

Reimagining Religion in a Contemporary Context:

The Case of Harry Potter

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*“After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the
next great adventure.”
-Albus Dumbledore*

For Athena--
Thank you for lighting my divine spark.

זיכרונו לברכה

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Preface

One of my first memories was waking up with the fourth *Harry Potter* book between my legs. I had fallen asleep reading the book, so utterly entranced by the story that I could not stop. I have always approached *Harry Potter* with the reverence that is often associated with religious devotion. As I struggled to navigate middle and high school, I often found myself seeking guidance from Harry, Hermione, and Ron. My struggle with mental illness was eased only by the comforting words of Luna Lovegood or the laughter brought by Fred and George Weasley. I found solace, hope, love, and community within the pages of *Harry Potter*. On my eighteenth birthday, I got the Hogwarts castle tattooed on my forearm, a symbol of triumph over difficult times and my faith in the series. But I never attend a religious service to talk about the meaning of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. Although the *Harry Potter* series felt religious to me, it did not really seem to have any of the elements that are closely linked with what I thought of as religious practice.

Simultaneously I experienced traditional (or as traditional as you can get at a Renewal synagogue in Boulder, Colorado) religion. I had Shabbat dinner every Friday night, hosted Passover seders, kept kosher, and gained some of my closest friends through our weekly Bat Mitzvah preparation class. I sang the prayers and learned the history and language. Both of my parents converted to Judaism, and they found meaning and purpose within the Torah and their religious community. Yet, I never turned to Judaism for support. The religion I grew up with did not feel as meaningful or significant to me as *Harry Potter*. So why wasn't *Harry Potter* and its surrounding universe a religion? I wondered: what constitutes a text or community as religious?

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a self-conscious break with inherited forms of religious belief and practice, along with a growing interest in what we might describe as non-traditional forms of religious life. An increasing number of people—one-fifth of the United States population, as of 2012—do not identify with any religion.¹ Why? According to the Pew Center, “some said they do not believe in religious teachings or dislike organized religion, while others said they *are* religious (though unaffiliated)...or that they believe in God but do not practice any religion.”² Because they are disenchanted with organized religion, they turn to other sources for the meaning and experiences associated with religion. That is not to say that people are becoming more secular, necessarily, but rather that they find religious meaning and community beyond the reaches of what we often conceptualize as traditional religion. For David Chidester, Coca Cola, baseball, and rock and roll could all be considered religious because they “evoke familiar metaphors...that resonate with other discourses, practices, experiences, and social formations that we are prepared to include within the ambit of religion.”³ Indeed, even scholars who study more traditional modes of religion find themselves striving to redefine it: to Robert Orsi, a Catholic scholar, religion is “a network of relationships between heaven and earth

¹ “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012), <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

² “Why America’s ‘Nones’ Don’t Identify with a Religion,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, August 8, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>.

³ David Chidester, “The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (January 1996): 743-765, 760.

involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together.”⁴ Because of these changes, we as scholars should ask ourselves: can we create a new definition of “religion” that is more suited to the contemporary world? This thesis will attempt to create a modern definition of religion that can expand to fit new types of phenomena alongside more traditional forms of religious life. In order to do this, I will draw on modern Jewish thinkers to develop an account of what religion involves. Then I will take this definition and attempt to apply it to one influential contemporary phenomenon—the *Harry Potter* series and its community of fans, often known as “the Potterverse”—to evaluate whether this account can encompass varying types of modern religious life.

The first chapter will focus on Jewish thought. Rather than begin from scratch, I will identify some key features of religion with which earlier thinkers have previously grappled, molding my own definition by drawing on the work of these figures. These thinkers will help me create a holistic description of religion which is sufficiently capacious to encompass contemporary forms of religious life, while also being appropriately rooted in the past to illuminate inherited modes of belief and practice. These Jewish sources often contrast and conflict with one another. Because I want to create an inclusive definition, I need precisely this

⁴ Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2.

type of diversity—a wide range of thinkers whose religious outlooks are themselves varied enough to encompass the breadth that I hope will fit within my definition.

I will turn to Judaism and the history of modern Jewish thought as my basis because questions regarding the conceptualization of religion have become central to Jewish tradition. According to Leora Batnitzky, “the question of whether Judaism and Jewishness refers to a religion, nationality, or culture is a particularly modern one.”⁵ Judaism is an important religion to study because modernity has brought questions to a wide range of Jewish thinkers and groups about how we think about religion. Batnitzky uses many of the thinkers that I will turn to in order to see “whether their conceptions of Judaism are best explained within the framework of a modern concept of religion.”⁶ Jewish thinkers are currently being discussed amid debates about the concept of “religion” and are simultaneously grappling with what it means to be “religious.” Therefore, I can turn to Judaism to find sources on modern religion and religious practices.

After developing the aforementioned definition, I will devote my second chapter to taking a contemporary phenomenon—the Potterverse—and testing my definition to begin to assess whether it is expansive enough to include non-traditional forms of religious life. The influence of *Harry Potter* spans diverse countries and cultures, and its community of fans worldwide has much in common with what we often associate with religious life. Like traditional forms of religious belief and practice, the series has inspired creativity, including fan fiction, podcasts, visual art, and other original works. The series has not only inspired creation; it has also formed communities through online fora, sparked interpersonal connection through

⁵ Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

symbolic practices (such as tattoos, apparel, and other forms of visible identification), and even generated holiday-like festivals.

I am not the only one who has made this connection between *Harry Potter* and religion. There is a growing body of scholarly and popular literature relating to the religious dimensions of the Potterverse (some of which I will explore in this thesis). Some figures associated with more traditional religions—especially Christianity—have also made this connection. There are countless articles and even a few books that address *Potter* in a Christian context, some of which embrace the series, and some of which express vehement opposition. John Granger, a Catholic author, advocates for the utility of the *Harry Potter* series for moral teachings and has written the book *Looking for God in Harry Potter*.⁷ Contrastingly, Michael O'Brien, also a Catholic, argues that the series' "wizard world is interactive with the real world and violates the moral order in both."⁸ Referred to by Danielle Soulliere as a "moral panic," the debates around the *Harry Potter* series have spread across a wide range of Christian groups.⁹ The *Potter* books have been removed from libraries and denounced for witchcraft and satanism. These facts suggest that this series exhibits enough points of contact with more traditional forms of religion that some communities feel the need to address it.

Because of this widespread sense that there is something religious about the *Harry Potter* series and its community of fans, we can use the Potterverse to test the definition created in the previous chapter. This test will not involve using my definition to identify whether the Potterverse counts as "religious." Rather, beginning from the assumption that this series *does*

⁷ John Granger, *Looking for God in Harry Potter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006).

⁸ Michael O'Brien, "Harry Potter and the Paganization of Children's Culture," *The Catholic Report* (2001) 4.

⁹ Danielle M. Soulliere, "Much Ado about Harry: Harry Potter and the Creation of a Moral Panic," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 22, no. 1 (2010): 6.

have much in common with traditional forms of religious belief and practice, I will ask whether my new definition is capable of grasping this—whether it is capable of encompassing a phenomenon such as *Harry Potter* in its account of religious life, illuminating, with more precision, *why* this series strikes so many as “religious.” In particular, I will look to the factors identified in my first chapter—community, practice, holiness, interpretation, conflict, and the potentially all-encompassing nature of religious life—and ask whether they are also central to the Potterverse. Thus, I will enter this chapter with the assumption that *Harry Potter* falls within the sphere of contemporary religion and try to understand why this could be by using my definition.

The sources for this section will be much more varied than those of the previous chapter. They will include content drawn from popular culture such as articles, fan websites, podcasts, and even images. Although much of the source material for this chapter will not be scholarly, I will, at times, draw on the growing body of scholarly work surrounding *Harry Potter*.

Together, Judaism and the Potterverse will give us insight into how religion exists in a contemporary context. I will use Judaism as a basis and the *Harry Potter* series and community as a test for a definition that should expand to diverse spaces of modern religious life. In this thesis, I will provide insight into modern forms of religion and how, in an expanding, interconnected, and diverse world, people find meaning and holiness in an array of texts and communities that fit within and expand beyond our traditional conceptions of religion.

Chapter One: A Jewish Perspective on Religion

Introduction

This chapter will examine the resources provided by the work of four modern Jewish thinkers—Judith Plaskow, Martin Buber, Mordecai Kaplan, and Joseph Soloveitchik—as we attempt to generate an account of religion tailored to fit within our contemporary context. These authors come from distinct backgrounds, both in terms of location and in terms of time period, and approach Judaism through different lenses. However, by extracting themes that run across the diverse perspectives on Jewish life that they represent, I hope to create a definition of religion that speaks to many diverse forms of religious life today. These thinkers will help to create the description of religion discussed in the introduction—one which is sufficiently capacious to encompass contemporary forms of religious life, while also being appropriately rooted in the past to illuminate inherited modes of belief and practice. While in many ways these thinkers advance incompatible conceptions of what religion should look like, each one also articulates ideas that fit cohesively with the other thinkers’ perspectives. Since I am trying to develop an account of religion that fits the diversity of the modern world, I will use these four different modern thinkers to point me to different pieces of religion in a modern context.

Each of these sources points to an important facet of religious life. Plaskow delves into the importance of interpretation and reinterpretation of inherited practices and shared texts. Buber will allow us to create a non-traditional idea of God, as well as emphasizing what I will describe as a values-based form of religion. Kaplan discusses the necessity of community within religious life. He will also illuminate the potentially all-encompassing nature of religious life, showing that facets of daily life that we often associate with the term “culture” can be integral to

religion. Interestingly enough, Soloveitchik, who in some ways fits least with the other thinkers, contributes much to this discussion of religion. Although he is the most traditionalist of the figures I consider, he emphasizes the importance of the role of the individual in religion far more than the other thinkers. At the same time, he also emphasizes the role of community. Here is where we will find insight into another key aspect of religious life: the existence and centrality of internal conflict. Religion is messy, and there exist conflicts and tensions between thinkers, individuals, and even texts within each religious community. In fact, the reason I include such a diverse group of thinkers is because I want to see what voices have contributed to, and are still contributing to, modern religious perspectives, even though those voices can often be at odds with each other. Conflict does not invalidate one worldview or another, but rather we must be willing to expand our conception of religion until it can fit, as best as possible, a wide range of thinkers.

