

HARRY, FRODO, AND THE RELIGION AT THE TIME OF CHANGES

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Abstract

Conflicts between religion and literature are not rare; history can produce many interesting examples of more or less important discussions leading towards prohibitions, burning /of books or authors/, excommunications or imprisonments. Although, in Christian religions and societies consequences of these polemics ceased to be so violent, the vehemence of arguments of the parties concerned is still great.

With the publication of J. K. Rowlings' Harry Potter and the revival of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings following Peter Jackson's films, literary critics, religious authorities, psychologists, and many others /re/started the polemics about fantasy literature, and its alleged danger for the souls of believers. On one hand, there is the freedom of the art and artist, on the other, gloomy views of destroyed children, rise of occultism, and threat of paganism.

In this paper the author takes a closer look at the arguments of both sides, and considers possible ways of approaching this kind of literature by a religious person of the 21st century.

Last year¹, quite an interesting piece of news reached many people all over the world: Harry Potter's books got the "blessing" of the Holy See. For many, it must have been a great surprise, for others, only the logical conclusion of a longer discussion that started immediately after the publication of Harry Potter in late 1990s. That such an institution as the Catholic Church should comment on a book for children is not a matter of pure coincidence. This comment had already been wished for by many, and as it approved Harry Potter, it also gave a seal of greater importance to the body of work that is not new, but long has been known only to a relatively small number of people – the fantasy literature.

Let us have a look at the larger situation involving fantasy literature as it was in our country. When J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was first published in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, it passed almost unnoticed. The latter translation of *The Lord of the Rings* in late 1980s did a little bit better. Still, the book, the author, and the whole of fantasy

¹ February 2004, source: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2722077.stm

literature were far away from the interest of literary scholars. We cannot blame it all on the Communist regime, because in Western countries the situation was not dramatically different.

The 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe experienced a boom of fantasy literature, many new authors started to explore this already almost forgotten kind of literature. But their efforts still remained in the limits of special magazines, small fantasy oriented publishing houses, and special bookstores run by fans. Books had cheap paperback covers with awful paintings of muscled men in leather dresses, half-naked women, dragons, and monsters. All this helped the mainstream literary critics in their belief that this is only minor literature of a quite doubtful quality. No serious reader paid much attention, and it would stay like this, but for two things – the publication of the first volume of the Harry Potter series – *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* – and the release of the first of Peter Jackson's film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Fantasy left the dark corners and entered the city lights. Quickly spreading all around the world, and becoming a mass "product", it also became a material for study, and a reason for anxiety. Especially Christian scholars in many fields - sociologists, psychologists, theologians – raised questions about whether books full of magic devices, witches, and wizards are harmful for the faith of believers, and whether they affect negatively the healthy development of children. The Harry Potter books, according to the American Library Association, got to the top of the list of challenged books and has remained there since 1999.²

What are the main objections to fantasy literature in general, and Harry Potter in particular, and what are the possible ways that Christians, their communities, and the Church in the 21st century should deal with this phenomenon? Let's have a brief look at the history of English literature to search for similarities that could help us to understand the problem better. Let us try to learn our lessons from past centuries, and find how conflicts between religion and culture /particularly literature/ could be solved in these changing times, that are in many respects so different, but also very much like the previous ones.

² In fact, in years 1999-2002, HP was on the 1st place, since 2003, it's among the first five – source: www.ala.org

Fantasy literature, although not called this before, is not a phenomenon of our century, far from that. In all the history of humanity, men related, later wrote stories full of magic, supernatural creatures, and their encounters with people. The first literate people in medieval England, Christian monks, recorded the oral stories of the inhabitants of the British Isles that reflected their beliefs, mythology, and folk tales. Although very often adding Christian flavor or points of view while writing, these monks kept the stories as authentic as possible. The masterpiece of this period, *Beowulf*, is taught as the first great work of English literature. Chaucer, Mallory, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and many others added to this tradition other beautiful pieces of great artistic value that nobody would ever dare to call "children's literature".

Nineteenth century Victorian England experienced the last great revival of "fairy stories" of the 2nd millennium. Such great poets as Keats, Blake, Tennyson reached out for the old myths, and while the country kept losing its rural /and romantic/ character under the iron rule of industry, they provided their readers with old Celtic stories of King Arthur, the Lady of the Lake, the sword Excalibur, and the Knights of the Round Table. In Ireland, a Catholic country, the whole idea of the Irish national revival was to encourage the nation by talking about their glorious /mythic, Celtic/ past. Was this an attempt to undermine the official religion, and turn people to pagan practices? Surely not. Writers knew the power of art, but didn't expect it to be understood literally.

