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Harry Potter *meets Clifford Geertz*

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ABSTRACT The success of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon may be seen as co-constitutive of the general resurfacing of religion in Europe and the United States. The first part of this article introduces Geertz's definition of the religious, which includes magic as 'slippage'. The second part draws on historical work on witchcraft in early-modern Europe to demonstrate that Harry's world shares so many traits with the lifeworlds of that period that its self-presentation as being an evolved version of those worlds is a credible one. The article speculates that the observable de-differentiation between the religious and consumption of popular culture artefacts such as *Harry Potter* may herald an individualization of the religious that is of a kind with the individualization of magic observed by Mauss. It is closely tied to the duality between individualized reading and mass-medialized social consumption, and suits the post-sovereign subject.

KEYWORDS *17th century, fantasy, Harry Potter, magic, religion, science*

Introduction: Potter fascination

In the eight years since 1997, when Bloomsbury issued the first book of a planned seven-volume *Harry Potter* series, 300 million copies have been sold worldwide, with 63 different translations. The films based on the books consistently generate turnover that places them in or near the all-time top 10. Merchandise turnover is measured in hundreds of millions of euros. Harry is a much-used teaching tool in schools, and fandom seems ever-present wherever teenagers and young adults gather, both on and off the internet. Measured in terms of the resources it has set into play, *Harry Potter* is the cultural mass phenomenon of the age.

Each of the seven *Harry Potter* novels, the sixth of which appeared in 2005, covers one of his years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.[1] Hogwarts and its four houses is one of the key institutions in a magic world which is intertwined with our own, so that its members may move freely in our world whereas we are excluded from theirs. The cycle of novels is primarily a *Bildungsroman*, written within the rich English genre of children's literature.

Harry's life in and out of school gains cosmic relevance from the fact that, together with school headmaster Albus Dumbledore and groundsman and holder of keys Hagrid, he plays the key roles in the good fight against the lord of the Dark Side, the fallen wizard Voldemort. To help him in this battle, Harry has two friends, Ron and Hermione, as well as an assorted cast of human and non-human magic beings such as animagi, ghosts, elves and monsters, etc. Their home terrain is their Hogwarts house, Gryffindor, which is traditionally opposed to Voldemort's old house, Slytherin, one of whose members is Draco Malfoy, a character revealed to be increasingly evil as the story unfolds.

As social analysts we are supposed to be able to account for cultural phenomena such as this one, and as political analysts we are expected to have something to say about its political preconditions and effects. We must ask what it is about the world of *Harry Potter* that fascinates our age, and try and excavate the roots of this fascination. A number of vistas offer themselves immediately. First, there is the question of genre. *Harry Potter* belongs to the genre of 'fantasy', which has a long if somewhat submerged literary history. The books borrow liberally from a large body of fantasy novels such as Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958). *Harry Potter* also belongs to the children's literature genre, of which Britain has been world leader since the days of Lewis Carroll, through Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), and from there to J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis in an unbroken chain up to the present day.[2] It is commonplace in social analysis that this is supposed to be the era of the knowledge society and of lifelong learning. Countless business gatherings and academic conferences are given over to this theme. The *Harry Potter* stories are themselves set in a learning environment. Indeed, the novels belong to a subgenre of children's literature which has seen enormous if intermittent popularity, from Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) and its less successful sequel *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861) to Anthony Buckeridge's *Jennings* series (1950–77), namely the boarding school novel (Mullen, 2000). While this is among possible perspectives from which to view Rowlings' work, my theme is a different one. Inasmuch as it is the constitutive theme of the novel, it must be said to be crucial and pivotal. This theme is magic and religion.

First, this article will draw on classic anthropological work to place magic as a practice that shares a family resemblance both with religion and science. The claim here is that, since magic and religion are historically inseparable, the reception of the *Harry Potter* novels may be treated as part of a wider phenomenon, namely religion. Second, it will draw on historical work on witchcraft in early-modern Europe to demonstrate that Harry's world shares so many traits with the lifeworlds of that period that its self-presentation as an evolved version of those worlds is a credible one.[3]

In this sense, Harry's world is our world, and the fascination with *Harry Potter* may be understood as part of a general return of religion to global politics. More people in a number of places where its demise has been discussed for a century ascribe more meaning and spend more resources on religious matters than they seem to have done some decades ago. Third, in order to analyse the political consequences of this return, the article will draw upon work on the history of ideas. A Manichean theme runs all through the Christian tradition and related traditions such as Islam. This theme takes centre stage in the *Harry Potter* novels, and it is dominant in the way that both principal parties to what is often called the 'War on Terrorism' frames their conflict. The return of religion may be traced in the *Harry Potter* novels, and it is becoming more pronounced in other social loci such as speeches given by the American president. The claim that is made about the relationship between these two practices is simply that they share a series of historical presuppositions which are to be found in the Christian tradition. No claim is made about the direct circulation between the two. What is at stake, however, is hardly a trifle, for the Christian presuppositions involve reducing politics to a matter of recruiting allies and individuals for the good cause rather than transforming the agencies of which political life consist. Thus, this article begins with *Harry Potter*'s fantastic world, but it does not stop there. When James Clifford (1986: 3) singles out 'the semiotics of exotic worlds and fantastic spaces' as an interesting body of writing for social analysis, I should like to emphasise that the investigation should be directed towards the intersections between these spaces and spaces of social life. Of course, the exploration of exotic worlds and fantastic spaces is an interesting undertaking in its own right. Yet even so, and in contradistinction to what goes for the literary critic for whom they form an endpoint, for the social analyst they can be only a starting point on the way to a better analysis of the social. Thus, this article is interested in fantastic places as a detour towards a more mundane one, namely our own.