Each of these figures will give me one or two distinct elements of the overall definition. It is important to note that, even though I will focus on certain issues for each thinker, there is a significant amount of overlap. Although Buber will be my main thinker for what I describe as a values-based account of religion, Kaplan and Plaskow also explore the importance of values that animate practice. Similarly, although Kaplan will focus mostly on community, all of these thinkers address this issue in one way or another. Even though each one of these scholars speaks to distinct dynamics of religious life, they will help generate a definition that will, I argue, be able to encompass both the views of all this chapter's figures and the dynamics of the *Harry Potter* series and its community of fans.

Judith Plaskow

Judith Plaskow, born in 1947, has taught Religious Studies at New York University, Wichita State University, and Manhattan College, and was one of the founders of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.¹⁰ The most recent of our thinkers, her analysis of Judaism focuses on religion and feminist theory. In her 1991 book *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow looks at Judaism through a feminist lens:

All of the tensions, between being a woman, a feminist, a historically grounded person, a post-colonialist, on the one hand and being a Jew, on the other, are merged into a feminist synthesis in which a dynamic, non-essentialist theology emerges from a unified feminist Jewish self.¹¹

This is all to say that Plaskow comes from a perspective that distinguishes her from the other figures whom we'll explore, insofar as she takes her experiences as a feminist and her experiences as a Jew and attempts to find a way to bring these identities together. She is, to put it succinctly, "not just a religious feminist who critiques the abuses of the patriarchy but a *Jewish feminist* who cares deeply about Judaism."¹² While the other thinkers I will examine are all men, Plaskow has the unique experience of having to struggle to secure access to certain aspects of Jewish life that traditionally were closed to women. Thinkers like Kaplan chose to forgo more traditionalist forms of Judaism, but Plaskow had no choice; in order to participate meaningfully in Jewish spaces, she needed to redefine such spaces.

¹⁰ Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes, eds., *Judith Plaskow: Feminism, Theology, and Justice* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 8.

¹¹ Rachel Adler, "Judith Plaskow," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* (Jewish Women's Archive, 2009), <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/plaskow-judith>.

¹² Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes, *Judith Plaskow: Feminism, Theology, and Justice*, 6.

In *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow roots her Judaism in a concern with allowing women¹³ to be present in all forms of Jewish life. She argues for the reinterpretation of Judaism as a whole: “Feminism demands a new understanding of Torah, Israel, and God.”¹⁴ This reinterpretation is at the core of Plaskow’s Judaism. Many traditional elements of Jewish life focus primarily or solely on men. God is gendered male, and most of the prominent figures in classical texts such as the Hebrew Bible are male, with women appearing primarily in the role of wives. While there is some female representation—the story of Esther¹⁵ is one example—biblical texts are male-dominated. Not only that, but many aspects of traditional practice revolve around, or even require, male participation. From Plaskow’s perspective, women in more traditional Jewish settings are separated from the men and relegated to what have traditionally been viewed as women’s roles: cooking, cleaning, and birthing.¹⁶ They are not counted in, and often excluded from, minyanim or prayer quorums,¹⁷ which is just one example of not being able to participate fully in all aspects of religious life. Even within less traditional communities, women’s places within religious space have often been severely curtailed. The first female rabbi, Regina Jonas, was ordained in 1935 in Berlin.¹⁸ In 1972, the Reform movement ordained the first United States female rabbi, Sally Priesand, and the Conservative movement gained its first female rabbi, Amy

¹³ Plaskow, who wrote primarily during the second and third waves of feminism, focused specifically on maleness and femaleness, not including people whose gender falls outside of that binary. This is important to note and is the reason why I will be focusing specifically on women when discussing Plaskow. However, I should also state that within my definition of religion there exist people across racial, ethnic, gender, ability, and sexuality spectrums. This will be discussed later when I mention the impact of J.K. Rowling’s transphobia on the Harry Potter community.

¹⁴ Judith Plaskow. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 9.

¹⁵ This story is told traditionally on Purim, a Jewish holiday that falls during the spring. It follows a woman who builds a relationship with the king of the land and then uses this relationship to save the Jewish people and defeat Haman, the man who attempted to have all of the Jews killed.

¹⁶ This is in the process of changing since *Standing Again at Sinai*, and there are now more conversations surrounding Jewish women in traditionally male-dominated spaces.

¹⁷ Minyanim traditionally require ten men and often exclude women from that practice.

¹⁸ Hartmut Bomhoff et al., *Gender and Religious Leadership: Women Rabbis, Pastors, and Ministers* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 145.

Eilberg, in 1985.¹⁹ Rabbi has, until very recently, been a male-exclusive role. To Plaskow, Judaism must be reimagined to include women in all roles and spaces. To achieve this goal, Plaskow must reinterpret not only traditional texts but also traditional practices.

In order to reimagine Judaism as a religion that welcomes the full participation of women, she must first establish that religion itself changes form depending on the time and place in which it exists. For this to be the case, there is one thing that must also be true: that “scripture itself is a product of community.”²⁰ If scripture is a product of community, then communities themselves have the authority to interpret and change religious texts and practices. To Plaskow, religion exists not as a phenomenon that is fixed in time (“this is how it has always been”), but rather as a more fluid set of beliefs and practices that are based in and generated by the communities within which they are valued. This means that contemporary thinkers and communities have the same authority to change Judaism as past thinkers and communities. As communities expand and change, traditional texts should be reinterpreted to fit with the needs of the community.

How does Plaskow reinterpret Judaism? She does so in three ways: reinterpretation of texts, reinterpretation of concepts, and reform of practices. She believes that “the same critical tools, literary and historical, that one would bring to reading any text are appropriate to religious sources.”²¹ Here she advocates for critical textual analysis and reinterpretation. Indeed, she demands it: “We cannot redefine Judaism in the present without redefining our past.”²² Plaskow focuses on expanding the stories of female biblical figures, as well as allowing women to

¹⁹ Ibid., 89, 297.

²⁰ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 19.

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² Ibid., 31.

“connect [women’s] history with present religious experiences.”²³ For example, she calls for reimagining the stories of Lilith and Eve, both female figures who appear in classical Jewish texts but are often portrayed negatively, in order to positively frame women in traditional Jewish stories.²⁴ As seen above, she time and time again says that reinterpretation is a necessary piece of modern Judaism.

Plaskow also reimagines some conceptual pieces of traditional Jewish texts, including God. The God-figure of Judaism is historically gendered as male. To Plaskow, this is not based on a fundamental truth, but rather reflects the fact that religion is “expressed in a vocabulary drawn from the significant and valuable in a particular culture.”²⁵ God is without gender, and maleness has been imposed upon the God-figure because of societal norms. This maleness is “so deeply and firmly established as a part of the Jewish conception of God...[that] it is simply part of the lens through which God is seen.”²⁶ To reshape Judaism to include women in the narrative, Plaskow must radically reimagine what Judaism can be, starting with concepts embedded in the Hebrew Bible itself. In *Standing Again at Sinai*, she uses female pronouns when referencing God. Here, she is not taking a passage and reframing what it means, but rather taking the entire concept of God and reshaping it. The idea extends beyond just the naming of God as “He,” but also through traits attributed to God: a dominant and formidable warrior and king.²⁷ Plaskow seeks to change not only the pronouns used for God, but also create a space for feminine spirituality. Plaskow sees Her²⁸ as “not a great king who rules the world,” but rather “the power

²³ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 54.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 123.

²⁷ Ibid., 132.

²⁸ I will be using different pronouns to refer to God. While Plaskow believes God to be female, the other thinkers identify God with He/Him/His. Thus, when discussing each thinker, I will be referencing God with the pronouns that that theologian uses.

that sustains and moves it.”²⁹ In this, Plaskow takes traditional conceptions of God and reinterprets this concept to create a more diverse and inclusive form of Judaism. This signals that religious reinterpretation is not only possible but often necessary to adapt religion to modern life.

Of the thinkers considered in this chapter, Plaskow is one of the most willing to break with inherited tradition, and with this posture comes a strong desire to reform practices associated with traditional Jewish law. Modernity, for Plaskow, “has brought increasing awareness of both the global diversity of religious beliefs and practices” along with the contexts in which such beliefs and practices were formed.³⁰ To Plaskow, “[Jewish] law itself is not divine; it is formulated by men in a patriarchal culture,”³¹ and therefore it is subject to the same analysis as any other set of laws. Here she points to an important piece of reinterpretation of Jewish tradition: it goes hand in hand with the reformation of practices. Plaskow’s goal is not to argue for the rejection of classical Jewish texts, but rather to insist that the Jewish tradition be “expanded and reinvigorated as women enter into the shaping of Torah.”³² She extends this idea to various aspects of Judaism, including clothing requirements, the ability to hold religious office or partake in certain rituals, laws on divorce, and sex. She seeks not only to reinterpret or reimagine the language of traditional texts but also to expand ways in which women are able to practice the Judaism linked to those texts.

Plaskow’s focus on reinterpretation of religious texts and concepts, as well as reformation of the practices that stem from them, is an integral piece of modern religion. As the world shifts, so too does religion require adaption. Reinterpretation of texts is linked to reform of practices. Our next thinker, Martin Buber, comes from a very different background and enacts very

²⁹ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 144.

³⁰ Ibid., 18.

³¹ Ibid., 71.

³² Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 60.

different practices from Plaskow. Buber finds his values-based practice within traditional Jewish texts themselves. He also expresses a distinctive perspective on God that will prove relevant for this thesis.

Martin Buber

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a German-Jewish philosopher who wrote on topics such as Hasidism and Jewish nationalism and authored the now-famous book *I and Thou*. He delved into philosophical thought on the nature of relationships, God, and religious theology.³³ One of his other influential books, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, explores the Jewish movement known as Hasidism to develop what I will term a values-based account of Judaism. In this, I mean that while Buber is interested in exploring the laws and practices associated with traditional Judaism, he also insists on the importance of the ideals that animate these laws and practices. He also emphasizes the idea that conceptions of God can exist beyond those present in traditional sources.

