

Melbourne College of Divinity

**An investigation into the use of  
film and literature in the Christian  
education of children aged  
10-12 years**

a thesis

by

Brent Allred

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## **Abstract**

Educationalists have identified the importance of media literacy in helping children's learning. They recognise the incredible influence the media has in influencing a child's thinking, value development and behaviour and, through media literacy programs, seek to assist children to become critical thinkers and analyse what they watch. These influences of popular culture can be used within Christian education as well. This paper will explore the role film and literature has in engaging children with biblical truth and aiding them in their spiritual formation. We will identify the particular and significant role imagination plays in this.

## Introduction

We are immersed in a media-saturated society. Children in particular are media-obsessed. The average Australian boy spends 4.3 hours a day in front of a television or computer screen. For girls, that figure is 3.2 hours. Researchers call these children “screenieboppers” and they are spending a staggering 27 per cent of their waking hours in front of a screen.<sup>1</sup>

These statistics do not surprise those involved in education, who see the results of such behaviour displayed in their students through poor attention spans, tiredness and a falling behind in class work.<sup>2</sup>

While acknowledging the need to combat the negative effects of media, I believe we can also recognise and utilise its positive possibilities. This paper will focus on two aspects of media – films and books – and demonstrate how they can be used as an ally in the Christian education of children aged 10-12 years.

There is growing pressure in our education systems to incorporate media literacy in schools. This has caused some polarisation in the community, with some questioning the value or

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<sup>1</sup> Pountey, Michelle. “Kids fight screen addiction.” *Herald Sun*, 15 April 2006. Quoting research by Tim Olds from the University of South Australia School of Health Sciences, published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. Even more alarming is the rise of what are termed “extreme screenies” – children who sit in front of a television or computer screen for more than five hours a day. Most of these are boys. One in 10 Australian boys spends more than seven hours a day in front of a screen.

<sup>2</sup> A US study reported in the *Paediatrics* journal (2006) found that children who watched television or played video games during the week did worse at school than those who had television and games blackouts. Weekend viewing and video games did not have much effect. The study’s author said, “On weekdays, the more they watched, the worse they did.” Children whose parents let them watch films rated with adult content did worse in class, especially boys. Quoted in “TV ban scores marks”, Suellen Hinde, *Sunday Herald Sun*, Oct 22, 2006.

otherwise of introducing Hollywood movies and popular television programs such as *The Simpsons* and *Home and Away* into the curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

Karen Brooks, a senior lecturer in popular culture, argues books such as the Harry Potter, Lemony Snicket and Narnia series and Andy Griffith's "bum" books have great educational value:

If a particular text, be it a beloved kids' picture book, a hit TV series, the lyrics to a top-10 hit single, or the poetry of John Keats, engages the student and really teaches them something about who they are (identity, sex and gender debates), where they are (local and global ideologies, politics) and how they are (philosophy), then which text is chosen doesn't matter nearly as much as how it is used and the relationship that is drawn to other, older texts.<sup>4</sup>

Resources have been developed to help teachers create lesson plans around movies and books. One curriculum uses fairy tales to debate ethics with 8-12 year-olds. The editor of that curriculum suggests the material will be effective because "by basing a discussion of ethics on fairy tales, you are launching from common ground".<sup>5</sup>

*Teach With Movies* is a web-based resource for teachers, providing lesson plans and learning guides based on 280 movies. Each recommended film contains "lessons on life and positive moral messages", using the "storytelling power of Hollywood to motivate, inspire and educate students".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Karen Brooks, Senior Lecturer in Popular Culture at the University of Sunshine Coast, refers to a debate between journalist Luke Slattery, the former Federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson and various teachers and academics in 2005 over the incorporation of various forms of popular culture in the English curriculum. In "Teaching With the Times," *Melbourne's Child*, March 2006, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Lindy, Elaine L. "Using Fairy Tales to Debate Ethics." [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/curr295.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr295.shtml) (accessed 24 March 2004).

<sup>6</sup> [www.teachwithmovies.com](http://www.teachwithmovies.com) (accessed 24 March 2004). For *The Wizard of Oz*, the lesson plans cover social-emotional learning in the areas of self-esteem, friendship and taking care of yourself; and moral-ethical emphases on trustworthiness, respect and caring.

As I reflected on the use of contemporary film and literature in secular education, I began to contemplate their use in children's Christian education. For some time I have used movie clips with children to illustrate a Bible story or reinforce a biblical concept, and I have observed this method being used extensively by others. I wanted to test whether this was a valid educational method. I felt more needed to be done to explore the contribution movies and literature in particular bring to the religious education of children and their spiritual formation.

My research begins with an exploration of children's spirituality. In this section I will reflect on current understandings of children's spirituality, outline what researchers say about children's spiritual development and introduce a paradigm of children's spiritual formation that I have found useful.

I will then examine the role of imagination. While this aspect of the human mind has had a chequered history in terms of its acceptance as a valid player in both religion and science, we will see that it is key in helping children engage with God.

After investigating the contribution and importance of storytelling in our psychological, emotional, moral and spiritual development, I will then outline a theological approach to film and literature. We will discover the place both have in spiritual formation.

I will then survey four types of media – Disney movies, the Chronicles of Narnia and Harry Potter series, and selected comic book superheroes – to identify how they might be useful in a child's Christian education.

Finally, I will review how the principles identified in this research are being practiced in different settings.

In using the term “Christian education”, I am considering the broader definition that encompasses the “learning of Christian beliefs and understanding”<sup>7</sup> rather than the narrower education *about* Christianity. It is education Karen Marie Yust describes as faith that “informs and transforms human lives”<sup>8</sup> and leads to a deepening understanding and adoption of Christian beliefs, values, worldview and lifestyle.

John Westerhoff calls for the church to re-examine its emphasis on content-driven instruction in Christian education, a re-examination that calls for “three deliberate or intentional, systematic or interrelated, sustained or lifelong processes essential to Christian faith and life: formation, education and instruction”.<sup>9</sup>

I have limited my investigation into the use of film and literature with children to those aged 10-12 years. Children by this age are more able to think abstractly and engage in deeper reflection than younger children. It has also helped me be more focused in my research and analysis.

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<sup>7</sup> Astley, Jeff and Leslie J Francis, eds. *Critical Perspectives on Christian Education*. Leominster, Eng: Gracewing Publishing, 1994, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Yust, Karen Marie. *Real Kids Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco: Josset-Bass, 2004, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Westerhoff III, John H. “Fashioning Christians in Our Day.” In *Schooling Christians: “Holy Experiments” in American Education*, Stanley Hauerwas and John H Westerhoff III, eds. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1992, 266. In Astley & Francis, 14, these processes are further defined as: formation: intentional, relational, experiential activities within the life of a story-formed faith community; education: critical, reflective activities related to these communal activities; and instructional: the means by which knowledge and skills useful to communal life are transmitted, acquired and understood.

## Chapter 1

# Children's Spirituality

### *An understanding of children's spirituality*

There has been much debate and varying viewpoints concerning a definition of spirituality, particularly as it relates to children.<sup>10</sup>

Peter Toon suggests spirituality is “all about the human search for identity, meaning, purpose, God, self-transcendence, mystical experience, integration and inner harmony”.<sup>11</sup> As such, he says spirituality is related to all religions and to many human pursuits.

Michael Anthony outlines three further definitions with which those involved in Christian education of children may resonate.

1. The Christian path [spirituality] consists of the awakening of the personal centre of the human being, by God's personal grace and Christ's compassionate, redemptive personal love, within the Christian community, in a journey that leads to personal union with the tri-personal God.<sup>12</sup>

2. In its Christian sense, 'spirituality' is about the process of renewal and rebirth that comes about through the action of the Holy Spirit, which makes us more like Christ. It's about spiritual growth and development, and includes the development of just about every aspect of our life of Christian faith.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> At a 2003 conference on children's spirituality, attended by researchers, scholars, teachers and leaders in children's ministry, the definition of spirituality was left open-ended. At one point in the conference one individual complained that this lack of a definition made things confusing, and that presenters and participants were talking different things when they spoke of spirituality. See Ratcliff, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Toon, Peter. *What Is Spirituality and Is It For Me?* London: Daybreak, 1989, 15 as quoted in *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation*, edited by Michael J Anthony. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Cousins, Ewert. "What Is Spirituality?" in *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodology and Historical Essays*, Bradley Hanson, ed, Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1990, 44 as quoted in Anthony, 9.

<sup>13</sup> McGrath, Alister. "Beyond the Quiet Time" in *Authentic Spirituality: Moving Beyond Mere Religion*, Barry Callen, Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2001, 218 as quoted in Anthony, 9.

3. Developing the spiritual...is synonymous with developing mature human beings, who possess such attributes as self-acceptance, a sense of responsibility, concern for others, a sense of wonder and awe, and sensitivity to reality beyond the physical senses of the material.<sup>14</sup>

Against what could be termed 'religious spirituality' are various streams of secular or natural spirituality. These include existentialism, humanism, postmodernism, developmental spirituality (eg Erickson's psychosocial model, Piaget's stages of cognitive development) and psychological spirituality (eg Alcoholics Anonymous).<sup>15</sup>

It is limiting to consider religious spirituality as completely divorced from natural spirituality. My particular understanding of evangelical spirituality is informed by some forms of natural spirituality.

John Bradford's tripartite model of spirituality is therefore helpful. He refers to human, devotional and practical spirituality.<sup>16</sup> Human spirituality is concerned with the need individuals have to be loved, affirmed, feel secure and the ability to respond in wonder to their environment. Devotional spirituality relates to the adherence to the teachings of a particular faith tradition. Practical spirituality is defined as the integration of human and devotional spirituality.

Rebecca Nye has coined the term "relational consciousness" to describe spirituality. Based on extensive interviews with children, Nye states that a child's spirituality is "an unusual level

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<sup>14</sup> Meehan, Christopher. "Resolving the Confusion in the Spiritual Development Debate" in *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 7, Number 3, 2002, 292 as quoted in Anthony, 9.

<sup>15</sup> For a summary of these forms of secular spirituality, see Anthony, 10-15.

<sup>16</sup> Bradford, John. *Caring for the Whole Child: A Holistic Approach to Spirituality*. London: The Children's Society, 1995 as quoted in Anthony, 17.

of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to other passages for that child".<sup>17</sup> It is characterised by the perception of the child in relation to other people, God or themselves.

Relational consciousness is built upon three fundamental categories that outline some parameters of children's spiritual experiences: (1) *Awareness Sensing* which includes an emphasis upon here and now experience, 'tuning' such as the sense of feeling one with nature, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of 'flow', and 'focusing' which involves insight that is a 'natural knowing', (2) *Mystery Sensing* that highlights experiences of wonder and awe, as well as use of the imagination, and (3) *Value Sensing* which includes experiences of delight and despair, a sense of the ultimate goodness of life, and "meaning-making and sensing".<sup>18</sup>

Nye believes that this "relational consciousness" seems to be at the very core of children's spirituality, "out of which can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight".<sup>19</sup>

Nye warns about attempting to define spirituality too closely; it may misrepresent spirituality's complexity and depth. "Spirituality is like the wind – though it might be experienced, observed and described, it cannot be 'captured' – we delude ourselves to think otherwise, either in design of research or in analytic conclusions."<sup>20</sup>

I think any definition of children's spirituality must recognise the child as a whole. This is affirmed by most scholars of children's spirituality. Jesus confirmed the place of children in his kingdom when he had a child stand among the group that was gathered around him (Matthew 18:2). Throughout Scripture we see references to caring for the whole person

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<sup>17</sup> Nye, Rebecca. "Psychological perspectives on children's spirituality." Doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham, UK, 1998, 237, as quoted in Ratcliff, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Nye, "Psychological perspectives", 129-140, as quoted in Ratcliff, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Hay, David and Rebecca Nye. *The Spirit of the Child (Revised Edition)*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006, 109.

<sup>20</sup> Nye, Rebecca. "Relational Consciousness and the Spiritual Lives of Children: Convergence with Children's Spiritual and Religious Development." In *The Case of Religion, Vol 2: Psychological Studies on Spiritual and Religious Development*, K H Reich, F K Oser & W G Scarlett, eds, Lengrerich, Germany: Pabst, 100, 57-82, as quoted in Anthony, 23.

(taking care of the poor and the widows, showing justice and mercy) rather than focusing on the spiritual only.

Donald Ratcliff asserts that every child has two immediate functions: to be and to become.

The 'to be' aspect is the value of children as they are, not just for what they will become – Jesus said we adults are to become like children, not that children are to become like us. But adults also have a responsibility to nurture and guide children – a pervasive theme in scripture as Deuteronomy 6:7 and many other passages reveal – as well as learn from them.<sup>21</sup>

### *Spiritual development*

Walter Wangerin's view of spiritual development may be more poetry than research; however, as Radcliff comments, "the true value may be as strong as that found in formal study of children".<sup>22</sup> Wangerin writes:

Who can say when, in a child, the dance with God begins? No one. Not even the child can later look back and remember the beginning of it, because it is as natural an experience ... as the child's relationship with the sun or with his bedroom. And the beginning, specifically, cannot be remembered because in the beginning there are no words for it. The language to name, contain, and to explain the experience comes afterward. The dance, then, the relationship with God, faithing, begins in a mist.

At first, the child has no name for this Someone so significant, this Other, the Dear, or else the Terrible Almighty (El-Shaddai!), yet the holiness and glory, the power and even the righteousness of the Other are very real to him – and the love, though kindness and the expression of that love may wax and wane, depending upon the child's own sense of goodness and his health. It is the common lot of all children to encounter and to experience the Deity. And so faithing begins. And because it begins in children, regardless of their cultures, regardless of what languages shall later contain, explain, and edit reality for them – because it begins, in fact, apart from the interpretive function of language.... It

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<sup>21</sup> Ratcliff, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ratcliff, 12.

is a universal human experience. We have all danced one round with God. But we danced it in the mists.<sup>23</sup>

This vivid imagery provides a context within which we can explore what researchers say about children's spiritual development. The works of four theorists of human development provide significant insights into the development of children: Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kolberg and James Fowler.

Child psychoanalyst Erik Erikson believed a person's development is strongly influenced by their social context and that relationships with family, friends and community have a significant role in our development through life.<sup>24</sup> Erikson identified eight stages of *psychosocial development*.<sup>25</sup> The four that cover the childhood years are:

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
1. Trust vs mistrust	Birth to 1 year
2. Autonomy vs shame and doubt	1 to 3 years
3. Initiative vs guilt	3 to 6 years
4. Industry vs inferiority	6 to 12 years

Erikson believed that, at various stages in life, individuals are confronted with a conflict or crisis. For example, a newborn baby is faced with the crisis of whether or not its carer can be trusted to provide for its needs. It responds to that crisis either positively (trusting in its parent's dependable care) or negatively (experiencing neglect at the hand of its caregiver).

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<sup>23</sup> Wangerin, Walter. *The Orphean Passages*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1986, 20-21, as quoted by Ratcliff, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Stonehouse, Catherine. *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*. Grand Rapids, Mich: 1998, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Stonehouse, 46 referring to *Childhood and Society*, Erik H Erikson, New York: Norton, 1985, 247-73. Specific age designations from *Life-Span Human Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Carol K Sigelman and David R Shaffer, Pacific Grove, Calif: Brookes/Cole, 1995, 269.

As a young psychologist in the early 1920s, Jean Piaget became fascinated by the thinking of children, particularly their responses to an IQ test. For the next 50 years he studied children and identified four stages of *cognitive development*.<sup>26</sup>

Stage	Age Range
1. Sensorimotor	Birth to 18 months
2. Preoperational or intuitive	2-6 years
3. Concrete operational	7-12 years
4. Formal operational	13-21 years

Piaget believed the mind is not like a mirror passively reflecting whatever is held up to it; rather, the mind is like an artist creating its own interpretation of what it sees.<sup>27</sup> We take in information by seeing, hearing and experiencing; then organise that information to make meaning from it.