Magic and religion

A world is religious in the degree to which its life centres on religious experience. Religious experience is a question of transcending the realm of mundane everyday life in order to return with stories that may complement everyday experience with new knowledge about a wider reality. As Clifford Geertz puts it:

> The religious perspective differs from the common-sensical in that . . . it moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them . . . It differs from the scientific perspective in that it questions the realities of everyday life not out of an institutionalized scepticism which dissolves the world's givenness into a swirl of probabilistic hypotheses, but in terms of

> what it takes to be wider, nonhypothetical truths. Rather than detachment, its watchword is commitment; rather than analysis, encounter . . . Having ritually 'leapt' (the image is perhaps a bit too athletic for the actual facts – 'slipped' might be more accurate) into the framework of meaning which religious conceptions define, and the ritual ended, returned again to the commonsensical world, a man is – unless, as sometimes happens, the experience fails to register – changed. And as he is changed, so also is the common-sense world, for it is now seen as but the partial form of a wider reality which corrects and completes it. (1973[1966]: 112, 122)

Harry's world is exactly such a world of dimensions or worlds, and the books fasten onto Harry's leaps from the non-magic world to the magic world, from the grounds of Hogwarts to a graveyard as well as his slips from the magic world to prescient dream-states, from now-time to the time of his childhood encounter with Voldemort. The 'muggle' (non-magical) world is but a front-stage for the magic world and, it seems, beyond the magic world there is yet another world of giants and monsters. Furthermore, the books fasten onto Harry's (and Hagrid's, and Hermione's) encounters with these other worlds, and onto his increase in understanding of his world of worlds under the guidance of Dumbledore. Actually, in a Geertzian sense, where the cruxes are the taken-for-grantedness of the sacred sphere and the possibility of slipping between spheres, and not for example belief in spiritual beings, Harry's world could not be more religious (see also Geertz, 1975).[4] One notes that Geertz's definition subsumes magic under religion, and it must be added that Harry's world is also a specific kind of religious world, namely a magical one.

In a classic article, Malinowski (1992[1925]) outlined the general relationship between magic, science and religion. While his article centres on the practices of people to whom he refers as 'stone-age savages', it is of interest to anyone concerned with treating magic as it appears in a work of literature that he further states that

> 'magic' seems to stir up in everyone some hidden mental forces, some lingering hopes in the miraculous, some dormant beliefs in man's mysterious possibilities. Witness to this is the power which the words *magic*, *spell*, *charm*, *to bewitch*, and *to enchant*, possess in poetry, where the inner value of words, the emotional forces which they still release, survive longest and are revealed most clearly. (1992[1925]: 70)[5]

Malinowski's point of departure, problematized but still basically shared by most anthropologists, is that lifeworlds may be divided into two spheres: the sacred (or otherworldly), and the profane. Magic and religion belong in the sacred sphere, while science belongs in the profane. The difference between magic and religion is that:

> While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event . . . The native can always state the end of the magical rite, but he will say of a religious ceremony that it is done because such is the usage, or because it has been ordained, or he will narrate an explanatory myth. (1992[1925]: 88)

Crucially, however, Malinowski argues that magic only comes into play when rationally accumulated knowledge fails. He insists that this knowledge, which tends to be stored in folk models ('simple and handy paraphrases of a complex or abstract reality . . . not detached from the craft') is the mother of science (1992[1925]: 34–5). Magic, then, is a way of manipulating materiality which begins where profane knowledge ends. In this sense, Malinowski holds, his predecessor Sir James Frazer was right in calling magic a pseudo-science. This broad way of conceptualizing the question continues to linger. For example, in an article on a similar theme written 70 years after Malinowski's, Arve Sørum sees magic gardens and magic generally as symbolic productions that

> directly mediate between matter and mind, between nature and culture. The use of material objects as signifiers in a symbolic production, represents a 'flow' of nature into the conceptual world of the users . . . Meaning emerges in the 'dialogue' between matter and mind. (Sørum, 1991: 244–5; see Barthes, 1977)

Magic and science share the goal of manipulating materiality but they differ in how they accumulate, with science being the result of 'observation of nature or knowledge of its laws', and magic being 'the one and only specific power, a force unique of its kind, residing exclusively in man', having no beginning but residing in tradition from time immemorial (Malinowski, 1992[1925]: 76). In primitive societies, Malinowski insists, it is an empirical fact that 'magic and outstanding personality go hand in hand': 'Round every big magician there arises a halo made up of stories about his wonderful cures of ills, his catches, his victories, his conquests in love' (1992[1925]: 83).

