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Who's OK, Harry or the Hobbits?

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With this past week's video/DVD release of "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," it is an apt moment to review the religious reaction to last fall's two major film releases, the Harry Potter movie and the "Lord of the Rings." The key religious question for both movies centers around the roles magic and witchcraft play in the stories and the focus on wizards as main characters. Is it OK for Christians to enjoy these entertaining stories, when the Bible forbids witchcraft and links it to sin and demons?

With regard to Harry Potter, it is not surprising that different Christian groups disagreed. Mainstream Protestantism, apart from the Southern Baptists, usually did not think the question was worth addressing -- it was imaginary after all, and fairly innocuous at that.

The evangelicals were divided on the question. A column at the popular religious Web site Beliefnet.com emphasized that Harry was about goodness and love overcoming hatred and evil, while the more traditional magazine Christianity Today argued that it led people toward sin.

But it was the fundamentalists who came out solidly against Harry, holding that it encouraged children to think about and to incorporate magic into their play. This in turn would lead them toward witchcraft and deeper sin.

So it was surprising that some of the most vocal anti-Harry groups came out in favor of "Lord of the Rings." Both Campus Crusade for Christ and Focus on the Family even created Web pages to help Christians understand and enjoy it!

Why the apparent double standard? Both films make extensive use of magic, witchcraft and wizards. Spells, potions and other occult acts appear throughout both stories. Their general plot lines are similar, focusing on evil wizards who want to take over the world, and who are successfully defeated by good wizards.

In his recent essay, "Harry and the Evangelicals," Richard Peace argues that the difference lies not in the stories but in the authors. J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote the "Lord of the Rings," was a committed Catholic whose close friend was C.S. Lewis, an author popular in religious circles. Tolkien's comment that the book was "a fundamentally religious work" has strengthened the book's Christian credentials. By comparison, J.K. Rowling, who writes the Harry Potter series, is a Presbyterian who has kept her religious beliefs (whatever they are) out of the public view. Rumors of Rowling's childhood play at being a witch and making potions with sticks also have weighed against her. In the fundamentalist view, Peace states, these clues to each author's character make the difference.

Another difference lies in the intended audience of the two works. Harry Potter appeals to a younger audience that may not understand clearly the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and are thus impressionable. The "Lord of the Rings" is for a more mature audience that has a stronger understanding that imaginary worlds are simply that, imaginary. Tie to this the observation that Harry lives in "our" world; that Harry, his friends, and even Hogwarts exist in modern-day Great Britain. By contrast, the "Lord of the Rings" takes place in a totally different time and place with no identifiable links to the real world. Thus the story aimed at the younger audience confuses the line between reality and imagination, while the story for the mature audience reinforces the difference between them.

In the end, however, I think it is Harry Potter's newness that works against his story in fundamentalist circles. The "Lord of the Rings" has been around for half a century and has had time to become a "classic." Harry Potter is a fad, and fundamentalists who reject modern, secular culture, reject its fads all the more so.

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