Harry Potter and the Creation of Spiritual Technologies

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Abstract

In American society, it is assumed that a person who identifies as nonreligious does not participate in activities often associated with religion. In my thesis I will argue that this assumption is false. Over the last 30 years the number of Americans who identify as nonreligious has increased by 200 percent. Yet at the same time, there have appeared numerous new "spiritual technologies" that nonreligious people can participate in, without having to engage in an established religious tradition. The podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* exemplifies this phenomenon by asking, "what if we read the books we love as if they were sacred texts?" I will argue that the podcast treats the Harry Potter series as a sacred text primarily by appropriating religious practices from Christianity and Judaism into "spiritual technologies." An exploration of American Protestantism's influence on American culture will situation the podcast within its general cultural context. Using comparative analysis, this thesis will explore how the podcast turns traditional religious practices into nonreligious spiritual technologies.

"Of course it is happening inside your head Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?"

- Albus Dumbledore (The Deathly Hallows)

Introduction

In American society, it is generally assumed that a person who identifies as nonreligious does not participate in activities often associated with religion.[1] In my thesis I will argue that this assumption is false.[2] Over the last 30 years the number of Americans who identify as nonreligious has increased by 200 percent.[3] Yet at the same time, there have appeared numerous new "spiritual technologies" that nonreligious people can participate in, without having to engage in an established religious tradition.[4] The podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* exemplifies this phenomenon by asking, "what if we read the books we love as if they were sacred texts?" I will argue that, for the creators, reading Harry Potter as a sacred text effectively means treating the *Harry Potter* series like the Bible.

Created in 2016 by Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, graduates of Harvard Divinity School's Divinity program, the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* appropriates Christian and Jewish sacred reading practices – practices used to understand the Bible and apply its insights to postbiblical life -- into "spiritual technologies" that can be deployed in respect to the *Harry Potter* series. These spiritual technologies include *Lectio divina, Ignatian Spirituality, Florilegium, Marginalia, Havruta, and PaRDeS.* The first four practices stem from the Catholic tradition, while the last two stem from Judaism. The final technology *Blessings* stems both from the Christian and Jewish tradition. Throughout each episode, the hosts discuss how the text

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[1] Sigal Samuel, "Atheists Are Sometimes More Religious Than Christians," *The Atlantic*, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/american-atheists-religious-european-christians/560936/.
[2] This thesis will utilize the "lived religion" approach to the study of religion. See Methods section (pp.61) for more information.
[3] Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 5.
[4] Definition for "spiritual technology" found on pp. 10

relates to their own lives, as well as to broader societal issues, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement. This podcast has inspired numerous communities worldwide to read *Harry Potter* as a sacred text.[5]

The creators of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* have yet to publish a statistical analysis of the demographics of their listeners.[6] As a Washington Post article notes, however, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* may appeal to individuals who are not religious as a tool to better understand the complexities of life outside of a religious setting (e.g. love, forgiveness, grief, etc.).[7] The hosts treat *Harry Potter* as a sacred text primarily by adapting Christian and Jewish sacred reading practices into nonreligious spiritual technologies. Understanding the nature of this transition is central to grappling with how the hosts and listeners who engage with such practices are treating *Harry Potter* as a sacred text.

Zoltan describes the podcast as "a secular Bible study, but using *Harry Potter* instead of the Bible."[8] To view the Bible (rather than, say, Christian or Jewish liturgy) as the basis for what it means to read the Harry Potter series as a sacred text may reflect the Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura.* This would make sense given the profound influence of Protestantism on American history, society and culture. Sola scriptura refers to the Protestant assertion that "the final authority of doctrine and practice is the Bible" rather than the church.[9] The hosts of the

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[5] This topic for analysis may suggest that humans have an innate need for religion of spirituality in their life, that religion or conducting ritual is central to human wellbeing. Due to the limits of this thesis, such a rich scholarly discussion will not be included. A good place to start when seeking to better understand this topic is Brimadevi van Niekerk's article "Religion and Spirituality: What are The Fundamental Differences" (2018).

[6] A survey of the members of the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Common Room* (the podcast's Facebook group) was conducted by the group's admin team and the information is explored in the Protestant section of the Analysis (pp. 78).

[7] Julie Zauzmer and Michelle Boorstein, "Hundreds Pack DC Hall to Discuss Podcast Exploring Harry Potter as a Sacred Text," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2017, sec. Acts of Faith, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/07/19/harry-potter-and-the-sacred-text-podcast-draws-non-believers-who-find-meaning-in-magical-fiction/.

[8] *Spend Two Minutes With The Co-Host Of The Podcast "Harry Potter And The Sacred Text,"* Video Clip (Boston: WGBH News, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6Xo5_oKHEg.

[9] James Stump, "The Bible," in *Science and Christianity: An Introduction to the Issues* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 56, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119415206.ch5.

podcast assert that they will only treat the *Harry Potter* books as sacred texts (rather than the movies, fanfiction, Broadway plays, or even JK Rowling's Twitter feed). It is noteworthy, however, that the actual practices used on the podcast do not come from Protestantism but from Catholicism and Judaism.

Background

"What if we read the books we love as if they were sacred texts?"[10] The hosts, Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile prepare for the recording of each podcast episode by first reading a chapter from the *Harry Potter* series through a central theme on their own in their homes.[11] These themes range from 'forgiveness' to 'revenge' and are used not only to understand the characters and context of the narrative better, but also to unearth the biases and perspectives the hosts and the listener bring to the text. They use this homework as the basis of their thematic discussion on the podcast.

Zoltan describes the podcast as "a secular Bible study, but using *Harry Potter* instead of the Bible."[12] On air, Zoltan and ter Kuile never explicitly refer to *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, and the community that has arisen from it, as a new religion. Instead, Zoltan has called the podcast a spiritual technology, arguing for new methods of nonreligious practice for those who have experienced trauma within a traditional religious setting.[13] Spiritual technologies are of course, available for anyone to use.

The term "spiritual technology" is relatively new to academia, and it has been defined in different ways. Christopher Dunn's Forward in Edward Malkowski's *The Spiritual Technology of Ancient Egypt: Sacred Science and the Mystery of Consciousness* uses the term to discuss the connection between technology and spirituality.[14] Teresa N. Washington defines a spiritual technology as a spiritual or supernatural *ability* that an individual has (for example, *satulmo*:

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[10] "About," Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/about/.
[11] For full discussion on how the hosts define and conceptualize "sacred" see pp. 65.
[12] *Spend Two Minutes With The Co-Host Of The Podcast "Harry Potter And The Sacred Text."*
[13] Kimberly Winston, "Reinventing Religion — with Romance Novels," Washington Post, August 24, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/08/24/reinventing-religion-with-romance-novels/.
[14] Edward F. Malkowski, The Spiritual Technology of Ancient Egypt: Sacred Science and the Mystery of Consciousness (Rochester: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

"the ability to cook upside down on the ceiling") in her analysis of African "philosophies, rituals, and spiritual phenomenon."[15]

The term "spiritual technology" is also used outside of academia, including the podcast under analysis. One organization that obviously uses this term is the Church of Spiritual Technology. This organization is "an autonomous church" of Scientology that seeks to "preserve and archive the Scientology Scriptures."[16] The Church of Spiritual Technology "owns the copyrights to L. Ron Hubbard's works and licenses their use" as well as uses a number of archival technologies to preserve Hubbard's works such as "stainless steel plates and nickel-plated records" that are "stored in 2 300 titanium capsules houses in calamity-proof vaults" to maintain the safety of these texts.[17] The documents produced by this Church uses the term "spiritual technologies" to refer to both Hubbard's writings and the technologies used in order to house and protect Hubbard's documents and records.

The term was also used for an online summit held in 2016 called Spiritual Technologies 2.0. This summit hosted online events and talks about technologies "designed to hack our biology for awakening to transcendent and transformative states of consciousness." Such technologies include "mindful video gaming, biofeedback, brainwave entrainment, flotation tanks, audiovisual entrainment, subtle energy devices, and apps."[18] The term "spiritual technology" in this case refers to actual technologies or devices that can aid in the development of one's spirituality with the use of technology.

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[15] Teresa N. Washington, "Nickels in the Nation Sack: Continuity in Africana Spiritual Technologies," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 5 (March 2010): 5, 12.
[16] "What Is Church of Spiritual Technology?," Scientology Canada, January 1, 1AD, https://www.scientology.ca/faq/church-management/what-is-church-of-spiritual-technology.html.
[17] "Church of Spiritual Technology."
[18] "Spiritual Technologies 2.0," Spiritual Technologies 2.0, 2016, https://www.spiritualtechnologies.io/homepage-3/.

These definitions and uses of the term "spiritual technology" do not adequately describe the ways in which Zoltan and ter Kuile use the term. In my research I define "spiritual technologies" as facets of religious and spiritual actions (e.g. ritual, liturgy, sacred practices) that deploy elements associated with "world religions" such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism outside of an explicitly religious context.[19] This definition aligns most closely with Todd Perreira's definition. Perreira, who studies death meditation ritual in Islam Sufism and Theravāda Buddhism, defines a spiritual technology as a tool that can be used "for understanding, defining, experiencing and ultimately, transforming the self in relation to the dominant culture that otherwise shapes one's personal and social identity."[20] This definition highlights the "transformation of the self" that results from the practice of spiritual technologies, even though, in the context of the podcast, they are practiced outside of a religious setting.

For Zoltan and ter Kuile, treating a text as sacred entails (1) "trusting the text," (2) reading the text with "rigor and ritual," and (3) "reading [the text] in community."[21] By "trusting the text," the hosts are not calling on their listeners to understand "the text [as] perfect," but rather to believe that the text "is worthy of [their] attention and contemplation."[22] Treating a text as sacred through rigorous ritual reading, they believe, allows readers to glean wisdom from the pages of the text.[23] The act of reading in community aligns with the views of religious

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[19] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[20] Todd LeRoy Perreira, "'Die before You Die': Death Meditation as Spiritual Technology of the Self in Islam and Buddhism," *The Muslim World* 100, no. 2–3 (2010): 264, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2010.01319.x.
[21] "Methodology," Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/about/.
[22] "Methodology."
[23] "Methodology."

studies scholars who argue that sacred texts are not inherently sacred. Rather, texts are sacred if "the community of readers" around those texts treats them as sacred.[24]

Treating a text as sacred is a spiritual technology. Although the vast majority of sacred reading takes places within the context of institutionally established religious rituals and services, such structured environments are not necessary. Anyone anywhere can choose a book, sit down, and read the words as if they are sacred words.[25] They can read the text, think about how the text is speaking to their own lived experience as a human living on planet Earth, and find comfort in having their lived experience validated and enriched through such sacred reading. Then, such insights can be shared with others who also find value in learning about themselves by reading a text as sacred.

Reflecting on treating *Jane Eyre* as sacred, Zoltan speaks to the importance of her atheist identity in relation to her desire to treat nonreligious art as sacred. She writes: "Just because I do not believe in anything supernatural does not mean that I do not believe that there are things in this world worthy of a critical yet sincere reverence."[26] Such practices, however, raise a number of questions related to how spiritual technologies differ from religious actions and rituals. By treating the *Harry Potter* series as sacred, are Zoltan and ter Kuile introducing a new mode of religious action? If an individual is participating in a sacred reading practice, are they thereby participating in a religious action? And, does it make a difference if the practice takes place in solitude or in community?[27]

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[24] "Methodology."
[25] This includes works of poetry, or even, as is happening within the podcast community, individuals are treating other works of art as sacred, like television shows or movies.
[26] Vanessa Zoltan, *Bertha Mason Is Sacred*, Summer/Autumn 2016, vol. 44, 3 & 4 vols. (Harvard Divinity Bulletin: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2018), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2016/bertha-mason-sacred.
[27] This thesis will not attempt to differentiate between "religion" and "spirituality" to illustrate the ways in which the podcast works within the space between religion and spirituality.

Literature Review

Introduction

This review seeks to understand four different areas of literature that are relevant for this project on the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. Though the podcast's creators and hosts do not consider itself to be a new religion, literature on fiction-based religions will be consulted to better understand how the field addresses the practice of treating fiction as sacred texts. Next, understanding the relationship between religion and American popular culture will be necessary to explore due to the way that the podcast connects religious practice to *Harry Potter*, an American pop culture phenomenon. American Protestantism in particular, however, has had an outsized impact on American popular culture. Therefore, exploring the field of American Protestantism will aid in understanding how Protestantism impacts American society and by extension, the broad cultural context in which the podcast functions. Lastly, literature on podcasts and the unique traits of the podcasting medium will make clear how far research on podcasts have come in academia. Doing this work will lay a strong foundation for the analytical section of this thesis.

Fiction-Based Religion

The 1950s saw a rise in what have been called hyper-real religion, fiction-based religion, or invented religion. The Church of the SubGenius date its founding to 1953, while Discordianism was founded only a couple of years later in 1957.[28] These two new religions gained the interest of religious scholars around the globe. What does it mean to

[28] Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–2.

create a new religion? Are these religions legitimate? How do we know which religions are legitimate, and which are not? What shall they be called? This section of the literature review seeks to explore the story of how scholars of religion have come to study fiction-based religions.

The first scholar to explicitly address this topic was Adam Possamai in *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (2005). Writing at the same time as some of these religions were being created (Matrixism specifically), the focus of his analysis is on the way that secularism, paired with the West's consumerist culture, has allowed new religions, such as those listed above, to be created and gain popularity.[29] He states that hyper-real religions are simply the postmodern equivalent to religions that were created during the modern era (like the Baha'i faith or Theosophical Society), and hypothesizes that these new religions may even gain mainstream popularity in the future.[30]

Initially it may seem out of place or rare for a religion to be created out of a work of fiction. Surprisingly, however, there are several popular religions that have arisen on the basis of fiction. The introduction to this section acknowledged the first fiction-based religions, The Church of the SubGenius and Discordianism. Some religions that were created more recently using fiction include The Church of All Worlds (created in 1968 based on Robert Heinhein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*), Jediism (created in 2001 and "based on the *Star Wars* films of George Lucas"), and Matrixism (created in 2004 and "based on the *Matrix* trilogy of films by Larry and Andy Wachowski").[31] Carole M. Cusack

[29] Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (Brussels: P.I.E. - Peter Lang S.A., 2005), 24 & 161.
[30] Possamai, 158–59.
[31] Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 3–4.

argues that such religions are in fact "an inevitable outcome of a society addicted to the consumption of novelties."[32] She further argues that these new religions are the result of "the retreat of institutional Christianity" in the West, along with the development of the religious marketplace that she argues arose in the 20th century.[33] Such assertions are challenged below in the section on American Protestantism.

The Question of Terminology

One area of particular concern for scholars of this phenomenon is classification and terminology. Possamai in *Religion and Popular Culture* (2005), and then again in the *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (2012), uses the term "hyper-real religion" to describe religions that are based on products from popular culture (like *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*). Directly influenced by Baudrillard's "theory of commodity culture," hyper-real religion refers to "a simulacrum of a religion" that is "created out of, or in symbiosis with, popular culture, which provides inspiration for believers/consumers."[34] This definition and emphasizes the constructed natures of these religions. This postmodern perspective argues that society is made up of signs and symbols that make it difficult for individuals to "distinguish the real from the unreal," which results in a hyper-reality that breaks down these exact walls.[35]

[32] Cusack, 18.
[33] Cusack, 25.
[34] Adam Possamai, *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1; Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
[35] Possamai, *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, 1.

Not all scholars, however, classify these religions as "hyper-real." Cusack in *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, Faith* (2010) argues that the best term for these religions is "invented."[36] Markus Altena Davidsen in "The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach" (2016) avoids both of these terms, and simply calls these religions "fiction-based."[37] While Davidsen states that his term and Possamai's are synonymous, he understands Cusack's term to refer to an entirely different category that "includes both fiction-based religions" (like Jediism) as well as parody religions (like the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster).[38] Cusack does not comment on this distinction.

The question of terminology was further complicated by Possamai's *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (2012), and a year later with Danielle Lee Kirby's "Between Synochromysticism and Paganism: Tracing Some Metaphysical Uses of Popular Fictions" (2013), and Paul-Francois Tremlett's "The Problem with the Jargon of Inauthenticity: Towards a Materialist Repositioning of the Analysis of Postmodern Religion" (2013). Possamai's *Handbook* marked a milestone within the study of fiction-based religions.[39] It includes scholars from all over the world studying aspects of hyper-real religion, and also the ways in which traditional religions may exhibit hyper-reality.[40] Martin Geoffroy in Possamai's volume, and Cusack directly criticize Possamai's use of "hyper-real" due to disagreements regarding Possamai's interpretation of Baudrillard's theory.[41] Danielle

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[36] Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 1.
[37] Markus Altena Davidsen, "The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach," *Religion* 46, no. 4 (October 2016): 522, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1210392.
[38] Davidsen, 522.
[39] This thesis will use the term "fiction-based religion" primarily to refer to the same phenomena that "hyper-real" and "invented" refer to in Possamai and Cusack's text. This term emphasizes the central role that fictional narrative plays in the construction of such religions.
[40] Possamai, *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, 299.
[41] Possamai, 33–34; Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 125.

Kirby, however, deviates from all of the terms introduced above in favor of "occulture." She uses this term to describe the way that fiction-based religion can encapsulate "an eclectic array of practices and beliefs" that, in her understanding, can range from "various forms of magic" to "environmentalism, divination" or even "radical politics."[42] Interestingly enough, she also uses the term "belief" in her analysis to describe how members of these fiction-based religions may come to understand their practice on a personal level.[43] Calling these beliefs "alternative," her terminology is open to critique due to the Christian undertones of the notion of "belief." Not all fiction-based religions have a set of established "beliefs or creeds," and to assume as such reinforces the idea that a religion must emulate Christianity in order to be considered legitimate.[44]

Paul-Francois Tremlett objects to all these terms. Arguing that scholars who study fiction-based religion are utilizing a "jargon of inauthenticity," Tremlett states that only a materialist approach is adequate to study the new religions of the postmodern era.[45] Influenced by the works of Russell T. McCutcheon and Robert Segal, Tremlett's deconstructive argument states that Cusack, Davidsen, and Possamai's approach is idealist. Therefore their approach does not allow for deep commentary on the impact that these new religions are having on "postmodern or late capitalist contexts."[46] In response, Tremlett does not argue in favor of any one particular term to describe fiction-

[42] Danielle Lee Kirby, "Between Synchromysticism and Paganism: Tracing Some Metaphysical Uses of Popular Fictions," *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 396, https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2013.838796.
[43] Kirby, 396.
[44] Lynn Davidman, "The New Voluntarism and the Case of Unsynagogued Jews," in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57, http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195305418.001.0001/acprof-9780195305418; Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 84.
[45] Paul-Francois Tremlett, "The Problem with the Jargon of Inauthenticity: Towards a Materialist Repositioning of the Analysis of Postmodern Religion," *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 463, https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2013.838795.
[46] Tremlett, 464.

based religions.[47] Rather, his materialist approach advocates for scholars to take seriously how fiction-based religions have made use of new social spaces, such as the internet, to constitute connection among members.[48]

A "Harry Potter" Religion: Snapeism

So far, the study of fiction-based religions has focused on the appropriate terms to use to describe these religions, and an analysis into what these religions actually are, especially in terms of their origin, rituals, and practices. Zoe Alderton's "'Snapewives' and 'Snapeism': A Fiction-Based Religion within the Harry Potter Fandom" (2014), however, welcomed an ethnography of the one and only fiction-based religion based on the *Harry Potter* books so far: Snapeism. Alderton chronicles the creation, rise, and then fall of this not so popular religion that existed in America between 2008 and 2011.[49] Through screenshot images of public forums (like Tumblr) where the creators of this religion shared their religious experience publicly, Alderton argues for the legitimacy of this religion.[50] Notably, Possamai, Cusack, Kirby, Davidsen, and even Tremlett, all argue for fiction-based religions to be treated with the same respect and dignity as traditional religion within academia. Alderton chronicles the use of both traditional and new methods of religious practice in Snapeism, from "fanfiction and chatroom channeling," to "older forms of worship" like "shrines and sacred images."[51] He notes that the traditional

[47] Tremlett, 473–74.
[48] Tremlett, 473.
[49] Zoe Alderton, "'Snapewives' and 'Snapeism': A Fiction-Based Religion within the Harry Potter Fandom," *Religions* 5, no. 1 (March 3, 2014): 223 & 225, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel5010219.
[50] Alderton, 219.
[51] Alderton, 256.

practices used in Snapeism "[drew] heavily on Christian culture as a source of legitimacy" while new practices like chat room channeling lead to the religion to be considered illegitimate by outsiders.[52] Highlighting the shortcomings of the "constraining categories of religious versus nonreligious," Alderton's ethnography is an example of how such categories can be questioned and explored further in academia if fiction-based religions are treated as legitimate.[53]

New Focus: Narrative

In "Fiction and Religion: How Narratives about the Supernatural Inspire Religious Belief – Introducing the Thematic Issue" (2006), Laura Feldt, Markus Davidsen, Carole Cusack, and Anders Klostergaard Petersen introduce a new theme into the study of fiction-based religion: the importance of narrative.[54] Each scholar outlined their theoretical thoughts about two major areas: (1) What is the difference (if any) between "religious narratives and supernatural fiction?" (2) Do fictional texts that cater well to being used as a religious text contain particular features that enable such interaction to occur?[55]

These scholars consider the differences between fantasy fiction and religious narratives.[56] Feldt and Petersen argue that these are more or less the same.[57] Davidsen

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[52] Alderton, 256.
[53] Alderton, 256.
[54] Davidsen invited scholars Petersen, Feldt, Cusack, and Dirk Johannsen to contribute to a "thematic issue" for the journal *Religion*.
[55] Markus Altena Davidsen, "Fiction and Religion: How Narratives about the Supernatural Inspire Religious Belief – Introducing the Thematic Issue," *Religion* 46, no. 4 (October 2016): 490–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1226756.
[56] Davidsen, 492.
[57] Laura Feldt, "Contemporary Fantasy Fiction and Representations of Religion: Playing with Reality, Myth and Magic in His Dark Materials and Harry Potter," *Religion* 46, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 555, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1212526; Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "The Difference between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature: A Matter of Degree Only," *Religion* 46, no. 4 (2016): 518, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2016.1221670.

disagrees, stating that the author of a text must purposefully relate their work to the real world in order for such a text to be used religiously.[58] Cusack argues that some texts lend themselves better than others to being used religiously, due to a number of factors. For example, if the narrative contains supernatural elements, or explicitly "describes religious rituals and organizations" that readers can model in the real world in a fiction-based religion, then that narrative lends itself well to being used religiously.[59] Johannsen adds a historical dimension, pointing out that "the distinction between religion and fiction only became explicit in the late 19th century."[60]

Each scholar then explores the importance of narrative for understanding religion and religious practice. Despite the fact that, as Davidsen asserts, religious narrative is central to "structuring and maintaining…belief and practice," up until 2016, there had been little research effort put into this area of study.[61] In that same year, and in that same journal, Davidsen argues that fantasy texts are used religiously when they contain "veracity mechanisms" that anchor that text within the real world of the reader.[62] While Cusack and Possamai maintain a sociological focus to their studies, here Davidsen asks how certain narrative structures seem to contain the capacity to be used for a religious purpose.[63] Peterson echoes this, arguing that when texts have "real" places in their narratives, it invites readers to participate with the story in the real world, but not

[58] Whereby the authors of the text claim that they are writing a non-fictional story about "superhuman beings who really exist in the actual world and who intervene in this world for the benefit (or detriment) of humans" (Davidsen 491-492).
[59] Davidsen, "Fiction and Religion," 493.
[60] Davidsen, 493.
[61] Davidsen, 496.
[62] Davidsen, "The Religious Affordance of Fiction," 521.
[63] Davidsen, 522–23.

necessarily in a religious way.[64] In order for a fantasy text to afford religious use, however, for Petersen, similar to Davidsen, the text must connect elements of the story to "a location invested with sacredness" on Earth.[65] Peterson also argues that evolutionarily, humans are creatures who rely on narrative to make meaning in the world.[66] This focus on narrative in the study of fiction-based religions is a new and exciting trajectory. Removing the focus from the legitimacy of fiction-based religion, and instead noting the similarities between religious and nonreligious narrative, all while exploring why and how humans are drawn to such narratives, is a refreshing take on understanding individuals who do not subscribe to traditional religious structures.