To understand Buber's account of Judaism as rooted in the enactment of values, it will be helpful to consider an example. One of Buber's key areas of focus is the theme of an individual's commitment and service to their community, which from his perspective is a fundamental aspect of Hasidic Judaism. To Buber, the ultimate purpose of human beings is one of service: "the perfected man is none other than the true helper."³⁴ This value underlies various practices and acts to which he is committed. Service can be enacted "through learning...through prayer...through fasting...and through eating."³⁵ These acts adhere to the commandments which

³³ Robert Erlewine, *Judaism and the West: From Hermann Cohen to Joseph Soloveitchik* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press., 2016), 85-86.

³⁴ Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York, NY: Horizon Press, 1958), 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

are laid out in traditional Jewish texts and constitute, for Buber, a type of service in the sense that they involve a devotion to a higher power and a commitment to discipline. It is also important to note that these acts are all deeply personal and show great concern with and knowledge of oneself and one's body.

There are other commandments or mitzvot—the practices associated with traditional Judaism—that Buber emphasizes which are grounded in ethics.³⁶ These practices include service to those in need,³⁷ not holding a grudge or take revenge,³⁸ befriending strangers,³⁹ and keeping promises.⁴⁰ Thus, his value-based practice is exemplified in simple acts of kindness. Not only does Buber emphasize the importance of good deeds, but he also highlights the importance of even the simplest good deed, stating that “however small our achievements..., they have their real value in that we bring them about in our own way and by our own efforts.”⁴¹ Within this is implied that acts of kindness are based as much on intent as they are on impact; the values that are enacted are as important as the acts themselves. To Buber, the fundamental expression of a clear value—for him, service to others—is integral to his religious practice.

Another key theme in some of Buber's writings is an insistence that the idea of “God” need not be interpreted exclusively as a singular, unified entity distinct from humanity. *Hasidism and Modern Man* often presents this idea in terms of the concept of a divine spark, which “can

³⁶ One of the commandments laid out in the Torah and other ancient rabbinic writings. It can also colloquially mean a good deed.

³⁷ “If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman.” (Deuteronomy 15:7)

³⁸ “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself.” (Leviticus, 19:18)

³⁹ “You too must befriend the stranger...” (Deuteronomy 10:19)

⁴⁰ “You must fulfill what has crossed your lips and perform what you have voluntarily vowed...” (Deuteronomy 23:24)

⁴¹ Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 139.

be beheld in each thing and reached through each pure deed.”⁴² More specifically, Buber argues that “in all the actions of men...dwell[s] holy sparks of the glory of God”⁴³ and that “holiness [is] a human quality.”⁴⁴ Here Buber seems to be getting at two ideas: (1) that the divine is best understood not as a distinct entity, but as a spark or quality, described as holiness, that exists in every human being; and (2) that this divine quality or holiness is manifest in human actions. Indeed, for Buber, this holiness or divine quality is not simply expressed in human actions, but is further strengthened by those actions: “all [of an individual’s] gestures and affairs and speaking,” he writes, “leave traces in the higher world.”⁴⁵ Here Buber says that all actions leave an impact on “the higher world,” on the divine or holiness itself. Here we can see that, rather than a singular figure who is different from or outside humanity, God is best understood as a form of holiness that can have plural expressions, and manifests in different ways. Because Buber moves beyond traditional portrayals of God and frames this in terms of a concern with holiness, his work points to a way of understanding the role of the divine in religious life—in terms of a concern with holiness strengthened by action—that also allows us to explore multiple expressions of these notions of divinity and godliness in contemporary religious life.

By focusing on themes such as small acts of goodness and the piece of holiness in all, Buber calls attention to two key elements of religious life. He emphasizes the possibility of moving beyond a narrow conception of God as a singular, unified entity distinct from human beings, and he calls attention to the centrality of values as factors animating and sustaining religious practices and religious life. While Buber emphasized the plurality of the sacred or the holy, Kaplan will see the manifestation of this within a communal approach to religion. Kaplan

⁴² Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

will expand this even further to demand the restructuring of Judaism—in his case, into an entire civilization. He will look at not only the importance of community but also the significance of religious life beyond doctrine and inherited Jewish traditions.

Mordecai Kaplan

Mordecai Kaplan, who lived from 1881 to 1983, was a founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. He lived in America from a young age and began his career as an Orthodox rabbi.⁴⁶ He later went on to oppose Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform visions of Jewish life and instead “proposed that Judaism must be reconstructed as a civilization.”⁴⁷ The existing forms of Judaism did not fit his ideas of Judaism as a communal and socially based religion and form of life. In response to these perceived failings, he authored *Judaism as a Civilization*, his most comprehensive account of what Judaism represents and how it should be practiced. Kaplan chose instead to define Judaism, as his book title implies, as its own civilization—as its own comprehensive, all-encompassing form of life. Within this civilization there exist institutions, activities, and practices that we might often describe as elements of cultural life. Kaplan suggests that what we sometimes think of as culture is not separate from religion, but rather that the two are deeply intertwined. He also emphasizes that community is key to Judaism.

One key feature of Kaplan’s approach is his focus on communal practice. He believes that each religion must adhere to its own unique cultural inheritances to survive:

⁴⁶ Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, 169-170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

No doctrine can be relied upon to serve as a means of permanently giving distinct character to a religion. This is why every religion has to develop certain forms, institutions and ceremonies which give it both individuality and continuity.⁴⁸

The foundations of religion lie not simply within inherited beliefs, but within communities and the practices that they enact. Jewish communities keep Judaism alive and these communities are created and upheld through concrete practices and institutions—through synagogue membership, youth groups, and other communal organizations. In fact, not only is community important, but it is essential: “The main need at present is to get the American Jews to become communally minded.”⁴⁹ Community is a driving force for Judaism and Jewish existence. To create and sustain such a Jewish community, Kaplan considers what might strike us as the logistics or mechanics of communal life, such as marriage, art, philanthropy, and leadership.⁵⁰ He outlines the depth in which the community must function.

Kaplan emphasizes that communal religious practice and institutional life are all-encompassing. He gives us both abstract concepts and ideas of what Judaism should be and practical ways in which his Jewish civilization could function. To him, there is much importance in the institutions, activities, and knowledge that bring together Jewish life. He includes information pertaining to several societal institutions:

Judaism...is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes the nexus of history, literature, language, social organization, folk

⁴⁸ Mordecai Menahem Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Construction of American-Jewish Life* (New York, NY: T. Yoseloff, 1957), 106.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 54, 59-65, 55.

sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization.⁵¹

His emphasis on Jewish life, and not just Judaism, is important to a definition of religion because it points to the potentially comprehensive, all-encompassing nature of a way of religious life.

Kaplan also shows us the value of community. Soloveitchik's approach will differ from many of the ideas put forward by Kaplan, as well as by the other thinkers discussed earlier in this chapter. However, we will learn from him how to grapple with textual and religious inconsistencies.

Joseph Soloveitchik

Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1993) was a key figure in what has come to be known as Modern Orthodox Judaism.⁵² He taught at Yeshiva University and was known as an advocate for a form of Orthodox Judaism that involved significant integration into society more broadly—for example, a form that is more inclusive of women while still maintaining traditional Jewish law or halakha.⁵³ His most influential book, *Halakhic Man*, outlines the roles and responsibilities of an individual described as “Halakhic Man,” who relies on his connection with God and the Jewish tradition to uplift and support his community. For Soloveitchik, this ideal figure tries to balance valuing certain individualistic aspects of religion while also emphasizing the importance of community.

⁵¹ Ibid., 178.

⁵² “On the one hand, [Modern Orthodox Jews] seek to demonstrate the viability of the Halakhah for contemporary life; on the other, they emphasize what they have in common with all other Jews rather than what separates them.” See Charles S. Liebman, *Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life* (New York, NY: American Jewish Committee, 1966), 48.

⁵³ Walter S. Wurzbarger, “Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 29, no. 1 (1994): 5-20, 7.

One of the most important elements of Soloveitchik's thinking for the purposes of this thesis is the role of conflict or tension in his conception of Judaism. This is exemplified in his emphasis on both the individual and communal dimensions of religious life. Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man is charged with supporting such a community: Halakhic Man is "a rabbi and teacher in Israel, serv[ing] his community."⁵⁴ Here we see that integral to his practice is community. Again, Soloveitchik posits that "the Torah...is a possession of the entire Jewish community"; given the value he places upon the Torah and its commandments, to support communal participation in it is to support the nature of community itself.⁵⁵

Interestingly, however, Soloveitchik also places a great deal of importance upon the role of the individual in religious life. His Halakhic Man is "one that does not require the assistance of others," implying that, while the Halakhic Man must serve his community, he cannot let his community serve him.⁵⁶ This heroic, "ideal, noble" figure makes sacrifices for his community and has a unique connection with God.⁵⁷ Here arises a distinct tension; Halakhic Man must value his community, yet must also value his individuality. As much as some thinkers may attempt to portray religious life as harmonious, Soloveitchik's thought reminds us that it is equally important to address sources of inconsistency, and here he identifies a significant one: individuality versus community. Soloveitchik "combines two seemingly irreconcilable perspectives on the world" and attempts to integrate the value of both into his Judaism.⁵⁸ While this conflict itself may not apply to all contemporary religious life, the idea of tension does play a

⁵⁴ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁸ Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, 60

role in many aspects of modern religion. Soloveitchik shows us that conflict is a natural occurrence in modern religious life and thought.

Conclusion

From these four thinkers, we have learned about several key aspects of religious life. We have identified six elements that should be incorporated into a modern definition of religion. With Plaskow, we saw the importance of interpreting, reinterpreting, and reimagining texts and reforming religious practices within different societal contexts. Buber led us to a focus on values-based practice and introduced us to the notion of a divine spark, which points to a conception of God that extends beyond a singular entity distinct from human being to encompass the holiness or value inhering in all individuals. Kaplan gave us an emphasis on the all-encompassing role of religious life in modern religion and the vital role of community. Soloveitchik called attention to pieces of internal tension that can exist within religion.

Bringing these ideas together, I wish to propose the following definition of religion:

Religion involves a set of communal practices concerned with holiness, linked to the interpretation of shared texts and animated by values. Religious communities often have their own comprehensive ways of life and religious life often involves tensions and conflicts.