Piaget used three words to describe the process of “mental organisation”: assimilation, accommodation and equilibration.<sup>28</sup> Stonehouse describes *assimilation* as taking new information and storing it into an existing mental category or structure. *Accommodation* is required to adjust a pre-existing category or to establish a new category to deal with the new information. *Disequilibrium* occurs when our understanding – our way of categorising certain things – is not accurate, causing a sense of inadequacy or discomfort. That triggers the desire to restore equilibrium – to set in motion the process of equilibration. Our inner sense of adequacy is restored when we accommodate our thinking and adjust the categories to more closely reflect reality, as we perceive it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Stonehouse, 71 referring to *Children and Adolescents: Interpretive Essays on Jean Piaget*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, David Elkind, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Stonehouse, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Stonehouse, 71-72.

In the 1930s Piaget began to study the moral development of children, focusing on 3-11-year-olds. Lawrence Kohlberg discovered this work and, building on it, continued the study of *moral development*.<sup>30</sup> He identified three levels of moral reasoning and two stages within each level.<sup>31</sup> The first three stages cover the childhood years:

*Preconventional Level*

1. Heteronomous Morality
2. Instrumental Exchange

*Conventional Level*

3. Mutual Interpersonal Relations

As Kohlberg interviewed people and heard their response to moral dilemmas he posed, he traced changes in the way children understood and used various moral values and perspectives.<sup>32</sup>

Fowler was influenced by the research of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson in his own research into *faith development*. He discovered that as individuals responded to the challenges and crises described in Erikson's model, faith developed as well. "With each new level of development persons have new capacities for relating to and trusting one another along with new potentials for a relationship with God."<sup>33</sup>

Fowler identified one pre-stage and six stages of faith development. Those relating to children are:

Undifferentiated Faith (0-2 year olds)

1. Intuitive-Projective Faith (2-6-year-olds)

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<sup>30</sup> Stonehouse, 94 referring to "My Personal Search for Universal Morality", Lawrence Kohlberg in *The Kohlberg Legacy for the Helping Professions*, Lisa Kuhmerker, Birmingham, Ala: REP Books, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> Stonehouse, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Stonehouse, 150, referring to *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, James W Fowler, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, 57; and Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 109.

2. Mythic-Literal Faith (6-11 year olds)
3. Synthetic-Conventional Faith (11-15-year-olds)

### *Undifferentiated Faith*

Fowler's first stage of faith development grew out of Erikson's description of the life crisis in his psychosocial model: trust vs mistrust. In the first few months of life, a child learns what trust and mistrust are by the way it is or is not nurtured by those in close relationship to it.

Fowler believes that our first "pre-images" of God are formed in this early stage.<sup>34</sup> This embryonic faith is formed before children have language to describe it and before they have concepts to compare it to. They will grow up without any memory of it being formed, however it is a critical stage of their faith development. As Fowler states, "although it does not determine the course of our later faith, it lays the foundation on which later faith will build or that will have to be rebuilt in later faith".<sup>35</sup>

### *Intuitive-Projective Faith*

Around the age of two children begin to develop what Fowler terms *intuitive-projective faith*. As identified in the research of Piaget and Kohlberg, children of this age tend to be egocentric in their thinking. They are unable to compare two different perspectives on the same topic, and simply assume without question that their opinion or perspective is the only one. Everything is interpreted in terms of their own experiences and their understanding of reality.

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<sup>34</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Fowler, James W. *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991, 103, as quoted in Stonehouse, 152.

Carol Mumford illustrates how a child understands a new experience based on what they have already experienced. Upon looking up at the sky the child commented: “I think it’s marvellous that the sun stays up in the sky. I think some string is holding it up. Why doesn’t it fall down?”<sup>36</sup>

There is an implication here for those involved in working with children. No matter how diligent we are in ensuring we do not confuse a child’s understanding about God by using figurative language they may not be able to grasp, they will still invariably form an image of God based on their own experience of the world around them.

From a cognitive development perspective, a child’s thinking is also what Fowler describes as “fluid and magical”.<sup>37</sup> As a result, their reasoning appears unconnected and illogical, with different information popping up in seemingly unrelated fashion.

Children in this stage bring together stories and images from their experience to form their image of God. According to Fowler, this is the case even for children from non-religious homes.<sup>38</sup> Sources for those stories and images may include television, movies and books.

Dr Ana-Maria Rizzuto, in her American study of the origins of God images, finds that:

despite our secularisation and religious fragmentation, religious symbols and language are so widely present in this society that virtually no child reaches school age without having constructed – with or without religious instruction – an image or images of God.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mumford, Carol. *Young Children and Religion*. London: Edward Arnold, 1982, 35 as quoted in *Children Finding Faith*, Francis Bridger, Bletchley, Eng: Scripture Union, 2000, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 129.

Imagination plays a key role in a child's faith development in this stage. Fowler refers to one of the German terms for imagination meaning literally the "power of forming into one".<sup>40</sup>

Imagination is the power to form in our minds the images of reality. Children use their imagination to form their image of God. This will be further explored later.

### *Mythic-Literal Faith*

Around the age of six or seven, children begin to develop what Fowler calls a *mythic-literal faith*, highlighting the important role of story – myth – and the literal thinking of this age group. A child in this stage is capable of inductive and deductive reasoning. While a child in the previous stage mixes fantasy, fact and feeling, the mythical-literal child can differentiate between what is real and what is make-believe. They have a desire to work things out and to determine what is really true.<sup>41</sup>

Children in this stage are also able to take into account the perspectives of others when constructing an understanding of God. They are limited in the range of perspectives they can comprehend, most easily understanding the viewpoints of family and friends.<sup>42</sup>

A mythic-literal faith understands justice in terms of the fairness that typifies Kohlberg's stage 2.<sup>43</sup> This is the fairness of instrumental exchange, where what one person is entitled to, the other is also – or reciprocity. From this belief in reciprocity and the literal thinking that characterises children of this age group comes the view of God as a powerful parent or ruler who is stern but fair.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 135.

<sup>42</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 139.

<sup>43</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 144.

<sup>44</sup> Stonehouse, 160.

In this age group children begin to take ownership of the stories, beliefs and observances that are valued by those who belong in their faith community.<sup>45</sup> They become more identified with this community as they learn the stories and participate in the rituals. John Westerhoff has called this the period of *experienced faith*.<sup>46</sup> It is a time when patterns of believing, imaging and trusting are based on what is learned from others.

### *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*

Between the ages of 11 and 15 children begin to develop what Fowler calls *synthetic-conventional faith*. With the ability to think abstractly and engage in deeper reflection, children at this stage can reflect more deeply on the meaning of their master stories and their faith. This reflection leads to the beginning of synthetic-conventional faith – a faith constructed by synthesizing or fusing together the meanings, beliefs and values they have distilled from various sources.<sup>47</sup> The basis of that synthesizing will be the standards of their peers, society, church and family. This will become important when we come to look at the role of story in the construction of faith in a 10-12 year old.

Interpersonal relationships are increasingly important to children in this age group. They will want to spend more time with their friends and less with their family. The need to be accepted by that peer group leads the adolescent to conform to the norms and standards of the group. In so doing, they take on the values and beliefs of those most significant to them.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 149.

<sup>46</sup> Westerhoff III, John H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* East Malvern, Vic: Dove Communications, 1976, 91ff.

<sup>47</sup> Stonehouse, 164.

<sup>48</sup> Stonehouse, 164-165.

The concerns for identity and interpersonal relationships in an adolescent are reflected in their image of God. God becomes personal at this stage. Although some concrete imagery from the previous stage may linger, they begin to develop an image of God in terms of companionship, guidance, and support and of someone who knows and loves them.<sup>49</sup>

Fowler found that young people construct their first articulate, self-defining belief system through conforming to the values and standards of others rather than independently forming their own system.<sup>50</sup> This highlights the importance of peers and adults to help a young person form a synthetic-conventional faith.

Nye believes Fowler's and others' emphasis on the development of intellectual and moral reasoning in children means that the spiritual dimension is downplayed.<sup>51</sup> She warns of the danger of looking at just "part" of the child:

My passionate concern...is about preventing Christian nurture and education from suffering from the same extremism – developing 'parts' of a child's faith – her biblical knowledge here, her moral values there, plus a measure or two of belonging to a supportive community, and the like. The consequences of ignoring spirituality in faith formation are far more serious than mere atomism of disciplines and research. Overlooking the primacy of spirituality develops, in effect, a potentially life-long impression that faith involves just parts of the person, but does not really touch who people really are, and are continually becoming.<sup>52</sup>

Nye refers to a three-year research project on children's spirituality at the University of Nottingham.<sup>53</sup> She claims that most psychological study on children's religion had debated the degree to which children at different ages had cognitive limitations on understanding

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<sup>49</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 156.

<sup>50</sup> Stonehouse, 165.

<sup>51</sup> Hay & Nye, 51

<sup>52</sup> Nye, "Christian Perspectives", 91.

<sup>53</sup> Hay & Nye outlines the results of that research.

religious material. “Children’s concepts of God also seem to show predictive cognitive hallmarks of childhood – children less than twelve years of age apparently struggling with abstract and symbolic conceptualisation when formally questioned.”<sup>54</sup>

Ronald Goldman, whose psychological research on childhood religion influenced Christian education for decades, inferred, on the basis of his study of children’s religious cognitive psychology, that children had limited spiritual consciousness. He referred to children being in “pre-religious” and “sub-religious” stages.<sup>55</sup>

The legacy of Goldman’s and others’ thinking was twofold. First, researchers assumed that children could handle only a watered down version of religious life. The implication was that spirituality was an exclusively adult experience. The second part of the legacy, as noted by Nye, was that “children’s expressions on apparently spiritual matters should be treated as cute, accidental, unintentionally meaningful, frequently illogical and a source of adult amusement”.<sup>56</sup>

Current scholarship is moving away from this erroneous thinking. In fact, as Nye notes: “it turns out that children, partly by *virtue* of their distinctive psychological characteristics, have an intriguingly rich capacity for spirituality, for a kind of religious knowing and being which is neither contingent on their religious knowledge nor moral accountability”.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Nye, “Christian Perspectives”, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Goldman, Ronald. *Readiness for Religion: A Basis for Developmental Religious Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965, 23-24.

<sup>56</sup> Nye, “Christian Perspectives”, 93.

<sup>57</sup> Nye, “Christian Perspectives”, 93.

Glenn Cupit agrees, reiterating that “for Jesus, ‘faith’ is not affirming doctrine, which would naturally exclude younger children”.<sup>58</sup> Rather than a matter of belief, Cupit says children’s faith is a matter of trust.

One of the features of children’s spirituality that Nye found in her study of a largely secular group of British children is the lack of compartmentalisation of spirituality from the rest of their lives. “We had to take the child as a whole to get a feel for her spiritual life, which flies like a bird through their intellectual life *and* their emotional life *and* their social life *and* their cultural life *and* their moral life.”<sup>59</sup> This confirms Cupit’s premise that just by being alive children will encounter God.<sup>60</sup>

One of the concerning discoveries of Nye’s research is that contemporary culture has a tendency to close down spiritual awareness in older children. She describes this rejection of Christianity by children as a “culturally constructed suppression or even repression of spirituality”.<sup>61</sup>

Nye’s research indicates that by the age of ten, children begin to display a “shyness” towards spiritual things, often expressed through their perceived embarrassment or a fear that they will be thought of as stupid, foolish or even mentally unbalanced if they speak about spiritual things in public.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cupit, Glenn. *Children and Spirituality*. Central Coast Business Centre, NSW: Scripture Union Australia, 2005, 40

<sup>59</sup> Nye, “Christian Perspectives”, 93.

<sup>60</sup> Cupit, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Hay & Nye, 144.

<sup>62</sup> Other research confirms Nye’s findings. A large-scale study of religious development in Finnish children in 1991 revealed high levels of spiritual experience in children up to about 12 years of age, followed by a steep decline. (Kalevi Tamminen, *Religious Development in Childhood and Youth: An Empirical Study*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1991 as quoted in Hay & Nye, 57.) A similar study in England showed a decline in religious interest in British children from the ages of 8 to 15. (Leslie Francis, “The decline in attitudes towards religion among 8-15 years olds” in *Educational Studies* 13 (2), 1987, 125-134, as quoted in Hay & Nye, 57.)

Nye argues that this trend can be attributed to the influence of secularism:

It is around the age of 12 that children in Western culture typically have their first serious induction into the scientific tradition of the Enlightenment, often accompanied by an explicit religious scepticism.<sup>63</sup>

### *A Paradigm of Children's Spiritual Formation*

Anthony presents a useful paradigm of children's spirituality. The model is based on two typologies.

The first is Urban Holmes's matrix depicting human spirituality on two intersecting axes.<sup>64</sup>

The horizontal axis represents the apophatic/kataphatic scale. This depicts the degree to which there is an emptying (apophatic) technique of meditation as opposed to an imaginal (kataphatic) technique of meditation. The vertical axis represents the speculative/affective scale. This depicts the degree to which a person's mind is illuminated (speculative) as opposed to the heart or emotions (affective).

The second typology Anthony builds into his model is David Kolb's Learning Cycle, in which he identifies how individuals experience and process new information in their world.<sup>65</sup>

Kolb's matrix also consists of two intersecting axes. The vertical axis describes how a person comes to *perceive* new information; one end of the axis depicts concrete experience

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<sup>63</sup> Hay & Nye, 57.

<sup>64</sup> Holmes, Urban. *A History of Spirituality*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980, as quoted in Anthony, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Kolb, David. *Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984, as quoted in Anthony, 31.

(feeling), the other end is abstract conceptualisation (thinking). According to Kolb, children perceive new information on the basis of intuitive feeling or cognitive reasoning. The horizontal axis depicts the way in which people *process* new information. At one end is reflective observation (watching); at the other end is active experimentation (doing). Children process new information by either watching others interact with it or by getting personally involved themselves.

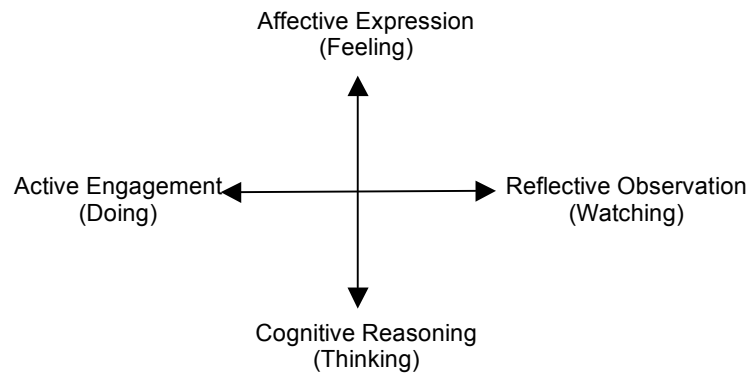
Anthony takes these two typologies – one providing insight into how one develops spiritually and one providing understanding on how a person learns cognitively – and suggests an integration of them to describe the complex process of spiritual formation, particularly in the life of children.

Anthony describes spiritual formation as “an interactive relationship between...two variables: *experiencing* and *knowing*”.<sup>66</sup> We *experience* God in profound and personal ways. It may occur as we gaze into the night sky or as we are touched by a scene in a movie. At some point we realise that there is something or Someone else, and we sense that it may be God. And slowly we are drawn into a relationship with him as we come to *know* him.

The two elements of experiencing and knowing God can be displayed as a matrix. How we *experience* God is represented on the vertical axis; how we *know* God or learn about him is on the horizontal.

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<sup>66</sup> Anthony, Michael J. “Putting Children’s Spirituality in Perspective.” In *Perspectives on Children’s Spiritual Formation*, Michael J Anthony, ed, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006, 33.



Anthony explains:

Regarding the vertical axis, there have always been two outcomes of the spiritual life. The first focuses on an affective spirituality that focuses on the engagement of one's affective expression (ie, feelings, emotions, inner impressions, etc). The second is a less speculative spirituality that is housed in cognitive reasoning (ie, thinking, reasoning, rational thought, etc). Viewed this way, we experience God on a continuum somewhere between how we feel about God (a function of our affect, or feeling) and what we believe to be true about God (a function of our mind, or thinking).