Conclusion

As research into the field of fiction-based religion continues, there is hope that our understanding of the relationships between narrative and religion will increase. So far, it is clear that there is something special about *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and even *Harry Potter*, if one is taking the religions that have come from them seriously. It is clear, however, that in the field of religious studies, the study of fiction-based religion is just beginning. Though the hosts of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* do not claim to be starting a new religion, the work on narrative happening within this field of literature will prove to be useful in explaining why the *Harry Potter* narrative lends itself well to be used as a sacred text.

[64] Petersen, "The Difference between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature," 506–8.
[65] Petersen, 512.
[66] Petersen, 509–10.

Religion and Popular Culture

Religion integrates itself into media in both obvious as well as less obvious ways. At first glance the study of *Harry Potter* in the field of religious studies may seem more fun than serious scholarship. But as Mark S. Scott and Jason Zuidema state, popular culture should be viewed as a serious object of study, not least because the very popularity of popular culture raises important areas for serious research.[67] This section of the literature review will explore some of the scholarship on religion and popular culture, with a particular focus on the Bible's role within American popular media.

The Relationship Between Religion and Media

The relationship between religion and media became a topic of seriously academic study in the mid-twentieth century.[68] William Kuhns' *The Electronic Gospel: Religion and Media* (1969) was among the first to explore this relationship. Reflecting a theological perspective, Kuhns is concerned primarily with the nature of new media, as well as the changes that media consumption will bring to Western culture. He posits that humanity will create "new myths" that will either comprise "serious beliefs of scientific and technological progress" or "the belief-unbelief fantasies of television…" Kuhns' main concern revolves around media's inability to provide "the promise of transcendence" for the viewer.[69] Kuhns was either unaware of fiction-based religions, which began to appear

[67] Mark S. M. Scott and Jason Zuidema, "Religious Studies and Popular Fiction: What Does Dan Brown Have to Do With the Ivory Tower?," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23, no. 3 (2011): 377, https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.23.3.372.
[68] Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1.
[69] William Kuhns, *The Electronic Gospel: Religion and Media* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 10, 155–56.

in the late 1950s, or he did not take them seriously. His perspective confirms the view held by many 20th-century scholars: religion and media are entirely separate entities that do not impact one another and should be studied in isolation from each other.[70]

This perspective was challenged in Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber's *Religion and Media* (2001). Containing perspectives from a variety of scholars from a wide-ranging number of fields of study, this book suggests that the relationship between religion and technology may be a more important area of study than the relation between religion and modernization and "secularization."[71] Differing from Kuhns' understanding that asserted religion and media's distinctiveness, De Vries and Weber's text introduced the complex relationship between media and religion. Recent scholarship has developed this field considerably.

Arguing that there is no clear-cut boundary between religion and media, Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark's *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media* (2001) asserts that religion and media are connected by layers of "religious symbols, interests, and meanings."[72] Along with the theme of religion and media's relationship, Clark explores another trend that has emerged in the literature – the "Protestantization" of this research.[73] This is the notion that American values primarily stem from Protestantism.[74] It is impossible to speak about religion and media in America without asserting Protestantism's influence on American culture, and by extension, media.

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[70] Kuhns, 141.
[71] Hent De Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: The Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, 2001), 14.
[72] Hoover and Clark, *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*, 1.
[73] Hoover and Clark, 7.
[74] Hoover and Clark, 7.

One of the links between media and religion that Clark's study *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003) explores is the beliefs of American teenagers.[75] Stemming from her collaborative work with Hoover, Clark maintains that due to its impact on the American media, Protestantism has also had an impact on American teenagers, for example, from television shows that talk about the afterlife, or the supernatural in general (like *Touched By an Angel* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*).[76] For example in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* when Wicca is portrayed, "magic is contained to the realm of fantasy" which leads to a perspective that challenges or even mocks "the possibility that [Wicca] might be" conceived as a legitimate alternative approach to spirituality.[77] This is done in order to maintain the interests and concerns of America's Protestant-informed audience. Clark began her study with the intention of avoiding studying individuals who identified as Evangelical Christian.[78] She quickly came to realize, however, that it would be next to impossible to study religion and media without acknowledging evangelicalism's "resonance in contemporary U.S. culture."[79] Not only does American religion and media maintain a complex and unique relationship, but it can be said that Protestantism heavily informs the religion side of this relationship.

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[75] Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ottawa/detail.action?docID=4963429.
[76] Clark, 45.
[77] Clark, 58.
[78] It should be noted that this review recognizes the complex nature of American Protestantism and asserts that American history and culture exemplifies a complex set of beliefs that cannot be reduced to simply being the product of Evangelicalism.
[79] Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, 45.

Will Popular Culture Replace Religion?

The year 2005 brought about another perspective in studying the relationship between religion and media. While previous research asserted the blurred boundaries that scholars must manage when studying religion and popular media, David Chidester's work took this to an entirely different extreme. In *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (2005), Chidester brings attention to the ways in which popular culture emulates religion. Calling this "authentic fakes," he argues that there are aspects of American culture that do "religious work" by way of community building, "focusing desire, and facilitating exchange in ways that look just like religion."[80] Chidester defines "religious work" as "negotiating what it is to be human."[81] Using Disney as an example, he explains that with the inclusion of supernatural characters (like fairies or genies), Disney's religious work "concentrates on playing with conventional distinctions among humans, animals, and machines."[82] Traditionally, "religious classifications of persons put these distinctions at stake," especially in Protestant contexts.[83] This perspective has allowed religious studies scholars to think more critically about the way in which humans are always engaging with religious questions, or questions of ultimate significance.[84] Chidester simply notes that this relationship between religion and popular culture is blended more than ever.

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[80] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (London: University of California Press, 2005), viii, https://www-fulcrum-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/concern/monographs/08612p16p.
[81] Chidester, 18.
[82] Chidester, 18.
[83] Chidester, 18.
[84] A chilling example of this is Jim Jones, a leader of a "fake" religion, being compared to the War on Drugs that was instituted by President Ronald Regan. Both situations involved the deaths of numerous of people and were justified under the same pretenses: that "the human spirit is disclosed, liberated, or redeemed in sacrificial death" (Chidester 100).

Whereas Chidester focuses more on how popular culture emulates religiosity from American citizens, Mazur and McCarthy study the way in which religious meaning can be found in even the most mundane activities.[85] Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy's *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (2001) draws attention to how products of American popular culture, like Disney products, may indeed "fill many of the roles often filled by religion."[86] A new publication from Casper ter Kuile addresses this question directly. *The Power of Ritual* (2020) explores how "we can nourish souls by transforming everyday practices – eating together, working out, reading, taking a walk – into sacred rituals."[87] Other activities such as working out (CrossFit/Soul Cycle for example) have been compared to religious communities as well by ter Kuile.[88]

This further complicates the category of "religion" that was explored in the fiction-based religion section of this review. If cultural products like baseball and Disney are being used by individuals to fulfill some sort of religious need, the question of what religion is becomes much more complicated. What this explains, then, is that in the literature on fiction-based religion and on religion and American popular culture, there is explicit evidence of, and theorizing around, why and how individuals use traditionally nonreligious media and cultural products as religious. This is explicitly seen in fiction-based religions, as well as inexplicitly in Chidester and Mazur and McCarthy's findings.

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[85] Chidester, *Authentic Fakes*, 33; Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.
[86] Mazur and McCarthy, *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*, 310.
[87] Casper ter Kuile, "Casper Ter Kuile," Casper ter Kuile, 2020, https://www.caspertk.com.
[88] Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, "How We Gather (Part 2): SoulCycle as Soul Sanctuary," The On Being Project, 2016, https://onbeing.org/blog/how-we-gather-part-2-soulcycle-as-soul-sanctuary/.

This section sought to study how religion is inexplicitly related to popular culture in America

How Religion is Utilized in American Popular Culture

Around the same time that Clark and Chidester were publishing their findings about the connection between religion and media, Anton Karl Kozlovic was studying what he deemed "the Cinematic Christ-figure" in American popular films in "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure" (2004). Here he argues that the "Christ-figure" exists in American popular films "as a living genre."[89] Though he predicts that this will decline in usage in the future, he seeks to call attention to one way in which religion and media's relationship is explicit.[90] Written as a sort of checklist for scholars to use to see if characters in film could be considered "Christ-figures," Kozlovic's text allows scholars to name and categorize America's Christianization in a concrete way.[91]

Sharing a similar perspective with Kozlovic is Peter John Barber in "The Combat Myth and the Gospel's Apocalypse in the Harry Potter Series: Subversion of a Supposed Existential Given" (2012). He argues, more explicitly, that there exist strong parallels between the *Harry Potter* series and the Gospels.[92] As one of the first scholars to make this connection, Barber's work is an important milestone in the study of religion and popular culture because it emphasizes the convoluted nature of religion and media that

[89] Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8, no. 1 (2004): 1, https://doi.org/0.3138.
[90] Kozlovic, 1.
[91] Kozlovic, paras. 20–68.
[92] Peter John Barber, "The Combat Myth and the Gospel's Apocalypse in the Harry Potter Series: Subversion of a Supposed Existential Given," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 24, no. 2 (2012): 183, https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.24.2.183.

blurs “threads of influence and interpretation” for scholars of religion. Barber’s analysis allows scholars to better see how popular media has been directly influenced by religion, and specifically Christianity.[93] Reinforcing all of these areas of focus is Adele Reinhartz’ 2013 text, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction*. Reinhartz seeks to understand how the Bible, in general within American culture, has been utilized on the silver screen.[94] As is seen in Clark’s work above, and will be further emphasized in this text, popular films are not isolated from the culture in which the film was produced within.[95] Therefore, it is nearly impossible for one to watch a movie in America that does not contain some inkling of religious, and particularly Christian, influence or symbolism.[96]

How the Bible is Utilized in American Popular Culture

Kozlovic explores the use of the Bible in American popular culture, particularly American cinema. He identifies “six functional heuristic categories” for organizing how the Bible is used in American cinema. These include: *“*(1) Scripture-quoting as verbal weapon-cum-divine protection, (2) Scripture-quoting as moral guidance, (3) Scripture-quoting as interpersonal jousting, (4) Scripture-quoting as indicator of madness, (5) mock Scripture-quoting, and (6) Scripture-quoting as scene-setting.”[97]

[93] Barber, 199.
[94] Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4, https://www-taylorfrancis-com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/books/9781134627011.
[95] Reinhartz, 2, 6.
[96] Reinhartz, 2.
[97] Anton Karl Kozlovic, “Holy Writ and Hollywood: Six Heuristic Categories of Scripture-Quoting Within the Popular Cinema,” *Journal of Media & Religion* 12, no. 2 (April 2013): 71, https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2013.811369.

The Exorcist (1973) exemplifies the first category when the Bible is quoted and used as a weapon against demonic forces.[98] The second category is seen in the 1923 silent film *The Ten Commandments* with its inclusion of "Though Shalt Not Steal (Exod. 20:25).[99] In *Lilies of the Field* (1963) the third category is shown when an overworked servant quotes the Bible to justify receiving adequate payment for their hard work.[100] In response, his Master quotes other passages from the Bible to justify not paying him.[101] The fourth category is seen in *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* (1963) when Dr. James Xavier develops x-ray vision after experimenting on himself.[102] This leads to him lose all control and become "psychologically unhinged."[103] The film ends with him literally plucking his eyes out in a fit of psychological distress - a reference to Matt. 5:29.[104] The fifth category is evident in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) when scripture is inaccurately quoted.[105] *The Road* (2009) exemplifies the final category when the main characters of this post-apocalyptic film walk past "an aging highway sign with graffiti daubed over it" quoting Jeremiah 17:6, "Behold the Valley of Slaughter."[106] Kozlovic concludes stating that "Hollywood cinema is a relatively untapped pedagogic resource for the extra-ecclesiastical examination of sacred Scripture in today's

[98] Kozlovic, 74.
[99] Kozlovic, 75.
[100] Kozlovic, 76.
[101] Kozlovic, 77.
[102] Kozlovic, 80.
[103] Kozlovic, 80.
[104] Kozlovic, 80.
[105] Kozlovic, 81.
[106] Kozlovic, 82.

increasingly postprint, secular society."[107] He calls for a refined and expanded version of the categories he introduced in this article.[108]

Reinhartz' *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* also analyses the explicit connection between the Bible and American films. She notes that, cinema's use of the Bible actually "[spans] all genres."[109] She further states that the consistent use of the Bible in American film, "means that North American audiences encounter some aspect of the Bible almost every time they watch a movie."[110]

Many American films that utilize the Bible are often marketed globally. Consequently, such films are consumed by a global audience. This has led to Christian symbolism and images arising "in non-Christian national cinemas" such as "India (*Karunamayudu,* 1978) and Israel (e.g., *Walk on Water*, 2004)."[111] Film and popular culture are also an important resource for those who seek to better understand American culture. For example, Reinhartz explains how film is a useful medium for immigrants. Watching American cinema allows for immigrants to "be socialized into the norms, values, and foundational stories of 'western' (North American, European) society," which includes "its privileging of the Bible."[112]

Reinhartz explores how the Bible serves many roles in popular culture. In cinema, the Bible may simply be included as a prop, other times its "a source of dialog, reference, and allusion" as was explored above in Kozlovic's text.[113] Further, the Bible may be "a

[107] Kozlovic, 84.
[108] Kozlovic, 84.
[109] Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema*, 11.
[110] Reinhartz, 12.
[111] Reinhartz, 12.
[112] Reinhartz, 12.
[113] Reinhartz, 133.

source of plot and character."[114] For example, *The Lion King* (1994) contains plot similarities with the story of Moses.[115]

Reinhartz asks: "why is the Bible used in films that are not really or not primarily about the Bible at all?" First, as a medium, cinema draws on broader culture or on elements of a culture that "would be familiar to their audiences" and inserts these familiar elements into popular tv and film.[116] Reinhartz cites the Bible as one of many influential books that impact American cinema. Other notable influences are Jane Austen, Shakespeare, popular novels like *The Da Vinci Code*, or even a "foundational document such as the American Bill of Rights," and popular psychology.[117] Second, she describes film as a "highly self-referential medium."[118] This means that "films often reproduce the ways in which other films have used the Bible."[119] Importantly, however, in contemporary American society, the Bible is considered a moral compass (seen in *Babel (2006)*, *Inglourious Basterds (2009)*, and *In the Valley of Elah (2007)*).[120]

The Bible has also been used in American popular culture in various ways to explore "numerous political and social issues."[121] These include "capital punishment (*Dead Man Walking*, 1995), the environment (*Children of Men*, 2006), racism (*Pleasantville,* 1998), and war (*Passchendaele*, 2008), and basic human emotions such as love and hate (*Cape Fear*, 1991)."[122] Reinhartz also explores how the Bible "provides a

[114] Reinhartz, 134.
[115] Reinhartz, 134.
[116] Reinhartz, 135.
[117] Reinhartz, 135.
[118] Reinhartz, 136.
[119] Reinhartz, 136.
[120] Reinhartz, 136.
[121] Reinhartz, 12.
[122] Reinhartz, 12.

verbal and visual vocabulary for addressing existential issues, such as good and evil (*The Good Shepherd*, 2006), presence and absence (*Sling Blade*, 1996), or life and death (*Magnolia*, 1999)."[123]

This pattern is made evident in Joe Biden's 2020 Democratic nomination speech. Here Biden makes numerous references to the book of Revelation and light and dark imagery while reminding his supporters that Americans must aim to "be a light to the world once again."[124] He asserts that "light is more powerful than dark" and "as God's children," being a light to the world is America's great purpose.[125] Reinhartz informs this perspective by stating that historically many Biblical epic films actually "celebrated and perpetuated the view of America as a "light unto the nations."[126] Such language, Reinhartz confirms, stems explicitly from the Puritan foundations of the American myth.[127] This myth, asserts that America is "set apart," as "God's chosen people," who are responsible for "[setting] an example for the world."[128] Such characterizations stems from America's Puritan roots.[129] This further confirms the impact of Protestantism in American culture in general.[130] As this section makes clear, the Bible's influence on American cinema is not only evident but seen on a global scale.

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[123] Reinhartz, 12.
[124] "Transcript: Joe Biden's DNC Speech," CNN, accessed August 26, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/20/politics/biden-dnc-speech-transcript/index.html.
[125] "Transcript."
[126] Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema*, 11.
[127] For more information on the Puritan origins of the American myth, see Sacvan Bercovitch's chapter "The Biblical Basis of the American Myth" in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters* (1983).
[128] Adele Reinhartz, "Holy Words in Hollywood: DeMille's The Ten Commandments (1956) and American Identity," in *The Bible in the Public Square: Its Enduring Influence in American Life*, ed. Mark A. Chancey, Carol Meyers, and Eric M. Meyers, Biblical Scholarship in North America (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 126.
[129] Reinhartz, 126.
[130] Forbes and Mahan in *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (2017) explore the ways in which *Superman* (from the comic books to the movies) as an American cultural product draws upon both Jewish and Christian elements in its creation (40). They also explore the influence of Christianity on the blues genre of popular American music (395). Further, Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) is a classic text that explored the explicit historical connection between the Puritans and American society today.

Conclusion

Christianity is imbedded within American culture, and consequently has greatly influenced media and popular culture in both explicit and non-explicit ways. Television and films are important phenomena in America due to their wide-reaching nature that can tell us more about American culture than many other methods can. As was stated in the introduction, studying popular culture in academia gives scholars the chance to better understand a society, and what that society values and does not value.

American Protestantism

Among the religions that are prominent in American society, American Protestantism has had the greatest influence on America's culture.[131] There are three key areas of research on Protestant Christianity that will be addressed in this literature review: how Protestantism developed in America, how Protestant worship has changed through the years, and how Protestantism became hegemonic in American society. This overview seeks to understand how American Protestantism developed into what it is today in order to place the podcast within its religious cultural context.

The Religion of the New World: Protestantism

Mark A. Noll in *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (2002) and Jason S. Lantzer in *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (2012) study two important aspects of the development of Christianity in the United States. Noll's text explores the unique way that Protestantism developed on American soil compared to the development of Christianity in Mainland Europe.[132] Lantzer's work studies later diversity developments that occurred in the 19th and 20st century as a result of a decline in affiliation among the major Protestant denominations.[133] Both texts focus on the rise of Protestant domination in America.[134] Noll seeks to better understand how Protestantism domination occurred since settlers to

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[131] Mark A. Noll, *Protestants in America*, ed. Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout, Religion in American Life (New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2000), 7, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ottawa/detail.action?docID=3051970.
[132] Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 45.
[133] Jason S. Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York: New York University, 2012), 2.
[134] Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity*, x.

America first made contact with American soil, whereas Lantzer studies the impact that American culture had on Protestantism.[135]

The theories proposed in these texts are complementary in some ways and contradictory in others. Noll's text explores well how early American Protestantism was able to attach itself to American culture due to the Reformed nature of "the kind of Protestantism that prevailed" during America's settlement years.[136] Although Lantzer asserts that American culture "is not 'Christian' in nature," he nonetheless explores how American Christianity has played a variety of important roles within American cultural discourse.[137] While Noll is more explicit in his assertion that America's culture has Protestant roots, Lantzer affirms Noll's theory through an analysis of how American Protestantism both impacts and is impacted by American culture today. Lantzer's analysis is therefore more nuanced than Noll's historical overview.

Puritan History of American Protestantism

In order to fully understand the impact of American Protestantism on American society, the history of Puritan immigration to America must be addressed. As Eric Luis Uhlmann and Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks note "few, if any, Americans explicitly view themselves as Puritans today."[138] This, however, does not diminish the influence that "the Puritan-Protestant tradition appears to have had….on the values and ideals" of America

[135] Noll, 135; Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith*, 104.
[136] Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity*, 45.
[137] Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith*, 96.
[138] Eric Luis Uhlmann and Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, "The Implicit Legacy of American Protestantism," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 45, no. 6 (2014): 994, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022114527344.

today.[139] In this way, "Puritan-Protestant settlers and their spiritual descendants set the tone of American culture for centuries to come."[140] Puritan influence is seen in a number of different areas of American society.[141]

The Protestant Reformation began in the 16th century, whereby "Martin Luther and John Calvin decried what they saw as the corruptions and heresies of the Catholic Church."[142] Such corruptions included "the sale of indulgencies and clerical offices, as well as rituals and doctrines they felt only distracted from the pursuit of true faith."[143] Following this was the English Reformation whereby the Catholic authority of England was overthrown in favor of the Anglican Church.[144] A group of religiously devout, however, who called themselves "The Godly," and "advocated for greater piety, spiritual purity, and adherence to the ideals of the Protestant reformers."[145]

Labeled "the Puritans" and considered religious fanatics, this group was persecuted for such beliefs. In response, "laws were passed that restricted their ability to participate in their religious practices."[146] To escape persecution , the Puritans immigrated to American and in doing so, "[established] some of the earliest British colonies in the New World."[147] By 1776, "over a century and a half" since they first colonized America, "three quarters of Americans were Puritans."[148] This is the historical

[139] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 994.
[140] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 994.
[141] See "Religious Voices in American Public Discourse" by James Darsey and Joshua R. Ritter in *The SAGE Handbook of Rhetorical Studies* (2009) for more details.
[142] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, "American Protestantism," 993.
[143] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 993.
[144] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 993.
[145] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 993.
[146] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 993.
[147] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 993.
[148] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 993.

foundation that established Protestantism as a dominant religious force in American society.[149]

Some areas of Puritan thought that have continued in America today are: religious traditionalism, and an individualistic ethos.[150] Studies show that "Americans display higher levels or religiosity, moral absolutism, and endorsement of conservative values on issues such as the death penalty, homosexuality, and suicide, than members of most other economically developed democracies."[151] Regarding individualism, "U.S. culture is characterized by its commitment to individualistic values and strong faith in individual merit."[152] What is particularly interesting about these data points is that "individualism and traditional religiosity are negatively correlated across nations."[153] Therefore, Uhlmann and Sanchez-Berks argue that these perspectives prevalent in American society "are traceable in part to the religious convictions of the founding communities of the United States," the Puritans.[154]

Sola Scriptura

Zoltan describes the podcast as "a secular Bible study, but using *Harry Potter* instead of the Bible."[155] To view the Bible (rather than Christian or Jewish liturgy) as the basis for what it means to read HP as a sacred text may reflect the Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura.* This would make sense given the profound influence of Protestantism on American history, society

[149] A classic book that looks at this question deeper is Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan View of the American Self* (1975). Another source for better understanding the Puritan influence on American society is Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (2006).
[150] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, "American Protestantism," 994.
[151] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 994.
[152] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 994.
[153] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 995.
[154] Uhlmann and Sanchez-Burks, 995.
[155] *Spend Two Minutes With The Co-Host Of The Podcast "Harry Potter And The Sacred Text."*

and culture. Sola scriptura refers to the Protestant assertion that "the final authority of doctrine and practice is the Bible" rather than the church.[156] As Martin Luther asserted in his famous speech to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, "unless convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I [Luther] do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God."[157] Of course, this focus on scripture as the final authority lead, in part, to the large variety of Protestant denominations seen today.[158] James Stump suggests that "at last count, the number of distinct Christian denominations worldwide exceeds 33, 000."[159]

It is noteworthy, however, that the actual practices used on the podcast do not come from Protestantism but from Catholicism and Judaism. Whereas Catholic or Jewish traditions consult texts outside of the Bible to inform their perspective (such as church/rabbi authority, catechism, or the Talmud), Protestantism asserts that the Bible is the source of final authority.

Referencing sola scriptura is not meant to characterize Protestants as a homogenized group. Rather, sola scriptura, for the purposes of this project, is utilized in order to highlight the choice that the creators of the podcast made: to treat only the *Harry Potter* books as sacred. They could have chosen to include other materials from the HP world (like movies, fanfiction, Broadway plays, JK Rowling's twitter), but instead they chose to limit their analysis to the seven books of the series. My thesis describes how this choice reflects the Protestant influence found in American culture.

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[156] Stump, "The Bible," 56.
[157] Stump, 56.
[158] Stump, 57.
[159] Stump, 57.

The Development of an Idea: Is America a Christian Nation?