Victorian period is also the time that introduces the notion of children's literature as a separate kind. It pushes the romantic ideal of an innocent and pure childhood to an extent not known till then. At the same time children /firstly of course only of upper classes/ begin to get into the focus of booksellers, and the original tales are being modified according to the "Victorian" ideal of morality. Hardly anybody now knows that original versions of Cinderella, Snow-White, Little Red Riding Hood, and others are very much different from the versions that children now read.

The most deadly blow that fairy tales got was from Walt Disney. As Terri Windling³ points out: "/Walt Disney/ did more damage to the tales than all Victorian editors put together."⁴ Disney himself once said, "*It's just that people now don't want fairy stories the way they were written. They were too rough. In the end they'll probably*

³ Terri Windling is a writer, editor, folklorist, and specializes in the field of fantasy literature

⁴ Source: On Tolkien and fairy stories Copyright © 2001 by Terri Windling. This article appeared in *Mediations on Middle-Earth*, edited by Karen Haber (St. Martin's Press, 2001), source: www.endicott-studio.com/fortolkn.html

remember the story the way we film it anyway."⁵ And he proved himself to be a very good prophet. His sterile, mutilated, and politically incorrect⁶ versions not only became the basis of children's reading, but are often referred to as examples of good stories for children.

But how to find out what literature is still for children, and what is already for adults? I share Tolkien's belief that children are not a class of people with the same tastes /"On fairy stories"/. Thus it doesn't mean that being a child equals loving fairy stories and having a great imagination. Also, those who love marvels will not stop when they become adults. This craving for magic, miracles, dragons and fairies is a lifelong hunger. It can be, and very often is, hidden and suppressed by education, and the society around us.

Can these books really mean some danger to children, to Christian communities, to the Church? Some believe yes, some no. In spite of the newspaper information I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, even the Vatican is not united at this point. Discussions are long, and arguments many, but the main objections are basically two. The first one – concerning only Harry Potter – is that its philosophy is that of moral relativism. The second one is the accusation that fantasy books introduce magic and wizardry as something normal and common, and so add to the rising influence of paganism and occult movements.

The question of dangerous moral relativism is attributed to Harry Potter not very fairly. The author, J.K.Rowlings, is far from being a pioneer in this field. Our childhood was filled with book heroes, whom we loved, because they were so like us - sometimes disobeying, sometimes peeping into the forbidden room, sometimes jumping into the water in "Sunday" dress, and very often doing some "heroic" thing not really "by accident". All those Tom Sawyers and Huckleberry Finns of our young years could have experienced their adventures only thanks to the fact that they did something they were not supposed to do. And in this aspect, Harry, Ron and Hermione are like their older literary friends. And although they use all that amount of magic words, sticks, books; their way to the victory above evil is very "real" – they have to use their wit,

⁵ Ibidem

knowledge /even things that they learn at school/, manual skill and true friendship. They have to be brave, generous, and loving. Otherwise they would never be able to win. There is no magic in that.

Nevertheless, this kind of behavior that would in other cases be perceived only as the question of a child's character might be viewed as dangerous, in combination with the second objection – the abovementioned problem of magic and wizardry.

How is it possible that in stiff and bigoted Victorian England nobody was worried about the fact that books were being filled with things wholly incompatible with Christian religion, and their authors were honored and valued for it, while nowadays, we talk of the threat of paganization and rise of occult power? One possible explanation might be that the role of the Church and its influence on people and society was definitely larger; there was no urgent need to worry about such things. On the contrary, old legends were far from ugly aspects of Victorian England, showed no working class living in slums and starving. Mythic creatures were noble, pure and chaste, and operated in the world of allegories.

The situation of our times is different with respect to religion. The greatest historical churches in Europe⁷ have lost much of their direct influence on people. The number of people who call themselves Christians and refuse to belong to any particular church is rising. Freedom and democracy brought also negative aspects – more opportunities for sects, occultists, new religions. Christian theologians became more sensitive towards anything that might possibly put people on the road towards them. But I am persuaded that this is not the appropriate reaction.