The horizontal axis describes how people come to learn about God. At one end of the axis are those who prefer to learn about God by reflective observation. They watch closely the faith of their parents, Sunday school teacher, camp counsellor, pastor, etc. Their faith is developed through less kinaesthetic means such as study, group prayer and small-group interaction.

At the other end of the axis are those who prefer to learn about God through hands-on activities.... They prefer doing over watching.<sup>67</sup>

Overlapping these two axes creates a typology that combines the way in which a person comes to experience a relationship with God and how they develop an ongoing relationship with him.

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<sup>67</sup> Anthony, 34-35.

This typology can begin to show how films and books can influence a child's spiritual formation, as an engagement of affective and speculative spirituality combined with reflective observation.

### *A spiritual journey*

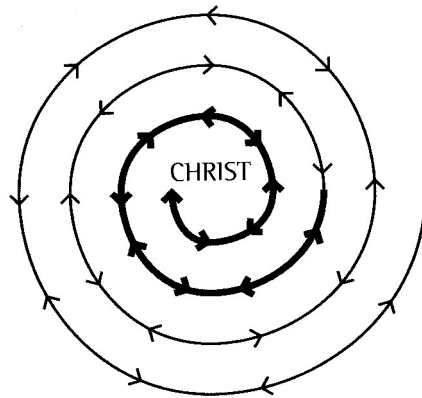
In our contemplation of children's spirituality, I find it helpful to think of it in terms of a journey.<sup>68</sup> The idea of a journey is behind a further model of spirituality that, although illustrating our understanding of a person's conversion to Christ, can also help us understand their spiritual formation.

Ron Buckland has developed a model to illustrate how a person becomes a Christian. Buckland was not happy with the limitations of the traditional "boxed set", where a person is outside God's kingdom (the box) until they repent, at which time they are "in Christ"; or with the "centred set", where every person is moving towards or away from Jesus at any moment in time, but there is no clear indication of where a person actually becomes a Christian. He therefore developed what he terms "the combined set", as illustrated below.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> In 2001 I participated in Scripture Union's International Children's Ministry Consultation in Nottingham, England. The theme of the consultation was "Joining children on their spiritual journey" and one of the outcomes was a statement affirming the role and responsibility of children's workers in journeying alongside children in their discovery of and relationship with God. Catherine Stonehouse also picks up this theme in her book *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* quoted in this paper.

<sup>69</sup> Buckland, Ron. *Children and the Gospel: Excellence in ministry with children and their families*. West Gosford, NSW: Scripture Union Resources for Ministry Unit, 2001, 75.



Buckland explains:

What this is showing is that all people move backwards and forward in their relationship with Christ. It is also showing that the idea of being in or out of God's kingdom also can become a reality. At some point, known only to God, a person can move into the situation in which they are now growing or drifting from Christian discipleship. They have a relationship with Christ as Lord; different from the relationship they had with him before. Before it was a creature/creator relationship, based on the grace of the creator. Now it is a child/parent relationship, based on being adopted into the family of God through a faith-link to Jesus the Christ.<sup>70</sup>

Coupled with this model, Buckland refers to "decisions *towards* Christ".<sup>71</sup> He suggests that, rather than making a once-for-all decision to follow Jesus, many people take gradual steps or decisions towards him. He describes the Christian life as an ongoing series of responses to Christ. "That doesn't mean we are converted over and over again. But it does mean that we continually give evidence about the direction of our lives by the decisions we keep on making."<sup>72</sup>

I find Buckland's model and his understanding of decisions towards Christ helpful in ministry with children. Children are on a spiritual journey. Along the journey there may be dramatic

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<sup>70</sup> Buckland, 76.

<sup>71</sup> Buckland, 80ff.

<sup>72</sup> Buckland, 82-83.

experiences with God or slow awakenings to his presence. Their spirituality is not limited to a religious conversion. Similarly, it is not determined by their attendance at church events. As Anthony observes, “children’s spirituality is multidimensional and convoluted”.<sup>73</sup>

I will now explore how film and literature may assist children in their spiritual formation journey, looking first at the role of imagination.

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<sup>73</sup> Anthony, 24.

## Chapter 2

# Imagination

Francis Bridger underlines the role of imagination as a vehicle for the discovery of God and the growth of faith. He believes we must develop what he terms a “*practical theology of imagination*”<sup>74</sup> in order to help children discover God and to grow in faith.

As we shall see, imagination has not always been viewed positively, particularly in theological circles. Garrett Green argues that religion itself has often been equated with imagination<sup>75</sup> and the two relegated to the realm of the superfluous. He argues that “religion, in an age virtually defined by the paradigm of natural science, has generally been understood as the great alternative to science, as the chief example of the *other* way of thinking and acting.”<sup>76</sup>

According to James Mackey, imagination’s apparent irrelevance to scientific and technological achievement, combined with its lack of economic usefulness, makes it of little importance in Western mindset. He writes:

In the common perception, imagination is seen as ... ornamental and peripheral to the main business of life which is ... carried on by the sciences and in its practical form of technology, by the creation of wealth and the raising of material standards of living.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Bridger, Francis. *Opening Windows into Heaven: Imagination, spirituality and the growth of faith*. Sydney South: Aquila Press, 2001, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Green, Garrett. *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1989, 10

<sup>76</sup> Green, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Mackey, James. *Religious Imagination*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986, 3 as quoted in Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 3.

In medieval time, society's worldview was laden with imagination in its understanding of spirituality reality. People, including the intellectual elite, believed symbolic meanings were to be found in the universe. As a result, God could be discerned in nature and the cosmos as well as in Scripture. Astrology was seen as a God-ordained means for discovering his purposes. The planets were perceived as symbols of divine revelation. Meanings could only be unlocked by those with divinely inspired imagination.

The rise of Protestantism and the impact of the Enlightenment broke down the medieval worldview. In the process, imagination was, in the words of Bridger, "consigned ... to the bottom drawer, if not the bin".<sup>78</sup>

By the nineteenth century, Rationalists had relegated both imagination and religion into the realm of fantasy. Ludwig Feuerbach criticised religion as "the dream of the human mind". He claimed Christians live in a dream world in which they see things "not in the light of reality and necessity but in the entrancing splendour of imagination and caprice". Religion, according to Feuerbach, is nothing but an illusion, evidence of the "childlike condition of humanity".<sup>79</sup>

Though Feuerbach's "reduction of religion to imagination"<sup>80</sup> is a powerful criticism of religion in its own right, Green notes that Karl Marx went even further in attacking imagination.

Religion, according to Marx, is the "fantastic realisation of the human essence", the "illusory

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<sup>78</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Feuerbach, Ludwig. *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Stuttgart: Phillip Reclam Jun, 1969, 53; *Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, New York: Harper & Row, 1957, 13, as quoted in Green, 23.

<sup>80</sup> Green, 23.

happiness of the people”, and the “opium of the people”.<sup>81</sup> He believed that oppressive capitalists drug the working class with “religious fantasies” in order to exploit them.

The Enlightenment, of which Feuerbach and Marx were heirs, attempted to replace imagination with science. Within this worldview, as Bridger points out, there was no need for imagination. “Truth could be discovered by empirical study, testing of hypotheses and in indisputable processes of deductive logic. Out of these would come general rules to govern the natural world.”<sup>82</sup>

As Bridger notes, this view has persisted in Western thought until the present day:

Behind [it] lay an assumption that all statements could be divided into two kinds: those which could be empirically and scientifically verified and those which couldn't. The former were classified as factual and therefore public truth; the latter were seen as belonging to the realm of mere opinions in which notions of truth could not be applied. Thus began what came to be known as the fact/value split – a divide which dominated Western culture and philosophy until the latter half of the twentieth century. Only allegedly scientific fact could be counted as trustworthy and true. Everything else, including faith, morality, aesthetics, values, beliefs, should be held as unverifiable and subjective.<sup>83</sup>

This view of imagination influenced theology as well, as the Church attempted to accommodate Rationalism within an understanding of faith. But there were other factors involved.

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<sup>81</sup> Marx, Karl. “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right”. In *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on Religion*, New York: Schocken Books, 1964, 41 as quoted in Green, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 6.

The Church itself became suspicious of imagination on three counts. First, that imagination leads to idolatry; second, that it denies the sovereignty of God's grace; and third, that it undermines a theology of the Word.<sup>84</sup>

### *Imagination and idolatry*

The Bible has many examples of how imagination can lead to idolatry.<sup>85</sup> These examples have given some validity to suspicions concerning imagination that, without the grace of God, can lead people away from him, rather than to him.

### *The sovereignty of grace*

The argument against imagination here is that "if the human faculty of imagination can provide a means to know God, what room is left for divine sovereignty"<sup>86</sup> or, indeed, revelation?

Two Swiss theologians – Emil Brunner and Karl Barth – argued this very point in the 1930s.<sup>87</sup> Liberalism of the day claimed that it was possible to build a bridge between humanity and God by means of the human intellect. Because God had made people in his image, presumably with the inbuilt capacity to know him, and was continuing the enlightenment of the human mind and spirit, it was believed people could respond to him with their own resources.

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<sup>84</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Examples from the Old Testament include the people of Israel making a golden calf while Moses was on Mt Sinai (Exodus 32); the prophets condemning Israel for turning to Baal worship at every opportunity. In the New Testament, Paul sums up the natural condition of humanity as being one that follows after idolatry (Romans 1:22, 23, 25).

<sup>86</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Anthropology in Theological Perspectives*. London: Continuum, 2004, 49. (Accessed at //books.google.com.au.)

“By the end of the twentieth century,” Bridger notes, “Western theology had become so enthralled by the Rationalist assumption of human progress and intellectual expansion, that natural theology was seen as the key to belief in God.”<sup>88</sup>

Brunner and Barth disagreed on the grounds that this thinking invalidated the need for grace. If human beings were capable of reaching God by their own means, where did grace come into it?

However, Brunner and Barth differed in their views about the “image of God”. Brunner believed that, despite the Fall and the presence of sin, there was enough of God’s image remaining in humanity to “point us towards our need for God”.<sup>89</sup> Brunner claimed that the image of God in us, although contaminated by sin, is the “point of contact” between human beings and God.

Barth, on the other hand, felt this understanding denied the action of grace. He argued that we can only know God because he has re-created his image in us, not because he meets us in the old image. Consequently, our knowing God has everything to do with divine initiative and nothing to do with human capacity.<sup>90</sup>

The controversy highlighted a dilemma. A central tenet of the Christian faith is that God makes contact with human beings. The challenge is to find a way of describing this “that not only does justice to the character of revelation as grace but also makes clear in purely

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<sup>88</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 9.

<sup>89</sup> Pannenberg, 50.

<sup>90</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 9-10.

'forma' or theologically neutral terms what it means to say that human beings receive that revelation."<sup>91</sup>

In other words, how can we know God or how does God reveal himself to us? If, in line with what Brunner claimed, there is some part of the divine image in us, then Bridger believes the human imagination in some way reflects this. As Cheryl Forbes argues: "Imagination is the *imago dei* (image of God) in us. It marks us as God's human creatures. It helps us to know God, receive his grace, worship him and see life through his eyes."<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, if Barth is right, the imagination cannot function in this way because the image already in us is incapable of being the point of contact between us and God as it is too tainted. In Barth's view, therefore, the imagination cannot be a vehicle for revelation.

Green's and Bridger's commentaries on this argument lead me to conclude it is possible to see a place for imagination in a person's discovery of God without limiting of the role of grace.

### *Theology of the Word*

The Reformation established the dual principle of *sola gratia, sola scripture* (only by grace, only by Scripture). It is by these two means that God reveals himself to us. Green argues that "with only a slight shift of emphasis, Barth's account of how revelation is received can be redescribed as a *conversation of the imagination* [emphasis mine]".<sup>93</sup> He points out that, instead of talking in terms of a *point* of contact, Barth prefers to depict a "drama of

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<sup>91</sup> Green, 25.

<sup>92</sup> Forbes, Cheryl. *Imagination: Embracing a Theology of Wonder*. Bromley: Marc Europe, 1986, 18 as quoted in Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Green, 38.

transformation, a story in which the human creature is originally formed by God, becomes de-formed or misshapen by sin, and is finally re-formed by grace through being conformed to the image of God in Christ.”<sup>94</sup>

If, as Bridger proposes, the image of God in us is transformed by the Word so that we can meet God in the Word, it follows that the same can be said of the imagination. God can renew our imagination so it becomes a vehicle for revelation.

Imagination does not possess an innate power to save. But, as Green and Bridger point out, it is a vehicle for revelation – “the arena where revelation takes place”.<sup>95</sup> Bridger concludes:

Imagination, properly understood as the name of a basic human ability, ... identifies that specific point where ... the Word of God becomes effective in human lives. Imagination is the anthropological point of contact for divine revelation. It is not the ‘foundation’, the ‘ground’, the ‘preunderstanding’, or the ‘ontological basis’ for revelation; it is simply the place where it happens – better, the way in which it happens.<sup>96</sup>

## *A Theology of Imagination*

Despite proponents of the Enlightenment seeking to dispense with imagination on the grounds that empirical methods of research and logic were the only means of discovering truth, science itself has proven otherwise. Scientists themselves have shown that scientific breakthroughs are as much the result of imaginative thinking as empirical observation and experimentation.

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<sup>94</sup> Green, 38.

<sup>95</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 12.

<sup>96</sup> Green, 40.

In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn demonstrates that the major breakthroughs in the history of science have come, not as a result of empirical research or logic, but through the outworking of the creative imaginations of individual scientists.<sup>97</sup> We can therefore conclude that imagination and science essentially complement each other. In fact, Bridger asserts “imagination is ... essential to the public task of discovering reality”.<sup>98</sup>

Green regards imagination as a paradigmatic faculty. “Imagination is the means by which we are able to represent anything not directly accessible, including *both* the world of the imaginary *and* recalcitrant aspects of the real world; it is the medium of fiction as well as of fact.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, imagination is “the ability to see one thing as another.”<sup>100</sup>

If imagination is a vehicle for discovering truth in the scientific realm, it follows that we can accept imagination as having a part to play in our discovery of God and as a vehicle for expressing truth, particularly in the field of literature and movies.

### *Truth and the imagination*

In demonstrating imagination’s ability to convey truth, Leland Ryken refers to the Bible’s heavy use of images and metaphors. Ryken notes:

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<sup>97</sup> Quoted in *Atoms and Icons*, Michael Fuller, London: Mowbray, 1995. Quoted in Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 14. Bridger gives the example of the discovery of an adequate model to represent DNA. It was not after a long process of research and mathematical calculations that Crick and Watson realised in 1953 that they had found the correct double helix model to represent exactly how DNA molecules are patterned. Rather, it was the result of Watson’s imagination after he had been arranging and rearranging cardboard models of DNA on his desk. Bridger quotes John Gribbin (*In Search of the Double Helix*, London: Penguin, 1985) who claims Crick and Watson were not experts in any of the areas of science that produced the model. Watson’s contribution was his ability to see the broad picture and to come up with something new.

<sup>98</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 14.

<sup>99</sup> Green, 66.

<sup>100</sup> Green, 73.

