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Harry Potter and the Gospel Message

07.20.2009 | Catholic *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* hit theaters Wednesday, and Emily Strand, campus minister for liturgies at the University of Dayton, was among the many fans flocking to see a midnight showing.

As a campus minister, Strand has an interesting perspective on the Harry Potter story, seeing explicit Christian themes interwoven throughout the series, a view not shared among all Christian groups. She compares *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling to C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien for their famous works of Christian symbolic literature.

The Christian Science Monitor interviewed Strand for a preview story of the movie discussing the wisdom and importance of Headmaster Dumbledore. Upon the movie release of the *Half-Blood Prince*, Strand offers seven Christian connections she finds in the series:

- * **Fawkes the Phoenix:** Dumbledore's pet firebird should have tipped us off from Book 1 that *Harry Potter* is a many-layered text. This ancient Egyptian mythical creature bursts into flame at the end of its life and rises from the ashes. Early Christians like St. Clement adopted the phoenix as an emblem of Christ's resurrection for all who claim the faith.
- * **Dumbledore:** Rowling claims she named the headmaster this provincial English word for "bumblebee" because he's the sort of guy who hums to himself, but in ancient Egypt bumblebees symbolized the human soul. Christians saw bees' flight habits in groups as a personification of the Spirit, which "blows where it wills." After all, Dumbledore is the soul of Harry's magical education, providing him true wisdom to defeat Voldemort.
- * **Harry Potter:** Harry is just like any other kid ... except he's the "Chosen One" who must defeat evil personified, or die trying. He started as a magically powerful baby, just like Jesus, the infant who wise men and shepherds adored. Rowling admits she gave Harry a wand made of wood from the holly tree because of holly's "certain connotations." Could she mean the legend that holly is the stuff from which Christ's cross was made? This is why holly is a traditional Christmas decoration. And if you're wondering why Harry's wand has a phoenix feather core, see above.
- * **The Trio:** Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione form a Dream Team when it comes to fighting the Dark Lord. Harry's sense of love and friendship guides them, Hermione's brainpower keeps them prepared for anything, and Ron is, well, Ron keeps everybody laughing and aware of when it's time for a meal. This sort of threesome is popular in classic English literature, for it symbolizes the well-ordered human person, who images the Holy Trinity of Father (mind), Son (body) and Holy Spirit (soul). Ever notice the Potter Trio always wins out when they stick together, following Harry's lead? There's a reason for that.
- * **The Gryffindor Lion:** Each of the four Hogwarts Houses has a mascot, and Gryffindor's is a lion. It shouldn't surprise anyone that a lion is a Biblical symbol referring to Christ (Rev. 5:5) and his royal ancestor King David. Rowling's lion is also a nod to C.S. Lewis, whose *Chronicles of Narnia* lion, Aslan, is a type of Christ.
- * **Harry's Stag Patronus:** Another creature in the series points to Christ. Harry's shield charm, or Patronus, takes the form of a glowing male deer. St. Eustace converted to Christianity in 2nd-century Rome after seeing a vision of the cross in the antlers of a deer, a prophecy that he too would suffer. For Harry, the suffering his own Patronus foretells will also be the impenetrable shield that protects him and the entire wizarding community from Lord Voldemort.
- * **The Outcome:** You'll have to read the seventh and final book for the most poignant and convincing evidence that *Harry Potter* is Christian literature. In *The Deathly Hallows*, Rowling reveals sign after sign, including references to Scripture, that Harry's destiny is wrapped up with Christ's. If you've been paying attention all along, however, this ending can't surprise. After all, Harry's story is all about that oldest form of magic: love.

Strand writes regularly for the Canadian journal of pastoral liturgy, *Celebrate!*, where she published in the July-August 2008 issue an article called "Harry Potter and the Paschal Mystery" about the parallels between the Harry Potter series and

Christianity.

In addition to her campus ministry role, Strand teaches courses on the Catholic faith and liturgy for the religious studies department at the University of Dayton, and she serves on various committees for the Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati. She is best known among her students, however, for playing in a rock band, dyeing her hair in accordance with the liturgical seasons and throwing an annual Harry Potter-themed Halloween costume party.

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