While the magician is central to his society, the spell is central to the magician:

> The spell is that part of magic which is occult, handed over in magical filiation, known only to the practitioner. To the natives knowledge of magic means knowledge of spells, and in an analysis of any act of witchcraft it will always be found that the ritual centers round the utterance of the spell. The formula is always the core of the magical performance. (1992[1925]: 73)

Since magic is a man-made, traditional force, it is a bridge between the golden past and the here and now, and the formulas used in the spells are

therefore 'full of mythical allusions, which, when uttered, unchain the powers of the past and cast them into the present' (1992[1925]: 83). Inversely, their use celebrates and confirms the originary event from which the magic springs in the first place. Malinowski rounds off his *tour d'horizon* of magic by stating flatly that for each magical act there is a counter act, for each good act a bad one, 'that the twin forces of white and black, of positive and negative, everywhere is beyond doubt' (1992[1925]: 86).

All these general observations, save one, fit Harry's wizarding world. Magic is wilful manipulation of materiality, it comes from tradition and therefore can be exhumed from old books. The magical acts of Harry and Voldemort replicate the acts of the founders of their Hogwarts houses, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin. The acts of the former take their force from the acts of the latter, and confirm their greatness. Harry and Voldemort (as well as Dumbledore) are indeed the outstanding personalities of their society. The spells used evoke ancient events and ancient learning; they are invariably in Latin or have Latin roots. For each spell there is a counter-spell, for each magical act a counter-act, and there is both a side of light and darkness. The one thing in Malinowski's general outline that does not fit Harry's world is that, since it is a wizarding world, there is little by way of science. There is logic and it has its place (as well as a non-magic touch to it), but magic is used even for everyday chores such as doing the dishes. Whereas for Malinowski, magic begins where science ends, to the minds of Harry's world it is the other way round. For example, Mr Weasley from the Office for Misuse of Muggle Artefacts at the Ministry of Magic bombards Harry with questions about Muggle technology, such as electricity and the postal service: '"*Fascinating!*"' he would say, as Harry talked him through using a telephone. "*Ingenious*, really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting by without magic"' (CS 37).[6]

Finally, a distinction made by the social anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1937) for use in an analysis of the Nilotic Azande may be refashioned for application to Harry's world. Evans-Pritchard defines witchcraft as an innate and physiological quality and distinguishes it from sorcery, which is deliberate employment of maleficent magic. Among the Azande, however, anyone who can master a set of formulae may become a sorcerer. This is not so in Harry's world, where becoming a sorcerer is a three-step process. First, you need a magic physiology, which may be either inherited or mutant. We know of cases where magic parents beget non-magic offspring, so-called 'squibs', so inheritance is no certain guarantee of magic powers. Second, in order to become a witch or a wizard, instruction is needed. We know that these instructions are not always brought to their final conclusion. Third, in order to become a sorcerer, one has to make the wilful choice of going over to the dark side and begin performing the dark arts.

So far, my claim has been no more than that Harry's world is an

internally consistent one which is not very different from run-of-the-mill sacred worlds, or more precisely from that part of those worlds which may be called magical (as distinct from religious). I now want to add two more claims. First, Harry's world bears a close resemblance to one specific historical cluster of magical worlds, namely the ones that existed in early-modern Europe. Second, the closeness of this class of magical worlds and the Christian tradition is such that the former must be said to be part of the latter.

Christianity shares with most other religious traditions a key interest in to what extent and which way the universe is alive, how it may be manipulated, and to what extent it is morally right to do so. Particularly during the first three-quarters of its duration, from the early European Christians to the Reformation, most of the key debates and practices of which western Christianity consists turned on these questions – the degree to which burning bushes or shining stones were enchanted, the type and number of corporeal and non-corporeal non-human intelligent lifeforms such as talking snakes, giants and angels, etc. This is also the tradition, and these are the debates, out of which the scientific tradition of which we are a part grew. The standard, eight-volume work on the topic is *A History of Magic and Experimental Sciences*, and with good reason (Thorndike, 1923–58; also Kuhn, 1957). Around the time of Francis Bacon, science overshadowed magic as a way of evolving technologies that could change the material world. The triumph of what we now refer to as a scientific worldview in the course of the 18th century centred on the idea that natural phenomena were law-like, and hence precluded miracles. Its concept of matter relegated spirits to the non-material realm – what we now may refer to as the sacred sphere (Kuhn, 1957). Magic, understood as mental manipulation of matter, became a moot proposition. However, it should be borne in mind that science inherited the very impetus towards manipulating nature from a long (and in principle venerable) tradition, namely that of magic. This fact is curiously absent in overall debates, probably for reasons highlighted by Foucault:

> Experience has taught me that the history of various forms of rationality is sometimes more effective in unsettling our certitudes and dogmatism than is abstract criticism. For centuries, religion couldn't bear having its history told. Today our schools of rationality balk at having their history written, which is no doubt significant. (1988: 83)

As seen not least by the widespread condemnation of the *Harry Potter* books around the Christian world, there are still people who baulk at being reminded of magic's central place in the Christian tradition.