The Bible is overwhelmingly literary in its form. The one thing it is *not* is what we so often picture it as being – a theological outline with proof texts attached. When asked to define ‘neighbour’, Jesus told a story. He constantly spoke in images and metaphors: ‘I am the light of the world’; ‘You are the salt of the earth’. The Bible repeatedly appeals to the intelligence through the imagination.<sup>101</sup>

Just as models, such as the double helix, are used in science to aid our understanding of reality, so the biblical models of metaphors and rituals help us understand and experience spiritual realities by engaging our imaginations.<sup>102</sup>

A term used to convey the work of the imagination is *image forth*. Dorothy Sayers links imagination’s work of “imaging forth” with Christian theology:

Let us take note of a new word that has crept into the argument by way of Christian theology – the word *image*. Suppose, having rejected the words ‘copy’, ‘imitation’ and ‘representation’ as inadequate, we substitute the word ‘image’ and say that what the artist is doing is *to image forth* something or the other, and connect that with St Paul’s phrase: ‘God ... hath spoken to us by His son, the...*express image* of His person.’ – Something which, by being an image, *expresses* that which it images.<sup>103</sup>

Ryken notes that the Bible repeatedly “images forth”. Its usual way of expressing God’s truth is not through sermon or theological outline, but by story, poem, letter – all literary forms and products of the imagination. “The point is not simply that the Bible allows for the imagination

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<sup>101</sup> Ryken, Leland. “With Many Such Parables: The Imagination as a Means of Grace.” In *Developing a Christian Imagination: An Interpretive Anthology*, Compiled by Warren W Wiersbe, Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1995, 244.

<sup>102</sup> For example, some of the metaphors the Bible uses to describe the nature of God include: a shepherd (Psalm 23); a king (1 Sam 12:12); a servant (Philippians 2:7). Jesus told a parable about a son who asked for his inheritance from his father and went away and squandered it, only to return to the loving arms of his father when he came to his senses (Luke 15:11-32). The story provides a vivid image of the nature of God, whom we easily identify with the father in the story. Two examples of rituals are baptism and communion.

<sup>103</sup> Sayers, Dorothy L. “Towards a Christian Aesthetic” in *The New Orpheus*, Nathan A Scott, ed. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964, 13 as quoted in Ryken, 245.

as a form of communication. It is rather that the biblical writers and Jesus found it impossible to communicate the truth of God without using the resources of the imagination.”<sup>104</sup>

Imagination, therefore, is a crucial dimension in grasping truth. It constructs pictures to help us understand conceptual truth.

### *Imaginative worlds*

Imagination has a role in creating imaginative worlds or alternative realities (sometimes known as paracosms) that provide a means for discovering God.<sup>105</sup> In the context of children, this is a powerful aspect of imagination.

Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) wrote: “Imagination is used by Providence to draw men [sic] towards reality”,<sup>106</sup> implying that imagination is not reality itself.

More will be said about this later, but Fowler argues that the creation of alternate realities is psychologically necessary. Provided that they contain an element of realism, such worlds provide “effective ways for children to externalise their inner anxieties and to find ordering images and stories by which to begin to shape their lives”.<sup>107</sup> Driving the process is

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<sup>104</sup> Ryken, 245.

<sup>105</sup> Examples of these are explored later in this paper. Concerning one, the world of Harry Potter, a 14-year-old girl commented, “The Harry Potter books take you to another reality, to a place that’s out of this world – a place you’d never think of yourself.” (Moore, Sharon. *We Love Harry Potter*. New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 1999, 10 as quoted in Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 18.)

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in *The Psychological Dynamics of Religious Experience*, Andrea Godin, Birmingham, Alab: Religious Education Press, 1985, 252 as quoted in Berryman, 109.

<sup>107</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 130.

imagination, “a powerful and permanent force by which we compose an ultimate environment and orient ourselves toward the being or beings that constitute its character”.<sup>108</sup>

In other words, by serving as playgrounds of the mind, imaginative worlds provide a place where children can work through issues in an unreal environment, the outcomes of which they can bring back into reality.

As Bridger describes:

It is in the alternate reality that all kinds of things can be tested out which could not be tested with safety in the so-called real world. Thus it is often while in a paracosm that moral dilemmas are faced and resolved, relationships worked out, inner fears addressed and behavioural boundaries set.<sup>109</sup>

Ryken calls this “the lie that tells the truth”.<sup>110</sup> He argues that all fictitious worlds are deliberate constructions. They are made-up fantasies. But they tell the truth about human nature and about the things that really matter to us. As Ryken explains, “Despite all its far-flung fantasies, the artistic imagination is a window to reality. The imagination transforms the materials it takes from everyday life, but by means of that transformation we are led to see reality more clearly.”<sup>111</sup>

Some Christians reject alternative realities such as the world of Harry Potter on the grounds that they encourage children to believe in lies. But, as Bridger notes:

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<sup>108</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 131.

<sup>109</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 19.

<sup>110</sup> Ryken, Leland. *The Liberated Imagination*. Wheaton, Ill: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1989, 113 as quoted in Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 19.

<sup>111</sup> Ryken, Leland. *The Liberated Imagination*, 113 as quoted in Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 19.

the creation of paracosms is not only psychologically inevitable but spiritually necessary. For it is in such worlds that children can be presented with – and begin to work through – some of the deeper questions of life.<sup>112</sup>

The question left for us to ask, then, is how do alternative worlds and indeed the broader aspect of imagination outworked in stories help us encounter God?

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<sup>112</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 19.

## Chapter 3

# The Role of Storytelling

Children across generations and cultures have delighted in stories. From an early age, an often-repeated phrase is, “Tell me a story”. Stories open up the imagination, allowing the reader, or, in the case of a movie, the viewer, to experience events, characters, situations and ideas that would never be possible in real life.

“Growing up without books is growing up deprived,” argues Dr Perri Klass, “and with a deprivation that puts one at risk for failure.”<sup>113</sup>

Why is storytelling so important? How can it influence a child’s success or “failure” (to quote Klass)? Can reading about Superman or Frodo Baggins really have a profound effect on a child’s development as a person? Dr Gene Edward Veith, professor of English at Concordia University believes it can:

Just as real-life experiences are occasions for learning and growing, the vicarious experiences made possible by literature also can shape values, sensibilities, beliefs and even personality. In other words, the great power of literature, to borrow Sir Philip Sydney’s phrasing, is ‘to teach and to delight’.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Dr Perri Klass, assistant professor of paediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine, quoted in “Literacy Facts and Factoids”, [http://www.publishers.org/SchoolDiv/issues/issues\\_04\\_Reading\\_subPgs/issues\\_04\\_Reading\\_03.htm](http://www.publishers.org/SchoolDiv/issues/issues_04_Reading_subPgs/issues_04_Reading_03.htm) (accessed 27 Oct 2007).

<sup>114</sup> Abanes, Richard. *Fantasy and Your Family: Exploring The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter and Modern Magick*. Camp Hill, Penn: Christian Publications, 2002, ix.

Researchers Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman have shown in relation to business and industry that “we are more influenced by stories (vignettes that are whole and make sense in themselves) than by data”.<sup>115</sup>

Some would argue that, rather than assisting in a child’s development, stories (especially those of the fantasy genre) actually do more harm than good. Dr Kieran Egan, professor of education at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia notes:

It does not require refined theories to recognize that telling children certain kinds of fantasy stories can induce fear – from the not-really-believed monsters under the bed who might grab your bare ankles with their cold, bony fingers to seriously disabling phobias that bring night-terrors and years of insomnia. On the other hand, in some stories we are offered a fantasy world that is ubiquitously cute and saccharined, a world of ‘happy-fantasy’ from which the inconveniences of pain, death, disease, cruelty, and so on, are completely absent.<sup>116</sup>

Plato argued that the beginning of children’s education must come in the form of stories. But he was firm in his belief that not all stories were suitable for children:

Our first business will be to supervise the making of fables and legends, rejecting all which are unsatisfactory; and we will ask nurses and mothers to tell their children only those which we have approved, and to think more of molding children's souls with these stories than they now do of rubbing their limbs to make them strong and shapely.<sup>117</sup>

Egan suggests that Plato believed the stories children hear early in their lives will have a profound influence on them, and so he wanted to eradicate any that created, in his

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<sup>115</sup> Peters, Thomas J and Robert H Waterman, Jr. *In Search of Excellence: Lesson from America’s Best-Run Companies*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982, 61 as quoted in Ryken, “With Many Such Parables”, 251.

<sup>116</sup> Egan, Kieran. “Fantasy and Reality in Children’s Stories.” <http://www.educ.sfu.ca/kegan/FantasyReality.html> (accessed 15 Sep 2007).

<sup>117</sup> Plato. *Republic II (377)* as quoted in Egan.

estimation, a false view of reality in children's souls. As a result, Plato concluded that "most of the stories now in use must be discarded".<sup>118</sup>

Plato cautioned that we must avoid those stories that can create "the presence of falsehood in the soul concerning reality. To be deceived about the truth of things and so to be in ignorance and error and to harbour untruth in the soul is a thing no-one would consent to".<sup>119</sup>

Two-thousand-year later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau took up the same theme. He believed that stories of deceit, injustice and cruelty did nothing more than glorify those vices in the eyes of children. His conclusion was that fantasy was suitable for adults only, but "children should deal only with reality".<sup>120</sup>

It is worth noting that Tolkien pointed out that what we consider classic children's fantasy stories today, such as the Grimms' collection, were not originally written for children.<sup>121</sup>

What, then, are the positive contributions of fictional stories?

### *1. Stories help us deal with real-life issues*

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<sup>118</sup> Plato. *Republic II* (377) as quoted in Egan.

<sup>119</sup> Plato. *Republic II* (381) as quoted in Egan. According to Plato, the positive use of stories is to stimulate courage, to teach that death is not to be feared, to inculcate nobility of heart and adherence to truth.

<sup>120</sup> Egan. Rousseau used La Fontaine's *The Fox and the Crow*, in which a crow sits on a branch with a piece of cheese in its beak. The fox sees the cheese and begins to flatter the crow, saying how wonderful the crow is and suggesting his singing voice must be beautiful as well. The crow is taken by the fox's words and opens his mouth to sing. The cheese falls out of his beak and the fox grabs it and runs away. Rousseau believes the story is confusing for young children and suggests it promotes the wrong message we would want children to learn – that it is in our best interests (like the fox) to take advantage of others' shortcomings.

<sup>121</sup> Egan. Tolkien likened their descent to the nursery when they went out of fashion among adults as like the descent of old-fashioned furniture from the adults' living room to the children's play room.

One of the better-known advocates for the value of fantasy stories was child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim. He drew heavily on Freud in arguing that fantasy stories are vitally important for children's psychological health.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim notes that certain fairy tale themes exist in almost all cultures. The themes deal with the major fears of childhood, such as the loss of a mother or father or separation anxiety and, in the presentation of these human predicaments, help the child find solutions to them. Bettelheim argues:

For a story to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality – and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future.<sup>122</sup>

Psychoanalyst Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estes reiterates the role story has in helping the reader deal with real-life issues:

Stories set the inner life in motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland, that lead to love and learning, that lead us back to our own real lives.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Estes, Clarissa Pinkola. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992, 20, as quoted in "The Importance of Storytelling in Learning", Dianne Haugen, <http://www.wcdd.com/proposals/thprop/thscope.html> (accessed 28 August 2007).

Professor Daniel Hade, Associate Professor of Language and Literacy at Pennsylvania State University, believes schoolteachers have a responsibility to initiate and sustain a conversation with children about stories. Only in the safe, grey, “what-if” world, between our “inner stories” (the ones we tell about ourselves to ourselves alone) and the real world of actions, can we “attend to our differing sense of morality...and grow as readers and as human beings”.<sup>124</sup>

Gerry Sittser illustrates the power of story as he relates the catastrophic loss of his wife, mother and one of his daughters in a car crash in 1991. A drunk driver hit the van he was driving and only Sittser and three of his other young children survived.

Sittser shares that among the things that helped him and his children to cope were the stories of others: friends, strangers who wrote to him, even those they read or saw on the screen. After commenting on those stories that had helped him personally, Sittser reflects on the stories that were meaningful to his children, Catherine (8 years old at the time), David (7), and John (only 2):

The children read books and watched movies that somehow touched on the theme of loss. John asked me to read *Bambi* dozens of times after the accident. He made me pause every time we came to the section that told the story of the death of Bambi’s mother. Sometimes he said nothing, and the two of us sat in a sad silence. Sometimes he cried. He talked about the similarity between Bambi’s story and his own. ‘Bambi lost his mummy too,’ he said on several occasions. Then he added, ‘And Bambi became the Prince of the Forest.’ ... Catherine found comfort in Disney’s movie version of *Beauty and the Beast* because the main character, Belle, grew up without a mother and, as Catherine has observed, became an independent, intelligent, beautiful person.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Brown, Nancy Marie. “The What-If World” in *Research/Penn State*, Vol 14, No 3, September 1993, <http://www.rps.psu.edu/sep93/whatif.html> (accessed 28 August 2007).

<sup>125</sup> Sittser, Gerry. *A Grace Disguised*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1996, 173 as quoted in Johnston, 28.

Children's author Jane Yolen makes a poignant comment when she says, "What do we turn to when we have nothing left? We turn to story."<sup>126</sup>

While Plato and Rousseau criticised fantasy stories for the portrayal of false reality, Bettelheim believed that it is the mythical nature of fantasy stories that make them so beneficial for a child, as opposed to real-life stories.<sup>127</sup> Real-life heroes can be detrimental to a child's developing sense of themselves, emphasising the child's insignificance compared to the confidence, goodness or power of the hero.

Children may feel a sense of hopelessness and inferiority in trying to copy the deeds of an actual person. But, as Bettelheim observed, in a fantasy story:

the child knows that he cannot possibly live up to the hero's virtue, or parallel his deeds; all he can be expected to do is emulate the hero to some small degree; so the child is not defeated by the discrepancy between this ideal and his own smallness.<sup>128</sup>

William Kilpatrick and Gregory and Suzanne M. Wolfe similarly emphasize the value of fantasy over real-life stories. They suggest that a child whose parents are going through a divorce does not necessarily get help from reading stories about children with divorcing parents.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Brown, Nancy.

<sup>127</sup> Bettelheim, 41.

<sup>128</sup> Bettelheim, 41.

<sup>129</sup> Kilpatrick, William, Geoffrey Wolfe and Suzanne M Wolfe. *Books The Build Character: A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values Through Stories*. New York: Touchstone, 1994, 44. The authors also tell the story of the mother of a ten-year-old describing her son's struggle with cancer: " 'At first he was very upbeat, but after several painful treatments his optimism faded. We were afraid that he was ready to give up. We were really afraid for his life. Then he came upon the story of the labours of Hercules in a book of myths, and he read it and re-read it, and it seemed to give him back his spirit.' The story about Hercules allowed the boy to transcend his fears and to cast his personal struggle on a mythic level. He was probably fortunate that some well-meaning adult didn't hand him a book about a boy with cancer. That sort of thing often serves only to increase the depression." (44).

As well as stories helping us cast our personal situation in a mythical setting (using Kilpatrick and Wolfe's term), they also help us construct our view of reality. Ryken says:

Good literature makes us re-examine the world as it is, and our conventions for understanding the world as we experience it. It makes us look more critically at that reality – we call it 'realism', and Dicken's description of the realities of the worst boarding schools in *Nicholas Nickleby* put many of them out of business. It helps us to imagine alternative realities – the traditions of Utopia and fantasy create alternative worlds for the serious purpose of play as well as showing the gap between what might be and what is.<sup>130</sup>

Ryken asserts that fiction has an amazing ability to defamiliarise both biblical material and everyday reality. "It uses dislocation to create new angles of vision. It removes hearers from the familiar world so they can see the world with greater clarity."<sup>131</sup>

A classic example of this in the Bible is the parable Nathan told to David (2 Sam 12:1-15). The story transported David through imagination to a fictional world where he was completely disarmed. He recognised the wrongfulness of the situation in that fictional world, and returned to reality with new insight. This is the power of imagination.

Ryken believes there is nothing wrong with telling a story that does not carry all its meaning on the surface. "Jesus told fictional stories that partly concealed the truth in order to reveal it by delayed action to the thoughtful listener."<sup>132</sup>

Walter Wangerin contends that if a story accords with the child's experience of life to some extent, then when the child leaves the story it becomes a framework by which the child interprets the rest of the world. "Everyday experiences for a child are often chaotic and lack

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<sup>130</sup> Barratt, David, Roger Pooley and Lelend Ryken, eds. *The Discerning Reader: Christian perspectives on literature and theory*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1995, 20.