John Fea's historical approach in *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (2011) seeks to better understand the development of the notion that America is a Christian, particularly Protestant, nation.[160] Thinking about the American public and political debates that surround the question of America's Christian nature, Fea deconstructs the narrative that such debates rely on. He does this to complicate and challenge long held assumptions about Christianity's influence on American identity by the American public.[161] He introduces strong evidence to suggest that American Christians tend to assume and therefore take for granted "that they [live] in a Christian nation."[162] Though constitutionally, religion and the state would remain separate, Protestantism did indeed shape the culture of pre-Civil War America.[163] Fea complicates this claim, however, arguing that the Biblically justified taxation policies of the eighteenth century were informed by the "popular political ideas of the day" rather than "sound theological" justification from Protestantism.[164]

Similarly, Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld's sociological analysis seeks to understand why, in light of a general decline in Christian affiliation, America continues to be viewed as a Christian nation.[165] In "America as a 'Christian Nation'? Understanding Religious Boundaries of National Identity in the United States" (2010), Straughn and Feld

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[160] John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction*, Revised (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), xxii&4.
[161] Fea, xviii.
[162] John Fea, Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 245.
[163] Fea, 245.
[164] Fea, 245.
[165] Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld, "America as a 'Christian Nation'? Understanding Religious Boundaries of National Identity in the United States," *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 302, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srq045.

study why, ideologically, America citizens conceptualize America as a Christian nation. Due to their differences in approach, however, Fea and Straughn and Feld reveal different sides of this question that are interesting to note. Because Fea takes a historical perspective, he is focused on the ambiguity and nuance within the historical record to prove that it is not clear whether or not America was traditionally viewed as a Christian nation by its citizens.[166] Straughn and Feld, on the other hand, theorize that "symbolic boundary construction" is responsible for America's self-proclaimed Christian identity.[167]

According to Michèle Lamont and Virár Molnár's "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences" (2002), "symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space."[168] Individuals and groups utilize such distinctions to "come to agree upon definitions of reality" in order to "acquire status and monopolize resources" within a society.[169] Using this sociological framework, Straughn and Feld theorize that due to the practical consequences that symbolic boundaries create, it may just be natural to think that, because America "has always been a predominately Christian country, many America Christians no doubt feel justified in" asserting that to be American is to be Christian.[170] This process maintains "both religious *and* national boundaries."[171] America's understanding of its Christian-ness can be understood using both Fea's historical approach and Straughn and Feld's sociological approach.

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[166] Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 244.
[167] Straughn and Feld, "America as a 'Christian Nation'?," 281.
[168] Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2002): 168, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107.
[169] Lamont and Molnár, 168.
[170] Straughn and Feld, "America as a 'Christian Nation'?," 301.
[171] Straughn and Feld, 301.

Protestant Worship

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text follows a certain style and approach that is emblematic of elements of Protestant Christian worship and structure. Donald Miller and Joel Schwartz study the changes that have occurred within Protestant churches in terms of worship style. This literature is important for understanding how Protestant worship has shifted over time and developed into what is seen today among Protestant denominations.

Donald Miller's "Postdenominational Christianity in the Twenty-First Century"(1998), seeks to better understand how Conservative Protestant Churches in the United States have changed their worship styles in order to attract the Baby Boomer generation.[172] Though Protestant worship has continued to change in style after this point, Miller's text explores some major transitions in worship style that influenced future changes within Protestant Christianity. Heavily influenced by the work of William James, Miller argues that the success of a religion depends on how members of that religion "[encounter] the sacred."[173] Such changes include the personal nature of the pastor's sermon, a shift in emphasis from the Sunday morning gathering in favor of weekly small group meetings, as well as the process of how new small groups, and later churches, are created.[174]

Joel Schwartz's critique of Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1995) also seeks to emphasize changes that have occurred

[172] Donald Miller, "Postdenominational Christianity in the Twenty-First Century," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558, no. 1 (1998): 199, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716298558001115.
[173] Miller, 209.
[174] Miller, 202, 205 & 207.

within Protestant worship in America. While Miller presents his findings through clear headings like “worship” and “theology” to outline the changes in worship style, Schwartz’ analysis is looser in structure as he compares Herberg’s predictions to the reality that Schwartz sees around him in Protestant communities. While Miller’s work presents itself more like an encyclopedia entry, Schwartz’ work is a deeper analysis of how religions and conceptions about religions’ impact on society shift over time.[175]

Both Miller and Schwartz explore how American society has become disenchanted with traditional organized religion, and the effect that this has had on Protestant communities around the country. Schwartz’ analysis, however, emphasizes the “culture wars” between the religious and the nonreligious, a theme that is absent from Herberg’s predictions.[176] Miller focuses most closely on the impact such changes have had on Protestant worship in general.

So far, the works surveyed here have suggested that American Protestantism developed in a unique way on American soil, and ideologically, America views itself as a Christian nation. Further, Protestant worship, over time, has evolved. To conclude the American Protestantism section of the literature review, the works of Warren J. Blumenfeld and Lori G. Beaman will be discussed. These works stem from the sociological tradition and study the hegemonic nature of Christianity in the United States.

[175] Joel Schwartz, “Protestant, Catholic, Jew ...,” *Public Interest*, no. 155 (Spring 2004): 106–25.
[176] Miller, “Postdenominational Christianity in the Twenty-First Century,” 125.

Christian Hegemony in America

Lori G. Beaman's work, "The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor: The Constitutional Privilege of Protestantism in the United States and Canada" (2003), is a sociological study on why, in the West, non-Protestant religions are forced to maintain a secondary status in Western society due to Christianity's hegemonic influence.[177] Beaman argues that hegemonic Protestantism in the United States impacts America's "religious landscape" and thus religious choice among Americans.[178] Challenging the theory of a religious marketplace, Beaman argues that Americans do not have the freedom to choose whatever religion they would like to from a wide variety of equal options.[179] Rather, "hegemony binds, restricts, and excludes" Americans who choose to live their life under a non-Christian religious system.[180] For example, according to Beaman, when religious minorities are included in American media, such representations "are almost always portrayed negatively."[181] Muslim Americans in particular are often the subjects of "biased media reports" that lead to discrimination and hate crimes against their communities and religious buildings.[182] Further, American phrases such as "Judeo-Christian" that sound inclusive actually obscure and minimize the persistence of anti-Semitism within modern society.[183]

[177] Lori G. Beaman, "The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor: The Constitutional Privilege of Protestantism in the United States and Canada," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (2003): 320.
[178] Beaman, 311.
[179] Beaman, 311.
[180] Beaman, 321.
[181] Beaman, 315.
[182] Beaman, 315.
[183] Beaman, 322.

Warren J. Blumenfeld's "Christian Privilege and the Promotion of 'Secular' and Not-So 'Secular' Mainline Christianity in Public Schooling and in the Larger Society" (2006) explores how Christianity is embedded within American culture. His work is influenced by Peggy Macintosh's "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), and Beaman's 2003 work explored above.[184] These influences are used to understand the concept of Christian privilege that maintains Christian hegemony in the United States.[185] His focus, however, is on the day-to-day lives of Americans and how the structure of the work week has been created to benefit the Christian individuals of America's society first (i.e. Sundays off from work, Christian specials on television, etc.).[186]

Both Blumenfeld and Beaman study the hegemonic nature of Christianity in America, and how its hegemonic nature impacts not only religious affiliation and expression, but America's culture in general. Not only does Christianity take up the most space in an individual's abstract understanding of what religion is, but American society is created around the assumption that Americans are Christian.[187] Further, Americans who are not Christian are villainized as the "other" within their own society.[188]

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[184] Warren J. Blumenfeld, "Christian Privilege and the Promotion of 'Secular' and Not-So 'Secular' Mainline Christianity in Public Schooling and in the Larger Society," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 39, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 195–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680600788024.
[185] Blumenfeld, 196.
[186] Blumenfeld, 200 & 203.
[187] Blumenfeld, 200 & 203.
[188] Beaman, "The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor," 318.

Conclusion

This section of the review investigated the complex relationship between Protestantism and American culture and society. This relationship is a result of the unique way in which Protestantism developed on American soil, how Protestant worship has changed, and Christianity's hegemonic hold on American society. Reinforcing the Religion and Popular Culture section of this review, this section makes clear the effect that Protestantism has had on American society, as well as American popular culture products. The podcast, as an American cultural product, emulates American Protestantism in its structure. This will be explored further in the analysis.

Podcasts

Podcasting is a new medium that was created after the invention of the MP3 Player, and particularly the iPod, when its usage became mainstream. Ben Hammersley, a journalist for *The Guardian*, coined the term.[189] Podcasting has become one of the most popular cultural industries of the 21st century. This section of the literature review explores the trajectory of the study of podcasting in academia. The literature, in its early years, primarily focused on understanding the logistics of the medium, and theorized the impact that it would have on radio, while later publications tend to focus more generally on why the medium has become so successful.

Understanding A New Medium

A major concern for scholars at the advent of podcasting was its predicted effect on radio. This is seen in Richard Berry's 2006 article title, "Will the iPod Kill the Radio Star?"[190] Of course, in 2019, it is clear to see that radio and podcasting can exist together in popular culture. In the early years of the medium, however, its impact on society was in question. Some major differences between podcasting and radio were "its portability, its intimacy, and its accessibility" for both listeners and creators.[191]

In 2010 and 2014, scholars began to seriously engage with the topics that Berry had raised in his initial study. While Berry introduced the question of podcast users and creators, Steven McClung and Kristine Johnson (2010), Kris M. Markman and Caroline E.

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[189] Richard Berry, "Will the IPod Kill the Radio Star?: Profiling Podcasting as Radio," *Convergence* 12, no. 2 (2006): 143, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856506066522.
[190] Berry, 143.
[191] Berry, 143.

Sawyer (2014), as well as Vincent M. Merserko (2014) continued to study these topics in greater depth, in order to better understand the persistence of this medium. What was of particular interest to scholars at this point was to better understand people who use podcasts, and listen to them on a regular basis, as well as those who create podcasts. In terms of podcast users, McClung and Johnson's "Examining the Motives of Podcast Users" (2010) found that, at this point in podcast history, podcast users were educated, and they listened to podcasts for a variety of reasons including "entertainment, timeshifting, library building, and social aspects."[192] These reasons explain why some may choose to listen to a podcast rather than turn on the radio. The personalization of the listening experience cannot be ignored, not to mention the community aspect as well that in many ways is unique to the podcast listening experience.

Vincent M. Meserko's "Going Mental: Podcasting, Authenticity, and Artist–Fan Identification on Paul Gilmartin's Mental Illness Happy Hour" (2014) added to these findings stating that podcast listeners maintain a bond with podcast creators.[193] Both McClung and Johnson as well as Meserko are studying within the communications field and study why podcast listeners are different from radio listeners. Because podcasting is such an intimate medium, Meserko notes, podcast audiences have a more intimate connection to the podcast creators, showing a new interaction between fan and creator in American culture.[194] Meserko credits this connection to "technologies of self-

[192] Steven McClung and Kristine Johnson, "Examining the Motives of Podcast Users," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 17, no. 1 (2010): 82, 93–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/19376521003719391.
[193] Vincent M. Meserko, "Going Mental: Podcasting, Authenticity, and Artist–Fan Identification on Paul Gilmartin's Mental Illness Happy Hour," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58, no. 3 (2014): 456, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.935848.
[194] Meserko, 468.

fashioning" that are developing in American culture.[195] McClung and Johnson make no reference to this concept, but it could be theorized that their findings about podcast users help explain how the motivations of podcast users may contribute to these "self-fashioning" technologies, given the freedom that podcast users have in curating their podcast listening and fan community experience.

Kris M. Markman and Caroline E. Sawyer sought to better understand podcast creators. "Why Pod? Further Explorations of the Motivations for Independent Podcasting" (2014) focuses on what is special about those who create podcasts and their motivations behind it.[196] Their findings state that "community, feedback" from listeners, and a drive to improve, are fundamental reasons why podcast creators make podcasts.[197] Their work shows that there is an explicit connection between the motivations of both podcast creators and listeners, which explains, potentially, why podcasting has been so successful on both a national and international level. Both creators and listeners are interested in engaging in a relationship with each other that is constructive. With this in mind, this is a part of human nature that is particularly interesting: the drive for connection, intimacy, and being heard.

Podcasting Today

Two unique aspects about podcasting are investigated in more recent literature: its intimate nature, and internet communities. Mia Lindgren's "Personal Narrative

[195] Meserko, 458.
[196] Kris M. Markman and Caroline E. Sawyer, "Why Pod? Further Explorations of the Motivations for Independent Podcasting," *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 33, https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2014.891211.
[197] Markman and Sawyer, 20.

Journalism and Podcasting" (2016) explores the role personal narrative plays in podcasting while arguing that podcasts are intrinsically intimate due to the primary role voice plays in this medium.[198] Related to this is Kyle Wrather's research on online podcasting communities in "Making 'Maximum Fun' for Fans: Examining Podcast Listener Participation Online" (2016). Individuals often listen to podcasts on their own, and then feel compelled to connect on a deeper level with a podcast community online. This allows them to share their own personal views, which makes the podcast experience even more personal and intimate for both the listener, and the creators who may or may not be a part of the online community.[199] Lindgren and Wrather's research both illustrate the uniqueness of the podcasting medium and the way in which intimacy is instrumental to podcasting's success. Further research on this intimate relationship between podcast creator and listener is necessary in order to better understand why this system is so compelling and why it has gained popularity within the last 20 years.

In "Part of the Establishment: Reflecting on 10 Years of Podcasting as an Audio Medium" (2016), Richard Berry outlined what predictions of his were correct, where he went wrong, and what his new predictions for the future were. One major change in podcasting that occurred from 2004-2016, was the move from iPods to Smartphones.[200] The Smartphone allows listeners of podcasts to listen to their favourite podcast and then engage in that podcast's online community through social media, all on the same device.

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[198] Mia Lindgren, "Personal Narrative Journalism and Podcasting," *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (April 2016): 24, https://doi.org/10.1386/rjao.14.1.23_1.
[199] Kyle Wrather, "Making 'Maximum Fun' for Fans: Examining Podcast Listener Participation Online," *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (April 2016): 58, https://doi.org/10.1386/rjao.14.1.43_1.
[200] Richard Berry, "Part of the Establishment: Reflecting on 10 Years of Podcasting as an Audio Medium," *Convergence* 22, no. 6 (December 1, 2016): 666, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516632105.

This only increases audience engagement and maintains the relationship between listener and creator. Regarding his article's primary concern, the lifespan of radio, Berry contends that radio and podcasting are different mediums, though an increase in on-demand radio has blurred this boundary.[201]

Conclusion

Research on podcasting has evolved greatly over the years. From its early concerns with radio, to now, there is still much research to be done on this topic. It is unclear where the future of podcasting and research on podcasting will go, especially regarding the way in which the medium has exceeded expectations already in its early years.

Literature Review Conclusion

This overview of the fields of fiction-based religion, religion and popular culture, American Protestantism, and podcasts draws attention to the major trends as well as the gaps in the scholarly literature. The research on narrative within fiction-based religion literature explains not only how and why individuals are choosing to listen to and engage with the podcast, but also why the *Harry Potter* narrative caters well to being used as a sacred text. Understanding the complex relationship between religion and popular culture in America allows for the podcast to be situated within its cultural context. This is further affirmed in the American Protestantism section of the review that explores the

[201] Berry, 667.

embeddedness of Protestantism within American culture. Lastly, the intimate nature of podcasting allows for listeners to feel like they are making a personal connection with the podcast creators. Such a connection may help explain why the podcast has been so successful, and why individuals feel safe in exploring their own spirituality within the context of the podcast on a personal and communal level.

Conceptual Framework

Introduction

As noted in the literature review, an analysis of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* must engage with several theories and concepts. According to the theory of Fictionalism, it is possible to participate in religious actions without believing in the beliefs or tenets of that religion. This theory is helpful for understanding the podcast's project from the hosts' perspective.[202] Given the fictional nature of the podcast's sacred text, it is sensible to address how the podcast exemplifies fictionalism outside of a traditional religious setting. Popular culture theory from the field of sociology will be referenced in order to better understand the relationship that exists between American popular media and religion.

Fictionalism

Fictionalism is useful for understanding the podcast from the perspective of the show's hosts. Fictionalism seeks to answer the question: "Can an atheist believe in God?"[203] Andrew S. Eshleman concludes that, as long as such belief is grounded within a non-realist framework, atheists can live and shape their lives through "theistic religious language and practice."[204] This means that it is possible for those who may enjoy engaging in rituals or community but do not want to commit to certain beliefs, can, in a Christian context, attend weekly church services, attend church extracurriculars, and shape their lives and worldview around Christian morality and ethics. This stance requires the fictionalist to "reinterpret religious language and belief" so

[202] Andrew S. Eshleman, "Can an Atheist Believe in God?," *Religious Studies* 41, no. 2 (2005): 183–99, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412505007602.
[203] Eshleman, 183.
[204] Eshleman, 183.

that they can continue to "signal commitment to an ideal and way of life" that is indeed shaped "by religious language and practice" despite their atheist interpretation being non-realist in nature.[205] Characterized as a fictionalist stance to religious affiliation, such belief stems not from believing in "a supernatural reality," but rather, through living a life that is "shaped…by religious language and practice."[206] With respect to the podcast, fictionalism can help us understand why the avowedly atheist hosts employ sacred practices as spiritual technologies.

Contrary to Eshleman, Benjamin S. Cordry argues that it is not appropriate or possible for fictionalists to participate in religious practice within religious communities.[207] Cordry believes that fictionalists may put themselves at risk of ostracization if their religious community finds out about their fictionalist stance.[208] He questions the fictionalist's ability to adequately interpret which religious claims (both from member of the community as well as their sacred text) should be "incorporated into one's fictionality" and which ones should not.[209] The podcast seems cognizant of this issue, as it contends that, at least within the context of a free society, individuals do indeed have the freedom to take and apply whatever practices or approaches to a text that they wish.

Cordry argues that fictionalism is limited within religious communities because interpreting the religious claims of community members is distinctly different from "interpreting a sacred text or tradition."[210] This point, however, explains why *Harry Potter and*

[205] For example, a non-realist "may agree with the realist's first claim – that assertions referring to God are cognitive in form – but deny the second – that they need to be understood as metaphysical assertions about a supernatural reality" (Eshleman 184 & 187).
[206] Eshleman, "Can an Atheist Believe in God?," 184.
[207] Benjamin S. Cordry, "A Critique of Religious Fictionalism," *Religious Studies* 46, no. 1 (2010): 77, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412509990291.
[208] Cordry, 82–83.
[209] Cordry, 83.
[210] Cordry, 83.

the Sacred Text works. Though there is a community that has arisen around the podcast, this community does not hold any distinct collective beliefs, nor does it make religious claims. Therefore, the podcast counters Cordry's conclusion because it seeks only to interpret the *Harry Potter* series and the ways to apply sacred practices from other traditions to these books. Both the podcast and the podcast's Facebook community page state that listeners of the podcast (who may or may not participate in the practices outlined on the show) come from a wide variety of religious traditions and perspectives. The community welcomes those from all traditions, and continually affirms this welcoming stance. As a result, many understand this community to be unique and special for people who have experienced trauma within traditional religious settings. This notion has been raised numerous times in the podcast's Facebook group from listeners of the show and in press material for Zoltan's podcast network *Not Sorry Productions*.[211]

Contrasting this, Christopher Jay suggests the Kantian Moral Hazard as an alternative way to frame the debate.[212] His interpretation of the Kantian Moral Hazard asserts that a fictionalist lifestyle is available for both realists and non-realists alike. Kant simply notes a connection between morality and the existence of God rather than making any conclusive claims about the reality of this relationship. This counters Eshleman's assertion that fictionalism only works if the practitioner uses a non-realist framework that maintains unbelief in God's existence. Jay alternatively asserts that to have faith in God's existence rationally is distinctly different from believing in God's existence. Understood from a rational faith perspective, this

[211] Kimberly Winston, "Reinventing Religion — with Romance Novels," Washington Post, August 24, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/08/24/reinventing-religion-with-romance-novels/.
[212] Christopher Jay, "The Kantian Moral Hazard Argument for Religious Fictionalism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 75, no. 3 (2014): 211, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-013-9435-0.

suggests "that religious fictionalism is not …just an interesting version of religious non-realism."[213]

Natalja Deng specifies the category further as "Weak Evaluative Fictionalism (WEF)."[214] WEF, which may be viewed as a weaker form of Jay's argument above, states that "the value of a given practice is independent of whether our attitudes are non-doxastic."[215] Outside of philosophical settings where one's beliefs are generally critically examined or questioned, non-doxastic acceptance refers to accepting beliefs "in all ordinary contexts." An example of this would be when a fictionalist treats a religious belief as if it were true without asking whether they believe it to be true.[216] Though it is true that engaging with a religious story "may play a role in moral growth," this is due simply to the powerful roles stories can play in the moral lives of individuals.[217] Understood as a "sui generis" form of engagement with religious ideas and practices," under a WEF model, practitioners decide for themselves what they would like to include in their fictionalist practice that "in principle…can include ideas from different religious traditions" or potentially other nonreligious sources like *Harry Potter*.[218]

Robin Le Poidevin suggests that the fictionalist debate may be a better framed around agnosticism.[219] Andrea Sauchelli explores the reasons as to why "it may be rational to make-believe or imagine certain religious beliefs" in a fictionalist manor.[220] Alternatively, Amber L.

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[213] Jay, 222–30.
[214] Natalja Deng, "Religion for Naturalists," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2015): 195, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-015-9529-y.
[215] Deng, 198.
[216] Deng, 198–99.
[217] Deng, 212.
[218] Deng, 212.
[219] Robin Le Poidevin, "Playing the God Game: The Perils of Religious Fictionalism," in *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*, ed. Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 179, https://books-scholarsportal-info.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/uri/ebooks/ebooks3/oso/2016-03-29/1/9780198722250-Buckareff.
[220] Andrea Sauchelli, "The Will to Make-Believe: Religious Fictionalism, Religious Beliefs, and the Value of Art," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96, no. 3 (2018): 620, https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12328.

Griffion argues in favor of the fictionalist view, stating that 'belief' is not necessary for religious engagement, while "a kind of volitional imaginative commitment" is.[221]

While these competing perspectives exemplify the variety of debates that exist within the fictionalist literature, it is important to specify which aspects of the debate are relevant to the study of the podcast. Eshelman's theory, that it is possible for an individual to participate within a religious community without believing in the tenets of that religion (e.g. in Christianity, that God exists), is helpful for studying how sacred practices are used on the podcast. The hosts invite the listener to participate in sacred practices without the listener having to go through the mental work of intentionally *not* believing in something. This is because the listener is not expected to believe in anything specific about *Harry Potter* or the hosts. Rather, the focus is on participating in the practices of *lectio divina* or *florilegium* – on applying the sacred practices to the text in order to help think about how the text is able to relate to one's own life. The practices are important not because they invite the listener to connect to a higher power (as prayer in a Christian context would), but because they help the hosts and the listener to think more attentively about how the text is speaking to the lived experience of the reader.

Cordy's concern, that a fictionalist stance is unsound due to issues surrounding justifying one's practice without grounding it in belief, is irrelevant to the podcast because the belief element is not present on the podcast. So, rather than encouraging the listener to live a life *as if* there is a God, as is the case of "imaginative commitment" in Griffion's understanding of fictionalism, the podcast simply asserts that engaging in a close, ritual reading of a text within a

[221] Amber L. Griffioen, "Religious Experience without Belief? Toward an Imaginative Account of Religious Engagement," in *Religious Experience Revisited Expressing the Inexpressible?*, ed. Thomas Hardtke, Ulrich Schmiedel, and Tobias Tan, vol. 21, Studies in Theology and Religion (The Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 87.

community setting, and trusting that reading that text in a formulaic way, will add value to one's life.

The fictionalist literature is rich and relates well to questions surrounding what exactly is taking place when Zoltan and ter Kuile engage with *Harry Potter* in a religious manner without relying on an established belief structure. Understood as a literal representation of fictionalism, my research seeks to understand the implications of "spiritual technologies" (prayer, blessings, sacred practices, etc.) being used within a system that separates itself from any sort of established belief structure.

Popular Culture Theory

Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark's work explores Protestantism's implicit influence on American media and thereby contextualizes the connection between religion and media. Clark, citing Meghan Morris (1990), suggests that popular media must echo, rather than challenge, dominant cultural ideas in order to engage and sustain the interests of American viewers.[222] She further asserts that popular media becomes an "implicit (and sometimes explicit) [resource for] identifying and elaborating what a culture expects of itself."[223] If so, we may argue that the popular medium not only affirms dominant cultural norms in order to maintain popularity, but also shapes culture itself.[224]

[222] Lynn Schofield Clark, "Religion, Twice Removed: Exploring the Role of Media in Religious Understandings among 'Secular' Young People," in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford Scholarship Online: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.
[223] Clark, 71.
[224] Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion In the Media Age* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 8.