Chapter Two: Diving into the “Potterverse”

Introduction

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the *Harry Potter* series is one of the most influential literary phenomena of the past several decades. Moreover, the series and community surrounding it seem to have much in common with what we often associate with religious life, even as these texts and their followers also differ distinctly from Judaism and other religious traditions—and, indeed, from the perception of religion in many spheres of society. In this chapter, then, I will use this phenomenon to test the definition of religion developed above. As discussed in my introduction, this test will not involve using my definition to identify whether *Harry Potter* counts as “religious.” Rather, building on the strong intuition that *Harry Potter* has similar characteristics to religious life, I will ask whether my new definition is capable of illuminating this—whether it is capable of encompassing a phenomenon such as *Harry Potter* in its account of religious life. Put differently, I will ask whether this definition provides us with a way of thinking about religion that allows us to go beyond the general impression that there is something “religious” about this series and its community of fans and clarify, with more precision, just what is religious about these books and the collective life they have inspired. If the answer is “yes,” this will provide us with an important indication that my definition addresses the need for ways of thinking about religion that are suited to the modern world, especially to the ways in which some individuals find the meaning often associated with traditional forms of religion through venues including art, music, and literature.

As we will see, all of the aspects of religion that emerged in the first chapter can be found in the *Harry Potter* series and its community of followers: communal practice, interpretation, an all-encompassing way of life, holiness, shared values, and internal tension. In what follows, I

will move through each of the elements of my definition, in turn, arguing that this definition is, indeed, expansive enough to encompass the Potterverse.

Background and Key Terms

Before I begin to delve into my definition of religion and the literature and community surrounding *Harry Potter*, it may be helpful to include some background, including a short description of the series itself and an introduction to the references I will make. In the broadest sense, the series focuses on Harry Potter, a young wizard. When he was an infant, his parents were killed by Voldemort, an evil wizard who attempts to take over the world and subjugate or kill all non-magical people. Each of the series' seven books involves Harry going to school, forming relationships, outsmarting or out-lucking Voldemort, and facing many unusual twists and turns.

One of the most important features of the *Potter* series is its level of detail and richness. I will be discussing many of these details as I explore the Potterverse, so it may be helpful to have some background on my references. I will by no means include every person, place, or thing involved in the series; rather, I will focus on elements that will surface in my analysis.

First, I will discuss some important places, beginning with Hogwarts, the wizarding school that Harry attends. To get to Hogwarts, one must take the Hogwarts Express, which is boarded at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ at King's Cross Station in London. There are four houses in Hogwarts (Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Slytherin, and Gryffindor) which determine the peer group and class schedule of the students. Gryffindors are known for their bravery and Slytherins for their ambition. Ravenclaws value knowledge above all else, while Hufflepuffs value loyalty and compassion. Hogwarts contains the Great Hall, where the students gather for feasts every night,

as well as a space known as the Quidditch Pitch. Quidditch is a wizarding sport involving flying brooms along with other equipment (known as bludgers, the quaffle, and the golden snitch). The details of the game are complex (there is a whole separate book written about it), so these are just the basics. Another key location is Hogsmeade, the town located outside of Hogwarts. In Hogsmeade there exist a few key shops and institutions, including Honeyduke's Candy Shoppe, The Three Broomsticks Pub, and Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop. At the Three Broomsticks, there are two drinks served: Firewhiskey (for adults) and Butterbeer (for kids). A third important locale in the series is Diagon Alley, the place where students go to purchase magical items such as spell books, cauldrons, and wands. The entrance to Diagon Alley is located in the Leaky Cauldron, a bar in central London.

Next, I will review some important people in the series. First and foremost are Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. These are Harry's two closest friends throughout the series. Hermione is known for her intelligence and magical skill, while Ron is known for his sense of humor. Ron's family, who also functions as a family for Harry, includes Fred and George Weasley, Hogwarts' resident tricksters, and Ginny Weasley, the youngest child of the family. Ron's parents, Molly and Arthur Weasley, love Harry as their own son. He also maintains a friendship with Luna Lovegood, a Ravenclaw. Contrastingly, Harry also has a school nemesis: Draco Malfoy, a wealthy Slytherin. Harry is mentored by Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts and arguably the greatest wizard of his time. Rubeus Hagrid, the groundskeeper at Hogwarts, is also a close friend of Harry's. Gilderoy Lockhart is one of the professors at Hogwarts, focusing on a subject known as Defense Against the Dark Arts. Severus Snape, the head of the Slytherin house, is a hotly debated character who treats Harry poorly but also covertly works with Dumbledore to defeat Voldemort. Snape is known for his role as the

“potions master,” which involves brewing concoctions such as Polyjuice Potion, an elixir that can make an individual look like someone else. Another of Harry’s professors, Remus Lupin, was one of James Potter’s (Harry’s father) best friends. Remus, along with James, Sirius Black, and Peter Pettigrew were best friends known as the Marauders.

Communal Practice and Interpretation

We can now move to the first dimension of religious life outlined in my definition: the idea that religion involves a set of communal practices concerned with holiness, linked to the interpretation of shared texts, and animated by values. In subsequent sections, I will focus on the notion of the holiness and centrality of values to the *Harry Potter* series and its community of fans. For now, we can begin with the themes of community, practice, and the interpretation and reinterpretation of shared texts. The Potterverse includes, and in many ways is defined by, diverse forms of communal practice, many of which involve interpretation of the series’ texts.

The communal dimension of *Harry Potter* and its following can be seen in both its online and in-person expressions. One key example of an in-person event is LeakyCon. Hosted in both Denver and Orlando annually, this program is attended by various stars of the *Harry Potter* films, but even more importantly by fans of the series. Fourteen years after the release of the final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, and ten years after the release of the final movie, and thousands of people still attend LeakyCon each year.⁵⁹ At LeakyCon, there are various activities that span the weekend, including meet-and-greets with some of the *Potter* actors, panels such as “Writing Antagonists” and “Are the Unforgivable Curses Unforgivable?”,

⁵⁹ “LeakyCon Denver: Frequently Asked Questions,” (LeakyCon), accessed October 22, 2020, <http://www.leakycon.com/denver-2021-guests/>.

and House meetups.⁶⁰ There is fan merchandise for purchase and even Wizard Rock bands, all while (most) attendees are dressed in cosplay (costumes based on the series).⁶¹

While this may be the most prominent Potter-themed event, there exist many other in-person expressions of community, including themed trivia nights, birthday parties, and even cafes and bars dedicated to the series.⁶² For example, at the Always Café in Vietnam, “you can borrow robes and wands and even a Nimbus 2000”⁶³ to pose for Instagram pictures; similarly, The Lockhart in Canada offers drinks such as “Ployjuice Potion,” “Befuddlement Drought,” and “Better Beer.”⁶⁴ There is even a pop-up bar, The Wizard’s Den, that is scheduled to come to Colorado in early 2021, promising “an immersive 90-minute experience that comes complete with your own robe and wand...a welcome drink, and 2 additional ‘potions,’ and your own potion master to help you create a tantalizing beverage.”⁶⁵ All of these spaces and events create opportunities for *Potter* fans to gather together, engage in the shared practices outlined above, and bond with one another. These are not merely niche settings for superfans: the Lockhart has over 19,100 Instagram followers,⁶⁶ and The Always Café has hundreds of reviews, many of which are from international travelers. These spaces, specifically designed for fans of the series (affectionately known as “Potterheads”) attract significant communities who seek them out for that experience. These cases suggest that community is a central piece of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon.

⁶⁰ “Go into the Pensieve!,” (LeakyCon), accessed October 22, 2020, <http://www.leakycon.com/past-programming/>.

⁶¹ “Casting a Spell on Harry Potter!,” (LeakyCon), accessed October 22, 2020, <http://www.leakycon.com/denver-2021-about/>.

⁶² Elizabeth Rayne, “7 Fantastic Harry Potter Bars and Cafes and Where to Find Them,” (SYFY WIRE, November 19, 2018), <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/7-fantastic-harry-potter-bars-and-cafes-and-where-to-find-them>.

⁶³ A type of broom used for Quidditch.

⁶⁴ Rayne, “7 Fantastic Harry Potter Bars and Cafes and Where to Find Them.”

⁶⁵ K. Shriver, “The Wizard’s Den: A ‘Harry Potter’ Pop-Up Bar Is Coming to Colorado,” (Our Community Now, September 25, 2020), <https://ourcommunitynow.com/events/the-wizards-den-a-harry-potter-pop-up-bar-is-coming-to-colorado>.

⁶⁶ @thelockhartbar, Instagram.

The Potterverse extends even deeper on the internet than it does in person. Drawing from a study at the University of Leicester, Tara Burton argues that “intense internet fandom communities...foster community through valued texts...and shared meaning, like any religious group,”⁶⁷ and this appears to be the case with *Harry Potter*. There are countless websites devoted to the *Harry Potter* series, including sites with fan fiction and fan theories. On Fanfiction.Net, the most popular fan fiction site, approximately 9,000 stories have been created based on the *Potter* series.⁶⁸ This is far from the only fan fiction website: DarkLordPotter, Fiction Alley, and MNFF all feature extensive fan-written collections.⁶⁹ Indeed, casting a broader net, the Harry Potter Wiki counts 44 fan-made websites dedicated to aspects of the Potterverse.⁷⁰ These include various roleplaying games such as Another Hogwarts, Beginning of the End, and Charming,⁷¹ as well as sites such as Potter Talk and MuggleNet that provide information, news, and updates on the *Potter* franchise.⁷² Here we can see that community in *Harry Potter* remains vibrant even when not revolving around in-person activities.

Central to these communities and their practices is the interpretation of shared texts; indeed, one of the primary ways in which followers of the series are able to engage with one another is through the interpretation and reinterpretation of the original series. Many of the internet-based fan stories cited above, especially the most popular ones, have thousands of comments on them. Members of the *Potter* community can interact with one another, contribute

⁶⁷ Tara Isabella Burton, “Why We Should Stop Using the Term Religious 'Nones',” (Religion News Service, December 13, 2018), <https://religionnews.com/2018/12/13/why-we-should-stop-using-the-term-religious-nones/>; “Finding Faith? Fandom and Religion,” (University of Leicester, July 20, 2015), <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2015/july/finding-faith-fandom-and-religion>.