<sup>131</sup> Ryken, "With Many Such Parables", 251.

<sup>132</sup> Ryken, "With Many Such Parables", 251.

the structure of a good story. Thus stories have the potential to make daily experiences more comprehensible by offering the needed structure by which the child interprets life.”<sup>133</sup>

Fictional stories, then, provide an imaginary world “in which children can rehearse and begin to deal with many of the most fundamental psychological problems that come with the territory of being human.”<sup>134</sup>

## 2. *Stories can help transform our perception of the world*

Stories can also provide a resource for children whose reality offers them very little. In *The Child That Books Built*, Francis Spufford shows the role fiction has in shaping a child. As a compulsive reader from a young age, he recounts that he wanted books to take him away to another place:

I wanted exodus. I was not alone. Tolkien believed that providing an alternative to reality was one of the primary properties of language. From the moment humans had invented the adjective, he wrote in *On Fairy Tales*, they had gained a creator-like power to build elsewhere.<sup>135</sup>

Novelist John Buchan also notes this aspect of stories:

[Stories] deal with simple and enduring things, birth and marriage and death, hunger and thirst, natural sorrows and natural joys. They sprang from a society where life was hard, when a man was never quite certain of his next meal, when he never knew when he arose in the morning whether he would be alive in the evening, when adventure was not the exception in life, but the rule.... It was a dangerous world and a cruel world, and therefore those who dwelt in it endeavoured in their tales to escape from it. They pictured weakness winning against might, gentleness and courtesy against mere animal strength, the one

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<sup>133</sup> Wangerin, Walter. “The use of story for spiritual formation.” Address given at the Children’s Spiritual Conference: Christian Perspectives, River Forest, Ill, June 2003 as quoted in Ratcliff, 13.

<sup>134</sup> Elgan.

<sup>135</sup> Spufford, Francis. *The Child That Books Built: A Life in Reading*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002, 82.

chance in a hundred succeeding.<sup>136</sup>

It cannot be denied that there is an element of joy and delight in being able to escape to another world as we retreat into a fictional reality. This is certainly an aspect of story that I enjoy. But as Abanes notes, “even more significant is the deep satisfaction we derive from safely immersing ourselves into a place that in many ways is better than ours”.<sup>137</sup>

C S Lewis believed fantasy enriches our appreciation of reality. He claimed that children "do not despise real woods because [they have] read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted".<sup>138</sup>

If we follow Lewis’s claim, we can therefore say that stories create a sense that there is something beyond or behind the surface of the everyday world. This in turn can stimulate wonder and inquiry.

According to Elgan, Lewis says that the acceptance of fantasy creates a kind of longing:

It is not a longing that the real world should be different, but a longing to be able to go through the mirror or the back of the wardrobe to worlds that enlarge and enrich our imaginative experience. Our bodies have pragmatic experiences, our minds have imaginative experiences; both are educationally important.<sup>139</sup>

Elgan reminds us that, while we may value fantasy for the way it can remove us from everyday reality, it is our everyday real world that is its arena of influence.<sup>140</sup>

In other words, we cannot remain in the world of fantasy; we must return to reality. But in the

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<sup>136</sup> Buchan, John. “The Novel and the Fairy Tale.” In *The English Association Pamphlet No 79*, July 1931 quoted in Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family*, 12-13.

<sup>137</sup> Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family*, 20.

<sup>138</sup> Elgan, quoting Lewis, 1982, 65.

<sup>139</sup> Elgan.

<sup>140</sup> Elgan.

real world, we can take the things we have discovered and apply them to our reality.

### 3. *Stories can be a vehicle for teaching morality*

The word “narrative” derives from the Latin word *narrare*, meaning, “to tell”, and the Indo-European root *gna*, meaning, “to know”.<sup>141</sup>

One of the subclasses of fiction is folklore. Yolen identifies four basic functions of this genre of writing: it provides a picture reflecting real society; it provides a way of understanding other cultures; it provides a means of coping with and responding to reality; it provides a framework for one’s belief system.<sup>142</sup> In other words, folkloric stories were developed as a way of presenting people’s beliefs, customs and memories, not only to their contemporaries, but to future generations as well.

To a certain degree, all fictional writing fulfils these functions – or at least, carries a message the author wants to communicate.

Wayne Booth, author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, claims that in fiction:

the author’s judgement is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it.... We must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Turner, Victor. “Social Drama and Stories about Them.” In *On Narrative*, 7 (1980), 163 as quoted in “Storytelling in the Digital Age”, Alison Lienau at <http://glasscock.tamu.edu/agora/summer04/Lienau.pdf> (accessed 15 Sept 2007).

<sup>142</sup> Yolen, Jane. *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie & Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. Little Rock, Ark: August House Publishers, 1981 (2000 edition), 15 as quoted in Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family*, 272.

<sup>143</sup> Arnsdorf, Aliza. “Rhetorical Ingredients in a Hypertext Narrative Soup”. In *Department of Communication*, 8 May 2001, California State University, as quoted by Lienau.

Alison Lienau claims that most narrative scholars are of the opinion that narratives need a “moralising” conclusion.<sup>144</sup>

Bettelheim illustrates the difference between the way a fairy tale communicates morality and the way a fable does. In a story like *The Three Little Pigs*, we learn that we should not be lazy or take things for granted; that intelligent planning and foresight combined with hard work pay off in the end. The messages are there, but “it is up to us whether we wish to make any application to our life...or simply enjoy the fantastic events it tells about”.<sup>145</sup>

The whole purpose of fables, on the other hand, is moral instruction. “Often sanctimonious, sometimes amusing, the fable always explicitly states a moral truth; there is no hidden meaning, nothing is left to the imagination.”<sup>146</sup>

It is interesting to note Bettelheim’s comment that a fairy tale such as *The Three Little Pigs* makes a much greater impression on children than Aesop’s similar but overtly moralistic fable, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*.

Bettelheim argues that stories answer eternal questions such as: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? The answers given may be definite (as in the case of myths and fables) or suggestive (as in the case of fairy tales). In the case of fairy tales, its messages may imply solutions, but it never spells them out. “Fairy tales lead to the child’s fantasizing whether and how to apply to himself what the story reveals about life and human nature.”<sup>147</sup> This is imagination at work.

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<sup>144</sup> Lienau.

<sup>145</sup> Bettelheim, 43.

<sup>146</sup> Bettelheim, 42.

<sup>147</sup> Bettelheim, 45.

Spufford believes one of the wonders of books is their ability to point us in a direction... “and the way those [directions] interact deep down in our reading minds with the directions our own temperaments are tentatively taking”.<sup>148</sup>

Abanes recalls the impact watching a television program had on him as a boy:

Most delightful for me was one specific segment of [*The Bullwinkle Show*], ‘Fractured Fairy Tales’.... Looking back as an adult, I ... see that I learned a great deal from them about right and wrong, good and evil, cleverness and stupidity, and, to some extent, how life works. I remember, for instance, as a third-grader, choosing to not taunt another student – a poor student – thanks to a fractured fairy tale I had seen that contrasted rich nobility with paupers.<sup>149</sup>

There is a danger in isolating a moral message in a story and then imposing that message on children without the acknowledgement that there may be other messages the children may see. In his elementary education classes, Hade refers to the “heresy” of reading a story in this way. As he wrote of his students:

They seem to believe that stories have one meaning or one best meaning.... It does not seem to occur to my students that a child’s experience in reading a book could be different from their own. Nor does it occur to them that there may be other ways of dealing with immoral elements in books than by telling children what to make of the book or by suppressing the book.<sup>150</sup>

Walter Wangerin suggests that while a story can be used as an illustration of a principle, it should be more than that: “A story, when it is told, is first and foremost a world, a little cosmos, a place in which the listening child may dwell.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Spufford, 8.

<sup>149</sup> Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family*, 1-2.

<sup>150</sup> Brown, Nancy.

<sup>151</sup> Ratcliff, 13.

Wangerin believes a child needs to dwell within the story, so the story will affect behaviour, and not just their intellectual thinking. He contends that if stories are only used as illustrations, then only parts of the child are invited into the story. But if the child sees the story as an invitation into another world, then it invites the whole child to enter it. The child then begins to identify not only with the cognitive content, but also “the emotions, the suspense, the totality of the story, and all of the senses as well as reason and imagination are involved”.<sup>152</sup>

Wangerin describes as “a soul event” the process whereby a child enters the story, embraces the mood and identifies with the characters.<sup>153</sup>

A story can captivate the mind and the imagination. A well-told story can have a powerful impact on an individual, and can invite the listener into what Susan Shaw describes as “a transformative realm in which old ways of living may be opened up to new possibilities”.<sup>154</sup> A story can be a powerful educational tool for both change and growth.

Narrative education is an important tool for the moral development of children. This is because, as Shaw describes:

storytelling organically unites substantive and structural content and can bring a holistic way of learning into the religious educational setting [and] can bring together experiential, intuitive, imaginative knowing and rational, analytic knowing in ways that engage the whole being of the learner.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ratcliff, 14.

<sup>153</sup> Ratcliff, 15.

<sup>154</sup> Shaw, Susan M. *Storytelling in Religious Education*. Birmingham, Alab: Religious Education Press, 1999, 5 as quoted in “Narrative and the Moral Education of the Christian Child,” Victoria M Ford and Esther Wong, in *Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, Donald Ratcliff, Sen Ed, Eugene: Cascade Books, Oreg, 2004, 311.

<sup>155</sup> Shaw, 114 as quoted in Ford & Wong, 314.

The importance of exposing children to fairy tales cannot be overstated. Nicholas Tucker, remarks:

[M]ore than most other literature, fairy stories provide the child with the 'knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil'. ...It may also start providing them with some sort of mental preparation for those more violent aspects of adult society which they will soon also notice, for example by watching television news bulletins.... In many senses, therefore, the fairy tale world is one of unique meaning to young readers, and as such something always to be treasured.<sup>156</sup>

Reg Grant and John Reed explain what stories can do for children:

A good story doesn't permit casual observation. It wraps you up in truth and recognition and won't let you go. You are there, in the story; your imagination is kindled; you are involved; you interact with truth on a deep and personal level because you are in the story and now the story is in you. Then it's over, and you sit in the embrace of truth. The story is still resonating in the deepest part of you. For the moment, you are still because it simply takes some time to 'get back'. And once you emerge from the story, you are never the same again. That's what stories can do.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Tucker, Nicholas. *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 96-96 as quoted in Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family*, 14.

<sup>157</sup> Grant, Reg and John Reed. *Telling Stories to Touch the Heart: How to Use Stories to Communicate God's Truth*. Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1990, 7 as quoted in *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family and Community*. Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, & Linda Cannell. Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 189.

## Chapter 4

### Theology of film and literature

In her book, *God-Talk in America*, Phyllis Tickle makes the claim that more theology is conveyed in, and remembered from one hour of television than from all the sermons preached in a given weekend.<sup>158</sup> While that is probably an exaggeration, there is an element of truth in her statement. Story, whether transmitted by television, portrayed in a movie or contained in the pages of a book, has the ability to impart theology or spiritual truth.

Mary Hess promotes an understanding of media “as elements of a culture from and within which we draw materials for forming and informing our identities, relationships and communities”.<sup>159</sup> She asserts media’s role in the creation of “religious meaning-making”. I would include the place of story, as expressed in film and literature, in this category.

Since the beginning of time humankind has used story as a means of communication and to convey purpose of life. As Brian Godawa observes, storytelling has been the backbone of civilisations and “has maintained ritual, systematized beliefs and taught dogma”.<sup>160</sup>

We recognise the power of story as demonstrated and already noted in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus consistently used story to communicate spiritual truth. As Catherine Barsotti and Robert Johnson observe, “Abstract proposition was not his trade. Rather, compelling stories

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<sup>158</sup> Tickle, Phyllis A. *God-Talk in America*. New York: Crossroad, 1997, 126 as quoted in *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith*, Catherine M Barsotti and Robert K Johnston, Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2004, 12.

<sup>159</sup> Hess, Mary E. “Media literacy as a support for the development of a responsible imagination in religious community.” A paper presented to the Media, Religion and Culture Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland, July 1999 at <http://www.iscmrc.org/english/hessrelima.html> (accessed 28 March 2004).

<sup>160</sup> Godawa, Brian. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*. Downers Grove, Ill: Inter Varsity Press, 2002, 26.

triggered the reason, imagination, and emotion of his listeners as they were invited to deepen their faith and understanding.”<sup>161</sup>

Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam also use stories to both inform and motivate their adherents. Stories give “flesh to belief”<sup>162</sup> and communicate a community’s values and tenets.

When effective, stories touch us as whole people – our minds, our hearts, our spirits – or, as Barsotti and Johnston describe, our “guts”.<sup>163</sup>

As already noted, stories help us make sense of the world. As we watch a movie or read a book, we are presented with options concerning life. Metaphors play a key role in this process.

Mark Burrows makes an interesting observation on the meaning of the word *metaphor*. He points out that in modern Greek cities, the word for mass transportation vehicles is *metaphorai*.<sup>164</sup> In other words, a person takes a “metaphor” if they want to go from one place to another. Similarly, stories take us on a journey, enabling us to move from where we are to another place.

We have already observed how stories can help us enter into another world to learn something about our own and how to deal with real-life issues. Stories are also *metaphorai* in the way they can transport us into the realm of the spirit.

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<sup>161</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 16.

<sup>162</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 16.

<sup>163</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 16.

<sup>164</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 17.

Barsotti and Johnson remind us that it is not just, or even primarily, the stories of angels and demons that are labelled “spiritual”. Rather, God is more usually encountered in the everyday things of life. When we experience metaphors of forgiveness, reconciliation, alienation or friendship in a story, that is a spiritual experience.

Usually an experience such as this confronts us unexpectedly. We often describe it as an “aha” moment. Barsotti and Johnson describe the process as being drawn into the story because of its humanity and leaving it transformed “because we have met divinity”.<sup>165</sup>

All methods of storytelling have the ability to stimulate theological reflection or to bring us into an encounter with the spiritual. Clearly film and literature archive this differently. But film probably does this more effectively and powerfully as we watch, particularly in the confines of a cinema, and then reflect on that experience. While film may stimulate imagination less than print, the story is more concentrated in time, allowing the viewer to enter the story and face the impact of it quicker than he may do in a work of literature.

David John Graham likens the experience of watching a movie to a religious experience. “The experiential dimension of watching a film, which can be close to being an existential experience, can mimic or stimulate the existential dimension of religious experience.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 17.

<sup>166</sup> Graham, David John. “The Uses of Film in Theology.” In *Explorations in Theology and Film*, Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds, Oxford: Backwell Publications, 1997, 36. Graham gives two examples. The first was after watching *Schindler’s List* for the first time. As he walked out of the cinema with two friends and drove home, there was complete silence. We reflect on the experience being like in the presence of something awesome. The second time was after watching *Cry Freedom*. These may not be specifically religious experiences and added little to theological reflection. However in both cases, the effect was to make Graham think about issues of religion, ethics and human rights.

## *The Power of Story to Transform*

Robert Johnston tells the story of screenwriter and *maggid* (an ordained Jewish storyteller who teaches people about God) Paul Woolf of growing up in Brooklyn, NY.

[Woolf] had a strong feeling about Judaism even as a young boy, but the rabbis did not connect with him. The spiritual experiences that he had were more often the result of simple things. He remembers walking down the street when he was four, holding his mother's hand and realising that he was in the presence of God. His consciousness seemed enlarged to the point that he could hear every bird singing and every leaf rustling. A similar experience happened when he was ten, as he stayed out playing with fireflies late into the summer evening. He says, 'Here were these creatures twinkling their lights, and the summer had breath. I could hear everything. The faraway tinkling bells of an ice-cream truck, dogs barking, my friends laughing. Again, it was a shift of awareness, away from the self to a wider awareness.'