The attempts made within scientific discourse to evade contemplation of its own muddled origins in magic under erasure, or rather attempts to relegate it to an early and long-since exhausted stage of its own

development, may be seen not only in Malinowski's way of treating the question but in evolutionist thought generally. Evolutionists of all kinds cast magic as a stage through which individuals and cultures evolve. A representative example refers to the chapter in Bruno Bettelheim's much-quoted psychoanalytical work *The Uses of Enchantment* (1989[1975]), 'The Child's Need for Magic'. Within such a perspective, religion lies on the dust heap of history, and religious phenomena are rightly relegated to childrens' books. The popularity of *Harry Potter* may be psychoanalysed as nostalgic, inasmuch as it is framed as filling a functional 'need' which adult readers and adult cultures alike should have outgrown long since. Judith Robertson (2002) provides such an analysis, focusing on how the imagery surrounding food, Harry's scar, his father's ghost, Dumbledore, etc. all evoke an uncanniness that is then transformed and made easier to deal with for the child reader. This kind of analysis, however, is not a social analysis, inasmuch as it does not meet the phenomenon to be analysed on its own terms or on its own turf, but rather shoehorns it into a 19th-century philosophy of history and a 20th-century psychoanalytical anthropology. Bettelheim's psychological reading may contribute to our understanding of why children are particularly preoccupied with Harry, but it cannot account for *Harry Potter* as a *social* phenomenon.

The *Harry Potter* novels postulate the return of (an evolved) magical wizarding world to our own lifeworld. Therefore it is highly appropriate that it is a world of individualized rather than collective magic, for as Marcel Mauss points out, an historical movement can be observed in Europe and elsewhere whereby magic 'tried to cast off all collective aspects. Everything involving theoretical and practical achievements now becomes the work of individuals, and it is exploited only by individuals' (1950[1902]: 172).[7] Of course, as with all individual action, magic is predicated on collective preconditions. The point is that it is experienced as individual by both performer and onlookers alike, which means that it is individual when viewed as a social phenomenon.

One of the factors which may account for the fascination of Harry Potter, as suggested previously, is that it is part of a more general return of religion. It is a postulated part of the social world, and as such neither more nor less worthy of social investigation than any other religious phenomenon. In making this claim, the reader is asked to bear in mind two things. First, if one follows Durkheim, Eliade, etc. and views religion as an aspect of social life which is simply lived out and taken for granted, then its bearers may have an attitude towards it which, even if it mixes belief and make-believe, will still be a religious phenomenon. What is key are practices that produce meaning, not 'belief'. It follows that there is no need for *Harry Potter*'s readers to believe that Harry and his world actually exists for the reception to be classified as a religious phenomenon. Second, when we compare our reception of Harry's world to the early-modern European reception of wizardry, we should bear in mind that it is still a

highly contentious issue as to whether witches' sabbaths actually did exist. Norman Cohn (1970, 1976, 1995), who is a central scholar in this area, thinks that they did not. I note this to underline that the difference between our reception of Harry and early-modern Europe's reception of whichcraft is not necessarily that we think that no ritual community of witches exist, whereas the early-moderns thought that such a community actually existed. The key difference between the two may turn on the degree of make-believe involved, and this seems to strengthen the claim that the reception of Harry may be counted as a religious phenomenon. My conclusion here is foreshadowed by simply observing that Geertz's limning of the religious as slippage invites a de-differentiation between suspension of disbelief in spiritual beings and the consumption of books about them on the one hand, and the suspension of a host of other kinds of disbelief, among which we find the consumption of fantasy novels, on the other.

Harry Potter and the return of religion

In a recent book on the concept of culture, Adam Kuper states baldly that 'Perhaps the most general presumption among social scientists in the twentieth century has been that the modern world is disenchanted' (1999: 102). Since Weber, what sociologists of religion call the secularization thesis – that modernity decentres and weakens the place of religion in social life – has held sway (Swatos and Christiano, 1999). There are a number of problems with this thesis. For example, we probably know too little about folk belief in early-modern Europe and earlier to draw up the necessary baseline for comparison; the number of discourses that are involved is so high and so amorphous that comparison is not an easy task. The secularization thesis is not of direct interest in this context, but it does form a necessary backdrop to a key claim here, namely that the waning of modernity seems to be accompanied by a return of religion towards the centre of social life. This possible return has been much debated over the last decades (for a recent survey see Berger, 1999), but then this has taken place usually on what seems to be considered more elevated academic ground. Scholarly interest has fastened onto organized religion and, to a lesser degree, onto a panoply of phenomena often referred to as 'New Age'. Often these returning religious practices are heavily intertwined. What is at stake within all these discussions is to what extent the subset of modes of thought, which cannot be classified as rationalist and are called religious, is relevant to social analysis.