According to Hoover, the concept of "double articulation" is central to understanding media's relation to American culture.[225] The media draw upon the broader cultural context to present themselves and their ideas to the public. In doing so, however, the media also affects the very culture upon which it draws. This process is termed "double articulation" due its circular nature. The cycle of cultural product creation, consumption, and cultural integration continues and manifests as more cultural products are created and overtime impact the very nature of American culture. Put simply, when new cultural products are being created they not only draw from their surrounding culture, but also, in their creation, actually impact that very culture in turn.

The sociological understanding of the impact of American Protestantism on American cultural products is useful when understanding *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. As a podcast created within the American context, and taking this popular culture sociology into account, this thesis assumes that Protestantism has impacted the makeup of this podcast. This is because Protestantism impacts what religion looks like in America.[226]

Of course, the cultural products upon which the podcast draws also reflects the education of its hosts. Harvard Divinity School is historically a Protestant institution.[227] Despite the hosts own nonreligous affiliation (cite), their approach to treating *Harry Potter* as a sacred text is reminiscent of how Christians may interact with their sacred text: the Bible. As was explored above in the Literature Review, *sola scriptura* is the primary method by which Protestants interact with the Bible as a sacred text. This is similar to the hosts' decision to only

[225] Hoover, 8.
[226] As stated above, research on the impact of Protestantism in other religion in America such as Judaism exists. Whitfield (1999), Kaplan (2003), and Dwyer-Ryan et al. (2009) may be a useful place to start.
[227] Explored further on pp. 75.

treat the *Harry Potter* books as a sacred text, rather than including other media from the *Harry Potter* universe. The movies are brought up in their discussion, but the hosts are quick to assert that though movies can offer another perspective, they have chosen to primarily refer to the events of the narrative as it is told in the book series itself. Rowling's Twitter feed has been a controversial phenomenon among *Harry Potter* enthusiasts who disagree about whether or not to take any new revelations Rowling shares as canon.[228]

Viewing the podcast as a product of American culture, this focus on *sola scriptura* can be understood using Hoover and Clark's framework. Because cultural products are in a double articulated relationship with the public, it makes sense that this element of the podcast would be reminiscent of Protestantism. As was explored above, it is difficult to speak about American culture without taking into account Protestantism's variety of influences on American cultural products. Though the podcast under analysis uses Catholic and Jewish reading practices to treat the text as sacred, this fact does not negate the influence of Protestantism on the podcast. The overall framework and perspective that the hosts are bring to treating *Harry Potter* as sacred can be said to stem from Protestantism.

Definition of Religion

This thesis utilizes the "lived religion" approach to the study of religion. The study of lived religion values the individual's approach to religious practice rather than a close analysis

[228] For example, in 2007 Rowling tweeted that Dumbledore identified as a homosexual. Many debates erupted online in response to this news, with some taking the claim seriously, while others chose to disagree with Rowling's assertion. Questions about the role of the author of popular media products have continued to this day in response to Rowling's transphobic tweets (see footnote 402 for more information).

of their religious affiliation or participation within a religious institution.[229] As Meredith McGuire notes, when the analysis is centered on religion-as-lived, it becomes clearer that religion "rather than being a single entity – is made up of diverse, complex, and ever-changing mixtures of beliefs and practices, as well as relationships, experiences, and commitments."[230] Religion is understood as "inherited, improvised, found, [and] constructed" by drawing upon one's own religious cultural context.[231] Intersubjectivity is central to the lived religion approach in two ways: (1) it takes into account "the intersubjective nature of individual, social, cultural, and religious identities" and (2) "it emphasizes the intersubjective nature of research on religion."[232] A lived religion approach to religious studies necessitates maintaining a careful balance between "familiarity and difference, strangeness and recognizability."[233]

As Robert Orsi concludes, studying religion-as-lived allows for certainties about what religious practice is to be challenged, for hidden agendas to be found and understood, and most importantly, "to encounter and engage religious practice and imagination within the circumstances of other people's lives."[234] This allows for an analysis that intermingles rather than distinguishes "between the sacred and the profane, and to relationships and relationality between beings."[235] In alignment with James Beckford's notion that religion is socially "constructed, negotiated, and contested" by both the practitioner and the researcher, this

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[229] Meredith B. McGuire, *Everyday Religion as Lived*, *Lived Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4, http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172621.001.0001/acprof-9780195172621-chapter-1.
[230] McGuire, 185.
[231] Robert A. Orsi, "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 173.
[232] Orsi, 174.
[233] Orsi, 174.
[234] Orsi, 174.
[235] Anna Sofia Salonen, "Living and Dealing with Food in an Affluent Society—A Case for the Study of Lived (Non)Religion," *Religions* 9, no. 10 (October 2018): 3, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9100306.

thesis seeks to better understand the underlying conditions that have allowed *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* to construct itself the way it has.[236]

Conceptual Framework Conclusion

Several concepts help us to understand the impact of America's religious culture on the podcast. Fictionalism is a useful theory for understanding why the hosts of the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast, as individuals who identify as nonreligious, may want to engage in religious ritual outside of a religious context through spiritual technologies.

Hoover and Clark's analysis of popular culture shows how, even with new pieces of media being created every day; media is in a double articulated relationship with culture. Not only does media draw from culture in order to be familiar to its cultural audience, but media also shapes, and challenges culture. This can help explain the Protestant leanings of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* despite its use, primarily, of Catholic and Jewish reading practices.

[236] James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

Method

Introduction

William Paden asserts that "comparison is a fundamental mental activity."[237] Winnifred Fallers Sullivan confirms this assertion by adding that "to do scholarly work is to compare."[238] When this approach is utilized in the study of religion, however, "the challenge for us is not ...whether or not to compare, but whether we can do a good job of it."[239] Historically, the comparative method essentialized and homogenized the diversity of religious practices that exist around the world. A contemporary approach to the comparative method challenges this. It recognizes that a comparative lens must be limited in focus and affirm difference over similarity. This method will be used to conduct an analysis on the use of traditional religious practices as spiritual technologies on the podcast.

Comparative Method

The first notions of an "academic field of comparative religion emerged in the late nineteenth century in European and American universities, reflecting scholarly goals."[240] During this time, however, religion was defined using a "Euro-Christian" conceptualization that privileged religions that looked like Christianity, while "othering" religions that did not act in familiar ways to the Christian scholars.[241] Consequently, "until the early nineteenth century,

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[237] William E. Paden, "Comparative Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 1877, http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424500628/GVRL?u=otta77973&sid=zotero&xid=17e6f909.
[238] Winifred Sullivan, "American Religion Is Naturally Comparative," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion In the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 118, https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/2027/heb.30751.
[239] Sullivan, 118.
[240] Paden, "Comparative Religion," 1877.
[241] Paden, 1877.

Western culture still divided all religion into four kinds: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and paganism."[242] This unfortunately lead to conclusions that asserted that other religions were simply unveiling Christian truths or "signs" about Christian teachings, "for example, Athena could be said to stand for God's wisdom."[243]

Therefore, scholars who argue in favor of the comparative method today have kept this history in mind when designing their approach to this method. Scholars using the comparative method must ensure that in doing so that they are not seeking to "reach closure in service of a particular theory, nor to achieve moral judgement or gain intellectual control over the 'other.'"[244] Rather, the central goal of this method should be "to empower mutual dialogue and the quest for understanding."[245]

Due to the critiques that the comparative method has received since its inclusion as a method in the study of religion, Paden offers some suggestions for how to use the approach today. First, an "aspectual, limited comparative focus" is necessary. Restricting the comparison to particular elements of religious traditions, rather than comparing entire religions, allows for scholars of religion to avoid essentialized comparisons.[246] Essentialized comparisons generalize "Asian versus Western religion" for example.[247]

Second, any scholar looking to employ the comparative method must affirm differences over similarity.[248] This is due to the historical use of the comparative method in religious

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[242] Paden, 1877.
[243] Paden, 1877.
[244] Kimberly c. Patton, "Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion In the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 157, https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/2027/heb.30751.
[245] Patton, 157.
[246] Paden, "Comparative Religion," 1880.
[247] Paden, 1880.
[248] Paden, 1880.

studies. Historically, "many early comparativists were interested in origins."[249] Related to the history of religious studies stemming from theology, during this time, Christianity was viewed as "the culmination and end of an evolutionary development."[250] Christianity was considered the truest and more evolved form of religion. Therefore, any other religion that had similarities to Christianity were viewed as emulating the truths of Christianity, "the truth as opposed to error."[251]

With this in mind, a comparative approach to *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* entails: (1) limiting the comparison to the spiritual technologies/sacred practices that are conducted on the podcast,[252] (2) and addressing both the similarities and differences that exist between the spiritual technologies and the traditional religious practices they have been adapted from. Though there are a number of areas of the podcast that could be studied using the comparative method (such as the pilgrimages or live shows), limiting the focus of the analysis to just the spiritual technologies will ensure that the study is not overwhelming and inaccurate. Noting both the similarities and differences that arise between the traditional practices and the spiritual technologies will nuance the discussion.

While the comparative method can allow for a rich and nuanced discussion about religion's interaction with culture and human society, as this section shows, it has a troubling history. Cultural and the subjective bias from the researcher can leech into the analysis if the objects of comparison are not limited in scope and if the similarities and differences highlighted are interpreted incorrectly by the researcher. With this in mind, this thesis will approach this

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[249] Sullivan, "American Religion Is Naturally Comparative," 199.
[250] Sullivan, 199–120.
[251] Sullivan, 199–120.
[252] *Lectio divina, Ignatian Spirituality, Florilegium, Marginalia, Havruta, PaRDeS, and Blessings*

method by simply outlining the similarities and differences between the traditional religious practices and the spiritual technologies without placing value judgements on these findings. Further, limiting the analysis to the practices conducted on the podcast will sufficiently limit the analysis.

Analysis

This analysis is comprised of two main sections. The first section compares the podcast's understanding of the sacred to how scholars of religion have historically understood this concept. The second section explores how the podcast appropriates sacred practices from Catholicism and Judaism in constructing its nonreligious spiritual technologies. Doing so will allow for a better understanding of how religious practices may be appropriated and adapted to be used within nonreligious contexts like the podcast.

Sacredness

For Zoltan and ter Kuile, sacred is a relative rather than an objective term; it refers to an *act* rather than a thing, or a feeling.[253] Sacred "things" do not exist as objects in the world. Rather, once someone or a community treats an object, event, or day as sacred, then, for the hosts of the podcast, those things are considered sacred.[254]

Zoltan lays out a structure in order to show people how one would go about treating any given object as sacred. The first aspect is to love it. Loving the text is an essential prerequisite to treating a nonreligious text as sacred. While one could theoretically read any book as a sacred text, part of the process of treating a text as sacred involved rigorously reading and rereading the text to find deeper and deeper meaning within its pages. So, if a practitioner picks a story that they do not like, it becomes difficult to enjoy a rigorous reading practice, or to continue treating the text as sacred. Alternatively, if the practitioner already loves what they

[253] *Dr. Stephanie Paulsell and Vanessa Zoltan on Sacred Texts* (New Haven: Yale Youth Ministry Institute, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B74YLRYz_2Q.
[254] Vanessa Zoltan, "Silence in Jane Eyre," Political Theology Network, May 1, 2018, https://politicaltheology.com/silence-in-jane-eyre/.

have chosen to treat as sacred, the hard parts of the practice (repetition, rigorous analysis, rereading sentences over and over) become easier since the individual is coming to the practice already excited to begin.

Zoltan emphasizes her conviction that everyone needs something in their life that they "treat with optimism."[255] In her view, being in a "continual, reciprocal relationship" with something optimistically opens oneself to "[learning] from" the text rather than simply "[learning] about" its content.[256] Treating something as sacred is an intentional act reflecting a decision that doing so is worthwhile. This decision permits one to consider a set of questions such as: *What if* doing this practice enhanced my life in some capacity? *What if* this text shows me something about myself that I did not expect to see? *What if* I learn something new about the world, or about people if I conduct this practice? These sorts of questions help motivate an individual to conduct these practices in the first place and must be rooted in optimism in order to be beneficial over time.

Related to this aspect of treating a nonreligious text as sacred is a concern that is raised at the end of season 1. In Season 1 Episode 1, "Commitment," Zoltan mentions that when she first began the process of sacred reading she believed that a text had to be *perfect* - free of factual, narrative, or ethical errors - in order to be treated as sacred. On the basis of further experience, she no longer holds this view. Instead, she argues that it is essential to use a complex text when seeking to treat nonreligious texts as sacred.[257]

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[255] Vanessa Zoltan, *Bertha Mason Is Sacred*, Summer/Autumn 2016, vol. 44, 3 & 4 vols. (Harvard Divinity Bulletin: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2018), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2016/bertha-mason-sacred.
[256] Zoltan.
[257] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Commitment: The Boy Who Lived," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/listen-2.

Saying that the chosen text must be complex does not mean that it must be difficult to read and understand. Rather, a complex text can be defined as a text that allows for a variety of differing inspirations and interpretations. For this to be true, the text must be complex enough to be generative and to allow for a deep thematically focused analysis.[258] As Zoltan states, if a text is too literal, "it lends itself to being profane…instead of sacred."[259] Unfortunately Zoltan does not explain what makes a text "too literal." From the context, however, she appears to be saying that a literal text is one that provides simplistic answers to the reader's questions and requires little if any interpretation on the reader's part. Such texts are not amenable to multiple or layered readings, such as symbolic or allegorical interpretations.

For example, when treating *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text, Zoltan clarifies saying "like all sacred texts, Jane Eyre does not simply offer clear, direct answers to the questions I ask of it. It requires, rather, the work of exegesis."[260] Contrary to her initial assumptions, Zoltan now sees that in order to be read as sacred, texts must be insufficient, to have plot holes, and be flawed. Such flaws create space for the reader to do the work of treating the text as sacred. Such a practice, Zoltan notes, may even inspire practitioners to do this sort of difficult, exegesis work in the real world too.[261] What might this exegesis work look like? According to the podcast: improving one's capacity for empathy and thinking about other humans complexly.[262]

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[258] Bart Campolo, "Harry Potter as a Sacred Text with Vanessa Zoltan," mp3, Humanize Me, accessed September 15, 2019, https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/john-wright/the-wonderfull-podcast/e/50702874.
[259] Mark Oppenheimer, Stephanie Butnick, and Liel Leibovitz, "Ferris Bueller and the Chamber of Secrets," mp3, Unorthodox, accessed August 17, 2019, https://podcasts.apple.com/il/podcast/ferris-bueller-and-the-chamber-of-secrets-ep-70/id1020815439?i=1000378995878.
[260] Zoltan, "Silence in Jane Eyre."
[261] Zoltan.
[262] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Special Edition: Owl Post and Stephanie Paulsell," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, n.d., accessed September 28, 2018.

This concept of treating art as sacred in order to better understand our interactions with those around us is fundamental to the podcast's structure. When treating a text as sacred, the practitioner engages in a practice that allows them to "[imagine] the inner lives of strangers" which in turn, "improves [one's] aptitude for empathy" in the real world.[263] This concept comes up multiple times within the podcast, particularly in Season 1, in order to justify the value of treating nonreligious art and literature as sacred. Rather than relying solely on religion or their texts to fill such a role, treating nonreligious art as sacred allows the practitioner to learn how to treat other people as sacred too.[264] For the Zoltan and ter Kuile, this even includes empathizing with the villains of the *Harry Potter* novels.

For example, at the end of each episode, the hosts choose a character from the chapter they are studying that week to bless. In Season 1 Episode 3 "Fear", ter Kuile chooses to bless Dudley Dursley for, at least in that chapter, his capacity "for generosity and for empathy, and for *love*" (emphasis kept) which ter Kuile states is not only important to remember, but also "not something we're asked to do every day" even though everyone is capable of it.[265] In the final episode of Season 1 "Owl Post", the notion of blessing the villains of the story arose again. This emphasizes the value that is placed on the practice and how it can contribute to developing one's own ability to be an empathetic person. In response to this empathetic turn towards the Dursleys, some listeners chose to engage with the hosts directly by sending in voice memos of their opinions to the podcast's email inbox. In the voicemail chosen for the Owl Post

[263] Vanessa Zoltan, "Trump Isn't Voldemort, and Other Lessons from Harry Potter on Its 20th Anniversary," *America Magazine*, June 9, 2017, sec. Arts & Culture, https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/06/09/trump-isnt-voldemort-and-other-lessons-harry-potter-its-20th-anniversary.
[264] "What We Do," Hot and Bothered, 2019, https://www.hotandbotheredrompod.com/the-process.
[265] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Fear: The Letters From No One," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, n.d., accessed September 28, 2018.

episode, the listener said they were confused as to how to feel about the Dursleys after the hosts chose to bless them. In response, ter Kuile states that while the practice of blessing a villain does seem strange, such practices help to make us better people in the end.[266] This practice not only challenges listeners to treat other people, no matter what, with respect and empathy, but also challenges them to "deal with the Vernon Dursley-ish-ness" that exists within themselves. [267]

A telling aspect of the framework proposed by the podcast is the presence of elements that are influenced by Christianity. For example, Zoltan frequently states that "if a text gets you better at loving, it gets you closer to God," a perspective she attributes to the Church father Augustine.[268] This view undergirds the principle that, when choosing which text to treat as sacred, it is important to first think carefully about the values or tenets that are displayed in the text and reflect closer on whether or not those tenets when meditated on in the context of these practices, would make you a more loving human. To be clear: Zoltan is not advocating that everyone should treat Christian texts as sacred. Nonreligious folk may still feel inclined to conduct the practice of treating nonreligious art as sacred, despite its Christian roots.[269]

Community is another important element in treating a text as sacred. The emphasis on community is found not only on the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* website but in Zoltan's other nonreligious projects as well.[270] In interviews Zoltan explains that both love and

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[266] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Special Edition: Owl Post and Stephanie Paulsell."
[267] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[268] *On Sacred Texts*.
[269] *On Sacred Texts*.
[270] *Hot and Bothered* is a secondary podcast created by Vanessa Zoltan in 2018. The premise of the show is rather than encouraging listeners to treat a text as sacred, it explores the idea of "[writing] Romance novels as a sacred practice" (*Hot and Bothered*). While this podcast is not the focus of this thesis project, much of the ideological backing of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* is articulated clearly on *Hot and Bothered*'s resources.

community are what "we want to get out of our sacred texts."[271] This community aspect is also related to why *Harry Potter* lends itself well as a sacred text. Not only are the themes that arise in the text useful when treating the text as sacred, but there already exists a huge community of fans who adore these books and want to understand them better. People are already relating these texts to their own life.[272] *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* seeks to aid readers in this endeavour by providing a purposeful structure for such explorations.[273]

Zoltan and ter Kuile sought to define what it means to treat nonreligious texts as sacred. How do these ideas of the sacred relate to how the field of religious studies understands sacredness?

One of the most important scholars of the sacred is Mircea Eliade. He defined the sacred as the opposite of the profane.[274] Eliade drew on the concept of hierophany – "*something sacred*" that "*shows itself to us.*"[275] In his view, hierophanies present a "paradox" – an object that has been treated as sacred by a community, both "becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself.*"[276] He uses the example of a stone. If a community treats a certain stone as sacred, this does not alter the fact that it is a stone: "nothing distinguishes [sacred stones from any other stone]." In Eliade's understanding, such an object maintains both a sacred and profane label.[277] For those outside that community, the stone is still a profane object. But "for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is

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[271] *On Sacred Texts*.
[272] A secondary thesis could be written about the process of being sorted into a Hogwarts House and how this informs or effect's one's identity or perceptions of others who may not be sorted into the same house.
[273] Campolo, "Harry Potter as a Sacred Text."
[274] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 10.
[275] Eliade, 11.
[276] Eliade, 12.
[277] Eliade, 12.

transmuted into a supernatural reality."[278] Sacred objects, hierophanies, then are a representation of a transcendent reality for Eliade. This perspective differs from the podcast's conceptualization of sacredness.

Zoltan and ter Kuile's structured approach to treating nonreligious art as sacred is also evident in Jonathan Z. Smith's concept of sacredness as a focusing lens.[279] In this way, the ordinary can become sacred only when an individual or community brings their attention to it in a special way.[280] For Smith, things in and of themselves are not inherently sacred or profane. Rather, sacredness is a situational category that has "mobile boundaries which shift" according to how an object is being treated.[281] Put simply, "[t]here is nothing that is in-itself sacred, only things sacred-in-relation-to" objects that are not treated as sacred.[282]

Contrasting Eliade's perspective is Durkheim. Durkheim's definition aligns with the podcast's definition. For Durkheim, "nothing is inherently sacred" because it is the job of humanity to determine what is or is not considered sacred.[283] Eliade understands "the world of religious things" to communicate a sort "empirical nature."[284] Alternatively, Durkheim understands sacredness to be a perspective that humans, "superimposed upon" the object in question.[285] As Durkheim asserts, "the sanctity of a thing is due to the collective sentiment of

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[278] Eliade, 12.
[279] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 115.
[280] Smith, 115.
[281] Smith, 115.
[282] Smith, 115.
[283] Seth Walker, "My[Sacred]Space: Discovering Sacred Space in Cyberspace," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (2010): para. 3, http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A238178978/AONE?u=otta77973&sid=zotero&xid=79bdc7c0.
[284] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915), 229, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/41360/41360-h/41360-h.htm#Page_36.
[285] Durkheim, 229.

which it is the object."[286] Durkheim emphasizes the "act" of treating something as sacred by emphasizing the role in which humans play in this construction.

This helps explain why what is considered sacred differs "from tradition to tradition, as cultures vary in regard to one another."[287] Though Eliade and Durkheim differ over the nature of sacred things, one element of their theories is similar: "the sacred is always and fundamentally disconnected from the profane (…that which is not sacred), and everything that is sacred 'is the object of respect.'"[288] Interestingly, Durkheim complicates the category of the sacred, explaining how when a person passes on, their corpse is first "feared" and considered profane. Then, after "the mourning has ceased" the corpse is "venerated as a relic," and considered to be sacred.[289] Nothing about the corpse's nature changes during these proceedings. But the ritual involved in the funeral rites and mourning practices may allow the human brain to make the switch between "profane" object (corpse) to "sacred" object (corpse that is a venerated relic), despite the material nature of the corpse remaining the same. What has changed is how the human relates to the corpse. How the human intentionally *treats* the corpse after the mourning period. Calling this sort of sacred category "impure," Durkheim views sacredness as an ambiguous category humans ascribe to objects depending on how humans interact with the object.[290]

It is clear that the podcast's theology/ideology around sacredness aligns closely with Durkheim's, while opposing other theories like Eliade's. Like the creators of the podcast,

[286] Durkheim, 413.
[287] Walker, "My[Sacred]Space," para. 3.
[288] Walker, para. 3.
[289] Walker, para. 6.
[290] Walker, para. 6.

Durkheim and Smith consider how a nonreligious individual may approach the binary world between the sacred and profane. Nonreligious individuals then, may engage in behaviours that are similar to those associated with traditional religions.[291] Eliade however, states that nonreligious individuals engage in "crypto-religious behavior" insofar as they may have their own "holy places" where it is "as if it were in such sports that he [sic] has received the revelation of a reality *other* than that in which he [anticipates thought his ordinary daily life]."[292] In contrast to Zoltan and ter Kuile, Eliade does not approve of this behavior, describing it as a "degradation and desacralization of religious values and forms of behavior." [293] Smith, on the other hand, does not denigrate these alternative expressions. In his view, individuals craft their religious experience out of the world around them and apply a sort of sacred disposition to their daily lives, as in the case of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*.[294]

Kim Knott explores the notion of the "sacred secular" that complicates the above perspectives. Knott asserts that "religion should not be conflated with the sacred," and "nor should its Other – the secular – be conflated with the profane."[295] Rejecting the assumption that the terms "religion" and "sacred" can be used interchangeably, Knott states that the secular world is filled with sacred significance that has simply gone "unnoticed, unremarked or misunderstood" within academia.[296] Instead, she suggests that rather that studying "the meaning or destiny of religion in a secular age, a more fruitful approach is to investigate

[291] E.g. Chidester, see literature review.
[292] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 24.
[293] Eliade, 24.
[294] Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," 115.
[295] Kim Knott, "The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/And?," in *Social Identities Between the Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Abby Day, Giselle Vincett, and Christopher R. Cotter, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 1, https://www-taylorfrancis-com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/books/e/9781315609454.
[296] Knott, 1.

representations of the 'religious' and the 'secular.'"[297] This relates well to Zoltan's thought that only complex texts can be read as sacred. Whereas Eliade expresses disdain regarding the use of the term "sacred" in relation to the nonreligious (or "profane" for Eliade), Knott seeks to explore, more optimistically, how the nonreligious objects or spaces can be "sacred" for some individuals.[298]

The conceptualization of "sacredness" and what it means to treat a text as sacred for the podcast aligns with what scholars of religion, such as Durkheim, have asserted: sacred objects in and of themselves do not exist. Rather, material objects of texts are treated as sacred through how the individual or community interacts with and relates to the object or text.