The next time this happened, Woolf was fourteen. It was the days of movie roadshows, and [he went] to see *Spartacus* (1960). Woolf sat transfixed as he watched ... the gladiator Spartacus, say to his wife, ... 'Anyone can kill, can be taught to fight; I'm not interested in that. I want to know where the wind comes from...why we are here.' Woolf describes that all of a sudden there was the 'incredible flight of questioning about life. In a film, no less'. As the movie ended the audience just sat there, stunned by what it had seen. Woolf concludes: 'On the train ride back to Brooklyn, I kept thinking, how can this be? Why had I never experienced this in a house of worship? That's when I made my decision. I said to myself, I'm going to Hollywood to make movies.'<sup>167</sup>

Robert Coles provides valuable examples of how stories have the power to transform lives.

He writes, "a compelling narrative, offering a storyteller's moral imagination vigorously at work, can enable any of us to learn by example, to take to heart what is, really, a gift of grace".<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Johnston, Robert K. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2000, 22-23. Direct quotations from "Turning Toward Home", Paul Woolf in *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion* 20, Summer 1998, 116.

<sup>168</sup> Coles, Robert. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the moral imagination*. Boston: Moughton Mifflin, 1989, 191 as quoted in Ford & Wong, 319.

It is precisely because stories reflect human experience that narrative is powerful and persuasive. As John Bolt indicates, “The key to moral growth for Christians is the capacity for our imaginations to be transformed by the image of Christ, by the metaphors, stories and images of the Christian faith”.<sup>169</sup>

Victoria Ford and Esther Wong explain how stories of the Christian faith can assist children in Christian discipleship. They highlight the inadequacy of Christian education that is centred only on the mind and reiterate the way moral character is facilitated “not only through moral reasoning, but also through the moral imagination”.<sup>170</sup> They assert that the more a child’s imagination is shaped by faith, the greater will be their capacity for spiritual and moral formation.

While Ford and Wong speak in terms of “Christian” stories, we should not limit our thinking to stories that might readily be identified as being “religious”. Any worthwhile story may provide an avenue for the imagination to be transformed and for the reader or viewer to encounter God.

Such an understanding of the role of story and imagination is very much part of incarnational theology. The Christian idea of incarnation is “holistic and integrative”.<sup>171</sup> As Jerry Gill notes, Jesus came into the world as a complete person and was involved in all aspects of life, not just its so-called “sacred” aspects.<sup>172</sup> God is involved and active in all parts of life, including,

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<sup>169</sup> Bolt, John. *The Christian Story and the Christian School*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Christian Schools International, 1993, 168 as quoted in Ford & Wong, 320.

<sup>170</sup> Ford & Wong, 320.

<sup>171</sup> Gill, Jerry H. “Faith in Learning: Integrative Education and Incarnational Theology.” In *Christian Century*, 17 October 1979, 1009 at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1262> (accessed on 31 October 2007).

<sup>172</sup> Gill.

as we shall explore further, story. It is through such involvement that God enters our lives and we encounter him.

In terms of incarnation, of importance also is the way God chose an indirect way of revealing himself to us, namely through the physical, historical and yet divine personhood of Jesus. Gill describes this as a “mediated rather than immediate mode of self-expression”.<sup>173</sup> This indirect quality of incarnational communication is also demonstrated in Jesus’ almost exclusive use of parable and metaphor in his ministry.

We can therefore say that, typically, God communicates with us indirectly. He leaves room for a faith response.<sup>174</sup>

In the case of story, we encounter God, not through literal depiction but indirectly, through observing matters of faith in the lives of others. As Barsotti and Johnston put it, “A truthful telling of the human drama can voice the divine as well”.<sup>175</sup>

The Catholic novelist Flannery O’Connor wrote: “The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depth the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality.”<sup>176</sup>

Hess asserts the inevitability that people will encounter God in the midst of popular culture, of which movies and literature are a part. “Popular culture ‘rituals’ are the ‘amniotic fluid’ (to

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<sup>173</sup> Gill.

<sup>174</sup> The use, by Jesus, of “Son of Man” as his preferred self-description, based as it was in the Daniel 7 teaching of the “son of man” to whom an eternal kingdom would be given, is a powerful example of “indirect” revelation.

<sup>175</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 18.

<sup>176</sup> O’Connor, Flannery. “The Novelist and the Believer”. In *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969. Reprinted in *Religion and Modern Literature*, G B Tennyson and Edward E Ericson Jr, Grand Rapids, Ill: Eerdmans, 1975, 69 as quoted in Barsotti & Johnston, 18.

use Beaudoin's phrase) in which we swim."<sup>177</sup> She argues that more and more, people are using the elements of culture with which they are most familiar to "name and claim transcendence".

### *A theological approach to film and literature*

I now wish to introduce a theological approach to film and literature. While the approach developed by Robert Johnston applies to film, I believe the principles it espouses can be appropriated to literature as well. I believe an understanding of these approaches can help us see the role of film and literature in the Christian education of children.

In analysing the church's response to movies over the last century, Johnston has observed five differing approaches to movie watching, which he labels as: avoidance; caution; dialogue; appropriation and divine encounter.<sup>178</sup> Although these approaches developed more or less chronologically since film's invention, Johnson believes each response is still represented in contemporary Christian thought.

Some people would argue that movies destroy the moral fabric of both the Christian faith and society in general and therefore should be *avoided*. This was certainly the case when the Harry Potter books were first released. Such blanket condemnation is now rare.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Hess, Beaudoin. Phrase not referenced. A Google search identified this phrase from *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, Tom Beaudoin, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

<sup>178</sup> Johnston, 41. A summary of these approaches is also found in Barsotti & Johnston, 20-21.

<sup>179</sup> Barsotti & Johnston note that in 1987 the Southern Baptists lifted their boycott on Disney for two hours so members could watch *The Miracle Maker* on ABC. Barsotti & Johnston, 20.

A more common approach is one of *caution*. This position asserts that movies often undermine Judeo-Christian faith and values. There are certainly a significant number of movies that offer little of value to viewers. However, as Barsotti and Johnston warn, when Christians approach a movie not expecting much from it, “caution short-circuits whatever spiritual encounter the movie might otherwise invite”.<sup>180</sup>

A growing number of Christians now approach movie watching with a view towards *dialoguing* with it. They recognise the importance of watching a movie on its own terms before responding from their personal understanding of life and faith. Johnston stresses the importance of approaching a movie in this way and letting the images themselves suggest meaning and direction before entering into theological dialogue with it. Viewers must “give the screen their ‘as-if’ assent and enter wholeheartedly into the movie’s imaginative world, or the experience risks being stillborn”.<sup>181</sup>

Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase “the willing suspension of disbelief”<sup>182</sup> that illustrates what Johnston is referring to here in terms of entering into the imaginative world of the movie. The same applies to reading books. When we enter a story, we willingly suspend our disbelief. We know that what we are seeing or reading is not real, but we put that knowledge aside for the time and let our imaginations engage with fantasy.

A story’s power is in its ability to engage us at the level of our feelings and emotions. Graham asserts a story is more immediately affective than it is cognitive, in that it engages our feelings before it does our logic and rationality.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 20.

<sup>181</sup> Johnston, 49.

<sup>182</sup> Wikipedia. “Suspension of disbelief.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension\\_of\\_disbelief](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suspension_of_disbelief).

<sup>183</sup> Graham, David John, 38.

John May paraphrases a statement by Roger Angell in this way: “Movies are felt by the audience long before they are ‘understood’ *if indeed they are ever fully understood*” (May’s emphasis).<sup>184</sup> In his comment on this, Graham asserts, “We cannot therefore underestimate the power of film to stimulate, convince and affect the viewer”.<sup>185</sup>

Film clips are often used in both adult contexts and in working with children to illustrate a theological concept or an aspect of the Christian faith. I believe Johnston would see this approach as fitting his dialogue category.

John Cooper and Carl Skrade, who write about film from a theological perspective, argue that it is insufficient and perhaps dishonest simply to use a movie to make a point or illustrate a theological truth. In commenting on this, Johnston agrees we must allow the movie to work its “charm”, enlighten and disturb the viewers. “Only then can it have a chance to deepen their understanding of reality (and perhaps even Reality itself).”<sup>186</sup>

Dialogue can take many forms. It can highlight explicit theological themes in a movie or dialogue with the themes in both the movie and the Bible. It can bring into conversation both film and biblical text or it can compare. Johnston says, “Whatever the shape, the common denominator in such approaches is the attempt to bring film and theology into two-way conversation, letting both sides be full partners in the dialogue.”<sup>187</sup>

Hess stresses the importance of engaging in dialogue with media:

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<sup>184</sup> May, John R, ed. *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Film Classics*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 3 as quoted in Graham, David John, 38.

<sup>185</sup> Graham, David John, 38.

<sup>186</sup> Johnston, 52. Johnston is making reference to *Celluloid and Symbols*, John C Cooper and Carl Skrade, eds, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970.

<sup>187</sup> Johnston, 55.

We need to help people re-encounter, re-interpret, or in some cases (perhaps many cases, given the increasing number of young people who have never been involved in any kind of church context) encounter for the first time, the scriptural 'database' if you will, of our shared Christian heritage. I have found...that working from popular culture texts into scripture and then back again, can be enormously liberating and energising. Such a process demands openness to critical engagement with difference.<sup>188</sup>

While she is speaking from an American context, where biblical literacy is higher, the thrust of her argument is valid in the Australian situation. The level of dialogue that can be engaged with a 10-12 year old child is of course much different than could be had with a teenager or adult.

There are some movies that have clearly identifiable religious themes that demand dialogue with them from a theological perspective. Johnston lists movies such as *Sister Act*, *The Apostle*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Amadeus*. For children's movies, one example would be *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

More recently, two other approaches to viewing movies have emerged. One recognises that we can sometimes learn from a movie's worldview. Movies do not simply provide alternative perspectives that invite dialogue from a Christian perspective. They can also expand our vision, helping us grasp new understandings of things like love, beauty and goodness. They can provide us with new insight into the human spirit. Johnston calls this approach *appropriation*.

Johnston believes movies "can tease out of their viewers greater possibilities for being human and present alternative selves not otherwise available to the movie watcher". In this approach, he says it is not to theology that the critic must first turn, but to a film itself. The

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<sup>188</sup> Hess.

goal in relating theology and film is not, first of all, to render moral judgement, but to achieve greater insight. “Only in light of a movie’s own vision of the nature of the human can the theologian effectively enlarge his or her horizons as movie and critic engage in conversation.”<sup>189</sup>

This approach may be along the lines Michael Frost and Robert Banks describe when they say that the best films “tap into our private and public consciousness and establish a genuine connection to truth and reality”.<sup>190</sup> They describe movies as holding a mirror to society and portraying life as it actually is, or reminding us of what it could be. “A film (or a scene from a film) can touch us deeply and crack open new possibilities of thinking about life.”<sup>191</sup>

The other approach comes mainly from Roman Catholics, who are helping Protestants to understand something of the “sacramentality of creation”.<sup>192</sup> The Catholic Church holds that God is known and revealed through all of life. For Andrew Greeley, movies are a type of sacrament because of their “inherent power to affect the imagination”.<sup>193</sup> This is the approach Johnston calls *divine encounter*.

In commenting on the role of movies as a visual medium, Johnston reflects on film’s ability to “dramatise, celebrate and present experiences that are not open to human experience prior to seeing it. It extends human vision to include that which would otherwise pass unnoticed.”<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Johnston, 54.

<sup>190</sup> Frost, Michael & Robert Banks. *Lessons from Reel Life: Movies, Meaning and Myth-Making*. Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 2001, iii.

<sup>191</sup> Frost & Banks, 2.

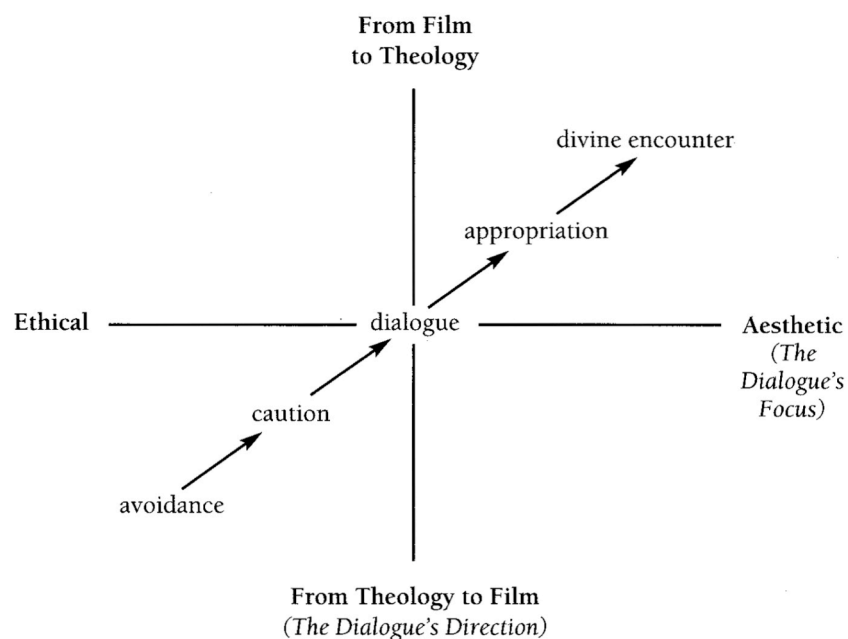
<sup>192</sup> Greeley, Andrew. *God in Popular Culture*. Chicago: Thomas More, 1998, 250, as quoted in Johnston, 57.

<sup>193</sup> Greeley, 250 as quoted in Johnston, 57.

<sup>194</sup> Johnston, 58.

In this regard, movies have what Thomas Martin describes as the ability “to awaken a sense of awe and wonder in the beholder”.<sup>195</sup>

Johnston provides a helpful graph of the five approaches.<sup>196</sup> This matrix indicates whether a person begins his or her reflection on the movie itself or from a theological position.



The matrix shows that a person who avoids a movie does so from an ethical position and moves from their theological perspective to the film in question. On the other hand, a person interested in exploring a divine encounter through a movie begins with the movie itself and in light of the movie attempts to make theological connections.

<sup>195</sup> Martin, Thomas. *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981, 46 as quoted in Johnston, 58.

<sup>196</sup> Johnston, 42.

In working with children, there are certain movies that we would avoid on the grounds that they are not age-appropriate.<sup>197</sup> Beyond that, however, I wonder if there would be any children's films that we would approach with avoidance? Within movies targeting adults, Johnston concedes there are some that are not suitable for all people and therefore caution is necessary. However, he rejects any avoidance strategy because of what that says theologically about Christian life and thought.<sup>198</sup>

Johnston provides a useful approach to understanding the theological significance of film and literature and how we use these media with children.

Some movies, and to a lesser extent books, we should approach and use with caution, taking into account the ages, experiences and background of the children. We should not demonstrate caution simply on the grounds that we do not agree with the themes of the movie or book. Such an approach may limit a spiritual encounter of that child with that material. Dialoguing, appropriating and hoping for a divine encounter are all approaches we can take and encourage as we help children encounter and engage with movies and books.

One of the strong aspects of story, particularly, but not confined to, movies, is its ability to catch us off guard and tell us things about ourselves and other people. Reg Grant and John Reed describe the ability of stories to "sneak past the defences of the heart"<sup>199</sup>. As such,

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<sup>197</sup> Any movie with a classification rating above PG should not be shown in a church program to children under the age of 13. If a movie is rated PG, parental permission should be obtained prior to screening. In some churches, the fact that parents permit their children to attend an advertised PG-rated movie is deemed sufficient permission.

<sup>198</sup> Barsotti & Johnston, 22. While I was in the final stages of editing this paper, I received an email urging Christians to boycott the upcoming movie *The Golden Compass* and Phillip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy (the first book on which the movie is based). The email claimed Pullman's objective in the books is to promote atheism and "kill God in the minds of children". This is a current example of avoidance in operation.