⁶⁸ “Harry Potter Communities,” FanFiction.Net, <https://www.fanfiction.net/communities/book/Harry-Potter/>.

⁶⁹ “List of Harry Potter Fan Websites,” Harry Potter Wiki, https://harrypotter.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Harry_Potter_fan_websites.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

their thoughts, and express their love for—but also engage in debate about—the content of the series. To cite a few examples, on these websites, we find what are known as “ships” (accounts of romantic relationships in the series, both explicitly in the texts and imagined outside of them), discussions about house conflicts, and fora for fans to defend or oppose their own readings of the series.

Ships are one significant piece of the online Potterverse. They range from Hermione and Fred Weasley (“Fremione”) to Remus Lupin and Sirius Black and far beyond (including pairings of non-human and human beings).⁷³ The most popular ship is an unlikely one: Draco and Harry, affectionally known as “Drarry,” which plays out the trope of enemies turned partners.⁷⁴ Many of these stories weave elements of the canon into their interpretively generated narratives: for example, Draco Malfoy must break up with his girlfriend from the series, Pansy Parkinson, before he can be with Harry.⁷⁵ The authors are also able to shift components of the series to allow for further interpretation; they can be set in the past or involve online dating.⁷⁶ There are hundreds, if not thousands, of stories involving each pairing, allowing fans to write in love stories that they see as arising from the series and that spoke to them personally. These ships are adamantly defended by their fans and create subcommunities within the Potterverse.

⁷³ Hermioneweasleypotterriddle, “There She Stayed Chapter 1, a Harry Potter Fanfic,” FanFiction, July 13, 2012, <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8158116/1/There-She-Stayed>; MsKingBean89, “All the Young Dudes,” (Archive of Our Own, November 12, 2018), <https://archiveofourown.org/works/10057010/chapters/22409387>.

⁷⁴ Cheryl Dyson, “The Incredible Race Chapter 1, a Harry Potter Fanfic,” (FanFiction.Net, November 7, 2010), <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6435350/1/The-Incredible-Race>.

⁷⁵ Faith Wood, “Then Comes a Mist and a Weeping Rain,” (Archive of Our Own, August 4, 2011), https://archiveofourown.org/works/234222?view_adult=true.

⁷⁶ dracosoftie, “Must Love Quidditch Chapter 1, a Harry Potter Fanfic,” (FanFiction.Net, February 2, 2009), <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4726251/1/Must-Love-Quidditch>.

Also crucial to these online communities are debates about key elements of the series, such as arguments that revolve around the character of Snape, who is considered by some an abusive bully and by others a lovesick hero. While some “see Snape’s life as a young, neglected boy with (heavily implied) warring parents, his unrequited love for someone who married his school bully, and his stressful life as a double agent,” others argue that his back story does not make up for the harm he did to many students, Harry included.⁷⁷ These sorts of conversations are by no means restricted to the internet: there is even a published book, *The Great Snape Debate: The Case for Snape’s Innocence*, which defends his character and his allegiance to Dumbledore.⁷⁸ Far from an incidental or peripheral feature of the Potterverse, I would suggest that such debates are key to communication and community-formation within the world of the *Harry Potter* series. The inability to reach unanimous conclusions keeps fans talking far beyond the end of the series.

Fansites are not merely fora for individuals to argue over a static, inherited body of texts. Rather, they also offer the opportunity for participants to create more inclusive spaces through reimagination. Visual art created by fans portrays Hermione as a black woman.⁷⁹ Shifting traditional views of the roles and identities of



Fan-created art of Hermione.

⁷⁷ Pottermore, “The Chapter That Made Us Fall in Love with... Severus Snape,” WIZARDING WORLD (WIZARDING WORLD Digital, May 17, 2016), <https://www.wizardingworld.com/features/chapter-that-made-us-fall-in-love-with-severus-snape>; Ann Darcy, “‘Harry Potter’: Is Severus Snape A Good Person?,” (Showbiz Cheat Sheet, December 7, 2019), <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/harry-potter-severus-snape-good-or-bad.html/>.

⁷⁸ Orson Scott. Card, Joyce Millman, and Amy Berner, *Great Snape Debate: The Case for Snape's Innocence* (Dallas, TX: Benbella Books, 2007).

⁷⁹ Film image of Hermione: “Hermione Jean Granger, the Brightest Witch of Her Age!,” (Pinterest), <https://www.pinterest.co.kr/pin/353391902012453845/>.



Hermione's portrayal in the films.

characters creates a place for marginalized communities who lack representation in the canonical story itself. Because there are few people of color in the series (and those present constitute relatively peripheral characters), fan-created art allows for characters of color to take center stage and hold a place among the main cast of characters. These interpretations open up the community and allow for more inclusivity which is not present within the series itself.

The interpretation of shared texts takes place not only through the websites devoted to discussion, debate, and original literary creations outlined above but also through a wide range of *Harry Potter* podcasts. These podcasts speak to different pieces of the Potterverse, functioning as a form of communal activity that revolves around the interpretation of the original texts of the series. For example, “Swish and Flick: A Harry Potter Podcast” dissects each chapter of the series, adding information from Pottermore, the main website for beyond-the-text *Potter* knowledge, along with other outside sources to create a deeper knowledge of the books.⁸⁰ Similarly, “The Gayly Prophet” “queer[s] the way you engage with the witchy world of HP” with episodes on HIV, trans activists, and the secret gay bar in Hogsmeade,⁸¹ and “Mischief Managed Podcast” discusses fan theories and insights into the texts.⁸²

Fan art of Hermione: Emerald Pellot, “Artist Perfectly Reimagines Harry Potter's Hermione As Black and Beautiful,” (Revelist, August 15, 2018), <https://www.revelist.com/internet/hermione-granger-reimagined-black/13217/creativity-is-the-best-revenge-if-you-ask-me-sophia-decided-to-create-a-new-illustration-of-hermione-the-result-is-gorgeous/6>. For more reference images, see #blackhermione on Instagram.

⁸⁰ Sarah O'Malley et. al., hosts, “Swish and Flick” (podcast), 2017-2020.

⁸¹ Jessie Blount and Malakai Grey, hosts, “The Gayly Prophet: A Queer Harry Potter Podcast” (podcast), accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.thegaylyprophet.com/>.

⁸² Laura and Katie, hosts, “Mischief Managed Podcast (podcast), 2018-2020.

One podcast of particular relevance to this thesis is “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.” It is the most popular Potter-cast, with over 5,000 five-star reviews.⁸³ Created by two Harvard divinity school graduate students, this podcast offers deep dive into the *Harry Potter* series using interpretive techniques from diverse religious traditions such as *Lectio Divina*, a Catholic practice which the hosts understand as analyzing one sentence or passage from a text, or *Pardes*, a Jewish practice which the hosts reimagine as looking at diverse layers of significance of a passage or chapter. Each week, the podcast looks at a chapter through a certain thematic lens, such as mercy or disappointment, using the aforementioned techniques. This practice has amassed a fanbase of its own who attend the live shows hosted by Vanessa Zoltan and Casper Ter Kuile, the creators of the podcast. Zoltan and Ter Kuile also believe that religion is based on the communal interpretation and shaping of it: “Scholars of religion explain that what makes a text sacred is not the text itself, but the community of readers that proclaim it as such.”⁸⁴ With “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text,” along with the other podcasts mentioned, we can see that interpretation of texts is central to the Potterverse.

Holiness

Another key element in the account of religion developed in our first chapter was holiness, understood in terms of a divine spark or value that exists in human beings and is manifest in, and strengthened by, good deeds. In the *Potter* series, we can identify a similar concept in magic: it exists in people (in this case, all magic people) and is manifest in, and strengthened by, acts of service, goodness, and kindness. While magic in the series can be used

⁸³ Casper Ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan, hosts, “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text” (podcast), 2016-2020.

⁸⁴ Ter Kuile and Zoltan, “Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.”

for both good and evil, we see various ways in which good acts or performances of service become powerful forms of magic.

Magic is not inherited or learned, but rather exists in magical beings from birth. Harry makes magical things happen with no intention of doing so, which speaks to the inherent nature of magic. He makes glass disappear long before he is able to study magic or even knows he's a wizard.⁸⁵ He turns his aunt into a human balloon without casting a spell, merely because she upset him.⁸⁶ Even individuals who want to learn magic, such as Argus Filch, the caretaker at Hogwarts, are unable to do so if they do not possess the intrinsic magical spark.⁸⁷ Here we can see that magic is intrinsic. However, while the original ability cannot be learned, magic can be strengthened, often through acts of goodness.

There are some direct cases in which good magic is shown to revolve around acts of service. Perhaps the clearest example involves Harry's own biography: Harry lived only because his mother sacrificed herself for him when he was attacked by Voldemort, and her love, "an ancient magic," protected him against the killing curse.⁸⁸ Here we see magic taking the form of, or being manifest in, an act of kindness that literally keeps Harry alive. Even more than that, her act of sacrifice not only expresses but strengthens this magic, creating a magical protection for Harry until he is eighteen years old. Thus, we see a strong link between acts of goodness and manifestations of magic.

Another key example of magic as an expression of goodness is a spell known as "Expecto Patronum." This spell is cast to fend off dementors, terrifying creatures that—symbolizing depression—feed off happy memories, taking all of an individual's good thoughts

⁸⁵ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1998), 28.

⁸⁶ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1999), 29-30.

⁸⁷ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1999), 145.

⁸⁸ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2003), 37.

and ultimately removing a person's soul through an action known as the "Dementor's Kiss."⁸⁹ "Expecto Patronum" wards off dementors by manifesting good thoughts and cannot be produced without a powerful enough good memory.⁹⁰ It is "a positive force, a projection of the very things that the dementor feeds upon—hope, happiness, the desire to survive," or, more simply, a manifestation of goodness.⁹¹ Here we can speak of intentionality: the intention behind this spell is what drives it, and the happier the memory, or the stronger the intention, the more effective the spell. Even more importantly, while "Expecto Patronum" is often used to save or protect oneself from a dementor, it can be used to protect someone else, and thus constitutes a form of service and kindness.⁹² Again, we see that magic exists as a value or spark that is manifested through acts of service.