Analysis of the Impact of American Protestantism on *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*

The next section of this analysis will explore how American Protestantism directly influences the podcast. The final section of this analysis will explore Catholicism and Judaism's influence on the podcast through the use of spiritual technologies. Because Protestantism does not have any distinct sacred reading practices in their tradition, Protestantism's impact on the podcast are seen in other areas of the podcast's makeup. This section of the analysis will be a brief overview of the ways in which the podcast's structure is influenced by American Protestantism. The next section of the analysis will analyze a survey (*The Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Common Room Survey*) that was conducted in the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Common Room* Facebook group. This survey simply asked about the basic demographic

[297] Knott, 5.
[298] Knott, 5.

information of the members of the Facebook group, and their religious affiliation and participation.

The Podcast's Structure

The impact of American Protestantism on the podcast is evident in the structure of each episode of the show. This influence may be due to the religious education the hosts received at Harvard Divinity School. Despite Harvard Divinity School being the first nonsectarian divinity school to be established in 1816, influence of American Protestantism in particular, and American religious culture in general, is evident in the history of the institution.[299]

Historically the school has ties to American Unitarianism and the United Church of Christ.[300] The institution was originally established "to ensure that 'every encouragement be given to the serious, impartial, and unbiased investigation of Christian truth.'"[301] In 2008, Harvard Divinity School adopted a new mission statement that broadened the school's mandate: "Harvard Divinity School educates students of religion for intellectual leadership, professional service, and ministry."[302] This new statement emphasizes a diverse perspective compared to the school's Christian-centric beginnings. Though the school boasts a diverse message, their permanent ministry studies programs includes ordination programs for those

[299] "History and Mission," Harvard Divinity School, 2020, https://hds.harvard.edu/about/history-and-mission.
[300] Though there are indeed structural similarities between Protestant churches and the Unitarian church, the content of these services would be very different (Sias 31).
[301] Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 242–43, https://books.google.ca/books?id=ZUUf7ssp1u4C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false; "History and Mission."
[302] "History and Mission."

looking to minister in Protestant settings (though a new 8-year pilot program in Buddhist Ministry is now available for prospective students).[303]

Although American Unitarianism is not a Protestant denomination like the United Church, its services follow a structure that is reminiscent of Protestantism. Their Sunday services typically involve "hymns, readings, meditation, singing by the choir, organ music and a sermon."[304] The podcast episodes follow a similar structure.

Each episode begins with one of the hosts telling a personal story from their own lives that is relevant to the theme being explored in that episode. This is similar to a common practice of preachers who begin their sermon with an anecdote to draw in the interest and attention of their congregations. As Leslie R. Peterson explains, integrating personal stories into Protestant sermons "provides new insights, commonality, identity, inspiration and mutual enjoyment" that allows the congregation to engage with the sermon on a personal level.[305] Similarly, the podcast hosts understand that there is a personal element to religious discourse that establishes a rapport with the audience that then allows them to explore complex topics pertaining to ethics and morality. When the hosts make themselves vulnerable in this way, they create a relationship of trust with their listeners that establishes a foundation for exploring life's big questions. This relationship is solidified when the hosts discuss where they saw the theme for that week in the chapter and relate these findings to their owns lives.

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[303] "Ordination Requirements," Harvard Divinity School, 2020, https://hds.harvard.edu/academics/ministry-studies/denominational-instruction/ordination-requirements.
[304] John Sias, *100 Questions That Non-Members Ask about Unitarian Universalism*, Fifth edition (Nashua: Transition Publishing, 2000), 31, https://www.uunashua.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/100questions.pdf.
[305] Leslie R. Peterson, "Sermon as Shared Story with Parabolic Insight" (D.Min., Claremont School of Theology, 1984), x, http://search.proquest.com/docview/303343316/abstract/98014E54A3934678PQ/1.

After this, the hosts lead the listener through a sacred reading of the text using a specific spiritual practice. These practices are drawn from Christianity and Judaism.[306] It is notable, however, that if a special guest would like to share a sacred practice from another religion on the podcast, they are often invited to do so. The special guests who are invited onto the show point to the dual arenas that the podcast is seeking to work within: non-religion and the Abrahamic faiths.

The hosts of the podcast itself identify as "a non-practicing Jew" (Zoltan) and "a non-practicing Anglican (ter Kuile)."[307] Most of the guests on the podcast do not state their religious affiliation publicly.[308] These guests do not affirm or question the podcast's approach to spiritual technologies. They generally do not argue about the legitimacy of the practices. Rather, they engage in open discussion with the hosts about how the practices affect their approach to the text. Sometimes, the special guests only share an anecdotal story that goes along with the theme without participating directly in the spiritual technologies. Other times the hosts ask them to offer a character a blessing.[309] This is a common approach in the later seasons on the show. While this podcast seeks to be welcoming to all religious traditions, it is clear that it is important to the hosts to include other non-religious individuals like themselves. It is notable, however, that when they do invite a religious guest, they tend to come from one of the three Abrahamic religions.

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[306] "Frequently Asked Questions," Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed October 2, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/frequently-asked-questions/.

[307] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Halloween Edition: On Witches and Brett Kavanaugh," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, n.d., accessed September 28, 2018.

[308] Some guests who have shared their religious affiliation on the podcast are: Sejal Patel (Season 3) is a non-practicing Hindu, Lynne Gerber (Season 5) is a non-practicing Jew and Wiccan, Broderick Greer (Season 4) is a Reverend at an Episcopal church, John Green (Season 4) describes his experience as a student Chaplin but does not explicitly share his religious affiliation, Father Jim Martin (Season 3) is a Jesuit Priest, Rabbi Scott Perlo (Season 2) is a non-denominational Jewish Rabbi, and Marya Bangel (Season 4) identifies as Muslim.

[309] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Yearning: An Excess of Phlegm," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/transcripts.

The Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Common Room Survey

In March 2020, the administrators of the "*Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* Common Room" Facebook group conducted a survey of its members.[310] While the results of this survey cannot be verified for accuracy, they provide a snapshot of the podcast's overall demographic interest.[311] This is not an academic survey and its results are not conclusive. This data, however, is the only data that currently exists on the demographics of the podcast's listening base.

Among those who chose to participate in the group survey, the majority of respondents 1) were over, 18 2) were white, 3) were from the United States, 4) identified as female, 5) spoke English as their first language, 6) were not parents, 7), identified as Protestant (no religion/Agnostic and Atheist are the next highest religious affiliations among group respondents), and 8) did not attend any sort of religious/spiritual service.[312] This last point is particularly interesting. The creator of the survey clarified that the "religious affiliation" question was the most difficult to interpret. This is because, as Meggie Needham (admin) comments in the Facebook post about the survey results, "a large percentage of the people who clicked Christian also clicked agnostics/no religion/added a caveat that's listed under the "other" responses. I think a lot of people raised Christian still feel it's part of their identity even if it's not a core belief."[313]

[310] Each question averaged between ~430-450 responses per question.
[311] Due to factors such as: small sample size, not everyone who listens to the podcast is a member of this Facebook community, and some questions (such as the "religious affiliation" question) allowed participants to mark multiple answers to their questions which obscures the final results.
[312] Maggie Needham, "Common Room Survey Results Feb-Mar 2020," March 2020, https://docs.google.com/document/d/14Zkpm7cW_W-HK1XwNQp4RFHHXtc5U2oGMT38Zi49kFs/edit?fbclid=IwAR0cAiS9DZbMJSZB2_OBgRjAe9PUb1eoGOeNoQZRTdDQMHxnDjGBBIpaQZU.
[313] Maggie Needham, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Common Room*, March 17, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/groups/377961979420635/.

Some of these "other" responses included:

- Spiritual. Raised Christian with elements of paganism, presently interested in spirituality and universal energy. Religion does nothing for me.
- Ex evangelical
- Went to Catholic middle school, Christian high school & grew up next-door to the Dutch 'bible belt'
- Non-practicing Catholic
- I believe in God, I'm not [stereotypically] religious
- Following the teachings and practices of Jesus but not the "American Christian" Church
- ??? (I am spiritual, but I don't have a definition for it)
- Raised evangelical
- Hindu
- Former Catholic with Buddhist leaning but agnostic[314]

This shows that, at least for those who responded to the group's survey, the majority identified as Protestant, while non-Protestants included a variety of religious and nonreligious perspectives.

Again, the findings of this survey are not suitable for deep analysis. Nevertheless, they do something about the Protestant-identifying listeners of the show. That maybe, more Protestants simply feel drawn to a) joining a Facebook group for the podcast or b) responding to a survey like this in the first place.[315] Either way, the survey suggests that a large part of the podcast's listeners feel comfortable identifying as either Christian (Protestant specifically) or nonreligious (either generally or specifically with labels such as Agnostic and Atheist).

A comprehensive survey of podcast listeners, not just members of this Facebook group, should definitely be conducted. Unfortunately, such a task is outside the scope of this project. Nevertheless, this preliminary data confirms an assumption made by this thesis: though

[314] Needham, "Common Room Survey Results."
[315] The same argument could be made for the results showing that the community is mostly made up of those who identity as female. But again, such results should not be conflated with an accurate picture of the podcast's listener base.

Protestantism influences the podcast (and potentially draws a number of Protestant identifying listeners) it still caters well to the needs of nonreligious Americans.

How Sacred Practices are Appropriated into Spiritual Technologies

Spiritual Technologies vs. Sacred Practices

This thesis defines spiritual technologies as rituals or actions that originated in particular religious traditions that are adapted for use outside of traditional religious contexts. In principle, any religious ritual can be turned into a spiritual technology. This is because, when turned into a spiritual technology, the ritual is stripped of any and all language that is associated with perhaps the supernatural or an explicitly religious realm. This does not mean, however, that "mystical", "spiritual", or religiously-charged language is not used on the podcast (as this thesis has explored thus far).

This project is utilizing the term "spiritual technology" primarily to refer to the podcast's use of sacred reading practices in a nonreligious context. Zoltan argues that spiritual technologies for nonreligious people are a necessary replacement for formal religion.[316] As she states, "…church for many people is a gift, but for others, it is a place of trauma, a place where they have been told that not all of their identity is welcome."[317] Of course, many people reject religion for reasons other than trauma. Nevertheless, Zoltan believes it is important to think about the ways that spiritual technologies may act as a new avenue for nonreligious practice for those who feel drawn to participating in religious practice despite any trauma they may have experienced in traditional religious settings. Zoltan comes to this project with an inherently empathetic perspective that emphasizes a concern for the

[316] Winston, "Reinventing Religion — with Romance Novels."
[317] Winston.

religious/spiritual/emotional wellbeing of her listeners no matter their experience (or lack of) with religion and religious practices.

Spiritual technologies are rituals conducted outside of traditional religious practice or environments, that allow nonreligious people to benefit personally from participating in the ritual. For Christians, it can be cathartic and healing to pray to God or bless someone in their congregation. But for someone who may not feel welcome in a Christian environment, or who has been told that their sexual identity or gender expression is blasphemous or sinful, such activities may induce trauma. That same person may be more open to hearing Zoltan and ter Kuile bless a character from their favourite *Harry Potter* novel. *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* primarily utilizes practices that are traditionally used within Catholic and Jewish settings. By applying religious ritual to nonreligious texts and appropriating the practice to be appropriate for a nonreligious setting, the reach of religious practice, and any and all benefits of such practices, can be extended to nonreligious listeners as well.

The Harry Potter and the Sacred Text website includes a section devoted to providing listeners with "spiritual practice resources." Such resources address the history of the practices, how they are traditionally practiced within their own religious tradition, and then (in some cases) ways for listeners to conduct their own spiritual practices, whether in a religious or a nonreligious setting. Although they define themselves as nonreligious, the hosts do not hesitate to provide religious material for their audience to read. Though their podcast seeks to be a part of one's nonreligious practice, their inclusion of religion and religious writers and thinkers both on the podcast and on their website underscores the podcast's inclusive goals. The resources

are not always accurate with respect to either the history or the method of these practices. It is not clear whether the hosts are aware of these inaccuracies.

So far, this analysis has explored the nature of the impact of Protestantism on the podcast's structure, and Protestantism's overall influence on the podcast's approach. As was explored in the literature review, the podcast's decision to treat only the books as sacred is reminiscent of how a Protestant would treat the Bible - *sola scriptura*. While this approach is overall informed by Protestantism, specifically Protestant sacred reading practices do not exist within the Protestant tradition. Therefore, the hosts of the podcast had to look further into religious history in order to uncover reading practices that they could emulate and mold for their own uses on the podcast. These practices stem from the Catholic and Jewish tradition and date back to before the Protestant Reformation (16th century). So while the Protestant ethos alive in America absolutely influences the podcast behind the scenes, the explicit religious practices appropriated into spiritual technologies do not stem from Protestantism.

The next section of this analysis will explore the nature of the podcast's spiritual technologies. Specifically, it will analyze how traditional religious practices are transformed and appropriated into spiritual technologies that the hosts feel comfortable using on their nonreligious podcast.

Lectio Divina.[318] Lectio divina is a "pedagogical method of uncovering wisdom embedded within a text."[319] The practice dates back to Origen of Alexandria, "a renowned Father of the Eastern Church who lived between 185-254 C.E."[320] The allegorical interpretations of Philo (20 BCE – 50 CE) and the Jewish tradition of Midrash ("a way of reading that draws upon the reader's senses and experiences to elicit an allegorical interpretation of a text") influenced Origen who applied these notions to his own method of interpretive reading.[321] As Mary Keator explains, midrash is an interesting practice because of its use of "creative tension between culture and tradition" that "allows room for the reader to add his/her own interpretation to the text based upon [their] own experiences."[322] This ideology from Judaism provides the backbone of the Catholic practice of lectio divina.

The first step of practicing lectio divina is understanding the literal meaning of the chosen passage.[323] Keator does not specify who picks the passage under analysis, so it may differ depending on the context. Origen's approach to lectio divina occurred within a scholastic setting.[324] Once the reader understood the text's literal meaning or "ordinary narrative," Origen encouraged the practitioner to dig deeper into the text to gain the text's spiritual meaning. The

[318] Please consult the audio tracks included in the thesis' submission to hear how these practices are conducted on the podcast. Doing so will allow for a better understanding of the following analysis.
[319] Mary Keator, *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-Appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 76, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315098104.
[320] Keator, 44.
[321] Keator, 45.
[322] Keator, 45.
[323] Keator, 47.
[324] Keator, 47.

final step is looking even deeper into the text to find its "spiritual sense" or "secret and hidden wisdom."[325]

Keator explores how, as in the fourth century as Christianity continued to "spread throughout the Roman Empire," desert ascetics began adopting the practice of lectio divina.[326] Similar to Origen's approach, the desert ascetics sought to "through slow repetition and committed practice" find the hidden meanings within the text and "[awaken] the monks to a new level of awareness."[327] The desert fathers stressed the importance of memorization in their method. Memorization was necessary for bringing "indwelling clarity and life force" to the practitioner.[328] The approach of Origen and the desert ascetics to lectio divina was foundational to how monasteries would conduct their interpretive reading practices.[329]

Saint Benedict of Nursia (480 C.E. – 547 C.E.) was "the most prominent figure in the history of western monasticism." [330] Learning to read the Scriptures was an important element of Benedict's monastic mission.[331] As The Rule of Benedict states, "all the community must be occupied at definitive times in manual labor and at other times in *lectio divina* (emphasis kept)."[332] Benedict was the first to coin the phrase lectio divina, a practice "designed to transform the reader… from the head to the heart."[333] Benedict's approach asserted that "one could attain union with Christ, *Logos*" through attentive reading and listening.[334] Reading the

[325] Keator, 48.
[326] Keator, 50.
[327] Keator, 53.
[328] Keator, 53.
[329] Keator, 54.
[330] Keator, 54.
[331] Keator, 55.
[332] Keator, 56.
[333] Keator, 56.
[334] Keator, 56.

scriptures this way allows the practitioner "to come to know God," through repetitive, meditation which allows in turn "to come to know oneself."[335]

Benedict's approach developed into the Scholastic Method that placed less emphasis on gaining wisdom from the text exclusively. Instead it broadened the influence asserting that teachers and students could work together "to provoke the text with questions of their own."[336] Whereas the Cistercian monasteries drawing from Benedict "emphasized the method of *lectio* as a way to access wisdom," the Scholastic School developed a method that placed greater emphasis on *quaestio (questioning the text)* and *disputatio* (scholarly discussions among teachers and students) rather than simply reading the text (*lectio*).[337] All of these versions of the practice paved the way for Cathedral Schools who incorporated lectio divina into their scholarly approach and method towards text. Keator explains that this actually provided the basis of textual analysis within the beginnings of the modern university.[338]

Lectio divina's overall structure and approach shifted throughout the decades as different monastic and Catholic educative institutions began to implement different approaches to lectio divina. In general, however, the practice is a movement from gathering a literal understanding of the text, in order to lead to an allegorical, and lastly, spiritual understanding of the text.[339] Origen's method was simply comprised of these three steps, whereas the Cistercian School's approach to lectio divina included five steps: "reading, meditation, prayer, performance, and contemplation."[340] As Keator notes, lectio divina adapted "to the changing

[335] Keator, 58.
[336] Keator, 60.
[337] Keator, 61–62.
[338] Keator, 62.
[339] Keator, 64.
[340] Keator, 68.

times" of the twelfth century and beyond as the practice continued to bring insights and wisdom to generations.[341]

Originally, lectio divina was a communal practice due to the illiteracy of the majority of the participants, hence the heightened call for memorizing such passages in order to better live out a life emmeshed in lectio divina. As technology improved (from manuscripts to printed books), the practice of individual study using lectio divina as a method became accessible to more people. The roots of the practice, however, are communal.[342]

On the podcast, lectio divina follows a similar structure that involves four main steps. The first step is simply understanding the context or, as Zoltan says, "just the narrative" of the chosen passage.[343] Within this first step of establishing what is happening in the narrative (for the podcast's version) at this moment in the text, the magic of lectio divina is revealed. The practice of lectio divina, of a close and careful reading of a small section of the narrative, allows for a deeper analysis of the text. Simply pondering one sentence of the text just a *little* longer than the average reader of *Harry Potter* allows for the subtext of the narrative to be discovered.

The passage chosen for episode 1's lectio divina is: **"You flatter me," said Dumbledore calmly, "Voldemort had powers I will never have."**[344] Ter Kuile notes that Dumbledore is speaking humbly which exemplifies the subtext of the narrative. Carefully reading and rereading a small section of a chapter, and in doing so, separating the passage from its context, allows listeners to discover new interpretations of the text. The passage must first be centered

[341] Keator, 71.
[342] Keator, 62.
[343] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Commitment."
[344] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury Children's Book, 1997), 12.

within the context of the narrative, however, before it can be extrapolated to allow for a deeper analytical reading to occur.

The second step of lectio divina for the podcast is "looking at allegory." This refers to finding metaphors or symbols that are hidden in the text.[345] The hosts of the podcast simply think in general about the symbols or allegories that come to mind when thinking about the passage.

> **Vanessa Zoltan:** Okay, so we're finishing up with Step One, which is just the literal what-happened in the text. The second step of Lectio Divina is looking at allegory.
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** What metaphors are hidden in the text? What symbols can we find in the words that are used? What strikes you, Vanessa? Any symbols or allegorical ideas that strike you?
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** What I love is Dumbledore saying 'Voldemort has powers that I will never have,' because I think literally what he could mean is that Voldemort is a more tal-ented wizard than I am, right? But I think metaphorically, allegorically what he's say-ing is that 'Voldemort has harnessed powers that I will never choose to have. Volde-mort went down a road that I will never go down.' Actually, I also really love the word 'will.' He's willing himself in this future tense way, and also he's fating himself through this decision. 'I will never go down that path.' And I think that is also true in our lives as well. I could will myself to be a lot of different things. I could will myself to be a marathon runner. And I want to be a version of that: I want to be a runner and I want to be a healthy person. But I'm not will-ing to put in the energy to be a marathon runner. That sounds painful and like a huge time commitment. So that's a power that I will never have. And there's no judgement in that, there's no saying that that is a good power to have or a bad power to have. And I think there's something beautiful in saying that, in saying: 'These are the pow-ers I'm going after. I'm going after being healthy, and I'm going after spending time reading, and spending time with friends. I'm not going after marathon running.'
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** Yeah, Dumbledore's core struggle is with power. The fact that he chooses not to become Minister of Magic is so much to do with his fear of how he would use his own power. I'm always thinking about names in the Harry Potter series, because there's so much interesting stuff that's hidden within the names. And Voldemort is a really important title that Tom Riddle chooses for himself. And mort in French is death, and the idea of vol-de-mort — vol is, I can never quite remember the

[345] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Commitment."

> French word, forgive me folks, there's something about moving or running away from — So we know that he's terrified of death. That is Riddle's biggest fear. And so even in the name that he chooses of this dark wizarding name, there's this kind of running away from death symbolically there. So that strikes me in this phrase.[346]

The third step of lectio divina on the podcast is "the idea of reflection" which explores how the text is speaking to the reader or listener in their lives.[347] This step has many similarities to the Catholic approach explored above where practitioners seek to develop themselves through the practice. The final step of lectio divina for the podcast is to ask oneself what action the listener and hosts would take as a result of this deep reading.[348] This step is much more concrete since it asks the practitioner for an action item, to consciously think about how this practice will and should influence their lives and how they act in the world. This explicitness is not found in the traditional practice of lectio divina but is indeed alluded to in its overall philosophy.

Lectio divina is a traditional monastic practice that has been turned into a nonreligious practice for the purposes of this podcast. In using this spiritual technology, the podcast provides examples of the practice's amenability to adaptation. This speaks to the power of the practice and the ways that nonreligious people may benefit from conducting a close reading of a work of fiction.[349]

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[346] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[347] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[348] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[349] Keator's text cited here also includes suggestions for how to incorporate lectio divina in nonreligious classroom settings. This highlights the ways in which religious practices are being adopted in other non-traditional settings.