<sup>199</sup> Grant, Reg and John Reed. *Telling Stories to Touch the Heart: How to Use Stories to Communicate God's Truth*. Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1990, 7 as quoted in *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family and Community*, Scottie May, Beth Posterski,

they can become what Johnston terms a “toolbox” that people can use as they respond to and give shape to their lives.<sup>200</sup> They can play a significant role in a person’s individual formation.

A story’s ability to catch us off guard is a form of communication Kierkegaard called “the indirect method”.<sup>201</sup> He contended that most of us reject messages that are direct. He believed that the gospel impacts us most when we overhear it spoken to someone else and realise that what is being said actually relates to us and what is going on in our own lives. He illustrated his argument with reference to Paul’s epistles, which were written to people in first century churches, but, when we read them today, we often can take their messages as our own.<sup>202</sup>

While Christian theologians may recognise the truth that God, as Lord and Creator of all, is present in every aspect of his creation, Johnston contends they have had trouble expressing the nature of his “presencing” through his Spirit in the lives of men and women. Johnston notes, however, that there are countless witnesses to this “happening” of the Spirit in the spirits of humankind.<sup>203</sup>

One such witness is C S Lewis. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes several experiences of his childhood in which he was pointed “to something other and

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Catherine Stonehouse, & Linda Cannell, Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing, 2005, 176.

<sup>200</sup> Johnston, 64.

<sup>201</sup> Campolo, Tony in *How Movies Helped Save My Soul: Finding Spiritual Fingerprints in Culturally Significant Films*, Gareth Higgins, Lake Mary, Fla: Relevant Books, 2003, x.

<sup>202</sup> In another illustration, Kierkegaard compares it to waiting with a crowd of people on a street corner for a break in the traffic and overhearing two people in front of you talking. The two of them are oblivious to your presence, and, to your shocked dismay, you realise that they are saying revealing things about you. Quoted in Higgins, x.

<sup>203</sup> Johnston, 67.

outer". After reading George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, those earlier experiences started to make sense. He writes:

It was as though the voice which had called to me from the world's end were now speaking at my side. It was with me in the room, or in my body, or behind me. If it had once eluded me by its distance, it now eluded me by proximity – something too near to see, too plain to be understood, on this side of knowledge.<sup>204</sup>

Lewis goes on to declare: "That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised."<sup>205</sup>

He had encountered God.

Experiences such as Lewis's help us understand the Holy Spirit's presence within the human spirit through film and the way we can encounter God in this way.

New Testament scholar Robert Jewett finds the divine encounters experienced in the daily life of movie characters as an expression of Paul's teaching in Romans 2. Jewett asks, Are the righteous actions of characters an example of people who "[persist] in doing good" (Rom 2:7<sup>206</sup>), who "do by nature things required by the law" (Rom 2:14)? Are they not showing that "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts" (Rom 2:15)?<sup>207</sup>

Jewett believes Paul is not speaking in Romans 1 and 2 of a "righteousness by works", by which people earn their salvation. Romans 2 speaks of the law written on humankind's heart to which "their consciences also [bear] witness" (Rom 2:15) – a work of the Spirit. He believes Paul has in mind those righteous individuals who lived prior to Jesus' coming. Their salvation is according to how they responded to the amount of revelation they received.

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<sup>204</sup> Lewis, C. S. *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955, 169.

<sup>205</sup> Lewis, 171.

<sup>206</sup> All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

<sup>207</sup> Johnston, 69 referring to *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture*, Robert Jewett, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993, 67.

Jewett suggests that Paul's argument could apply equally to all who have experiences of God's Spirit, regardless of time or place, whether that led to their salvation or not.

Johnston argues this is the appeal of the work of the Spirit in our spirit at its most basic.

"Such is the possibility that books...paintings...and movies...offer their readers and viewers. If the Spirit is active in and through the human spirit, then the potential for the sacred is present across our human endeavour."<sup>208</sup>

One might ask how God is able to speak to someone through the work of a non-Christian.

Robert McAfee Brown suggests that over the centuries theologians have given three different responses to this question.<sup>209</sup>

The first response is to claim that non-Christian writers and moviemakers are the unconscious inheritors of the Christian faith. They have grown up and been nurtured in a 'Christian' environment, so their works portray a Christian perspective.

A second approach, and one which Johnston claims is much more widely subscribed to by contemporary Christians, is that all truth is from God.

Brown identifies limitations in the above two approaches and suggests a third approach: that Christians should recognise that "God can use *all* things for the fulfilment of the divine

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<sup>208</sup> Johnston, 69.

<sup>209</sup> Johnston, 71-72 referring to a lecture published in two different forms: first in *The Pseudonyms of God*, Robert McAfee Brown, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972, 96-103, and later in *Persuade Us to Rejoice: The Liberating Power of Fiction*, Robert McAfee Brown, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992.

purposes, including the *full* message of non-Christians rather than only selected congenial parts”.<sup>210</sup>

Johnston comments:

The analogy should not be overdrawn, but its point is clear. Christians need not claim that non-Christian filmmakers are covert Christians or simply appropriate from their movies what is congenial to or congruent with their understanding of the Christian faith. Rather, if viewers will join in community with a film’s storyteller, letting the movie’s images speak with their full integrity, they might be surprised to discover that they are hearing God as well.<sup>211</sup>

This concurs very much with the words of Paul Tillich: “everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not”.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Brown, Robert McAfee. *Persuade Us to Rejoice: The Liberating Power of Fiction*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992, 35 as quoted in Johnston, 72. Brown reflects on the Christian’s conviction that God is able to use all things for his purposes – truth and untruth. He illustrates his point with a reference to Isaiah 10, when the prophet tells the people of Israel (who believed they were “God’s people”) that God will use the Assyrians (who were certainly not “God’s people”) to make his will known to Israel. Brown argues that, just as Isaiah recognised in his day that God could speak the truth to his people, Israel, through the unbelieving, unethical Assyrians, so Christians should recognise today that God can speak not only through believers, but also through “Assyrians in modern dress”.

<sup>211</sup> Johnston, 72.

<sup>212</sup> Quoted in Graham, David John, 37.

## Chapter 5

### **A survey of film and literature**

I will now survey four examples of children's film and literature. I have chosen Disney movies as one of these, because of the family values that have historically been attributed to them. The Chronicles of Narnia series has been included as an example of popular literature and movies that portray explicit Christian themes. I have included the Harry Potter series because of the immense popularity and appeal this series has generated, as well as controversy both within and outside the Church. Finally, I have included selected comic book superheroes because of the strong parallels many of these contain to the gospel. There is therefore coverage of both film and literature, and material that contains intentional Christian themes and those where those themes may not be intentional, but can still be found. The examples included are ones children aged 10-12 years engage with.

#### *Disney*

One of the most prolific producers of children's media (movie and television particularly) is Disney.<sup>213</sup>

Many people have identified clear messages of faith and Christian values in these movies.

Journalist and author Mark Pinsky recognised in Disney's movies "a generally identifiable

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<sup>213</sup> An entry on Wikipedia suggests Disney has produced 281 feature length films for children, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1931 to *The Game Plan* in August 2007. This does not include films labelled, produced or distributed by other Disney imprints or subsidiaries, including Touchstone Pictures, Miramax Films, Hollywood Pictures, and Dimension Films. Wikipedia. "Disney Films." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disney\\_films](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disney_films) (accessed 22 October 2007).

and ethical system”<sup>214</sup> and sensed that children around the world were having their values shaped by Disney’s animated features. The result of his research is *The Gospel According to Disney* in which he explores the role the animated features of the Walt Disney Company have played in the moral and spiritual development of children.

Pinsky believes there is a consistent set of moral and human values in these movies, largely based on Western, Judeo-Christian faith principles, which together constitute what he refers to as a “Disney Gospel”:

This gospel reflects the personal vision of Walt Disney and the company he shaped in his image and, to a lesser degree, the commercial goals of the studio. Good is always rewarded; evil is always punished. Faith is an essential element – faith in yourself and, even more, faith in something *greater* than yourself, some higher power. Optimism and hard work complete the basic canon.<sup>215</sup>

According to Bob Thomas, author of *Walt Disney: An American Original*, Disney did not want his films to be seen as religious or to portray any material dealing with religion, “reasoning that portions of the audience would be displeased by the depiction of a particular sect”.<sup>216</sup>

Despite there being little explicit theology or religious substance in Disney’s movies, the works are scattered with theological words such as *faith*, *believe* and *miracle*. It is not difficult to identify themes and messages that can help children in their understanding and application of faith.

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<sup>214</sup> Pinsky, Mark I. *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, x.

<sup>215</sup> Pinsky, xi-xii.

<sup>216</sup> Thomas, Bob. *Walt Disney: An American Original*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976 (no page reference listed) as quoted in Pinsky, 1.

Movie mogul Sam Goldwyn is quoted as saying “Pictures are for entertainment; messages should be sent by Western Union”.<sup>217</sup> He believed movies should not be used to promote a political position or a moral lesson. Walt Disney took a different view.

Pinsky comments:

[Disney’s] animated features were always designed to be ‘message’ films in the broadest sense, and especially for children. Yet throughout his life, it was a decision he downplayed, steadfastly denying there was any particular theological perspective in his work. ‘We like to have a point of view in our stories, not an obvious moral, but a worthwhile theme,’ he told one interviewer. ‘All we are trying to do is give the public good entertainment. That is all they want.’<sup>218</sup>

Since early times, storytellers and writers of drama have introduced unexpected devices or characters into their works to resolve a conflict or enliven the plot. Pinsky refers to the Greeks use of an actor portraying a god who would descend onto the stage in a basket, which they called *deus ex machina* (literally, “god from the machine”). He says Disney decided to use magic to achieve this in his stories rather than any one religion, Christian or other.<sup>219</sup> The strategy worked. As Pinsky observes, “Disney characters are arguably far more recognisable around the world than images of Jesus and Buddha.”<sup>220</sup>

There has been much debate over whether Disney’s movies portray a Judeo-Christian message or secular humanistic values. “The essence of the Disney ‘religion’ is not theology, but ‘morality’, and moral behaviour; not ‘thought’ as much as action,” wrote William I McReynolds in his thesis, “Walt Disney in the American Grain”.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Wikipedia. “Samuel Goldwyn.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Goldwyn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Goldwyn) (accessed 22 October 2007).

<sup>218</sup> Pinsky, 2.

<sup>219</sup> Pinsky, 4.

<sup>220</sup> Pinsky, 4.

<sup>221</sup> McReynolds, William I. “Walt Disney in the American Grain.” PhD diss, University of Minnesota, 1971 as quoted in Pinsky, 32.

John Culhane believes Disney did not tell people who God is. “Walt promoted what he said were values and beliefs common to all mankind. That was what he was interested in. Disney films are very high on values and morals, but not to one particular way to God.”<sup>222</sup>

Tony Campolo agrees that God may appear absent from Disney’s movies. But he sees them as parables. “Jesus used parables. Are not the Disney movies parables? Are they not lessons?”<sup>223</sup>

Reverend Michael Catlett, pastor of McLean Baptist Church in McLean, Virginia, preached a sermon on 22 June 1997 entitled, “Everything I Needed to Know I Learned from Watching Disney”.<sup>224</sup> He acknowledged that it is not the intention of Disney to tell us the stories of Jesus or to disclose to us the revelation of God. However, he believes we can see some gospel truth missed in with what Disney offers:

If the only place we ever look for the gospel is in the written text of the [B]ible, I fear we may miss some of the most important truths of the [S]pirit. ...If we come to church to get our weekly dose of the gospel I fear we will receive no more than a tiny bit of what God has to offer, a minuscule dose that vaccinates us and mistakenly protects us from all the reality of what God has to give. The Holy Spirit doesn’t wait for Sunday morning, doesn’t wait until we have opened our Bibles to read the [S]criptures. Sometimes I have experienced God’s grace and love through Disney movies.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Culhane, John. *Aladdin: The Making of an Animated Film*. New York: Disney Editions, 1993 (no page reference listed), as quoted in Pinsky, 117.

<sup>223</sup> Pinsky, 9.

<sup>224</sup> This sermon was delivered the Sunday following the Southern Baptist Convention’s resolution to boycott Disney and its products and subsidiaries due to what the delegates saw was Disney’s deviation from acceptable family values and practices. Catlett sent me a personal copy of this sermon after I contacted him at [mcatlett@mcleanbaptist.org](mailto:mcatlett@mcleanbaptist.org) on 25 April 2006.

<sup>225</sup> Catlett.

To illustrate his premise, Catlett cites four Disney classics – *Dumbo*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* – and attempts to show how they reflect stories Jesus told and embody the *essence*, not the totality, of the gospel:

If there is a theme that connects many of the Disney cartoon works, it is that love, acceptance and appreciation of those who are different from us, whatever *us* may mean. Whether it is ... *Beauty and the Beast*, and the recognition that beauty and bestiality are a part of all of us; or *The Little Mermaid*, and the insight that we seldom really understand those whom we perceive to be different from us; or *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and the realisation that outcasts are people, too, there is an implied declaration that we have a moral responsibility to love and care for one another. The barriers erected to demonstrate our differences are artificial constructions; everyone is my neighbour. I believe that is the gospel.<sup>226</sup>

Catlett concludes:

I have discovered the gospel from time to time within [Disney's] celluloid frames of animation. I have heard the gospel pronounced by some unlikely characters. The gospel is not relegated to special places and times. If we will but listen we can hear it spoken all around us. Sometimes we hear the gospel through sermons and worship services, and sometimes it's through children's stories contained on VHS tapes with a mouse ears logo. I want to listen to the gospel wherever I can find it. Don't you?<sup>227</sup>

Pinsky states there is growing evidence, beyond the speculative and the theoretical, that animated movies like Disney's can have a real impact on the lives of children. A study conducted by two Colorado State University researchers and reported in *National Post* newspaper of Canada suggests that films such as these "are likely to play a role in the development of children's culture and may influence children's and adult's information about families."<sup>228</sup> Given the large percentage of movie characters in families without both parents in the home, the report found that Disney movies might be helpful to parents and children in blended families.

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<sup>226</sup> Catlett.

<sup>227</sup> Catlett.

<sup>228</sup> Pinsky, 12.

Careforce Church Mt Evelyn<sup>229</sup> used *Finding Nemo*<sup>230</sup> as the basis of a six-week series in their children's program. Children's pastor Peter Lusk decided to use this movie because of the positive things it said about families. The fact that the story centred on a single dad and his son was an added bonus. Lusk comments, "We had many single parents in the church and we didn't want to portray the idea that 'family' is only mum and dad. We wanted to be inclusive rather than exclusive."<sup>231</sup>

The movies also provide children a broader understanding of cultures different to their own. Indian rights activist Russell Means called *Pocahontas* "the single finest work done on American Indians by Hollywood," according to Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney*. "Because it's Disney, millions of children forever are going to see this in their formative years, and it's going to affect how they see my people and our culture all the way through their lives."<sup>232</sup>

*Beauty and the Beast* has provided parents and children's ministers with a platform to begin discussion with children about the way appearance affects the way we see people. Pinsky observes:

Children can be incredibly cruel to peers, based on physical appearance. This is particularly true when these instincts are reinforced every day by media and popular culture and – worst of all – advertising that exalts aesthetic perfection.... Having a beast turn into a handsome prince is an easy sell. But what about schoolmates who are not thin, or blond, or who don't have skin like unblemished porcelain? How should they be treated? If not angels, might not they become valued friends, or even dates? The next time a son or daughter makes a

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<sup>229</sup> Careforce Church Mt Evelyn is a Church of Christ in Mt Evelyn, Victoria. <http://www.careforce.org>.

<sup>230</sup> *Finding Nemo*. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

<sup>231</sup> From a personal conversation when I was researching for the article "Finding Gospel Truths in Finding Nemo." *KidsWise*, Issue 7, 2004.