A third key expression of the link between magic and acts of goodness or service involves a magical item known as the Sword of Gryffindor. The Sword of Gryffindor, a sword that possesses extraordinary magical characteristics, presents itself "only to a true Gryffindor."⁹³ In short, that means that this sword will only come to those who show true bravery in the face of peril. It gives a magical advantage to those who exhibit admirable qualities. In the series, the appearance of this sword allows the individual wielding it to serve or save others, enhancing the magical abilities that the already possessed.⁹⁴ In this, we see another case of magic being linked to acts of goodness—in this case, of an individual's magic being strengthened by the acts of goodness that have already been performed.

⁸⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 384.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 237-241.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁹² For an example, see: Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 378-415.

⁹³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 503.

⁹⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2007), 733.

These are just three examples of the diverse ways in which magic is manifested in, and enhanced by, good acts. We can see here that not only is magic central to *Harry Potter*, but magic involves much of what we might associate with the concept of holiness.

Shared Values

The next key piece of my definition is the idea that religion is animated by values. This appears in the Potterverse in three specific ways: (1) values animate the series itself, as argued by scholarly readers of the texts; (2) values animate the way the series is used pedagogically by its community of fans, both in society more broadly and in sub-communities that try to build bridges with traditional religious life; and (3) values animate activist groups that try to root their work in the *Harry Potter* series. These three modes of value-based practice and interpretation create a community of fans and a set of practices steeped in and shaped by certain fundamental ideals.

We can begin with scholarly analyses of the series. Many readers have tackled aspects of the Potterverse in order to uncover and illuminate the values—both compelling and problematic—that appear within the series. Scholarly works have been written, for example, on the way in which the series develops a discourse on gender, reflects theories of childhood development, and helps sparks “fan activism.”⁹⁵ According to Olivia Hamilton and her group of researchers, the series’ author, J.K. Rowling, addresses issues of race and critical race theory.

⁹⁵ Farah Mendlesohn, “Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 12, no. 3 (47) (2001): 287-308; Meredith Cherland, “Harry’s Girls: Harry Potter and the Discourse of Gender,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 4 (2008): 273-282; Giselle Liza. Anatol, *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003).

These scholars take distinctions within the texts, specifically those of magical bloodlines,⁹⁶ and apply theories of racial hierarchies to them. Here, Hamilton and others argue that “a social and political hierarchy is evident amongst the blood statuses, with the pure-bloods at the top. This hierarchy was created by and for the pure-blood wizards in order to feed their desire for superiority, power, and privilege.”⁹⁷ This is similar, these authors posit, to racial hierarchies today, where white people create and determine power and privilege. They cite examples of educational discrimination and the application of bigotry as a political tool to garner support in both the *Potter* series and the United States.⁹⁸ Another scholar, Linnea Helgesen, puts it concisely: “the narratives both examine and rally against slavery, neo-Nazism and racism.”⁹⁹ Here we see that scholars are able to take real-world issues and apply them to the series.

However, scholars are not limited to examining the *Potter* series through a positive lens. For example, Meredith Cherland and Farah Mendelsohn critique the series in order to illuminate what they see as problematic values lurking behind the books. Cherland aptly states that the portrayal of women in the *Harry Potter* books both reflects and feeds into, patriarchal norms: “The subject position of siren inscribes itself on girls’ bodies as they paint them, starve them, pierce them, and bare them to attract men, as they speak and write themselves into existence.”¹⁰⁰ She takes a set of characters from the *Harry Potter* universe—in this case, a species known as Veela, or half-sirens—and critiques it based on the way it portrays women. Cherland notes that,

⁹⁶ Magical bloodline is split into four distinct categories and determines, to an extent, social class or status: pureblood (all magical parents) wizards, half-blood (one magical parent) wizards, muggle-born or mudblood (non-magic parents) wizards, and squibs (magical parents but not magic themselves).

⁹⁷ Olivia Hamilton et al., “The Harry Potter Hierarchy: Critical Race Theory and Harry Potter,” in *The Mirror of Erised: Seeing a Better World Through Harry Potter and Critical Theory*, ed. Sarah L. King and Nathan J. A. Thompson (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International, 2017), 67-85, 74.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁹⁹ Linnea Helgesen, “Harry Potter’s Moral Universe: Reading Harry Potter as a Morality Tale,” Thesis Abstract, (University of Oslo, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Cherland, “Harry’s Girls: Harry Potter and the Discourse of Gender,” 276.

by invoking this allusion to a common Greek myth, Rowling sets up her Veela characters as “sexual beings with dangerous power over men.”¹⁰¹ In this treatment of the Veela, Rowling reaffirms certain gender roles set for women. While Rowling tries to create strong female characters throughout the series, including Hermione, Ginny Weasley, and Luna Lovegood, Cherland goes on to say that “female children learn to take up the subject position of siren at different points in their lives” and that this imagery has a significant impact on young girls.¹⁰² This critique of Rowling is an example of scholars breaking with the series in order to shed light on spaces where Rowling fell short of the values for which she seems to advocate.

Similarly, Farah Mendelsohn addresses class structures within the *Potter* texts, and what they say about broader questions about society and class.¹⁰³ She posits that, in the series, lower classes are consistently associated with lower intelligence and magical ability, with one key example being the figure of Rubeus Hagrid. He is a character who possesses relatively weak magical abilities and whose manner of speech, links to physical labor, and other characteristics seem to mark him as outside the elite: “Hagrid is an egregious portrait of an underclass ne’er-do-well whose magical incompetence can be traced to his mixed blood. Hagrid lacks agency and he lacks real intelligence.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, Rowling links magical ability to classist notions. Indeed, Mendelsohn states that, while Rowling attempts to distance herself from aristocratic values, “in reality she, like other school story writers and fantasists before her, simply reconfirms its validity, both by the superficial appearance of egalitarianism - Potter's success - and by the use of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 275.

¹⁰² Ibid., 276.

¹⁰³ Mendelsohn, "Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority."

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 292.

liberal characters to reinforce the status quo.”¹⁰⁵ This critique again creates a more nuanced representation of some of the surface-level values portrayed in the text.

The role of values in the Potterverse also appears through the use of the series in a variety of pedagogic contexts. From studies on children ages to 11-13 that show that *Harry Potter* helps teach basic morals to a self-help book “for young Harry Potter fans to help them better cope with psychosocial struggles,” *Harry Potter* has been studied and used for its value-based teachings specifically.¹⁰⁶ For example, two scholars of education, Lauren Binnendyk and Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl have argued that “Harry Potter stories could be used as a vehicle to promote moral development in pre-adolescent children because many of the characters in these stories exhibit stages of moral reasoning to which this age group can relate.”¹⁰⁷ However, it is not just children who have been subjects of Potter-based, values-focused pedagogic practices; adults, too, show profound psychological differences because of their engagement with the *Potter* series. For example, a study conducted by Cambridge researchers suggests shows that the *Harry Potter* series can affect political opinion:

Using multivariate observational models and panel data from 2014 to 2016, results suggest that the lessons of the Harry Potter series have influenced levels of opposition to punitive policies and support for tolerance of groups considered

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 293.

¹⁰⁶ Ratna Setyowati Putri, Rosma Indriana Purba, and Donna Imelda, “‘Harry Potter’ And Moral Values Learning: A Qualitative Study Of The Response Of Children Aged 11-13 Years Against J.K. Rowling Books,” *Dinasti International Journal of Education Management And Social Science* 1, no. 3 (2020): 282-305; Janina Scarlet and Vince Alvendia, *Harry Potter Therapy: An Unauthorized Self-Help Book from the Restricted Section* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

¹⁰⁷ Lauren Binnendyk and Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl, “Harry Potter and Moral Development in Pre-Adolescent Children,” *Journal of Moral Education* 31, no. 2 (2002): 195-201, 200.

outside the American mainstream. Further, they predict public reactions to Donald Trump above and beyond their influence on policies consistent with his views.¹⁰⁸

Here we see that exposure to the series influences political views and alignments, as well as acceptance of marginalized groups. In another example, Stephanie Wheeler used a *Harry Potter* simulation to teach disability ethics in business communication to college students.¹⁰⁹ This series is not only theoretically useful as a moral teacher but has been proven to be psychologically effective at changing an individual's moral leanings. It sparks action and is used in educational settings to influence students. It can also be used in conjunction with other religious texts to illuminate shared values.

We see this pedagogic use not only in a broad societal context but also in subcommunities that attempt to create connections between what we might see as more traditional religions and the Potterverse. One example is Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg's (*Unofficial*) *Hogwarts Haggadah*. The Haggadah is the traditional Passover¹¹⁰ prayerbook. There exist many variations on this text, including this very popular (*Unofficial*) *Hogwarts Haggadah*. Rosenberg ties lessons of Passover to themes from the *Potter* series: sacrifice, education, and redemption.¹¹¹ Here we see connections created between a religious subgroup and the Potterverse so as to illuminate what an author from that subgroup sees as Jewish values. Rosenberg even uses content from the Haggadah and *Harry Potter* to connect to the present-day world. He discusses "the cyclical nature of struggle" with which modern Jews and the *Harry Potter* universe are both

¹⁰⁸ Diana C. Mutz, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Donald," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, no. 04 (2016): pp. 722-729.

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie K. Wheeler, "Harry Potter and the First Order of Business: Using Simulation to Teach Social Justice and Disability Ethics in Business Communication," *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (June 2018): 85-99.

¹¹⁰ Passover is a Jewish holiday that falls in the spring and celebrates the exodus of Jews from Egypt and their freedom from enslavement.