Harry Potter and other popular cultural phenomena should have a place within this landscape, and hence also in the academic literature that attempts to analyse it. Harry's world has strong family resemblances to other religious worlds. It is, as it were, a kindred spirit – or rather a world of kindred spirits. That magic has been held generally to be less respectable

inside the Christian tradition for the last 500 years than it was in the preceding 1500 years, cannot change the fact that it is a key part of that tradition. Indeed, as will be demonstrated, it has an unbroken history in what historians of religion refer to as the 'low' or 'folk' tradition accompanying the 'high' Christian tradition. Interestingly, all world religions have such accompanying subterranean traditions, which suggest that they may not be able to sustain themselves without the kind of access to everyday practices afforded to them by such traditions. By the same token, however, and seen from a clerical point of view, they all have problems with striking a balance between maintaining a system of doctrine which appears as meaningful to the initiated, on the one hand, while remaining open to these everyday and often heterodox practices, on the other. *Harry Potter* is a topic of controversy among large groups of Christian believers. A number of complaints have made newspaper and television headlines. Dozens of books with titles such as *What's a Christian to Do with Harry Potter?* (Abanes, 2001) and *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick* (Neal, 2001) have been published. In the United States, where around half of the population doubt the historical soundness of Darwin's reading of human history in favour of a literal reading of the Bible, *Harry Potter* books have been destroyed and banned from libraries and school curricula (see Gemmill and Nexon, 2006).[8] Minor incidents have occurred also in Europe.

The Christian discourse on *Harry Potter* turns on the extent to which the Bible is to be read literally. Kimbra Wilder Gish (2000) sets out the evangelist case against Harry with admirable clarity. For her, the key point is that 'witchcraft is as real to us as any other religion', and that this religion should be condemned together with the occult *tout court*. The reason she gives for this is appeal to sacred authority, first and foremost the following scripture:

> When thou art come into the land which the Lord Thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee. (Deuteronomy, 18: 9–12)

Wilder Gish (2000) also points to 10 other places in the Bible where these practices are explicitly condemned. Of the practices noted in the verses from Deuteronomy, with the possible exception of the fire ordeal, and granted that observing the times may be read as dabbling in astrology, all are on display in the *Harry Potter* books. So is possession, and celebration of a particularly important set of Biblical villains, namely the

Egyptian wizards (see esp. Exodus 7: 8–13). Since these things have been explicitly forbidden by the Lord, his followers must condemn them. Wilder Gish insists that it is not enough simply to overlook phenomena such as the *Harry Potter* books or to read them metaphorically, for: 'Portraying something that we consider to be dangerous as harmless or ineffective is conceptually as perilous as saying it is good or efficacious, if not more so' (Wilder Gish, 2000: 266). In an evangelical context, Wilder Gish's position is moderate, both in the sense that she does not advocate a ban on the books, and that she does not seem to hold the *Harry Potter* books to be a central part of today's religious landscape. Other evangelists do, however (e.g. Chambers, 2001).

The differences between different explicitly Christian readings and recommendations for what to do about the *Harry Potter* books need not concern us here. It is of interest that on *Harry Potter*, as on other topics involving magic, the Catholic Church has few objections, whereas Protestants seem to have more objections the more evangelical they become. However, the key point is that Christian discourse, in its variety, treats the *Harry Potter* books as (part of) a religious phenomenon. Since the religious groups that organize the protests against them give as their explicit reasons the presence of magic, paganism and other harmful religious influences, and since there can be no other reason for the protests than religious disagreement, these readings are proof that *Harry Potter* is part of religious discourse, as well as proof of the extent to which the question of magic is still very much alive in Christian tradition. During high modernity, this world became more marginal to 'western' social life as a whole, although it never actually disappeared. The *Harry Potter* books form a key locus for its return back into fuller view.

We may now take stock of the relationship of the wizarding world as it existed for the English (and in overlapping degrees for other Europeans, including those living overseas in places such as Salem, MA) around the 17th century, and Harry's own wizarding world. Both worlds are divided into centres of learning, on the one hand, and a loose network of wizards living in or at the edges of sundry villages, towns and cities, on the other. Both draw on a wide array of techniques such as conjuring, transformation and astrology when they perform their magic. Both are accompanied by helping spirits called familiars, 'who would take the shape of an animal, usually a cat or a dog, but possibly a toad, a rat, or even a wasp or a butterfly' (Thomas, 1971: 446; Thomas notes that this was a 'peculiarly English notion'). Both draw widely on various anthropomorphized imagined lifeforms such as goblins, elves, mermaids, giants and monsters as a source of their power (Thomas, 1971: 606). Both are organized along a central ethical cleavage between good and evil, with black wizards gathering around a key evil presence and performing detrimental acts on non-magical humans. In 17th-century Europe such acts were known as

maleficium; in Harry's world they are known as 'Muggle torture'. Both experience fighting between good and evil wizards on a cosmic scale.

Where specific practices are concerned, in both worlds evil wizards carry a mark on their bodies (known as the devil's mark and the death mark, respectively). They also put human blood and ashes to good use. In the Christian tradition, heretic cults were said repeatedly to be bound to one another by drinking a concoction of the blood and ashes of one of their own children, who had been ritually slaughtered and burned for the occasion. They were also said to conjure up evil spirits by offering them pieces of human flesh (Cohn, 1976). In Harry Potter's world, Voldemort arranges his escape from death (his *volée de mort*) by having a bath in a cauldron boiling with the blood of his arch-enemy Harry, the ashes of his father and the flesh of one of his servants. Evil literally feeds on the living.