Ignatian Spirituality. Ignatian Spirituality is a contemplative practice that stems from the Jesuit tradition.[350] It asks the practitioner to utilize their imagination as a religious or spiritual tool. When Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) founded the Society of Jesus in the middle of the 16th century, he published a treatise called *Spiritual Exercises* in 1548.[351] Saint Ignatius initially envisioned the *Spiritual Exercises* as a one-time life-changing experience. As the Society of Jesus sought to assert itself as a new religious order, the Exercises became a part of the Jesuits' daily life.[352] The Exercises were also a component of the daily prayers that occurred during the order's annual retreat.[353] Ignatian Spirituality's slow methodical approach to reading the Gospels is reminiscent of lectio divina's meditative style, and indeed, the Benedictine approach to Scripture informed Ignatius' approach.[354]

Ignatian Spirituality is a methodical approach to praying with and understanding the Gospels.[355] Ignatius believed that the process of working through the *Spiritual Exercises* should ideally take about a month. A skeletal version of the practice's main steps, however, will be outlined here for comparison sake. These steps were meant to be taken slowly over the course of several weeks.[356]

Ignatius's method begins with three preliminary steps, or "preambles": (1) recall a Gospel story; (2) set oneself within the narrative or scene (3) pray for "knowledge, love, and

[350] On the podcast the hosts sometimes refer to this practice as "sacred imagination." Since they call the practice Ignatian Spirituality on the website, this thesis will use that name for clarity's sake.
[351] Cristiano Casalini, "The Jesuits," in *Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill (New York: Routledge, 2017), 132 & 135, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770512-14.
[352] Philip Endean, "The Spiritual Exercises," in *The Cambridge Companion to The Jesuits*, ed. Thomas Worcester (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 64, https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.1017/CCOL9780521857314.
[353] Endean, 64.
[354] Zoltán Dörnyei, *Vision, Mental Imagery and the Christian Life : Insights from Science and Scripture* (London: Routledge, 2019), 136, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351068925.
[355] Endean, "The Spiritual Exercises," 54.
[356] Endean, 57.

dedication to service" as a Jesuit.[357] Then, the practitioner is called to follow three main steps: (1) establish a mental image of the story's setting; (2) notice what the characters are saying; (3) and think about what the characters may be doing in the scene.[358] The exercise ends with a colloquy or an imagined conversation with the characters in the narrative.[359] After engaging fully with the practices outlined in the *Spiritual Exercises*, practitioners should be drawn to make an "*election* or *decision*" as a result of their practice.[360] The goal is to develop a knowledge of not only the will of the Divine, but also for the practitioner to better understand themselves.[361]

Because the basis of this practice is one's own imagination, there was concern among the Jesuits that the practitioner may be led to imagine situations within the narrative that the church would deem heretical.[362] The early Jesuits addressed such concerns "diplomatically rather than theoretically," while Ignatius further developed the rules and structures for the practice in the *Spiritual Exercises* to make the practice's fundamental intentions clearer.[363]

On *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* Ignatian Spirituality is first introduced in the episode on Book 1, Chapter 7. The hosts simplify the practice, which for their purposes now entails: (1) reading a passage from the chapter of the week; (2) imagining oneself into the story; (3) visualizing the scene; (4) paying close attention to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or feelings that arise from visualizing the passage; (5) losing oneself in the story without worrying about whether or not one's imagination is staying within the strict canon of Rowling's story; (6)

[357] Endean, 54.
[358] Endean, 54.
[359] Endean, 55.
[360] Endean, 62.
[361] Endean, 52.
[362] Endean, 62.
[363] Endean, 62.

and finally, recognizing that if one's imagination is exploratory, that Ignatius would ask is "your imagination bringing you consolation or desolation?'"[364]

The practice is next used on the episode for Season 3 Episode 11 "Duty." Here, the hosts invite Jim Martin, a Jesuit priest, to introduce the practice. Father Martin describes the practice as "lectio divina on steroids." He asks them to think, "…what do I see? What do I feel? What do I hear? What do I smell? What do I taste?"[365] He uses the story of Jesus in the boat with his disciples found in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41, and Luke 8:22-25) as an example of how this practice is used within the Catholic and Jesuit context. From the Gospel of Mark, the passage reads:

> On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." [36] And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. [37] A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. [38] But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" [39] He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. [40] He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" [41] And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"[366]

Here is how Father Jim Martin explains how to conduct Ignatian Spirituality on this passage:

> **Father Jim Martin:** […]let's take one of my favorite passages, the storm at sea, so the disciples are on a boat in the Sea of Galilee and a storm comes up and Jesus is asleep on the boat and they say, "don't you care about us?" And he stands up and rebukes the wind and the waves and it stops. And they're terrified and they say that, "even the winds and the waves obey him." So, what would you do there? You would literally read the passage, close your eyes, ask god to be with you, and you trust that god is going to be at work in this exercise. And you would compose the place, as Ignatius says, what

[364] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Vulnerability: The Sorting Hat," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/listen-2.
[365] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Duty: The Firebolt," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/season-three-harry-potter-and-the-prisoner-of-azkaban.
[366] Michael D. Coogan, ed., "Mark 4:35-41," in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with The Apocrypha*, Fourth Edition (New York: Oxford university Press, 2010), 1799.

> does the boat look like? How many disciples are on the boat? What's it look like outside? Is it dark? Is it stormy? Is it the daytime?
> What am I wearing? What does it feel like? Well I'm going to be cold; it's going to be cold and clammy. And is the boat rocking? What does it sound like? Well there's fishing tackle going from place to place, are the disciples complaining? Lightning, thunder, what do I do now? Well if you're in a fishing boat, you're going to smell fish. So, all of that stuff is to engage the imagination. And all sorts of stuff can come up: insights, emotions, memories, desires, feelings.

After this explanation Zoltan asks: "is [non-canonical imagining] still prayerful or spiritual or am I simply making it up?"[367] Here, Zoltan is struggling to find the correct term (prayerful vs. spiritual) to frame her question. This uncertainty reflects an important issue faced by nonreligious individuals who seek to explain themselves while conducting nonreligious practice. Zoltan may believe that being prayerful is an activity or mental spaces that anyone, no matter their religious affiliation, may participate in. Nevertheless, when Zoltan chooses to juggle between both religious language ("prayerful") and more generalized spiritual language ("spiritual"), her confusion over what terms to use to best describe her concern underscores uncertainties that exist around how to adequately understand, describe, and conceptualize nonreligious practices in English.

When introducing Father Martin, the hosts appear to warn their audience that Father Martin may use the language of God when describing Ignatian Spirituality. This points to the hosts' ability to understand what their audience might be familiar or comfortable with. Ter Kuile suggests that listeners should maintain "an open heart" when listening to Father Martin.[368] A detailed discourse analysis on the specific Protestant phrases that the hosts engage

[367] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Duty."
[368] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Vulnerability."

in on the podcast would be a fruitful area of further study on this podcast.[369] Doing so would further the assertion that the podcast's Protestant underpinnings are more explicit that one might first think.

The podcast's version of the practice has taken all of the "god language" out of the steps and simplified the practice for the benefit of a nonreligious practitioner. This essentially means that the focus on "Jesus" is removed. Here is an example of what this looks like on the podcast:

> **Casper ter Kuile:** So now, let's put on our newfound expertise to practice and find a passage.
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** Sacred Imagination me.[370]
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** So, the passage I want to read for you today is when the trio go down to Hagrid's hut. So, if you're [the listener] comfortable, and not driving, feel free to close your eyes and try to imagine yourself into this scene.
>
> > **"I've not bin meself lately," said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. "Worried abou' Buckbeak, an' no one likin' me classes---" "We do like them!" lied Hermione at once. "Yeah they're great!" said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. "Er—how are the flobberworms?" "Dead," said Hagrid gloomily. "Too much lettuce." "Oh no!" said Ron, his lip twitching. "An' them Dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an' all," said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. "Gotta walk past'em ev'ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. 'S like bin' back in Azkaban—"He feel silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, "Is it awful in there, Hagrid?" "Yeh've no idea," said Hagrid quietly. "Never bin anywhere like it."**[371]
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** So Vanessa, what did you see in that scene?
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** I was imagining myself as like one of the three kids and first of all just feeling so little in front of this very large man; and then my life feeling so little in the face of everything that he has experienced. And just also feeling scared at the idea that

[369] I identify the Protestant phrases to include: feeling "called to" something, "bearing witness," feeling "broken," and "gift" language. The limits of this thesis do not allow for a detailed discourse analysis of these phrases.
[370] The hosts refer to Ignatian Spirituality as Sacred Imagination occasionally on the podcast.
[371] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (London: Arthur A. Levine Books, 1999), 220.

there's someone who I love with such big problems that I can't fix. Watching an authority figure be scared is just, it's terrifying.

Casper ter Kuile: [...] Yeah, I was kind of thinking of myself as Ron a little bit, he's kind of playing earlier up the page, he's saying like, "oh we do like your classes," and he's crossing his fingers which is a childish thing to do and his lip in twitching when he hears that the flobberworms are dead, he's kind of smiling. And then when Hagrid starts talking about Azkaban, the world falls silent and all of that childishness disappears and I think it's interesting that Hermione asks the question, who we already know is maturing much more than the boys, and she doesn't offer a pronouncement she doesn't offer a placation or anything, she invites a question, which I think is so beautiful, and she just asks him, "is it awful in there Hagrid?" They know it's bad, and I think she wants to validate his experience and make him, give him some space to talk more about it. This is the first time bringing it up, and it happened a while again, and I think sometimes you have those moments in conversations where suddenly there's this space to talk about this thing that's so shaming or frightening or upsetting and she's making it safe to do that.

Vanessa Zoltan: Yeah and because she waited for him to bring it up, it doesn't feel like prying curiosity but just like, "do you want to talk about it?" And she even has the elegance not to ask about, "what was it like for you in there?" She gives him space to either sort of be a reporter-type of like, "yeah people really struggle there" or to talk about his own experience. […]

Casper ter Kuile: You know what it's making me think that of course the title of the book is about Sirius [Black], but actually we have a second Prisoner of Azkaban, which is Hagrid.

Vanessa Zoltan: Yeah.

Casper ter Kuile: Like he has not left and some part of him has not left that confinement.

Vanessa Zoltan: I just hate those moments when you're seeing someone suffer and you just feel like there's nothing you can do and the trio, by being there, and just sort of existing in that space are like doing everything that they can and I love that Hagrid even thinks that they've somehow, magically, instantaneously found out. But I just, it's just so heartbreaking to sit there and watch someone you love suffer and know that there's little to nothing you can do to alleviate their suffering and that every protest that they put they're right. It's like; yep the system is just corrupt. Yep, he is just going to suffer. Yep.

Casper ter Kuile: Yeah the thing I'm taking away is just this deep sadness. He's remembering a horrible experience, he feels rotten right now, he feels like he's bad at

> everything. And now he's dreading this event that's coming, which is Buckbeak's probable execution. He's just stuck.
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** He is very lucky to have these three kids though, and I do think that's something and a real solace to him.
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** Absolutely.
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** And fang.[372]

As this transcript shows, even in a nonreligious context, Ignatian Spirituality's use of the imagination invites the opportunity for fresh discussions around *Harry Potter*. The power of imagination allows the mind to experience a unique form of empathy that a regular reading of the text may not lend itself well to. This focus on empathy confirms the value of conducting such a practice in a nonreligious setting. As Zoltan states, this is the podcast's mandate.

When a Jesuit practitioner conducts the practice, whether at the beginning or throughout their religious journey, their goal is to prayerfully develop a deeper, fuller connection to their own religion, spiritual mission and personal goals.[373] In a nonreligious context, this spiritual technology provides the opportunity to imagine what it may feel like to empathize with a fictional character. Practicing this may in turn improve one's own capacity for empathy in the real world.[374]

Florilegium. Florilegium dates back to the "ancient Greek times with the genre of 'anthology' already appearing from the classical period, and continuing with the addition of Christian

[372] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Duty."
[373] Endean, "The Spiritual Exercises," 52.
[374] *Spend Two Minutes With The Co-Host Of The Podcast "Harry Potter And The Sacred Text."*

authors after the third century CE."[375] The Latin florilegium specifically refers to "*flores* and *legere*, 'to gather flowers.'"[376] A florilegium is "a collection of excerpts" from scripture or other theological texts, that are compiled together.[377] This collection may contain excerpts by one or by several authors.[378] The first florilegia were collections of the sayings of Jesus or the apostles.[379] Sometimes florilegium collections included "excerpts from commentaries on the Bible by the church fathers."[380] This was called "catena" which refers to "an exegetical chain.'"[381] Other types of florilegia derived from the patristic writings and focused on "dogma, liturgy, morality, spiritual life, or canon law."[382] Greek florilegia from the patristic fathers were used for theological discussions when proving "the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of individual theologians."[383] For example, "Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea collected excerpts from the writings of Origen" in a florilegium called *Philocalia*.[384]

In Season 2 Episode 18 "Love," "Friend-of-the-Pod" Stephanie Paulsell introduces the florilegium genre.[385] She explains that monks and academic theologians would transcribe portions of text (called Sparklets) in a different notebook or on a new sheet of paper or velum and in doing so, would create entirely new texts for exegesis or contemplation.[386]

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[375] Alexander Alexakis, "Byzantine Florilegia," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 15, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118438671.ch2.
[376] Everett Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity: Second Edition*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2013), 433, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203456187.
[377] Alexakis, "Byzantine Florilegia," 16.
[378] Alexakis, 16.
[379] Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 433.
[380] Ferguson, 433.
[381] Ferguson, 433.
[382] Ferguson, 433.
[383] Ferguson, 433.
[384] Ferguson, 433.
[385] Dr. Stephanie Paulsell is a faculty member of Harvard Divinity School and was Vanessa Zoltan's Master's thesis supervisor. Her guidance aided Zoltan as she grappled with how to treat *Jane Eyre* as a sacred text and she is credited at the end of each episode of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* as "a friend of the pod" due to her role as a mentor figure for Zoltan.
[386] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Love: Dobby's Reward," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/listen.

The simplicity of the practice of compiling a florilegium allows for flexibility. This allows the hosts to shape it into a spiritual technology that suits their text and goals. Ter Kuile ponders, "I think a lot of people keep these 'quotations books' or people will have on their wall different pieces of text that they love."[387] Zoltan adds that, "there are whole Twitter profiles that are florilegia, that are just quotes" which confirms the "very salient and contemporary" nature of this spiritual technology.[388]

In keeping with the podcast's goal to codify their spiritual practices, Zoltan asks Paulsell how they should work with or create florilegia as a nonreligious spiritual technology. Paulsell replies suggesting each host could simply pick their own sparklets (quotes) from the text and then "just see what [the quotes] sound like next to each other and see what emerges rather than going through it any systematic way."[389] Zoltan counters saying she likes systems, while ter Kuile comments on the interesting ideas that arise when studying two sparklets side by side. This latter comment provides the basis for the methodology that is used when drawing on the concept of florilegia for the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast. Rather than explicitly compiling their own florilegium, for the sake of publicly conducting the practice, the hosts simply place their sparklets in conversation with one another's.

> **Vanessa Zoltan:** I chose just four words: "**even I don't understand**."[390]
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** Hmm. I chose: "**it was planted because I had come to Hogwarts**."[391] Okay, so those two next to each other are, '**even I don't understand; it was planted because I had come to Hogwarts**.' So why did you choose yours?

[387] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[388] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[389] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[390] Rowling, *Prisoner of Askaban*, 350.
[391] Rowling, 253.

> **Vanessa Zoltan:** It cracks me up as a sentence. (Casper laughs) I just think it's so funny. So it's –Lupin says that there are parts of what happened that even he doesn't understand. I think that it's such an obnoxious sentence of, like, even I don't understand. Like, (laughs) Lupin, why would you understand everything that happened? You were just given this information a minute ago. But then it's also this, like, generous thing of admitting that he doesn't understand something and being like, 'I'm the one talking right now, I'm the teacher, I'm the authority, but I don't understand either.'
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** Right, that's how I read it. Which is this, like, beautiful, like, humble moment of saying, 'you know, even though I'm in charge, even I don't understand everything.'
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** It also to me sounds like a sort of prayer moment that you open yourself to something outside of yourself. It's when you don't understand when you're supposed to understand, and you're like, 'this is my life, this is my child, this is my whatever, and even I don't understand. Like I don't know what to do.'
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** Especially in moments of such stress, right? Like, when everything is falling apart, I don't know, like you just say, "ugh, help."
>
> **Vanessa Zoltan:** Right, and I feel like I talk to a lot of people right now who feel called to social activism and are like, 'but I don't understand what I can possibly do.' And the only thing I can think to say is that we need to get ourselves ready so that when the moment comes, we're ready to fight…[392]

As this transcript shows, creating a florilegium is a seemingly simple practice that allows for a deep and meaningful discussion to arise in this nonreligious context. Their rich discussion comes about after only focusing on four words. This simple fact speaks to the value of treating nonreligious texts as sacred, and what one may get out of conducting such a practice in a nonreligious context.

[392] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Isolation: Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/season-three-harry-potter-and-the-prisoner-of-azkaban.

Marginalia. Marginalia are a feature of manuscripts and is not considered explicitly as a sacred practice. Whereas the previous practices studied so far followed particular steps and methods to conduct the practice, the act of a reader writing within the text they are reading is simply the byproduct of humans having access to books and writing materials. Beginning in the early Middle Ages, before the invention of the printing press, monks copied Biblical manuscripts day in and day out for the privileged classes who commissioned such volumes. As they did so, they added marginal comments. Some of these comments – marginalia – were complaints about the task at hand or even the temperature of the room, while others included commentary on or corrections (or mis-corrections) of the text itself.[393] Although some or most of these marginalia likely stem from monks who were copying out the text, others may stem from the readers of the finished product itself.

H.J. Jackson's book *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* explores the concept of marginalia and what it implies about human nature's interactions with materiality when interacting with printed (or electronic) text. He states, "readers' notes in books are a familiar but unexamined phenomenon. We do not understand it well."[394] In the "first century or so of what we now call print culture," when access to circulating manuscripts was rare and literacy was only available to the wealthy, marginalia primarily consisted of "textual collations and corrections, explanations of hard words and obscure passages, references to sources, and illustrative examples."[395] In this period, marginal comments were used as a learning tool rather

[393] "Monks' Marginalia Shows People Haven't Changed | Laserfiche Blog," *Laserfiche* (blog), 2016, https://www.laserfiche.com/ecmblog/monks-marginalia-shows-people-havent-changed/.
[394] H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 4, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ottawa/detail.action?docID=3420410.
[395] Jackson, 50.

than a chance for readers to express their personal opinions of the text to themselves or the author.[396] Many factors influenced the earliest examples of marginalia, primarily the limited access to possessing and owning physical books.[397] Further, the writing of marginalia was primarily encouraged in educational settings.[398]

Then, the sixteenth century saw the impact of the Protestant Reformation "and the print revolution coincided to bring more books – especially books in English – to more people and to present readers with new models of annotation."[399] As private ownership of books increased, more people began to write in book margins. Jackson argues marginal comments began around the Middle Ages but asserts that such tendencies became more widespread between 1700-1820.[400] Others assert that marginalia are actually "unique and privileged evidence of humanist reading practices and therefore of the history of reading as a social and intellectual collaboration, rather than an individual, private, activity."[401]

Jackson then explores a number of motivations that may lead one to write in the margins of their books. These motives may inform why this approach to interacting with a text may be useful for the podcast. Primarily, "annotators are self-conscious readers."[402] But why, Jackson asks, does a "writer of marginalia [act] on the impulse to stop reading for long enough to record a comment?"[403] In some contexts, writing margin comments is socially acceptable (such as educational settings), other times, particularly when borrowing a book from the library

[396] Jackson, 50.
[397] Jackson, 50.
[398] Jackson, 53.
[399] Jackson, 51.
[400] Jackson, 72.
[401] Katherine Acheson, ed., *Early Modern English Marginalia* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315228815.
[402] Jackson, *Marginalia*, 2001, 81.
[403] Jackson, 82.

or a friend, such behaviour is discouraged.[404] Nevertheless, no matter the context, writing margin comments is "seldom *required* behavior."[405]

Jackson notes that generally fictional books tend to be "less commonly annotated than other genres..."[406] This makes the use of marginalia as a sacred practice (explored below) on the podcast particularly interesting. Because fictional books are seldom annotated as often as other genres, the act of consciously choosing to write in the margins of *Harry Potter* as one reads through the text allows for a new and different engagement with the narrative. This is one aspect of studying margin comments that lends itself well to be used as a spiritual technology.

Jackson agrees, saying the act of writing margin notes can "help readers to focus their attention and to recall what they have read more exactly."[407] Further, in line with Zoltan's assertion that the chosen sacred text should be a text that one truly loves, Jackson asserts that marginalia are in fact "a record of affection."[408] Not only are marginalia proof of a well-loved text, but they also alter how one reads and experiences the text.[409] As this quote clearly articulates, "the book is a thing that differs from itself, at all moments of its production, and at all the moments of its consumption."[410]

On the podcast, Zoltan states that she and ter Kuile will "conduct the practice" of marginalia by first making marginal notes within their own copies of *Harry Potter* on their own while they prepare to that week's episode. They may write notes or thoughts in the margins of

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[404] Jackson, 82.
[405] Jackson, 82.
[406] Jackson, 70.
[407] Jackson, 234.
[408] Jackson, 72.
[409] Jackson, 241.
[410] Acheson, *Early Modern English Marginalia*, 11.

the chapters, mark their texts with underlines or circle words in the text. Then, during the spiritual technology section of the episode, the hosts will swap books with each other and analyze each other's marginalia.[411] When first introducing the practice, the hosts ask each other a number of theoretical questions regarding what counts as marginalia. Do JK Rowling's tweets count as margin notes on the books? Should such tweets be treated as sacred?[412] They clarify that for the sake of the podcast they will not be doing that.[413] Scholars of marginalia also ponder the future impact of technology on marginalia with the growing use of eBooks and Twitter.[414]

In the case of the episode entitled "Belief: Dudley Demented" which is a reading of the first chapter of the *Goblet of Fire*, the hosts explore different areas of the text that they may have commented on or underlined in their copy, and then explore with each other what these comments may mean or allude to.

> **Casper ter Kuile:** Let me find one in your notes here. Vanessa I'm picking up on something we touched on before. You underlined,
>
> > **'Perhaps it hadn't been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary noises.'**[415]
>
> And you wrote underneath the word, 'Doubt,' 'plus hopeless.' And to me, that just kind of signals that— that moment I call the doom spiral, like you open the door to the curly

[411] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Belief: Dudley Demented," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/season-five-order-of-the-phoenix.
[412] This is a notable exclusion given the recent controversy Rowling caused in the summer of 2020. Rowling decided to use her twitter feed to explain her opinion around transgender identity and rights. After publishing a number of inflammatory tweets that rejected the legitimacy of transgender identities, Rowling wrote a long blog post defending her position. In response, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* asserted their unwavering support for the transgender community and rejected Rowling's tweets as harmful. They compiled a group of voicemails from transgender listeners of the podcast who are personally affected by the contents of Rowling's tweets and posted them on their website. The podcast creators then published an official statement on their site affirming the central tenets of the project in relation to this controversy. "It is not these texts that are magic. It is you," they state, while defending the notion that these "aren't her books, they are ours." Their official statement can be found on their website.
[413] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Belief."
[414] Sjoerd Levelt, "Early Modern Marginalia and #earlymoderntwitter," in *Early Modern English Marginalia* (New York: Routledge, 2019), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315228815.
[415] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), 12.

> whirly slide that goes all the way down, and you start with just a little bit of doubt and then you are going down. You're like, 'Oh, I don't believe anything anymore.' Then you're like, 'Belief itself is fake.' 'I'm not real.' 'Help, help, help.' And then you're down in that hopeless drain. That's what I see you referencing here.
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> **Vanessa Zoltan:** Yeah, I feel like our listeners know this and I'm sure I'll be able to talk about it in a more productive way in a few months, but I've been very sick for the last six months, and I just got a diagnosis which is very good news because it's super treatable and, great. But, the last month or two before I got my diagnosis, doctors were starting to ask me questions like, 'Oh, do you have a very stressful job? Are you a very nervous person?'
>
> I was really starting to doubt whether I was sick. I mean it's really humiliating because being sick has made me cancel plans, it has made me break promises, it has made me be a bad communicator with people because I'd just like, lose days to feeling sick. And so by them questioning whether or not my sickness was quote unquote 'real,' there was such self-doubt, of like, have I been faking this? Have I been like, not the person that I think I am? And then when the diagnosis came through, I got to finally rewrite myself like, 'No. I am a person with integrity and who keeps promises and who reaches out to friends and who doesn't cancel things. There has just been something wrong with me.'
>
> There was such a doom spiral, and just like, weeks. It was absolutely identity-shattering. And so, for Harry in this page where he like, he knows what apparition sounds like. He knows what he heard, and to just go through this like, complete self-doubt doom spiral, I think it is an absolute doom spiral, I just so empathize with him. I have gone these last few weeks of knowing what it feels like to be like, 'Who am I? Maybe I don't know what magical sounds sound like. Is there someone named Dobby? I don't know.' Right?[416]

The practice of annotating documents and books is present both in religious and nonreligious contexts. Annotating a written work can be seen as both a mundane activity (in the case of someone losing their favourite novel that they scribbled in while riding on a bus, rendering it useless, "unlovable and unsalable" in its messy highlighted state).[417] On the other hand, marginalia from the past can provide historical insights into how human's interactions with texts have changed or stayed the same.[418] As a practice that forces the reader to slow

[416] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Belief."
[417] H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 1.
[418] Jackson, *Marginalia*, 2001.

down, think, and interact with the text in new ways, studying marginalia (one's own, or other's marginalia) offers a variety of uses as a spiritual technology.