The origin of this anxiety is based on a mistaken assumption that the mere existence of a bad influence /in our case mystical elements, magic, and supernatural events in books/ makes people more inclined towards evil. People need much more to leave church, or become indifferent. It's not so much the sect that gains a victim; it's a church that loses a sheep. It should always be easier to hold something that you already have, than to reach something new. And in this lies the greatest problem of

⁶ See: James Finn Garner: Politically Correct Bedtime Stories, Macmillan Publishing Company, NY, 1994 – this is a very interesting book that mocks both – the exaggeration of political correctness, and stereotypes in some traditional fairy-tales

⁷ In this text, if not stated otherwise, the term Church applies to all major Christian denominations that exist in Europe or United States; in case of history – in England, I mean the official – Church of England

Christian churches – we are not very willing to admit our mistakes.⁸ The situation in almost all Europe came to the point that believers are free – this freedom is a dangerous and very difficult thing to handle, but it gives every church a true and real picture of its work and efficiency. We have to stop blaming others for our own mistakes, persuading ourselves and the world around us that the reason for our failures are the attacks that the Church is suffering from outside. The centuries of history give a clear message – the greatest harms in the history of the Catholic Church were not made by pagans, barbarians, witches, or whatever nice names we give them, but by members of the Church - their own weaknesses, imperfections, and mistakes that they refused to acknowledge. On the contrary, the worst anti-religious dictatorship that ever existed – communism – never managed to destroy the church and faith as its representatives planned to since the beginning. The more they pushed, the more people resisted, and stuck together.

So, if we come back to the question whether any book can be dangerous, I must say yes, with an emphasis on "any". Any book can become dangerous in the hands of an unprepared individual. There is a long road between being literate and being able to read literature. Many books were accused of having a bad influence on people, only because their readers couldn't distinguish between fiction and reality, and understood the work of art literally as directions for use. The best example is the Bible – many times during its existence, people took out sentences from it and killed others in the name of something they absolutely misunderstood.

Literature requires responsible and cultivated readers, and it must be given proper attention. In case of children, they cannot be left unguided, and unadvised. The love and relationship to literature is not the subject that we can teach at universities, it comes with nursery rhymes, and is developed only in cooperation with patient and understanding parent. And the role of the Church in this process can be of great importance especially in our high-tech era of mass-media "fast food culture".

⁸ Although, situation is improving. The BBC in the article "Harry Potter Gets Vatican's blessing" states that the document that the Vatican issued to deal with the problems of new age movement, "admits that the immense popularity of the New Age movements suggests the Catholic Church does not always provide the answers to today's spiritual questions."
Source: www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2722077.stm

How can the Church help, in what way, and what should be its place and responsibility? How should we thus approach the situation of so controversial a book, or kind of literature, as Harry Potter and all of fantasy are?

The Church can use its authority and officially ban such a book. Or, to make sure that the evil is destroyed, we can set a fire, and burn it, as is still being done in many communities all over the world. The other option is to read, discuss, persuade, and influence, and in spite of the fear that things might go wrong, put the trust in Lord, and give others what God gave us – free will and the responsibility to ask questions, as illustrated by the book of Job.

Both options are being used, but which one is bringing more fruit? Burning /prohibiting, cursing, condemning/ is an old way mankind has been using ever since books have existed. It is definitely the easier of the two ways – and as such should be suspicious to us. Not only the Catholic Church had several known and long discussed problems with books. We kept on burning /and not only books/ and later we had to revise and apologize, which has never been an easy process.

Burning books begins all terrible dictatorships – we shouldn't be eager to stand abreast in company with Hitler or Stalin /to give an example from a very long list/.

But the most important of all objections against it is that it is not compatible with Christ's teaching. God gave us free will to do whatever we like, although he knew that it will often be a mischief. From the time we got it, we have kept on trying to prevent others from using it. We would like to decide for others and control the things they are doing. Of course, children need some kind of guidance, but it must be clear, that this power is only temporary and every parent should responsibly and gradually prepare his child for the "taking over" of responsibility.

All those on a crusade against HP and fantasy are surely meaning no harm. On the contrary, they are trying to prevent damage from happening, and are serious about that. But prohibiting or burning is not the way. It not only attracts people when it should discourage them, but once we start considering such a thing acceptable, the danger will become great. What would be the criteria for putting a book on such a list, what authority would decide, and how would we prevent rules from being abused? Each group, each community would add their victim to the fire, and the pyre would be larger than we can afford. And the damage on books will be the smallest price to pay. Slowly

creating and strengthening this kind of spiritual and intellectual dictatorship, one group of people would get too much power in their hands; others will be losing their ability to think for themselves, to be responsible and conscious.

An old Chinese proverb can help us understand a possible future for any Christian Church –"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime". There is no use giving people selected kinds of fish with the argument that other fish are poisonous. Let us teach them - with faith, humbleness, love, and kind face - all we can about fish, and fishing, and we will not be afraid to leave them unguarded. If all of us strive to do it like this, no occult movement will be interesting for our fellow believers. We will be able to enjoy the literature the way we like it, - without fear; and the fairies, goblins, witches, and broomsticks will stay where they are supposed to – in books and our imagination.