and biblical parents, as in the current study, may wash out differences found among biblical parents on scriptural literalism, suggesting that future research may consider the unit of analysis (the SLS) on a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

While biblical families were interviewed in person, over the phone, or through the mail, all but one liberal family was interviewed in-person. Given the sensitive nature of the *Harry Potter* controversy for conservative Christians, the interviewer noticed and respected that many biblical participants were more comfortable participating over the phone. Other interviewing options were not offered to liberal families because discussing *Harry Potter* did not seem as controversial or sensitive an issue for them. Considering different interviewing methods may produce different results, biblical families interviewed over the phone or through the mail may have responded differently in person. All biblical parents who com-

pleted the survey through the mail were opposed to their children reading *Harry Potter*. Hence, this turned out to be an important choice because requesting only in person interviews for biblical participants may have biased the sample by eliminating families who felt hesitant about an in person interview but seemed comfortable sharing their positions in a more impersonal way. In the future, researchers may want to consider how best to respect varying levels of sensitivity to *Harry Potter* without using different interviewing methods.

Furthermore, as the series progresses, it becomes appropriate for increasingly older audiences. Although the first books may be appropriate for 9- or 10-year-olds, the latter books appear aimed at older teens. Our study collected no data on whether participants read the books at age-appropriate times, but this is a variable that could potentially impact children's perceptions of and responses to the series' themes and characters. Additionally, we did not have access to groups of participants who had read only one of the *Harry Potter* books, limiting our insight into children's understanding of particular moral themes that may have been stressed in specific books (e.g., friendship in the first book versus forgiveness in the last book).

Broader implications of the study's findings for moral education are suggested with the caveat that data was collected in the northeast; one of the more liberal regions of the United States. Families in more conservative regions may have different norms. Although traditional character educators focus on the value of simply reading moral stories such as *Harry Potter* (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Kilpatrick, 1994), Narvaez and colleagues' work (e.g., Narvaez, 2001; Narvaez, Gleason, et al., 1999) suggests that not all children and adults interpret stories the same way. The current study suggests that children are generally not being led to an interest in the occult by reading *Harry Potter* but appear to filter their understanding of the plot, themes, and characters through what they have learned in their churches and families. In gen-

eral, children understand the context in which Dumbledore is making decisions, and hence do not appear to learn to break rules simply because they witness an authority figure in the series doing so. Rather, children are assessing the value of rules and concentrating on the theme of friendship and courage within the series. As researchers and Christian authors have emphasized, the *Harry Potter* series can also provide opportunities for moral instruction as it exposes children to the complex-reality of moral decision making, encouraging them to "grow beyond the simplistic morality of just minding the rules" (Neal, 2001, p. 175). While this study provides evidence that *Harry Potter* may not be as harmful to children as some believe and argue, which can be used by schools and libraries facing censorship issues, findings also suggest the importance of sensitivity to children's diverse religious perspectives.

Although some Christians forbid their children to read *Harry Potter*, many children reading the series do come from a deep faith perspective, suggesting a need to respect and be sensitive to perspectives of children with a religious background. Religion is a sensitive issue in today's multicultural world, and as Dill (2007) suggests, teachers are not necessarily prepared to deal with religious perspectives in school. Using *Harry Potter* in the classroom raises different ethical concerns depending on developmental level. Thus, teachers should be cognizant of their students' moral and cognitive maturity as they decide how or if to present a controversial work in a way that uses its richness yet remains respectful of various viewpoints.

Using *Harry Potter* in the classroom may cause students to experience conflict, tension, and cognitive disequilibrium, as they reconcile differing opinions and viewpoints of parents and other authority figures such as teachers or pastors. Varying viewpoints may be particularly hard for those who reason preconventionally, such as elementary students, who may continue looking to and relying on their churches and families for answers. Older chil-

dren can be respectfully nudged to consider the complexity of viewpoints on *Harry Potter*, with teachers explicitly pointing out the value of exposing students to varying positions. Although doing so may lead some adolescents to question religious authorities, sensitive adult guidance may help them to move to a more complex and satisfying understanding of faith and morality. Given that many parents in our study read the books alongside their children, teachers using *Harry Potter* may want to consider letting all parents know and providing alternative assignments if necessary. Parents can then choose to read the books with their children or voice specific concerns about why their children should not read the series, such as a strong religious conviction or previous fascination with the occult.

Although controversial, when cautiously considered, *Harry Potter* can expose children and adolescents to a complex moral world, thus providing opportunities for them to learn how to process moral messages and evaluate popular culture through the lens of faith. By reading the series with children and adolescents, concerned parents and moral educators can promote moral growth and development by guiding youth in understanding the moral dimensions of Harry's decisions and actions.

#### **APPENDIX A: QUALITATIVE ADULT INTERVIEW**

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Saint Joseph College West Hartford, CT

**Directions:** Please answer the following questions.

1. What motivated you to read *Harry Potter*? What types of positive and/or negative comments had you heard about the series before you read the book(s)?