Havruta. Stemming from the Jewish tradition, havruta is a sacred reading practice applied primarily to the Talmud but also applied to other Jewish texts including the Bible. As Sharon Blumenthal asserts, "central to Judaism is the study of text, of *Torah.*"[419] *Torah* refers both to the "five books of Moses" (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), as well as "the entire body of Jewish law and teachings."[420] Jewish practice primarily involves living "in accordance with G-d's laws" that are "revealed through the act of reading and interpreting *Torah*."[421] Blumenthal clearly states that it is only through "textual interpretation that Jews learn how to meet G-d's ethical standard for behavior" which in turn makes "the act of interpretation…an ethical act."[422] Further, Torah actually translates to "a teaching."[423] Therefore, "when Jews pray, we communicate with G-d, and *Torah* is how G-d reciprocates communication" with the Jewish community.[424] This provides the ideological background for the importance of sacred reading practices like havruta in the Jewish tradition.

Havruta, as a discussion-based practice, is based on the premise that working through passages with a partner allows for a clearer understanding of the text.[425] Blumenthal also notes that this collaborative approach to textual analysis allows for a better understanding of another

[419] Sharon Meredith Blumenthal, "Havruta as Modeled Pedagogy: Your People Shall Be My People" (Dissertation, Ann Arbor, The George Washington University, 2012), 8, http://search.proquest.com/docview/992882500/abstract/E7BCB08F28C34FCDPQ/1.
[420] Blumenthal, 26.
[421] Blumenthal, 9.
[422] Blumenthal, 9.
[423] Blumenthal, 13.
[424] Blumenthal, 13.
[425] Blumenthal, 9.

human being's perspective. As she states, "commitment to text *is* commitment to the Other, and reading becomes not only an intellectual practice but an ethical one as well."[426] This notion relates well to *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text's* ideology, which is based on the conviction that treating texts as sacred allows the practitioner to practice empathy towards fictional characters. Such practicing in turn allows for the better treatment of others in the real world.[427] This perspective is further confirmed when Blumenthal states that "behind Jewish curriculum is a deceivingly simple idea: One is what one studies."[428]

Blumenthal notes that there are a variety of textual analysis and interpretation methods practiced in the Jewish tradition, particularly in educational institutions like the *yeshiva* or a *beit midrash* ("house of inquiry").[429] Such methods, however, are seldom practiced or known outside of the Jewish tradition, and a number of scholars are beginning to note how a havruta approach to textual interpretation may benefit nonreligious settings like high school and university-level English classes.[430]

Jewish education, Blumenthal states, "prioritizes questions over answers" and invites a collaborative learning approach rather than solitary study.[431] Learning collaboratively not only "makes the act of learning public" but also "holds students accountable for what they learn" and encourages debate.[432] As Blumenthal notes, "the concept of the *havruta* is not

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[426] Blumenthal, 9.
[427] Zoltan, "Trump Isn't Voldemort, and Other Lessons from Harry Potter on Its 20th Anniversary."
[428] Blumenthal, "Havruta as Modeled Pedagogy," 13.
[429] Blumenthal, 10 & 14.
[430] Rebecca Shargel and B. P. (Barbara) Laster, "Partner Learning (Havruta) for Close Reading Comprehension," *English Journal, High School Edition; Urbana* 105, no. 3 (January 2016): 63–68.
[431] Blumenthal, "Havruta as Modeled Pedagogy," 16–17.
[432] Blumenthal, 17.

unidimensional," and the term may be used as a noun and as an adjective (referring both to the partner as a havruta and the partnered learning session as conducting a havruta).[433]

Another complication when trying to understand havruta is its pervasiveness and embeddedness within the Jewish tradition. Havruta is "experienced by students through their witnessing and participating," as when numerous havruta partners study at the same time in the *beit midrash,* but the practice itself is relatively untaught.[434] This makes finding and learning about the historical origins of the practice difficult despite the practice's relative popularity within contemporary *yeshivot.*[435]

As Orit Kent explains, "during a *havruta* discussion, participants construct and reconstruct the meaning of the text through their moment-to-moment interactions."[436] In general, the havruta approach differs depending on the context.[437] Many rabbinical settings take a hands-off approach and offer little guidance to the students on how "to pick a Havruta [partner] or what to do once they [are] in a Havruta [partnered learning session]," furthermore, "faculty [are] ambivalent about how much they should intervene" during the havruta sessions.[438] He does, however, state that in general, studying in havruta involves three main practices "(1) listening and articulating; (2) wondering and focusing; and (3) supporting and challenging."[439]

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[433] Blumenthal, 18.
[434] Blumenthal, 19.
[435] Blumenthal, 22.
[436] Orit Kent, "A Theory of Havruta Learning," *Journal of Jewish Education*, The Beit Midrash Research Project, 76, no. 3 (2010): 8.
[437] Elie Holzer and Orit Kent, "Havruta: What Do We Know and What Can We Hope to Learn from Studying in Havruta?," in *International Handbook of Jewish Education*, ed. Helena Miller, Lisa Grant, and Alex Pomson, vol. 5, International Handbooks of Religion and Education (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), 408, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0354-4_24.
[438] Holzer and Kent, 411.
[439] Kent, "A Theory of Havruta Learning," 8.

Although the practice is only loosely structured, the steps generally include: (1) picking a partner and passage (how this is done will depend on the context), (2) reading the passage out loud, often a couple times to ensure a close reading is conducted, (3) taking turns "articulating the explicit and implicit meanings of the text," and (4) "challenging one's partner to think more deeply" about their interpretation of the passage.[440] As is clear, havruta is a flexible practice that offers many benefits when applied to a text both in religious and nonreligious settings.

On *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text,* the hosts describe the necessary steps for how havruta is conducted on the show: (1) work in pairs; (2) pick a passage; (3) one person will first pose a question about the passage; (4) that same person will "pose a potential response" to their own question; (5) finally the partner offers their own answer to the question posed in the beginning. The hosts welcome a variety of answers to their proposed questions making the discussion often rich and wide-ranging.[441] The hosts never claim that this is the only, or correct, way to do havruta. Rather, they clarify that this is how the podcast will conduct this practice.[442]

According to Kent, a successful havruta involves a balance between the practitioners.[443] Or, as the hosts put it: "…it isn't any one answer that is right, but it is the aggregate of all the answers that are right."[444] Both in traditional settings and on the podcast, the practitioners do not pronounce on a single "correct" interpretation but rather engage in a back and forth involving listening and articulating.[445] Here is an example of what the havruta process looks like on the podcast:

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[440] Shargel and Laster, "Partner Learning (Havruta) for Close Reading Comprehension," 64.
[441] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Excellence: The Dueling Club," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/listen.
[442] Zoltan and ter Kuile.
[443] Kent, "A Theory of Havruta Learning," 9.
[444] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Excellence."
[445] Kent, "A Theory of Havruta Learning," 13 & 20.

Vanessa Zoltan: Casper, we are now going to transition from doing Sacred Imagination to the Jewish practice of havruta. And to remind our listeners, havruta is a several-hundred year old practice where two people are reading a book together, usually it's the Talmud, and the idea is that two people together can learn everything that they need to learn if they are willing to have an open and rigorous discussion amongst themselves and with the book. And so, the way that we will do havruta is that one of us will pose a question, but the person who poses the question is also supposed to pose a potential response to a question, and then the next person will give another response to the question. So, the idea is that it isn't any one answer that is right, but it is the aggregate of all of the answers that are right. And that we can really just go on and on because there's an endless depth to these things. So Casper, you will be leading us in our first havruta of Book 2. What would you like to discuss?

Casper ter Kuile: […] And so I'm wondering, the question that I'm bringing to our conversations today is why are we able to change our opinions of others so quickly? For good and bad, we'll see Harry go from hero to zero and back to hero again. […] And I think my potential answer is that it's something to do with the fact that we don't understand the fullness of other people's experience. And we're so good at creating stories about them, and so as soon as we have a new piece of information, we're able to recreate an entire new story, which paints them in a completely different light. But I'm still kind of unsatisfied by that so what do you think?

Vanessa Zoltan: […]. And it seems to me when you're doing those 180-degree turns in an intimate friendship it has a lot more to do with you and your own insecurities. Ron gets mad at Harry, not when Harry necessarily does anything wrong, but when it has poked a really sensitive spot within him. [..] But certainly if somebody who I already know and am intimate with, hurts my feelings usually it has more to do with them striking a sensitive chord in me then it has with them messing up in some big way.

[…]

Casper ter Kuile: Right, I didn't think we'd get to such a juicy place. Thanks Vanessa, good havruta-ing.

Vanessa Zoltan: Thank you, yes that is the correct Hebrew verb for havruta, excellent.[446]

The practice of havruta as a spiritual technology allows for a deep analysis of the text.

This give the hosts and the listeners a chance to ask deep questions not only about the

[446] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Excellence."

characters of the novel, but also of themselves. Further, the ideology behind havruta, and Jewish sacred reading in general, as a way to practice empathy, aligns perfectly with *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text's* theology/ideology.

PaRDeS. PaRDeS is a Jewish four-step hermeneutical practice used to investigate "the literary and rhetorical elements of sacred texts."[447] PaRDeS is an acronym that stands for Peshat, Remez, Derash, and Sod. Blumenthal notes that this interpretation method is often conducted in pairs, meaning "PaRDeS demands *havruta.*"[448] PaRDeS translates roughly to "orchard" which suggests "that one is nourished and sustained by reaping meaning from the *Torah* just as one might be nourished and sustained by reaping fruit from the earth."[449]

As was introduced in the havruta section above, textual study and hermeneutics is central to Judaism.[450] This is because "*Torah* study is understood in Judaism to have the capacity to fulfill a human's basic needs if one knows how to access its awesome potential.[451] Hence, much importance is placed "on the manner in which one studies sacred religious texts and on how one understands what G-d communicates through these texts."[452] Not only is *Torah* considered to be a text that is "complete and self-sufficient," but these hermeneutic principles emphasize the importance of valuing the wide variety of meanings and interpretations that can be found in the text.[453] The first recorded evidence of the use of PaRDeS is in the late thirteenth century in Spain by R. Moshe de Leon (1240-1305) in *Sefer*

[447] Blumenthal, "Havruta as Modeled Pedagogy," 29.
[448] Blumenthal, 29.
[449] Blumenthal, 35.
[450] Blumenthal, 27.
[451] Blumenthal, 27.
[452] Blumenthal, 28.
[453] Blumenthal, 28.

HaPardes and R. Yosef Gikitilla (1248-1305) in *Sha'arei Orah*.[454] Since then, this method of hermeneutics became popular particularly among Kabbalistic communities.[455]

The steps of PaRDeS follow the acronym. Step one, *Peshat*, refers to "the plain, simple, and direct meaning of a text—its literal meaning," in other words, what is happening in the story's plot at its most basic level?[456] Though, as Rashi, "the medieval Rabbi considered to be the most significant commentator on the *Torah,*" says, though a single verse may have a number of different interpretations, "when all is said and done, Scripture does not depart from its simple meaning."[457] This literal meaning allows for the passage to be understood on a deeper level.

Step two is *Remez*, which "involves investigating hints that expose the allegorical meaning" of a passage.[458] As Blumenthal explains, "the Hebrew Bible consists of much word-play including words that double as first- and final-letter acronyms that convey multiple levels of meaning."[459] Blumenthal's example of this step included looking at the root meaning of names in the *Book of Ruth* to find meaning, as well as studying the numerical values of the letters in Ruth's name (for example, "when combined, the numerical value of Ruth's name is six hundred six or the number of additional laws Jews are commanded to obey").[460]

The third level of interpretation is *Derash*. Yonatan Kolatch notes that among the four steps of PaRDeS, the majority of "Biblical commentary distinguishes mainly between peshat and derash, with remez and sod considered to be alternative types of derash."[461] Derash refers to

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[454] Yonatan Kolatch, *Masters of the Word: Traditional Jewish Bible Commentary From the First Through Tenth Centuries*, vol. 1 (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House Inc., 2006), 38.
[455] Kolatch, 1:38.
[456] Blumenthal, "Havruta as Modeled Pedagogy," 29.
[457] Blumenthal, 30.
[458] Blumenthal, 31.
[459] Blumenthal, 31.
[460] Blumenthal, 32.
[461] Kolatch, *Masters of the Word*, 1:44.

the metaphorical meaning of a passage.[462] Blumenthal explains that, compared to remez that is looking deeper at the specific meaning or roots of important names to unlock their deeper meaning, in derash the practitioner may look for metaphor in other areas of the text. The structure of the text for example may present a derash interpretation. Using the *Book of Ruth* as an example, she shows how "the first chapter begins with a famine and ends with a harvest" which "strikingly [parallels] Elimelech's personal famine of loss of connection with the Jewish people at the beginning of chapter one and Ruth's reaping of connection with the Jewish people through her conversion at the end of chapter one."[463]

The final step of PaRDeS is *Sod*, or the "secret or mystical meaning of the text."[464] This interpretation of the text is considered to be the most difficult to uncover. Only one with "extensive background in *Talmudic* study and experience in *Kabbalah*, or Jewish mysticism, would be able to identify the layers of meaning at this secret level of textual interpretation."[465] This is indeed the most difficult step of the PaRDeS practice.

In *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, the hosts walk each other through each step of this interpretive practice. First they determine what is happening narratively or literally in the passage under analysis. This approach has many similarities to peshat, given the descriptive nature of this step. Then the hosts ask themselves what allegory or metaphor the passage reminds them of. Sometimes the hosts will ask themselves what words from the passage stand out to them and ask themselves how the meaning of the word may have changed over the course of the series. This of course an interesting combination of steps two and three (remez

[462] Blumenthal, "Havruta as Modeled Pedagogy," 33.
[463] Blumenthal, 35.
[464] Blumenthal, 35.
[465] Blumenthal, 35.

and derash) due to the inclusion of finding both allegory and metaphor in this step, as well as looking for how specific words change over the course of the series. For step three the hosts ask themselves what they would preach their sermon on if the passage chosen for that week's service was the one under analysis.

> **Vanessa Zoltan:** […] Okay so the next step of PaRDeS is Derash. And for Derash, what we ask ourselves is, if we were going to preach a sermon on this bit of liturgy, what would the sermon be? What is it that we would want to preach? […] The sentence is, "**people were cheering out in the entrance hall.**"[466]
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** Oh, I know what I would say. I think that the cheering here is premature. And I think so often we make big judgments about something that's happened in our lives before we know. My colleague has this phrase where she says, "could be good, could be bad. Too soon to tell." And it's so helpful because it's a really useful block when I go down on like a negative mental train. I'm like, "this is going to bad, and that's not going to work, and nothing's ever going... I'm just going to eat ice cream." Being able to say to myself, "it could be bad. But it could be good. Too soon to tell." I want to use that phrase more and more in my life […] How about you, Vanessa? What's the kind of mini sermon that you would preach? [467]

The final step of the practice involves the hosts sitting in silence to see if a sod emerges for them. Sod, according to Zoltan, is "really the most mystical practice that [they] engage in on the podcast."[468] Though how sod is actually conducted within a Jewish setting has not been discussed here, this "sitting in silence" approach is not mentioned in Blumenthal's overview of PaRDeS. Here is an example of how the podcast has interpreted sod:

> **Vanessa Zoltan:** So, the last stage of PaRDeS is Sod. And Sod is, I think it's, you know, really the most mystical practice that we engage in on the podcast. Because the idea of Sod is that the text has a secret to reveal to us. And so, what we do is we give ourselves a moment of silence to reflection the sentence and to see if a secret emerges. And a secret does not always emerge. And I don't think that it's ever because the text doesn't have a secret; I think sometimes we're just not in touch with secrets. And it's not our fault either, but sometimes it doesn't emerge. Sometimes something really beautiful

[466] Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 170.
[467] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Resentment: The Goblet of Fire," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, accessed September 28, 2018, http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/season-four-harry-potter-and-the-goblet-of-fire.
[468] Zoltan and ter Kuile.

does. So, Casper, will you read the sentence for us one more time, and we'll take a moment of silence and see if a Sod emerges.

Casper ter Kuile: "People were cheering out in the entrance hall."[469]

[Pause]

Vanessa Zoltan: So, Casper, did a Sod emerge for you?

Casper ter Kuile: I feel like I got ⅔ or maybe a third of a Sod? (Laughs)

Vanessa Zoltan: That's great, you got a sss-

Casper ter Kuile: I got a suh. (Laughs) I just suddenly noticed that within the word "cheering," there's the word "ring." And Dumbledore creates the age line, which is this golden circle around the Goblet of Fire. And I'm thinking about promises we that make that are, you know, especially in a wedding ceremony, which are embodied in a ring. And the kind of commitments that people make to each other. And I don't know what it means, but I'm just really thinking about this image of a ring.

Vanessa Zoltan: Well I also wonder if cheering for someone is a kind of commitment, right? Because you're publicly saying that you're rooting for them, which means that you want them to succeed because you have risked a little bit of public support for them. Right? And so, you look like a fool if they fail or if they betray you. So, I think cheering for someone is a sort of commitment.

Casper ter Kuile: What about you, Vanessa? What did you see?

Vanessa Zoltan: What I saw was how we could change spaces how a space can mean so many different things in so many different times. You walk through the entrance hall a million times and it's just a way to get from Hagrid's hut back to the common room. Or it's a space that you walk by and, you know, you check the [house points] counter obsessively or you don't. Right? So, it both can mean different things in different times and it can mean such different things to different people. And I think that often those are what fights are about, right? Is the statue means X to me and it means X to you and we have to negotiate as a society what this space means and when it should change and when it should stay the same. And what spaces should be hallowed and should be kept as is and what spaces, you know, we should be like "do you know what? This served one purpose but now it's going to serve another." I think that often when we're negotiating about space, we're negotiating about something much deeper within ourselves. We're negotiating about history and who we want to honor and who we don't care about

[469] Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 170.

> honoring. So yeah, it just made me think about how many different things this entrance hall can be….[470]

PaRDeS is a great example of how a religious practice can be shifted and molded into a nonreligious practice and the value that doing so can bring to the practitioner.[471] Their interpretation of Sod was the most interesting due to the lack of information from religious studies scholars about the traditional approach to this step. As a result, ter Kuile and Zoltan had to develop their own approach to Sod. As a result, the podcast's approach to PaRDeS differs greatly from the Jewish approach to this reading practice.

Blessing. The practice of "blessing" a character from the chapter of the week is an important end to every episode of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. The podcast defines a blessing as "tapping into your most valuable wish for someone," thereby taking a religious concept and co-opting it to be appropriate for a nonreligious context.[472] This is an explicit example of using blessings as a "spiritual technology."

Within religious settings, whether Jewish or Christian, blessings generally refer to a belief or hope that something greater than the practitioner will intervene and bless the individual.[473] In Judaism, certain blessings may be said in certain contexts (like on the High Holidays or during the Sabbath), while other times impromptu blessings may be appropriate.[474] Jewish blessings stem from the desire "to promote joy and appreciation, wonder and

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[470] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Resentment."
[471] Interestingly, the resource that the podcast lists on the website for how to conduct PaRDeS uses passages from the New Testament to explain how to conduct this hermeneutic process (see: http://www.yashanet.com/studies/revstudy/pardes.htm). The information included in this resource is unfortunately inaccurate from a Jewish perspective and confirms the Protestant impact on America's approach to religious practice and education.
[472] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Commitment."
[473] Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2016), 6, http://muse.jhu.edu/book/48528/.
[474] Marcia Prager, "The Spiritual Practice of Blessing," *Tikkun* 13, no. 6 (1998): 35.

thankfulness, amazement and praise" as the practice allows the practitioner "to recognize the presence of [God] in everything and everyone."[475] Blessings allow for a causal effect or an "'abundant flow' of God's love and goodness to pour into the world."[476]

According to Zoltan, blessings acknowledge that though individuals may feel as though they have no power, a blessing publicly states that despite this, there is still room to hope for a particular outcome.[477] When blessings are used within nonreligious contexts, the element of "hoping" or understanding that blessing is surrendering to the lack of control that humans feel daily is interesting. This is made clear in this transcript:

> **Vanessa Zoltan:** Casper, now is the time in the episode in which we each get to bless someone. I'm just going to start with a reach of a blessing – so not in these pages, but always worthy of a blessing, Minerva McGonagall. She might be the, like, only living or one of the only living, legal Animagi in the world. We know that there are only seven on register; I personally know of four illegal ones. And I just think that Minerva McGonagall is the type of woman who, if she was on a road trip in, like, rural California, even if she hadn't seen another car for hours and it was three in the morning, she would still stop at that stop sign and be like, 'safety first, Potter!' or whatever. People say that real character is how you behave when no one is watching, and Minerva could totally get away with being an unregistered Animagus, but she wants to be able to teach about transfiguration, and she has all of these reasons, including her integrity, and I just want to bless her for having such a wonderful character. So, Casper, who would you like to bless this week?
>
> **Casper ter Kuile:** I feel like I have to bless Lupin. I mean, we learn so much about him and his story, and the thing that really caught my eye was he has lived for so long at the margins of society really struggling financially, struggling to find paid work, struggling to have people trust him, and invest in him, and believe in him. And so, I guess for anyone who is struggling with money right now or is struggling to find work that they really want to do, um, this blessing is for Lupin and for you.[478]

[475] Prager.
[476] Prager.
[477] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Commitment."
[478] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Isolation."

Blessings come from a variety of religious traditions but are rather notable in Christian and Jewish settings, the two traditions that have a particular impact on this podcast. In a nonreligious setting, blessings provide another opportunity to practice empathy on a personal level. The listener, in hearing the hosts of the show bless a character they identify with may feel comfort knowing that they are not alone, or that the struggles these characters face are simply human struggles.

Other spiritual practice resources. The resource section of the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* website ends with a section of resources that the hosts of the show believe are necessary readings for those who seek to participate in the spiritual technologies they are advocating for. This section will provide an overview of these resources to better understand the nonreligious theological or ideological grounding of the podcast's project.[479]

The first resource is Simone Weil's essay titled "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God."[480] As a secular Jewish woman who grew up in bourgeois France, Weil was strongly attracted to Catholicism. This diverse religious perspective mirrors the perspective the hosts are coming to their project with. The piece chosen for the website makes this connection explicitly clear. As Weil states in this document, "while

[479] The choice of the word "theological" exemplifies the lack of language that exists to adequately describe the reality of nonreligious practice. These resources make up the background or grounding principles of the podcast's project, and therefore act as a sort of nonreligious theological grounding for the nonreligious practices to center themselves around. More research into alternative ways of describing what these resources do to contribute to the project as a whole is necessary.

[480] Simone Weil (1909-1943) wrote in three periods: 1925-1934, 1935-1939, and 1939-1943. She was born in Paris February of 1909, to Jewish parents and grew up in "an assimilated, secular, bourgeois French" setting. She primarily "philosophized on thresholds and across borders." While her work covers a wide range of topics, "her central concepts are addressed under five categories: social-political philosophy, epistemology, ethics, metaphysical and religious philosophy, and aesthetics." These categories are of course academically imposed onto Weil because she rejected systems and the development of concepts fundamentally (Rozelle-Stone, Davis 2018). For the purposes of this thesis, her work on attention in relation to prayer played a role in inspiring the podcast (due to its inclusion on their website) under analysis and therefore deserves to be looked at momentarily here.

spirituality is individual *vis-á-vis* God, this spirituality occurs within a social context, namely, the collectivity, and principally, the nation."[481] Weil clearly articulates what has been explored at length in this thesis: that humans and human creations (such as the podcast or the spiritual technologies) are impacted by American culture.

This thesis assumes that Weil's work was added to the website because it was used to develop the host's own notions around how to conduct the podcast. This assumption can be made, however, after looking at the content of this resource and how it relates to the podcast's approach. Perhaps this text was introduced to the hosts during divinity school. A justification for its inclusion on their website is not provided by the hosts.