There are, of course, differences between the two worlds. In 17th-century Britain, 'The notion that witches could fly or change themselves into animals was . . . seldom advanced, and the broomstick, made famous by subsequent children's fiction, occurs only once in an English witch-trial' (Thomas, 1971: 445). However, Thomas is quick to add that they did occur regularly on the continent, so were definitely part of early-modern European lifeworlds (see Cohn, 1976; Mauss, 1950[1902]).[9] Harry's world is an internally consistent magical world with a strong family resemblance to the magical worlds that were an inextricable part of Christian life in early-modern Europe.

Conclusion

The continuing slippage between the fantastic worlds that add up to the world of *Harry Potter* induce a series of altered states in the protagonists. As they are laid out for us in the novels, these experiences seem to fall squarely within the category that Geertz outlines and defines as religious. In the sense that these worlds parallel lifeworlds that existed in early-modern Europe to such a degree that their claim to be historic extensions of those worlds must be taken at face value, the *Harry Potter* event constitutes part of the return of religion to contemporaneity.

There may remain a whiff of counter-intuitivity to the argument that *Harry Potter* is a part of an ongoing countermove against the decentring of religion from our lifeworlds. Surely, it will be argued, there is a difference between the act of reading about fictional characters slipping in and out of fantastic worlds, and the act of slipping in and out of such worlds oneself? Surely Geertz is not talking about the act of reading, but about more bodily acts? However, as already intimated by Geertz himself when choosing the verb 'to slip' rather then the 'too athletic' verb 'to leap' in order to characterize what is going on, it does not seem that the body is key to the slippage. Certainly, bodily techniques are quite often part of the

religious practice of slipping from realm to realm, but there are plenty of visionaries and other worshippers whose slippage has been induced routinely by reading texts. If there is a problem here, it is not with reading as slippage, but with slippage as religion. Let us begin to dissolve this problem by evoking some of those who have come at the question from outside of religion. The tradition of subsuming religion under a wider category of slippage between realms goes back at least to Thomas Hobbes, who famously asked, what is the difference between saying, 'God spoke to me in a dream' and 'I dreamed that God spoke to me'? It should be of significance here that Bacon is also of key importance to our story of how the magic lifeworlds of early-modern Europeans have stuck it out in subterranean existence since the 17th century, for as a key constituent of the rationalistic modern worldview, he played a key role in driving those lifeworlds underground in the first place. And since they ended up there, magicians have not been alone in trying to excavate them. Consider, for example, the programme of the early British Romantics. In the 14th chapter of his *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1971[1817]: 169–9) recounts how, in writing *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), he wanted to conjure up 'characters supernatural' and give them a 'semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'. His co-writer William Wordsworth, however, tried 'to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention . . . to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us'.

What is being argued here – and it is an argument that runs through modern western literary thought in its entirety – is that fictional evocation is akin to religious evocation. It is not hard to find examples of religious movements that have made this kinship a pivot of their existence. It was noted above how some of the most vocal critics of *Harry Potter* believe in a rapture of the saints whereby God will shortly intervene in our mundane lives and call to himself 115,000 sanctified humans in an act of granting them what religious scholars refer to as 'pre-millennarian dispensation'. A key recruiter – by some account the key recruiter – for this movement is the *Left Behind* books, a series of science fiction novels describing life after the rapture that has sold more than 50 million copies in the US. Again, the founder of the Church of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, was a writer of science fiction. To add a piece of ethnographical data, 30 years ago I went to a Norwegian junior high school with a girl named Heidi, who shared my middle-class Lutheran background. She spent a lot of her time slipping on headphones in order to listen to the Osmonds – a Mormon pop group. She is now a Mormon mother of five living in Utah, and she attributes her slipping away from Norway and Lutheranism for other realms to that popular culture experience. These couplings demonstrate a certain imbrication of church-based and popular culture-induced slippage, so emerge as examples of the way that

institutionalized religion has been able to swim with the tide. *Harry Potter*'s popularity, however, has not been articulated in this way.

Perhaps this intermeshing should come as no surprise. After all, religious slippage is often combined with other practices that may induce slippage between states, such as narcotics, sex, pain and different aesthetic practices. Indeed, in a tentative taking to the field, I sought out (again Norwegian) parents who I rather expected to be skeptical of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, and it became clear very quickly that it was exactly this confusion between different kinds of slippage that worried them. The children, they said (echoing Bettelheim but lacking his complacency), did not know what was what ('*de er for små til å vite hva som er hva*'). I read this as a worry that religious slippage will not stand out relative to other kinds of slippage. This worry is surely warranted. Consider, for example, comparative research done by sociologists of religion on near-death experiences, where a standard finding used to be that, whereas this experience often turned on the encounter of a so-called 'being of light', this being was Arjuna for Hindus, Christ for Christians, and so forth. However, whereas the being of light frequently reported by Americans who had experienced a near-death state was formerly Christ, increasingly the being of light is Elvis Presley (see Rønnevig, 1999). In light of this, the question of the status of popular cultural artefacts is surely of the essence, not only where Christians worrying about the popularity of *Harry Potter* is concerned, but also to the meaning of *Harry Potter* as a social phenomenon and to Geertz's definition of religion *tout court*.