¹¹¹ Moshe Rosenberg, *The (Unofficial) Hogwarts Haggadah*, (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2017), 12-13; 52-53; 34.

intimately familiar, link what he sees as a recurring pattern of rising and falling levels of anti-Semitism to the way in which Voldemort himself rises, falls, and then re-ascends to power (a potentially apt comparison, because, according to the author of *Harry Potter*, Voldemort is based in part on Hitler).¹¹² Here we see that Rosenberg can grapple with social issues using both traditional Jewish content and the *Harry Potter* narrative. His work, in fact, extends beyond the *Hogwarts Haggadah* and to another book, *Morality for Muggles*. In this book, he “hope[s] to trace some of life’s eternal questions from the vantage point of both Torah and the world of Harry Potter.”¹¹³ This rabbi ties these two sets of texts closely together, arguing that “the nexus of Bible and Harry Potter has a very special application in the world of religious education.”¹¹⁴ He finds that pieces of *Harry Potter* can illuminate Jewish texts and vice versa.¹¹⁵ Ron’s “unswerving loyalty” gives insight into the relationship between Aaron and Moses in the Hebrew Bible, while the idea of the *rebbe* gives helps to enrich the role of Remus Lupin as Harry’s mentor.¹¹⁶ Thus, Rosenberg shows that these two sources, *Harry Potter* and Judaism, can work in conjunction to illuminate and define the values embedded within them.

The centrality of values to the Potterverse also appears when we turn our attention to advocacy, activism, and morally influenced action framed as rooted in the *Potter* series. An organization known as the Harry Potter Alliance uses *Harry Potter* to enhance its activism “by strategically connecting the story with social justice issues when cultural attention is at its

¹¹² Rosenberg, *The (Unofficial) Hogwarts Haggadah*, 40; Orly Eleonore Fuerst, “J.K. Rowling, Voldemort and Hitler,” (Aish HaTorah, 2017) <https://www.aish.com/ho/i/JK-Rowling-Voldemort-and-Hitler.html>.

¹¹³ Moshe Rosenberg, *Morality for Muggles: Ethics in the Bible and the World of Harry Potter* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2011), 7.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40; 48.

peak.”¹¹⁷ This group addresses issues including gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, net neutrality, and racial injustice by drawing on the series, and even create libraries in underserved areas and partner with other non-profit organizations.¹¹⁸ At this moment, The Harry Potter Alliance is focused on immigration. With their program “Dumbledore’s Army Fights Back,”¹¹⁹ they demand that Potterheads “be like a Hufflepuff!”— “kind, loyal, and unafraid of toil”—by contacting lawmakers, enacting letter-writing campaigns, and calling elected officials. They also provide resources on immigrant or immigrant-serving communities across the United States.¹²⁰ Additionally, they maintain the “Wizard Activist School,” an online training service that includes modules about fan activism, elevator pitches, hosting events, and conflict resolution.¹²¹ They use these books to complement their activism. Embedded within the idea of a value-based religion is the need for value-based action, and such organizations seek to enable followers to create meaningful change. *Harry Potter* illuminates the ways in which values are taught, engrained, and enacted in modern life.

Religious Life as All-Encompassing

Another element of my definition was the potentially comprehensive, all-encompassing nature of a community’s religious life. In what follows, I would like to highlight five examples of this expansiveness—common identifiers, sports, arts, food, and land—that play a significant role in the *Harry Potter* community.

¹¹⁷ Jackson Bird and Thomas V. Maher, “Turning Fans into Heroes: How the Harry Potter Alliance Uses the Power of Story to Facilitate Fan Activism and Bloc Recruitment,” *Social Movements and Media Studies in Media and Communications* Abstract (June 2017), 23-54.

¹¹⁸ “What We Do,” What We Do | Harry Potter Alliance, https://www.thehpalliance.org/what_we_do.

¹¹⁹ Dumbledore’s Army, a rogue group of students led by Harry himself, used knowledge of spells to resist an oppressive school curriculum.

¹²⁰ “Dumbledore’s Army Fights Back,” Dumbledore’s Army Fights Back (Harry Potter Alliance), <https://www.thehpalliance.org/dafightsback>.

¹²¹ “Wizard Activist School,” (The Harry Potter Alliance), https://www.thehpalliance.org/wizard_activist_school.

The first of these is what I am describing as common identifiers. This can take the form of apparel or body alterations. *Harry Potter* tattoos range from a simple lightning bolt to complex intricate Hogwarts landscapes and are a way to create a sense of community: “Harry Potter tattoos, just like the Deathly Hollows, are a sign of belonging.”¹²² It allows fans to identify one another within a context where there would be no other way to do so. When one can identify a like-minded individual, it breeds community. The *Harry Potter* community is able to express their membership through not only permanent means but also in non-permanent clothing. Apparel is one of the most significant non-permanent identifiers and can appear in a multitude of ways: costumes, cosplay, or everyday clothing. *Harry Potter*-themed Halloween costumes are ubiquitous and available at most Halloween retail stores, often involving Hogwarts robes and a wand. Cosplay, which is based on one specific character, can be handmade or purchased. These often go beyond robes and wands and can include custom broomsticks, wigs, or other outfits worn by characters in the films. A handmade version of Hermione’s dress from the Yule Ball¹²³ can cost as much as \$900 on Etsy.¹²⁴ But costumes and cosplay are generally for special events or occasions. *Harry Potter*-themed daily wear is much more common. Many don replicas of the sweaters knitted for Ron and Harry by Mrs. Weasley.¹²⁵ Others show their house pride with

¹²² The Deathly Hallows are the symbol of a group of people who believe in the existence of three extraordinary magical items: The Invisibility Cloak, the Resurrection Stone, and the Elder Wand. For the quotation, see Sarah Kinonen, “The Most Magical Harry Potter Tattoos to Celebrate Its 20th Anniversary,” (June 26, 2017), <https://www.allure.com/story/best-harry-potter-tattoos>; Anne Chassagnol, “Embodied Stories: Tattoos, Self-Identity, and Children’s Literature,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 19, no. 2 (August 22, 2018), 66.

¹²³ A ball hosted at Hogwarts during Harry’s fourth year at school.

¹²⁴ RoDMakers, “Hermione Granger Dance of the Yule Strain,” (Etsy), 2020, https://www.etsy.com/listing/792109147/hermione-granger-dance-of-the-yule?ga_order=most_relevant.

¹²⁵ GiftsWithPassion, “Harry Pottery Sweater,” (Etsy), 2020, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/788697647/harry-pottery-sweater-harry-pottery?gpla=1>.

Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff attire.¹²⁶ These non-permanent means of identification show up in many different ways, but they all signify membership as a Potterhead.

Another example that points to the comprehensive nature of the form of life associated with *Harry Potter* and its fans is sports and leisure activities. Quidditch, the sport of the magic world, has come to occupy a space in the contemporary American intramural sports arena, boasting over 200 high school, college, and club teams across the United States. On these teams, individuals run with brooms between their legs, attempting to avoid “bludgers” (dodgeballs), score points with the “quaffle” (a volleyball), and even catch the “snitch” (a person dressed in yellow). These teams adhere to the rules of the Potterverse Quidditch as best they can. This, too, is a way in which *Potter* fans can gather together and participate in one of the most prominent activities in the *Harry Potter* series.

There are also arts specifically for Potterheads. *A Very Potter Musical* is a fan-made musical parody that has garnered over 17 million views on YouTube.¹²⁷ It follows Harry, Ron, and Hermione through their adventures, invoking events and people from all seven books, as well as creating plots and stories that are entirely their own. References to *a Very Potter Musical* are almost as integral to the Potterverse as knowledge of the series itself. One reviewer writes: “so we can all agree that the only canon Harry Potter material is this and Potter Puppet Pals, right?”¹²⁸ This brings us to our next piece of fan theater: The Potter Puppet Pals.¹²⁹ This series of YouTube videos follows the main characters, all as puppets, through various comedic skits based on the content of the books. The scope of literary and artistic content in the Potterverse expands

¹²⁶ “Clothing---Harry Potter Shop,” (Harry Potter Shop), 2020, <https://www.harrypottershop.com/collections/clothing>.

¹²⁷ *A Very Potter Musical*, YouTube (Team StarKid, 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmwM_AKeMCK&list=PLC76BE906C9D83A3A&ab_channel=TeamStarKid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ *Potter Puppet Pals: The Mysterious Ticking Noise* (YouTube, 2007), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tx1XIm6q4r4&ab_channel=NeilCicierega.

far beyond the texts themselves, playing a significant role in the creation and maintenance of the *Potter* community.

One further example pointing to the comprehensive nature of the life of the *Harry Potter* community is the prominence of food. Dinah Bucholz's *The Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook*, which contains 150 Potter-themed recipes, has been a #1 best seller for Children's Cookbooks on Amazon,¹³⁰ and fans can buy products with the names "Bertie Bott's Every Flavoured Beans" and "Chocolate Frogs"—two candies that originate in the series—at Walmart or Target. From Great Hall feasts to Honeyduke's Candy Shop to Mrs. Weasley's homemade cooking, food plays a distinct role both in and out of the *Harry Potter* books. Just as it did for Harry, certain foods signify a sense of belonging within other communities. Indeed, if we briefly think back to Judaism, Claudia Roden described Jewish food as "a romantic and nostalgic subject which has to do with recalling a world that has vanished."¹³¹ For *Harry Potter* fans, Treacle Tarts and Pumpkin Juice harken back to a world that never was.¹³² This food evokes a sense of nostalgia and belonging and is deeply embedded in the Potterverse.

The last example pointing to the comprehensive nature of the form of life associated with the Potterverse that I will discuss is the prominence of certain geographic locations. Potterheads are spread among different cultures and traditions, participating in diverse societies. According to Pottermore, the *Harry Potter* series has been translated into over 80 languages.¹³³ Despite this diversity (which one might be tempted to call a "diaspora"), the Potterverse does have certain shared physical sites. Fans can visit a replica of the entrance of Platform 9 ¾ at King's Cross

¹³⁰ Dinah Bucholz, *The Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook: from Cauldron Cakes to Butterbeer—More than 150 Magical Recipes for Wizards and Non-Wizards Alike* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2018).

¹³¹ Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996), 8.

¹³² These are two sweet candies that appear and reappear in the *Potter* series.

¹³³ Pottermore, "500 Million Harry Potter Books Have Now Been Sold Worldwide," (October 9, 2019), <https://www.wizardingworld.com/news/500-million-harry-potter-books-have-now-been-sold-worldwide>.