2a. Do you think the *Harry Potter* series is appropriate for children? If you have children,

are you comfortable with your children reading the series? Why or why not?

2b. Are there specific Bible verses or biblical teachings on which you have based your conclusions on?

3. Many critics of the *Harry Potter* books cite Deuteronomy 18:10-11 as part of their rationale for opposing children reading the *Harry Potter* books. Please read the following verse and then answer the questions below:

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord...” (Deuteronomy 18:10-11)

3a. Did this specific passage influence your own decision about whether *Harry Potter* was appropriate for children?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

3b. Why or why not?

3c. Do you think this passage refers to the kind of magic in *Harry Potter*?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

3d. Why or why not?

4. Can you think of any examples when Dumbledore allowed or even encouraged Harry, Ron, and Hermione to break rules?

4b. Are there ever times when it is okay to break a rule? If so, when?

**Please read the following passages:** When you are finished, please turn the page for some questions about these passages.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry used the invisibility cloak to wander

around Hogwarts late at night and enter the restricted section of the library. When Harry asked Dumbledore who sent it to him, Dumbledore exclaimed, “*Ah—Your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it ... Useful things... your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here*” (p. 299).

You may remember that in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, after Harry and Ron entered the Chamber of Secrets and rescued Ginny, Dumbledore exclaimed, “*I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules ... Which just goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words ... you will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and—let me see—yes, I think two hundred points a piece for Gryffindor*” (p. 331).

In this passage, from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Dumbledore encouraged Harry and Hermione to use the time-turner to go back in time to save Buckbeak and Sirius Black. He explained that, “*What we need ... is more time ... If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law—you know what is at stake ... You—must—not—be—seen*” (p. 393). Later, Hermione explained the time-turner to Harry. She revealed that by going back in time to change things they were, “*breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody’s supposed to change time, nobody!*” (p. 398)

4c. Why do you think that Dumbledore sometimes allows the children to break rules? (For example, when he encouraged Hermione and Harry to use the time-turner?)

4d. Do you think that it would have been more fair to other kids at Hogwarts if Dumbledore had punished Harry, Ron, and Hermione when they broke school rules? Please explain.

4e. When you read passages where Dumbledore allows Harry, Ron, and Hermione to break rules, do you admire him or look down on him? Please explain.

5. Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about the *Harry Potter* books, Dumbledore, or this survey?

Thank you very much

### **APPENDIX B: QUALITATIVE CHILD INTERVIEW**

Department of Psychology  
Saint Joseph College West Hartford, CT

**Directions:** Please answer the following questions.

1. Can you tell me a little bit about what got you interested in *Harry Potter*? Had you heard anything about the series before you read the books?

2. Have your parents read the *Harry Potter* books? If so, do they talk about the books with you?

3. Below is a verse many writers and journalists have discussed when supporting their position on *Harry Potter*. Please read the verse and then answer the following questions.

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord ...” (Deuteronomy 18: 10-11)

3a. Are you familiar with this passage?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

3b. Did any adult ever quote this passage to you in a discussion about the books?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

4a. Can you think of any examples when Dumbledore allowed or even encouraged Harry, Ron, and Hermione to break rules?

4b. Are there ever times when it is okay to break a rule? If so, when?

**Please read the following passages:** When you are finished, please turn the page for some questions about these passages.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry used the invisibility cloak to wander around Hogwarts late at night and enter the restricted section of the library. When Harry asked Dumbledore who sent it to him, Dumbledore exclaimed, "*Ah—Your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it ... Useful things ... your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here*" (p. 299).

You may remember that in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, after Harry and Ron entered the Chamber of Secrets and rescued Ginny, Dumbledore exclaimed, "*I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules ... Which just goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words ... you will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and—let me see—yes, I think two hundred points a piece for Gryffindor*" (p. 331).

In this passage, from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Dumbledore encouraged Harry and Hermione to use the time-turner to go back in time to save Buckbeak and Sirius Black. He explained that, "*What we need ... is more time ... If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law—you*

*know what is at stake... You—must—not—be—seen*" (p. 393). Later, Hermione explained the time-turner to Harry. She revealed that by going back in time to change things they were, "*breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody's supposed to change time, nobody!*" (p. 398).

4c. Why do you think that Dumbledore sometimes allows the children to break rules? (For example, when he encouraged Hermione and Harry to use the time-turner?)

4d. Do you think that it would have been more fair to other kids at Hogwarts if Dumbledore had punished Harry, Ron, and Hermione when they broke school rules? Please explain.

4e. When you read passages where Dumbledore allows Harry, Ron, and Hermione to break rules, do you admire him or look down on him? Please explain.

5. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the Harry Potter books, Dumbledore, or this survey?

Thank you very much!

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