Weil explores the importance of attention when conducting prayer and its relation to attentiveness.[482] As she states, learning to be attentive during school studies (an activity that is not religious) develops a lower kind of attention that is "extremely effective in increasing the power of attention" for use in religious matters such as Christian prayer. [483] Weil continues saying, "we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them." It is difficult, however, to discover such gifts if one is not paying attention to where they hope to get the gifts from.[484] In this case of Weil, she would assert that in this waiting, one's attention should be on the Christian God.[485]

The French language makes clear "the connection between attention (*l'attention*) and waiting (*attente*)."[486] As Weil states, "attention [is] characterized by suspension and

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[481] A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Benjamin P. Davis, "Simone Weil," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2018 (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/simone-weil/.
[482] Rozelle-Stone and Davis.
[483] Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crauford, Routledge Revivals (Routledge, 2009), 32, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203092477.
[484] Weil, 35.
[485] Rozelle-Stone and Davis, "Simone Weil."
[486] Rozelle-Stone and Davis.

detachment."[487] She argues that "in attention one renounces one's ego" and receives "the world without the interference of one's limited and consumptive perspective."[488] Weil believes this allows for the cultivation of an impersonal as well as intersubjective ethical code.[489] For if in Christian prayer, one's "attention is toward a mysterious and unknown God (often experienced as a desire for the Good)," one is naturally led to "the secondary disposition…toward another person, especially toward those going through affliction."[490] This last point is of particular importance for the podcast's project.

As was made clear throughout this analysis, the podcast seeks to better understand how treating *Harry Potter* as a sacred text can strengthen one's empathetic disposition. Practicing empathy with a fictional character challenges the practitioner to practice empathy in their everyday lives. Weil notes that learning how to be in tune with the thoughts and perspectives of others builds up one's skills as an empathetic individual.[491] In this way, Weil's "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" can be used to understand the ideological and theological underpinnings of the podcast's nonreligious empathetic mandate.

The next resource is *Secular Death*, an article written by Amy Hollywood for the Harvard Divinity School Bulletin. This piece explores how reading and writing "difficult literature… might be a training ground for approaching the difficulties of death – and of life."[492] It argues that close attention to a nonreligious literary source can provide meaning and understanding during

[487] Rozelle-Stone and Davis.
[488] Rozelle-Stone and Davis.
[489] Rozelle-Stone and Davis.
[490] Rozelle-Stone and Davis.
[491] Zoltan and ter Kuile, "Fear: The Letters From No One."
[492] Amy Hollywood, *Secular Death*, Summer/Autumn, vol. 44, 3 & 4 (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2016), https://bulletin-archive.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2016/secular-death.

complex life events. The arguments put forth in this article exemplify how and why the podcast is important given the rise in nonreligious affiliation in the United States.

The podcast showcases how treating art as sacred is a useful coping mechanism for managing complex feelings around humans' events. After the 2016 American election, many were distressed to hear about Donald Trump's appointment as President of the United States. In response, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* released a short 48 second episode where they presented a passage from *The Order of the Phoenix*. As Zoltan says, "in the wake of the election, many of us are trying to make meaning of what has happened, but Casper, Ariana, and I have found this quote to be helpful:" Ter Kuile introduces the quote simply as "a reading from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.*"[493] This introduction is reminiscent of a reader introducing the Bible passage they are going to read out loud as part of a Protestant church service. The quote ter Kuile read is as follows:

> **""I DON'T CARE!" Harry yelled at them… "I'VE HAD ENOUGH, I'VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON'T CARE ANYMORE!"**
> **"You do care," said Dumbledore... "You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it."**[494]

Though this short episode is not listed on their website, it reflects the strong need to respond that many Americans experienced after the 2016 election. The podcast is a way for the hosts and listener to make meaning out of a chaotic world outside of a religious context.

Another example of this is seen in a short 8-minute episode titled "Black Lives Matter." In light of the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent rise in activism around the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, the hosts chose to replace their regular

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[493] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "A Brief Post-Election Note," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, n.d., accessed September 28, 2018.
[494] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 824.

episode with an episode from another podcast called #WizardTeam, from Black Girls Create, in order to amplify black voices. In this short episode they also reflect on a passage from *The Deathly Hollows:*

> **"Thank you," said Lee's voice. "And now we turn to regular contributor Royal, for an update on how the new Wizarding order is affecting the Muggle world."**
> **"Thanks, River," said an unmistakable voice, deep, measured, reassuring.**
> **"Kingsley!" burst out Ron.**
> **"We know!" said Hermione, hushing him.**
> **"Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties," said Kingsley. "However, we continue to hear truly inspirational stories of wizards and witches risking their own safety to protect Muggle friends and neighbors, often without the Muggles' knowledge. I'd like to appeal to all our listeners to emulate their example, perhaps by casting a protective charm over any Muggle dwellings in your street. Many lives could be saved if such simple measures are taken."**
> **"And what would you say, Royal, to those listeners who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be 'Wizards first'?" asked Lee.**
> **"I'd say that it's one short step from 'Wizards first' to 'Purebloods first,' and then to 'Death Eaters,'" replied Kingsley. "We're all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving."**[495]

Similar to the *Order of the Phoenix* example, where ter Kuile turns the reading into a ritual reminiscent of a reading done in Protestant settings, in this short episode there is evidence of Protestant influence, found in ter Kuile's use of "gifts" language. Ter Kuile notes that everyone has gifts that can be utilized for the benefit of the Black Lives Matter movement.[496]

The last couple of resources on the website are worksheets that are available for printout. A couple of the spiritual practices lend themselves well to being used alongside worksheets for visual learners or for classroom settings. The worksheets for lectio divina and

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[495] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007), 357.
[496] Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, "Black Lives Matter," Audio, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, n.d., accessed September 28, 2018.

florilegium are included in the appendix of this thesis.[497] The final resource on the site includes a video of Zoltan and ter Kuile talking about what divinity school is and the options that are available for those who are interested in attending both with religious and nonreligious motivations.[498]

These resources offer insight into the theological or ideological grounding of the podcast's nonreligious project. For listeners of the show who want to better understand what the podcast is doing on a theoretical level, these resources may be helpful for their own learning.

Analysis Conclusion

The study of the specific spiritual technologies exemplified the continued influence of religion on the podcast's nonreligious approach. It explored the ways in which religious practices have been appropriated in order to be used within a nonreligious context such as the podcast. In doing so, the analysis highlights the adaptability of religious practice and introduced how conducting sacred practices may be useful for nonreligious individuals to do as well. Treating the *Harry Potter* series like the Bible, by applying these sorts of textual practices onto the series, allows for anyone, no matter their religious affiliation, to reap the benefits of engaging with a text in this way.

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[497] Appendix is on pp. 136.

[498] In response, ter Kuile and Zoltan note a number of elements to consider when thinking about applying to divinity school. In general, they see divinity school as an opportunity to engage with a rich history and tradition of community building and meaning making. They explore the fact that divinity school is open to both religious and nonreligious people and that many options exist for alternative kinds of divinity teaching and learning.

The goal of conducting such practices for the podcast creators is to practice empathy in order to improve one's ability to be a compassionate and empathetic individual in the world. When viewed in this light, the possibilities and potential benefit of treating fiction as sacred in a society that is increasingly identifying as nonreligious are endless.

The podcast reveals the opportunity to engage with religious practices in a brand-new nonreligious way. Zoltan has cited the need for new spiritual technologies to cater to the needs of individuals who do not feel welcome within religious communities. With this in mind, the podcast allows for an expansion of the definition of religion and brings up pressing questions about the central role that ritual can play in a fulfilling life. Of course, anyone no matter their thoughts around religion can participate in the practices outlined on the podcast.

Conclusion

Though the individuals who created *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* identify as nonreligious, this thesis demonstrates that their podcast provides an explicit avenue for listeners to engage in practices that come from traditional religious traditions. More explicitly, it argues that for this podcast, treating *Harry Potter* as a sacred text means treating it like the Bible. It explored the contours of America's Protestant context and how this context impacts the podcast's structure. It engaged in a comparative analysis of the spiritual technologies that the podcast employs highlighting the similarities and differences that exists between the spiritual technologies and traditional religious practice.

A quick analysis of how the podcast constructed sacredness was necessary to situate this research within the broader world of religious studies' research on sacredness. The survey from the podcast's Facebook page helped to confirm, at least preliminarily, the demographic makeup of the podcast's listener base. Though no conclusions can be made from this survey, it offers a window into who among the podcast listeners are the most engaged (due to their decision to fill in the survey in the first place).

Regarding the conceptual framework of this project, two theories were used in order to nuance and deepen this analysis. Fictionalism aided in understanding how the hosts may be approaching the practice of treating nonreligious art as sacred. The popular culture theory established a theoretical foundation regarding the nature of the American religious context. Given that the podcast has been created within an American context, it was necessary to explore how media is in a "double articulated" relationship with religion in America. These

threads of influence are not always the most evident, but their existence in American society is telling of the ways in which religion is uniquely situated within the American context.

The methodology of comparison allowed for a detailed analysis of how traditional religious practices can be appropriated into nonreligious spiritual technologies. By limiting this analysis to the spiritual technologies that the podcast employ, the major similarities and differences that exist between the traditional practices and the spiritual technologies were made evident. Further, the inclusion of transcripts from the podcast exemplified how these practices are actually conducted on the podcast itself. Doing so allowed for a better understanding of the value of conducting spiritual technologies in a nonreligious setting.

There were some limitations to this research method. There were a number of times when it would have been helpful to speak directly to the creators of the podcast to ask them about the choices they made. This is an area in which future research would be helpful. This thesis allowed for a broad overview of the situation as it now stands. Future studies on new religious or nonreligious movements in the United States should continue to ask where America's religious context may fit into their analysis.

More studies on spiritual technologies are necessary to gain an understanding of how religion is used outside of religious contexts. As more people begin to identify as nonreligious, it can be theorized that more spiritual technologies will be created, or indeed already exist for scholars to study. Some research questions to consider are: What is the connection between meaning-making and nonreligious media or art? What is the connection between conducting ritual and meaning-making?

Terminology in nonreligious contexts is a particular area of interest. Further, research on how Protestantism may indeed influence future nonreligious movements, particularly those that arise in an American context, is necessary. Such research will allow for a better understanding of why this is the case, and the effect that this influence has on potential members of these new movements or communities. Does Protestant influence exclude people who may be interested in being members? More research is necessary.

It would be interesting to do a study on the effect that the 48-second episode (A Post-Election Note) had on individuals who were troubled by the 2016 election results. While no conclusive evidence can be offered here, it is enough to say that the creators of the show felt the need to share this quote and felt comfort and meaning in their own experience by relating it to Harry's experience in *The Order of the Phoenix.*

This thesis helps contribute to the study of fiction-based religion because it complicates the definition of what a fiction-based religion is. The podcast creators have never considered their podcast and the community that surrounds it to be a new religion. Despite this, the practice of treating nonreligious art as sacred, and applying sacred practices to such texts and effectively participating in rituals is reminiscent of religious practice. This research helps to better understand the nuances and spectrum of religious behavior that exists and complicates the binary between what is religious and nonreligious.

The literature on religion and popular culture, particularly media, aimed to situate the podcast within its cultural context. Research on podcasts was used in order to broaden the discussion in religious studies by exploring the uniquely intimate role that podcasts can play in a spiritual or nonreligious lifestyle.

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is a fascinating study subject. My hope is that research on this podcast and the other projects they conduct (their pilgrimages, live shows, or the host's upcoming publications) will strengthen the basic groundwork that has been established here in this thesis, and that terminology to better explain the perspective of nonreligious Americans, outside of a specifically Protestant or broadly spiritual framework, can be developed. As nonreligious affiliation continues to rise, the research possibilities in religious studies offer endless opportunities to challenge current theories and assumptions about this growing sector of North America's population. Until then, as Dumbledore said, "Of course it is happening inside your head Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?" While studying this podcast is difficult to do ideologically due to the boundaries and definitions that it crosses, this is indeed a real phenomenon that deserves scholarly attention to better understand how nonreligion works and will impact society in the years to come.

Some important and interesting questions that my thesis raises are: Do human beings need religion or religious-type action in order to make meaning? Or, what is the difference, fundamentally, between religion and spirituality? Although these questions are outside the scope of this thesis, they illustrate the value of studying the products of popular culture, including podcasts such as *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* from a religious studies perspective.

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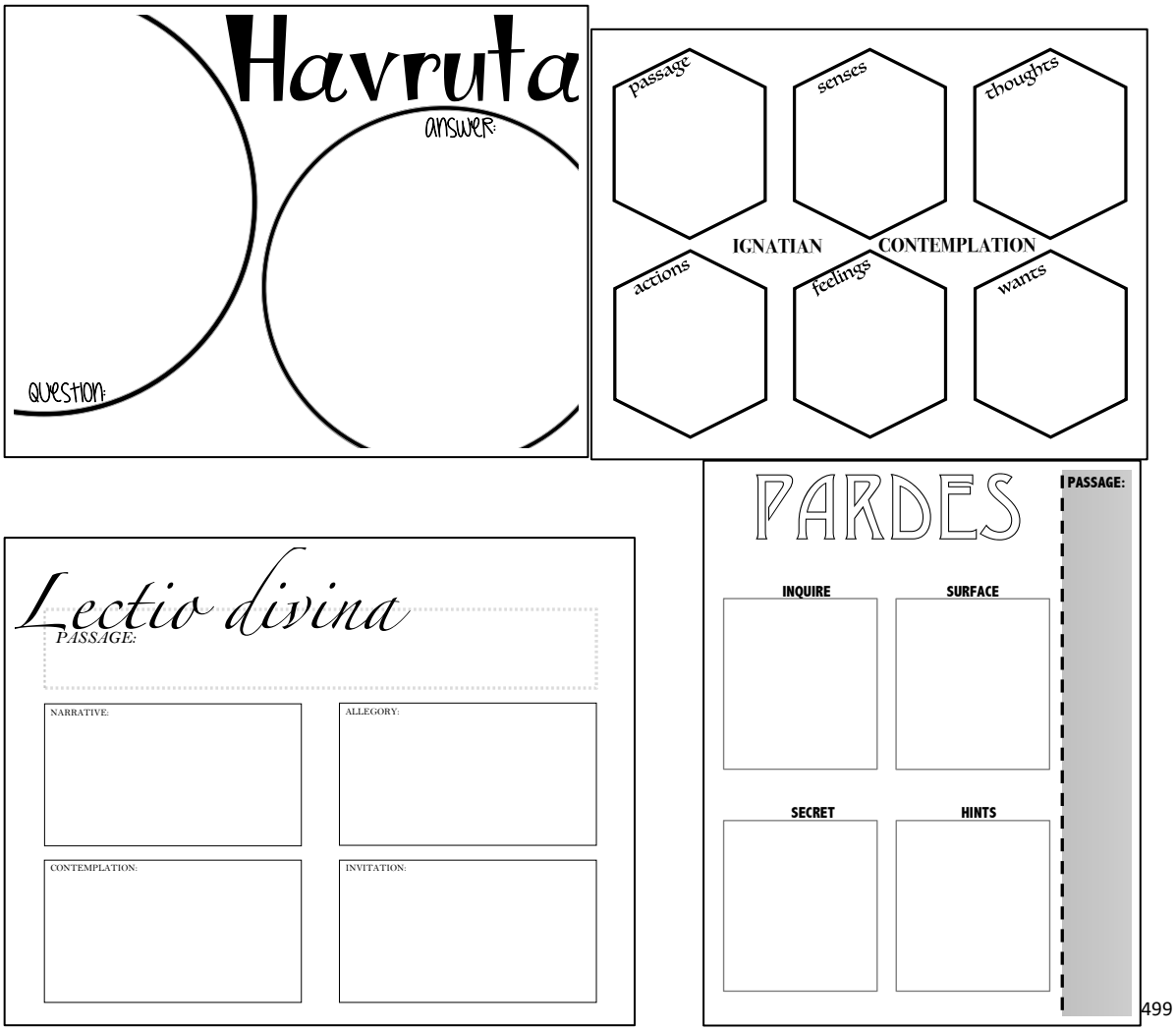
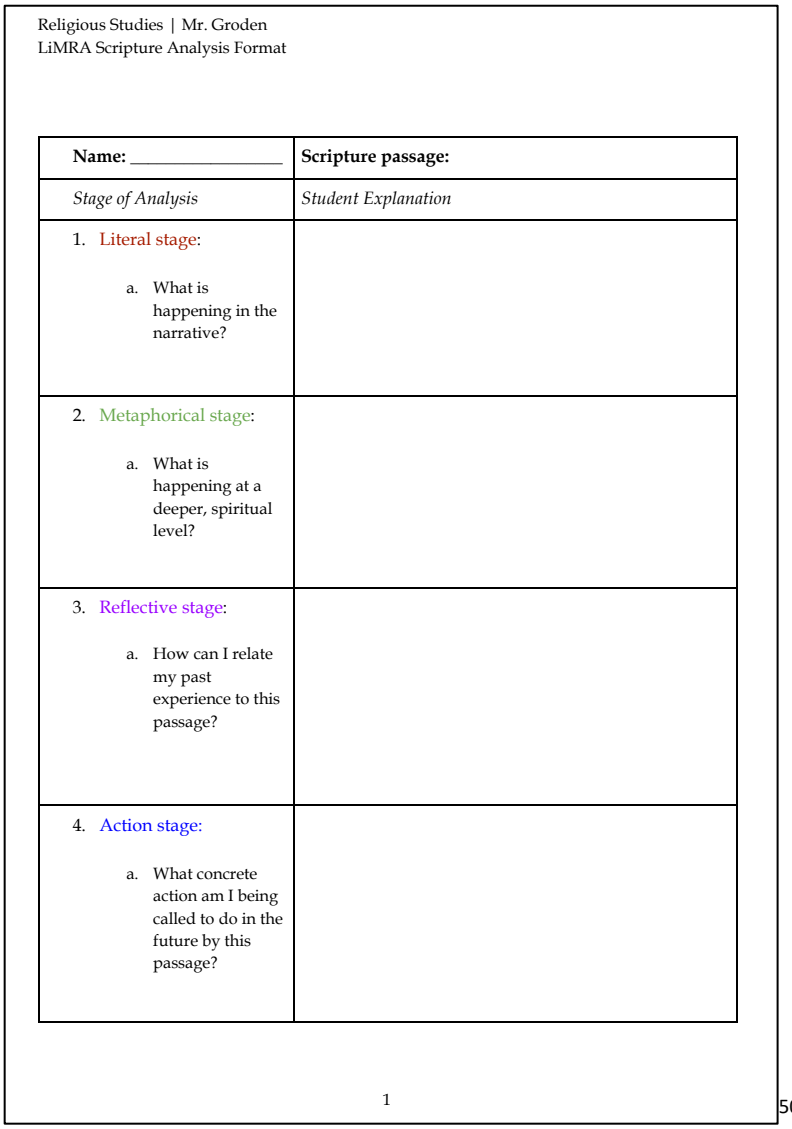
Appendix



[499]

These are a collection of free printout worksheets that teacher Nikole Seeger made after listening to *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*. They are meant to encourage teachers to bring these reading practices into the classroom as a reflection and learning opportunity.

[499] Nikole Seeger, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, n.d., Teachers Pay Teachers, n.d., https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Harry-Potter-and-the-Sacred-Text-3506419.



Religious Studies | Mr. Groden
LiMRA Scripture Analysis Format

Name: _____	**Scripture passage:**
Stage of Analysis	*Student Explanation*
1. Literal stage: a. What is happening in the narrative?	
2. Metaphorical stage: a. What is happening at a deeper, spiritual level?	
3. Reflective stage: a. How can I relate my past experience to this passage?	
4. Action stage: a. What concrete action am I being called to do in the future by this passage?	

1

[500]

This resource did not include an official description. It can be inferred that this worksheet is for either a high school or university setting due to the professional style. Interestingly, though this sheet is based off of the lectio divina practice conducted on the show, that is not what this worksheet is titled. LiMRA seems to be an acronym for the names of the steps listed on this worksheet.

[500] Groden, *LiMRA Scripture Analysis Format*, n.d., n.d., https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/spiritual-practice-resources.

Read it Four Ways

Read it Four Ways is a practice to help us dive deeper into the meaning of a passage from a book or story. Rather than focusing on the mechanics of the writing or narrative like we do in an English class, this practice helps us make connections to other stories and images as well as to our own lives. Read it Four Ways can be done with any amount of text, but usually works best with 1-5 sentences. As always when trying to make meaning, it is a richer experience to share your thinking with others. We must be thoughtful about setting intention and ground rules with each other. If we do this practice right, we will share deep connections and meaning with each other. Each one of us should strive to share our own experience rather than comment on other people's connections. Enjoy!

To Start

Be sure everyone is comfortable, knows each other's name and you have talked about ground rules for the conversation.

Choose a passage of the text that calls to you or seems very important. This passage should be about 1-5 sentences, though that is just a suggestion. This passage can be chosen at random, or someone can choose the sentences to present to the group.

Read the passage through once.

The first way: Narrative

Identify what is happening at a narrative level in this passage. Maybe look at the passages just before or after to identify the who, what, where, when and why of this passage. You might look at author's choices or character motive at this time if that seems important.

Once everyone is clear on what is happening in this passage, move on to the next way.

[501]

This is page one of a four-page document that again, outlines the lectio divina structure in a way that is not explicitly religious in nature.

[501] Alyss Broderick, "Read It Four Ways" (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, 2018), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/571a6e39b6aa608067028725/t/5ba92a0a4785d3d70b7a73a0/1537813003377/Read+it+Four+Ways.pdf.

Florilegium

Florilegium is a reading practice to help us connect the text with other parts of the text, with other texts and stories and with our own lives. The name derives from the Latin words "flor", or flower and "legere", to gather and developed from the practice of some medieval European monks who would collect bits and pieces from their reading. Once these bits of text were collected, like flowers collected on a walk through a meadow, each one highlights each other, sparks new ideas and may help us see beauty and meaning in a different way. One of these ancient florilegia was called The Book of Sparklets so we can call the collected bits of text sparklets. Other examples of this practice include reading journals that collect pieces of the reading and the reader's comments, curated twitter feeds of quotes and excerpts and found poetry.

One can do florilegium alone or with a group. As you read, look for sparklets - pieces of text that jump out at you and seem to speak directly to you. When you have collected a bouquet of sparklets, put them next to each other and see what connections you can make or how they speak to each other. If you do this with a group, be sure to set intention and ground rules for sharing. The connections we make can be deep and personal so be thoughtful about sharing your observations rather than comment on other people's sharings. Enjoy making beautiful florilegium!

Before You Start

As you read, look for sparklets in the text. These will be sentences, quotes, words or passages that seem particularly relevant, important or shiny. Collect these in a way that seems right. You might write them down on sticky notes, copy them into another notebook, type them into a document, write them on cards or audio record them. You will examine the sparklets together to see how they speak to each other, so collect a modest number (2-5, or one per person) for one session so as not to get overwhelmed.

[502]

This is another document, 3-pages this time, that outlines how to conduct florilegium as a meaning making practice for nonreligious purposes.

[502] Alyss Broderick, "Florilegium" (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, 2018), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/571a6e39b6aa608067028725/t/5ba92a4fe79c70e28cdf00f3/1537813072166/Florilegium.pdf.

CAPS LOCK HARRY

a florilegium from
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

(page numbers from USA paperback edition)

Text	Spoken By	Chapter/Page
...SHUT IT!	Dudley	"Dudley Demented", p13
DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p15
GET THAT THING AWAY FROM--	Dudley	"Dudley Demented", p15
WHAM!	Dudley's fist	"Dudley Demented", p17
DUDLEY, COME BACK! YOU'RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p17
DUDLEY, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p17
EXPECTO PATRONUM!	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p18
THIS WAY!	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p18
DUDLEY? DUDLEY!	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p18
GET IT!	Harry	"Dudley Demented", p19
--MUNDUNGUS FLETCHER, I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!	Mrs. Figg	"A Peck of Owls", p22
DIDDY! ... VERNON!	Petunia	"A Peck of Owls", p25
BOY! COME HERE!	Vernon	"A Peck of Owls", p25
OWLS! ... OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN MY HOUSE!	Vernon	"A Peck of Owls", p26
CRACK!	*~magic~*	"A Peck of Owls", p28
OWLS!	Vernon	"A Peck of Owls", p28
DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE. DO NOT DO ANY MORE MAGIC. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND.	Arthur's letter	"A Peck of Owls", p28
SHUT UP!	Vernon	"A Peck of Owls", p30

503

This document, sent in by a listener of the podcast, is 10 pages in length and documents every instance in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* where Rowling chose to use the "caps lock" button while writing the book. Seeing all these sparklets in one document allows for a practitioner to easily place two or more phrases together and see what meaning comes from a florilegium analysis.

503 "CAPS LOCK HARRY: A Florilegium from Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" (Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, n.d.), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/571a6e39b6aa608067028725/t/5ba92af74785d3d70b7a835a/1537813240273/CAPS+LOCK+HARRY+-+Google+Docs.pdf.