Three possible ways of tackling the analytical situation appear to have arisen here, where we have de-differentiated the boundary between the consumption of religion and the consumption of popular cultural artifacts. First, something may be wrong with the concept of religion that is used. It may be argued that Geertz is wrong in putting belief in spiritual beings, the existence of a 'cult' and other traditional definitional criteria of religion under erasure, and that his definition should be discarded. This would be a rather momentous step, however, for we could appeal to authority in the form of the editor of a recently published reader in the anthropology of religion who argues that Geertz' is 'one of the strongest attempts within modern anthropology to compose a definition of religion and hence a model for subsequent research' (Lambek, 2002: 20). In that case, what is at issue is no less than our understanding of religion in general. Second, another possibility may be to argue that my choice and analysis of the case is wanting: for example, that magic cannot be subsumed under religion.

It is my prerogative to leave the possible spelling out of these two possibilities to others, and to propose a third way of making sense of contemporary de-differentiation of religion and popular culture. I take my cue from Mauss's (1950[1902]: 172) aforementioned reading of the evolution of magic thought to the effect that magic went from being collective towards being more individualized. Mauss's evolutionist claims

aside, the change that Mauss seems to spot here may throw light on *Harry Potter*'s popularity as well. One notes that the use of magic in Harry's world is indeed individualized in the way suggested by Mauss. Furthermore, one notes that, although the consumption of *Harry Potter* is of course a social phenomenon and includes collective events such as media packaging, film showings and fan conventions, the key event is the reading of books. According to a number of educators, '*Harry Potter*' is more or less what reading means at the present juncture. Perhaps it is this textual quality of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon that is key. The immediate dialogical situation is that of a reader and a text. If any social setting may be described as individualized, then this must be it. Harry is a reading event, a multimedia event, a text and a hypertext. As such, it invites the consumption of a traditional magical lifeworld in an individualized setting while at the same time providing social arenas for the processing of this slippage outside of churches. The Gutenberg press played a key role in revolutionizing Europe's religious life by bringing the Bible to the hands of readers. Still, the churches held sway, providing an institutional locus for processing religious experience. The folk tradition of little people remained a 'little' and subterranean tradition that accompanied the 'great' Christian tradition. In a multimedia setting, the cults have not been equally efficient at articulating the individual slippage that may emanate in a reading situation to an institutionalized framework. Therefore, religious slippage has become more individualized. This is not only a question of how and where slippage is induced, for it may not matter that slippage takes place outside an institutionalized ambit if it may be processed in such a setting later. However, the slippage that results from reading *Harry Potter* only rarely seems to be processed in a church setting. When viewed in this light, Wilder Gish's call for parents and church leaders to sit down and talk to children about *Harry Potter* and what it means to them emerges as a perfectly sound strategy for a cult to maintain its ties to the kind of slippage that defines religion. One way of making sense of *Harry Potter*'s popularity, then, is to see it within the framework of an individualization of religious experience, made possible by a multimedia situation that relativizes the importance of 'cults' to the production and processing of slippage between altered states.

However, this does not account for the reason why the key popular culture phenomenon of the times should take the form of a tale about a magic world, and not some other religious form. I should like to end on a speculative note, which is to do with the relationship between magic and politics. I take my cue from Stuart Clark's (1997) work on witchcraft in early-modern Europe. Clark observes that, as with any other phenomenon, witchcraft was embedded in a wider intellectual discourse. As with other beliefs, belief in magic only makes sense if it is seen as part of a social system. Clark then asks to what other beliefs witchcraft stood in relation in early-modern Europe, and fastens onto political beliefs. He makes the

empirical observation that demonology exploded as a pursuit from the mid-15th century onwards, only to die out rather abruptly from the late 17th century onwards. The received understanding of why it died out is that it was killed off by the emergence of modern science (see e.g. Thomas, 1971). However, this understanding does not tell us anything about why interest had exploded some 200 years before. Clark then goes on to make a second empirical explanation, namely that demonology's heyday coincided with the emergence of sovereign statehood in Europe. More precisely, it is imbricated with ideas about kingship. This insight he traces to Robert Muchembled, who explained why witchcraft was such a heinous crime by pointing out that, in counter-Reformational Europe particularly, it was a form of treason – '*lèse-majesté divine*' (Clark, 1997: 554; Bloch, 1973; Muchembled, 1993; Walzer, 1974). Drawing on Lévi-Strauss's idea that certain concepts are 'good to think with' (the book's main title is *Thinking with Demons*), Clark then links his two empirical observations and suggests that demonology is the logical companion of absolute monarchy.[10] Absolute monarchy saw the king as God's representative on earth, decreeing that resistance to the king was resistance against God. If the devil is the negation of God, then the witch and the wizard are the negation of the king's magistrates, and those who believe in them the negation of God-fearing and loyal subjects:[11]