Station in London, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter in Orlando, or many of the film locations for the *Harry Potter* movies.¹³⁴ I, myself, have visited The House of MinaLima, dedicated entirely to the art showcased in the books and films.¹³⁵ At all times of the year, these places are full of eager Potterheads, waiting to stand in the spot where Harry ran headfirst into a brick wall or see the inspiration for the Great Hall. These holy sites unite fans, regardless of nationality.

The all-encompassing elements of religious life are of the utmost importance to building community. Together, identification, sports, arts, food, and shared spaces all enrich and tie together the lives of *Potter* fans, signifying belonging, and creating a shared identity.

Authorship and Controversy

One final element of my definition was the role of conflict and tension in religious life. We find this in the Potterverse, as well, with perhaps the best-known case being the recent controversy surrounding the series' author, J.K. Rowling. Rowling, who was widely beloved following the series, has recently taken a strong position against trans individuals on Twitter. She has denied the manhood of trans men (to her, people with uteruses must be women), supported an individual who was fired because of transphobic tweets, and is now authoring a book about a cis-gendered male serial killer who dresses up as a woman to hunt his victims.¹³⁶ Many

¹³⁴ "About Platform 9 3/4: The Harry Potter Store," (The Harry Potter Shop at Platform 9 3/4, 2020), <https://www.harrypotterplatform934.com/pages/about-platform-934>; "See What Awaits You Inside The Wizarding World of Harry Potter™," (Universal Studios Hollywood, 2020), <https://www.universalstudioshollywood.com/web/en/us/things-to-do/rides-and-attractions/the-wizarding-world-of-harry-potter>; "Warner Bros. Studio Tour London - The Making of Harry Potter: Official Site," (Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, October 14, 2020), <https://www.wbstudiotour.co.uk/>.

¹³⁵ "House of MinaLima," (MinaLima, September 10, 2020), <https://minalima.com/>.

¹³⁶ J.K. Rowling, Twitter Post, June 6, 2020. https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269389298664701952; J.K. Rowling, Twitter Post, June 6, 2020. https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269382518362509313; J.K. Rowling, Twitter Post, December 19, 2019. https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1207646162813100033. For more information, see: Abby Gardner, "A Complete Breakdown of the J.K. Rowling Transgender-Comments

individuals, including members of the cast of the *Harry Potter* films, have criticized her transphobic approach to feminism.¹³⁷ As we have already seen, the Harry Potter Alliance, known for fighting for LGBTQ+ individuals, is a significant part of the *Harry Potter* community. How do individuals who fight for trans rights find meaning in a source written by someone who does not support trans individuals? Not only that, how do non-binary and trans folks, “many of whom found solace in the world of ‘Harry Potter’ and used to see the series as a way to escape anxiety,” coping with this clash of identities?¹³⁸

Just as Soloveitchik struggled with internal contradictions, so too must Potterheads. In the words of one journalist, they must struggle with “how to distance or separate themselves from the author who created a fantasy world that animates their lives on a daily basis.”¹³⁹ Some attempt to separate the creator from the work: “while Rowling gave us this world,” writes the maintainer of MuggleNet, a popular *Potter* website, “[w]e created the fandom, and we created the magic and community in that fandom. That is ours to keep.”¹⁴⁰ Some readers focus, in

Controversy,” (Glamour, September 15, 2020), <https://www.glamour.com/story/a-complete-breakdown-of-the-jk-rowling-transgender-comments-controversy>; Dani Di Placido, “J.K. Rowling Is Destroying Her Legacy, One Tweet At A Time,” (Forbes Magazine, June 7, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2020/06/07/jk-rowling-is-destroying-her-legacy-one-tweet-at-a-time/>; Aja Romano, “J.K. Rowling’s Latest Tweet Seems like Transphobic BS. Her Fans Are Heartbroken.” (Vox, December 19, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/19/21029852/jk-rowling-terf-transphobia-history-timeline>; Kalhan Rosenblatt, “J.K. Rowling Doubles down in What Some Critics Call a ‘Transphobic Manifesto,’” (NBCUniversal News Group, June 11, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/j-k-rowling-doubles-down-what-some-critics-call-transphobic-n1229351>; K.W. Colyard, “How J.K. Rowling’s New Book Became The Most Controversial Novel Of The Year,” (Bustle, October 1, 2020), <https://www.bustle.com/entertainment/jk-rowling-new-book-is-just-as-problematic-as-her-transphobic-tweets>.

¹³⁷ Emma Watson, Twitter Post, June 10, 2020, 3:15PM.

<https://twitter.com/emmawatson/status/1270826851070619649?lang=en>; Daniel Radcliffe, “Daniel Radcliffe Responds to J.K. Rowling’s Tweets on Gender Identity,” (The Trevor Project, June 8, 2020), <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2020/06/08/daniel-radcliffe-responds-to-j-k-rowlings-tweets-on-gender-identity/>.

¹³⁸ Julia Jacobs, “Harry Potter Fans Reimagine Their World Without Its Creator,” (New York Times, June 12, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/style/jk-rowling-transgender-fans.html>.

¹³⁹ Jacobs, “Harry Potter Fans Reimagine Their World Without Its Creator.”

¹⁴⁰ Dan Selcke, “Fans Still Love Harry Potter, but Try to Leave J.K. Rowling Behind,” Winter is Coming (FanSided, June 16, 2020), <https://winteriscoming.net/2020/06/16/harry-potter-fans-still-love-try-leave-j-k-rowling-behind/>.

particular, on values in the books. Particularly striking are the following remarks from the Harry Potter Alliance itself:

Fan activists recognize that there is almost no media produced without problematic creators or owners... What matters to the Harry Potter Alliance is how fans choose to embody, share, and re-imagine the stories that meant something to them, and how fans can use our incredible, creative, imaginative communities to build a better, more just and loving world for all.¹⁴¹

To aid in this work, the leadership of this organization started “Protego!,” a campaign “aimed at fighting institutionalized discrimination and building a better, safer world for the transgender community.”¹⁴² These individuals root their actions in the *Harry Potter* series and its community despite Rowling herself. Here we can see that conflict and tension exist within the *Harry Potter* community as a whole.

Conclusion

As discussed in my introduction, the *Harry Potter* series and its fans seemed to be “religious,” and now we can see why. It shares all of the pieces of religion identified in our definition. It maintains a strong sense of community-based practice through online fora and in-person events. It revolves around interpretation and reinterpretation using fan fiction and fan theories. It maintains a comprehensive way of life while also developing a conception of magic that has much to do with the idea of holiness. It is based on values, as was made clear by the use of it in activist spaces and to teach children. It even has pieces of conflict and controversy with

¹⁴¹ “We Stand with Trans People.” (Harry Potter Alliance), <https://www.thehpalliance.org/statement>.

¹⁴² *Protego! Creating Safe Spaces for Trans People*, YouTube (Harry Potter Alliance, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8iKQLpv5Oc&list=PLP3imAa1WIVmH6Fjf8Zx6s6jC9HWbHbIW&ab_channel=thehpalliance.

which the community must wrestle. We already fit the definition within a Jewish scope, confirming its ability to describe inherited forms of religious life. This chapter has shown us that it also applies to a non-traditional, emerging form of religion like Harry Potter.

Conclusion

We need a new definition of religion suited to the modern world. With the change and diversification of modern life, we must find a new way to think about religion that can include less traditional forms of faith and community. In this thesis, I have formulated such a definition using Jewish thinkers, and then I have used the *Harry Potter* series and its community of fans as a test for that new definition. In the end, it seems as though this new definition of religion is expansive enough to encompass non-traditional religions while also finding the key components of more traditional religious life.

First, we have seen the ways in which modern Jewish thinkers address religious life and religious texts. Judith Plaskow brought us an understanding of the centrality of reinterpreting texts within religious life. Martin Buber showed us the importance of values within religious practice, while also pointing us toward the idea that there can be different ways of imagining God—indeed, that we might think of religious life as maintaining a sense of holiness. Mordecai Kaplan was integral in the study of how different religious communities have their own comprehensive ways of life. Finally, Soloveitchik showed us that conflict is a natural piece of religion. Together, these thinkers gave us the following definition:

Religion involves a set of communal practices concerned with holiness, linked to the interpretation of shared texts and animated by values. Religious communities often have their own comprehensive ways of life and religious life often involves tensions and conflicts.

We then examined the points of contact between the conception of religion outlined in the definition and the Potterverse to see whether the definition can encompass modern religious life beyond Judaism. We saw the vibrant communal life, both on- and offline, created both through

analysis and reinterpretation of the original *Harry Potter* texts, and through a comprehensive, all-encompassing way of life involving elements such as food, identification, arts, holy sites, and leisure activities. We also realize the importance of textual analysis in the Potterverse, as well as different manifestations of holiness. We considered ways in which the *Harry Potter* series is used to teach and enact values, and we even encountered the presence of conflict within its community of fans. All of this suggests that my new definition of religion is expansive enough to include this modern religious phenomenon. Thousands, if not millions, of people hold these books, communities, and practices dear and sacred to them. They don their Hogwarts robes for Halloween and discuss their favorite characters with friends and family. In *Harry Potter*, we find a world based on the interpretation of shared texts, like Plaskow, and one that has a vibrant and communal religious life, as Kaplan envisioned. We find a world suffused with holiness and revolving around a values-based set of practices, as Buber emphasized. We find a world that struggles with tension and conflict, as Soloveitchik exemplifies. These pieces of both Jewish thought and the Potterverse come together to create and confirm a definition of religion that works in a diversifying and changing world while also adhering to traditional religious thought.

I wanted to see what modern religious life looks like, and this analysis is certainly not the end. If I had more time and space, I would look into other sources of traditional religion, like Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. What can they tell us about religion that we did not find within Judaism? Are there ways in which they do not fit within our definition of religion, potentially pointing to the need for further revisions and refinements—or even more significant changes? I would also like to look at other contemporary examples of religion. Does J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and its community of fans exhibit the same features that we have discovered in the Potterverse? What about other important literary texts, “cult classic”

films, or other well-known works of art? What about the scientific community? Might these communities, too, be religious if examined more closely? I cannot encompass the entirety of modern religion in this thesis, but I believe that my analysis points to a variety of questions about religious life today.

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