> Early modern demonology was an intellectual accompaniment of a particular political tradition; it emerged on a significant scale at the same moment in European history, flourished alongside it, and declined as the world of politics was decisively rethought. (Clark, 1997: 618)

Clark highlights how this belief in the royal magistrate's divine strength explains why the witches and wizards who were apprehended by the powers that be ostensibly lost all their powers immediately. For Clark, absolute monarchy legitimized itself in mystical and quasi-magical ways. Since these systems were so important for their claim to rightful rule, it stood to reason that challenges to these mystical and quasi-magical systems were seen as challenges to kingly rule. It follows that magical practices that took place outside of the sphere of kingly power were a direct threat to kingship, as well as to the natural political order. Witchcraft was an attack on sovereignty.[12]

One of the key political debates of the last decades has turned on how political sovereignty seems to have reached a social impasse. After the end of the Cold War in particular, we are definitely living in a post-sovereign world. If the rise of sovereignty coincided historically with the decline of magic, then it may not be all that surprising that the decline of sovereignty now coincides with the return of magic. The individualized character of magic makes it a form of religious activity that suits the post-sovereign subject. If this is the case, then *Harry Potter* may be read not

only as a harbinger of religion, but also as a parable of post-sovereign politics.

Notes

1. I suggest that *Harry Potter* scholarship adopts the usage both of fandom and reference books by employing two-letter acronyms and page numbers only, for example PS 5 instead of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Book One* (Rowling, 1997: 5). In the light of what I will argue below, Kathinka Frøystad's observation (personal communication, 13 October 2002) that Potter fandom uses a reference technique that is parallel to that used for a number of religious literatures (for example, Bible quotes by book and verse) seems particularly apposite.
2. In a famous work inspired by Sir James Frazer, Jessie Weston (1957) argues that Arthurian legends and Morris dances are transformations of ancient rituals. I do not want to make any such claims of direct descent here. *Harry Potter* is a work of fiction fashioned partly out of historical material, with echoes of oral traditions about elves, etc. What is at stake is intertextuality. Harry's world is an heir of previous magic lifeworlds, but not necessarily by direct descent. Magic has an unbroken presence in the western tradition, and so it may be possible to draw up a continuous genealogy. Such a task would involve engaging among others the works discussing Yates (2002[1964]).
3. I have concentrated on English folk traditions here. For comparative studies see, for example, Jolly et al. (2001), Oja (1999), Ryan (1999). Eastern Europe stands out as different, for among the eastern Slavs, 'the intellectual rationale for witchcraft was predicted on a pantheistic concept of the universe rather than on a demonological one', meaning that witches 'could be tried and punished, much like the English witch, for the secular crime of malign sorcery – but not for heresy' (Zguta, 1977: 1206–7).
4. Since this is the case, Ostling's (2003) argument to the effect that Harry's world is a disenchanted place is moot for our purposes, since in a Geertzian sense, disenchanted worlds may be as religious as enchanted ones. In the same vein, Blake (2002: 96) finds no Christianity or 'no substitute religion' in *Harry Potter*, and argues that 'there are no rituals, no feasts . . . no identified superhuman power'. He adds that '[t]he stories are not about actual magic' (Blake, 2002: 46). It is true that we hear nothing about belief in spiritual beings, but rituals abound, be that as ritualistic magic or as ritualized social practices such as the opening of a triwizard's tournament or the running of a wizard's duel, the sorting into houses as a *rite de passage*, the how to greet a hippogriff, etc. It is not necessary for my argument to work that the stories are 'about' magic; it is enough that magic is present in this world.
5. As pointed out to me by Keith Brown, Malinowski seems overly impressed with contemporary romantic poetry here, and so forgets about other kinds.
6. The exception, then, turns out to be a straightforward inversion. Interestingly, Malinowski's hypothesis that magic fades away as scientific knowledge grows is also the part of his general outline that has been most roundly criticized by later anthropologists.
7. One notes that Mauss (1950[1902]) in contradistinction to what has been

argued so far, in this work is at pains to separate magic from religion. One also notes, however, that he ends up by admitting to not being able to substantiate this claim.

8. See Gemmill and Nexon (2006). A poll taken by the National Opinion Research Center in the early 1990s showed that 23% of respondents did not believe in evolution, with another 33% being undecided (see Wilson, 1994).
9. A British judge dismissed a witchcraft case in 1712 'with the cheerful remark that there was no law against flying' (Thomas, 1971: 459).
10. Indeed, the general idea that Government, as it became absolute, was also invested with a new kind of religiosity, goes back to Durkheim and *L'année sociologique* (see Lukes, 1975).
11. Clark (1997) notes how this ties in with Moses' victory over the Egyptian magicians in the Old Testament, who are present in Harry's world, and with St Paul's victory over Simon Magus in the New Testament.
12. One of Clark's (1997) key examples is how Jean Bodin's foundational book on sovereignty from 1580, *Les six livres de la république*, is not read together with his 1576 book, *De la démonomanie des sorciers*. Clark performs such a reading, and demonstrates that what is at stake in both books is the maintenance of a divine order that exists seamlessly in the sacred as well as in the profane spheres.

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