<sup>232</sup> Wasko, Janet. *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001 (no page reference listed), as quoted in Pinsky, 165.

disparaging remark about another's looks, it might be helpful to ask how Belle might find the beauty in someone like that.<sup>233</sup>

In "Disney Gets Religion", Donald E Fadner illustrates the impact Disney movies have had in his 11-year-old son:

My son has learned from *Aladdin* that it is a mistake to pretend to be something he is not in order to get others to like him, that he should 'be himself' and trust that there will be others who will like him for that. He has learned from *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* to like and appreciate girls who are active and accomplished; the kind who spend their time trying to be petite and pretty pale by comparison.<sup>234</sup>

Susan Lochrie Graham, in "Some Day My Prince Will Come: Images of Salvation in the Gospel According to St Walt", wrote that Disney's earlier features implicitly supported Christian values such as faith, hope, and love associated with belief in Jesus. "For children, especially the church-going children of the 1950s, the images of Walt's fantasy films provided an important intertext for understanding these Christian concepts."<sup>235</sup>

Henry Giroux wrote:

The question of whether Disney's animated films are good for kids has no easy answer and resists simple analysis. I soon found that for my children, and I suspect for many others, these films possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as the public schools, religious institutions and the family. Disney films combine enchantment and innocence in narrating stories that help children understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Pinsky, 147.

<sup>234</sup> Pinsky, 264.

<sup>235</sup> Graham, Susan Lochrie. "Some Day My Prince Will Come: Images of salvation in the Gospel According to St Walt." In *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible*, George Aichele, ed, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, 79 on [http://books.google.com/books?id=vIxY0g\\_unwQC&pg=PA11&lpg=PA11&dq=book+%22culture+entertainment+and+the+bible%22&source=web&ots=B-FobqXlIx&sig=dfCWU8rsc-AMQ0PCPMKjm466Coo](http://books.google.com/books?id=vIxY0g_unwQC&pg=PA11&lpg=PA11&dq=book+%22culture+entertainment+and+the+bible%22&source=web&ots=B-FobqXlIx&sig=dfCWU8rsc-AMQ0PCPMKjm466Coo) (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

<sup>236</sup> Giroux, Henry A. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999 (no page reference listed) as quoted in Pinsky, 264.

Mike Thomas wrote about the dilemma Disney's animated features pose for parents like him. His daughter Carly's top ten movies are all Disney animated features, and each teaches her a lesson. He says:

When she had been afraid of the dark shapes in her room at night, I remind her of *Snow White* imagining all sorts of scary things when running through the woods. It turns out they were nothing but trees, logs, shadows and friendly animals. From *Beauty and the Beast*, we learned people could change. From *Lilo and Snitch*, we learned that even two people can make up a family – a bond that squabbles, fights and a crazed alien can't break. Disney can be a child's first introduction to the cruelties of the real world. It puts them up there on the big screen and forces you to talk about them. Death. Loss of a parent. Struggle.... Say what you will about Disney, and I have. But when it comes to kids' movies, nobody does it better.<sup>237</sup>

Pinsky concludes:

All of this is not to argue – and I will not – that Disney's animated features are a viable substitute for therapy, education, worship, or Sunday school. What I will argue...is that they are useful tools in building a general moral sensibility among children and in reinforcing parental and religious values. In some cases, where individual films parallel the situation children may find themselves in, the movies may be able to do more.<sup>238</sup>

## *The Chronicles of Narnia*

Released in 1950, C S Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was an instant success<sup>239</sup> and has remained widely popular over the years.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Pinsky, 265.

<sup>238</sup> Pinsky, 12.

<sup>239</sup> Brown, Devin. *Inside Narnia: A Guide to Exploring The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2005, 12.

<sup>240</sup> Angus and Robertson's "2006 Kids Top 50" survey, in which Australian children aged 5 to 17 were invited to vote for their all-time favourite book, placed *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* at number 2, behind the Harry Potter books, and The Chronicle of Narnia series at number 4. Angus and Robertson "Kids Top 50" and [www.angusrobertson.com.au/b2c/init.do](http://www.angusrobertson.com.au/b2c/init.do).

Lewis recognised the power of story and its ability to communicate the gospel in an indirect way. He wanted children (and adults with the eyes to see) “to meet Jesus in fiction so that when they encountered him in fact they would not merely acknowledge him, but love him”.<sup>241</sup>

The land of Narnia may be viewed as a “metaphorical children’s Bible”.<sup>242</sup> Lewis capitalises pronouns when referring to Aslan, just as the pronouns for the Godhead are capitalised in some translations of the Bible. Aslan is a lion, a clear reference to Jesus, the Lion of Judah. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Queen Jadis is the personification of evil and her tempting of Edmund similar to the tempting of Jesus by Satan. Aslan willingly gives up his life for Edmund. Mr Tumnus, the faun, is like Judas Iscariot in the way he betrays the presence of the children to Queen Jadis, which leads to the eventual capture and death of Aslan.

Lewis “debunked” the idea that the Narnia stories were allegories. Parts of it *can* be read allegorically (such as when Aslan dies for Edmund and is later resurrected). But, as Abanes notes, “a true allegory would *have to be* read as symbolic representation of a deeper message”.<sup>243</sup>

Lewis claims Narnia’s Christian parallels were not deliberately made. Rather, “[Christianity] pushed itself in of its own accord”.<sup>244</sup> He reflects:

I did not say to myself ‘Let us represent Jesus as he really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia’; I said, ‘Let us suppose that there were a land like Narnia and that

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<sup>241</sup> Newman, Marc T. “Rediscovering a Gripping Gospel Through *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*.” [www.movieministry.com/articles.php?articles=popular&article\\_view=65](http://www.movieministry.com/articles.php?articles=popular&article_view=65) (accessed 28 October 2007).

<sup>242</sup> Bledsoe, Kathy. “The Heart of a Child” [www.hollywoodjesus.com/comments/narnia\\_features/2005/04/heart-of-child.html](http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/comments/narnia_features/2005/04/heart-of-child.html) (accessed 3 Feb 2006).

<sup>243</sup> Abanes, Richard. *Harry Potter, Narnia, and The Lord of the Rings*. Eugene, Oreg: Harvest House Publishers, 2005, 107.

<sup>244</sup> Lewis, C S. *Of This and Other Worlds*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967, 111 as quoted in Abanes, *Harry Potter*, 108.

the Son of God, as he became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen.<sup>245</sup>

Based on this supposition, Lewis created a fantasy world that depicts the central theme of our real world – redemption through the incarnate God’s death and resurrection. Through the power of story and imagination, “this mythical Christ somehow draws us ever deeper to the Real”,<sup>246</sup> as described by Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware.

There is no doubt that Lewis hoped that the Narnia stories would draw readers towards a deeper love of Jesus, or at least spark an inquiring mind as to who his is.

In 1953 an 11-year-old girl named Hilla experienced such an awakening while reading the Narnia stories – an experience she later described as “an indefinable stirring and longing”.<sup>247</sup>

She wrote to Lewis inquiring about the “other name” Aslan suggested. Lewis replied:

As to Aslan’s other name, well I want you to guess. Has there never been anyone in this world who: (1) Arrived at the same time as Father Christmas. (2) Said he was the son of the Great Emperor. (3) Gave himself up for someone else’s fault to be jeered at and killed by wicked people. (4) Came to life again. ... Don’t you really know His name in this world?<sup>248</sup>

In May of 1955, the mother of a nine-year-old boy named Laurence wrote to Lewis, explaining that her son was concerned that he loved Aslan more than Jesus. In his reply 10 days later, Lewis wrote:

Laurence can’t really love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that’s what he is doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the thing

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<sup>245</sup> Lewis, C S. *Time & Tide*, 14 August 1954 as quoted in Abanes, *Harry Potter*, 108.

<sup>246</sup> Bruner, Kurt & Ware, Jim. *Finding God in the Land of Narnia*. Salt River, 2005, xv.

<sup>247</sup> Bruner & Ware, xvii.

<sup>248</sup> Dorset, Lyle W & Marjorie Lamb Mead, eds. *CS Lewis: Letters to Children*. New York: Scribner, 1996 no page reference, as quoted in Bruner & Ware, xviii.

Jesus really did or said. So that when Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus, and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before.<sup>249</sup>

Bruner recounts an incident that happened as his 9-year-old son, Shaun, was listening to an audio version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* while travelling in the car:

Not a word was spoken as we endured the dreadful scene of Aslan's death on the stone table. A deep sadness rested upon Shaun as he absorbed the injustice and loss. But then, moments later, he was overwhelmed with celebration as he discovered that Aslan was alive again. The gloom of death overtaken by the delight of resurrection. Shaun could not contain his excitement. 'That's just like Jesus,' he screamed from the backseat.

Like most kids raised in Sunday School, Shaun had heard the story of Jesus' death and resurrection literally dozens of times. It had become routine, expected – perhaps even boring. But through a fantasy tale that had none of what Lewis called 'stained glass and Sunday School associations', Shaun was caught off guard, surprised by the most wonderful and potent truth of Christian faith. The effect on his heart...was a whiff of true delight. We entered into the experience of the gospel rather than merely exploring its tenets. And along the way we 'crossed a great frontier' that awakened a new, more vibrant faith.<sup>250</sup>

Linda Banks recalls running weeklong "Wonderful World of Narnia" holiday programs, each year focusing on one of the Narnia stories. The programs were largely attended by local (unchurched) children. As they entered into the world of Narnia, through drama, craft, music, film and props, Banks recalls the children "ultimately came face to face with the Great Lion, Aslan himself and some learned to follow him".<sup>251</sup>

Marc Newman identifies clearly developed elements of the gospel in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: the slippery slope of sin, the roadblock of unbelief, the Suffering Servant, the power of the resurrection, the need for faithfulness.<sup>252</sup> Newman believes there are clear

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<sup>249</sup> Dorset & Lamb, no page reference, as quoted in Bruner & Ware, xvi.

<sup>250</sup> Bruner & Ware, xiii.

<sup>251</sup> Banks, Robert and Linda Banks. "Narnia on the Big Screen." In *Zadok Perspectives* No. 91, Winter 2006, 16.

<sup>252</sup> Newman.

Christian messages in the story. He cites the popularity of the movie version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* suggests that most people want to believe in a world like Narnia, but they lack the eyes to see the similarities between that world and our own. “The thought that someone might love them enough to die for them is the basis of many appealing and timeless romances – how much better to discover that Someone already actually has.”<sup>253</sup>

Newman concedes that not everyone who enjoys Narnia will want to love Jesus. But the connection some people may feel with Narnia may make it easier to introduce Jesus. The fictional account of Aslan might make discussions of Christ’s work to save us more “present and real”.<sup>254</sup>

Soon after the movie’s release, *Children’s Ministry Magazine* website featured suggested ideas to use with children after they had seen the movie. The talk sheet provided a discussion guide for families to use “to advance faith in kids and families”.<sup>255</sup> While this talk sheet appears to be targeting children who already have a knowledge of Jesus and an understanding of faith, the suggestions and questions (with some modification) could be used with equal effectiveness with unchurched children.

I can see a place in this type of dialogue approach alongside Jerome Berryman’s “I wonder” questions. In his “Godly Play” storytelling method, Berryman suggests helping children

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<sup>253</sup> Newman.

<sup>254</sup> Newman.

<sup>255</sup> “The Chronicles of Narnia” [http://cmmag.com/current/narnia\\_special.htm](http://cmmag.com/current/narnia_special.htm) (accessed 3 March 2006). Some of the discussion suggestions include: Have everyone close their eyes, turn around in a circle until they’re dizzy, and then try to walk in a straight line. How did you feel? How is that like or unlike the way the kids may’ve felt when they first came to Narnia? How would you have felt in Narnia? Of the four children, who do you think you’re most like? What obstacles did each child face in Narnia? Read aloud Romans 1:1-4. How is Aslan coming back to life in the movie like or unlike Jesus rising from the dead in real life? What do you think are the Christian messages from this movie?

respond to the story with “I wonder” questions.<sup>256</sup> Questions such as: “I wonder what part of the story you like best?”, “I wonder what part of the story is the most important?”, “I wonder who you are in this story?”, “I wonder if there’s a part of the story we can leave out and still have the story?”, can help children reflect on the experience and begin a dialogue with it.

Linda Banks warns against over-allegorising the Narnia stories. To do so results in the story losing its wonder, stops people asking questions and “ultimately reduces its spiritual value”.<sup>257</sup>

In a newspaper article soon after the release of the movie *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Kevin Donnelly noted that one of the strengths of the movie was the debate it had ignited about values. He observed critics in the US and Britain had attacked the film as “moralistic and guilty of pushing a Christian agenda”.<sup>258</sup>

Donnelly, author of *Why Our Schools are Failing*, believes the debate about the movie was part of a much wider debate about deciding which are the best books for children to read. He cites Australian authors such as Andy Griffiths who argue that children should be given the freedom to read whatever they like, so long as those books are not used as “an exercise in moral instruction”.<sup>259</sup>

However, Donnelly believes such a values-free approach is wrong. Noting that much of television, movies and books children encounter today is “morally empty”, he asks how children can learn the difference between right and wrong, or how they can understand the

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<sup>256</sup> Berryman, Jerome W. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995, 34-35.

<sup>257</sup> Banks & Banks, 17.

<sup>258</sup> Donnelly, Kevin. “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.” *Herald Sun*, 3 January 2006.

<sup>259</sup> Donnelly.

best way to act and to live with others, if they have not experienced or been taught such values.

Donnelly comments: “Far from the belief that developing a conscience happens spontaneously or by accident, the reality is that children will only become responsible and fair-minded as a result of what they have been taught.”<sup>260</sup>

Donnelly believes one of the strengths of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is that Edmund’s experience, where he betrays his sisters and brother but then redeems himself by fighting the White Witch, helps children come to terms with their own inner conflicts.

Lewis biographer A N Wilson has observed that since the publication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a whole generation has grown up of people who read the Narnia stories in childhood and then passed them on to their children and their grandchildren, making the stories a part of the cultural heritage for three generations of readers.<sup>261</sup>

Another explanation for the enduring popularity of the Narnia stories is that they represent what Green and Hooper refer to as “a new mythology”<sup>262</sup> and they can therefore play an integral role in the personal growth and development of those who read them. Roland Hein argues, “With Lewis, myth was a vehicle by which supernatural reality communicates to man [sic]”.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Donnelly.

<sup>261</sup> Wilson, A N. *C S Lewis: A Biography*. London: Flamingo, 1991, 220, as quoted in Brown, Devin, 16.

<sup>262</sup> Green, Roger Lancelyn and Walter Hooper. *C S Lewis: A Biography*. New York: Harvest, 1994, 251, as quoted in Brown, 16.

<sup>263</sup> Hein, Roland. *Christian Mythmakers*. Chicago: Cornerstone, 1998, 206, as quoted in Brown, Devin, 17.

Bruner's and Ware's reflection was written only on the power of the Narnia books, but could equally apply to films. They write:

Lewis draws us into another world so that we might experience Christ by another name. And when we return home from the adventure, we bring with us a better understanding and deeper love for the Saviour. Or at the very least, we return having smelled the aroma of joy – and craving its true source.<sup>264</sup>

## *Harry Potter*

Since the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997, the Harry Potter books have gained immense popularity, critical acclaim and commercial success worldwide. As of April 2007, the first six books in the seven book series had sold more than 325 million copies<sup>265</sup> and have been translated into 64 languages.<sup>266</sup> The seventh and final book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, was released on 21 July 2007. Publishers announced a record-breaking 12 million copies for the first print run in the USA alone.<sup>267</sup> The success of the novels has made author J K Rowling the highest-earning novelist in history.<sup>268</sup>

The books and movies have been attacked by some parts of the church as being evil, promoting disrespect for adults and authority and, more importantly, glamorising the occult

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<sup>264</sup> Bruner & Ware, xvii.

<sup>265</sup> Jordan, Dearbil. "Time comes for Harry to fly to the rescue." Times Online, 4 April 2007. [http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry\\_sectors/retailing/article1610344.ece](http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/retailing/article1610344.ece) (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

<sup>266</sup> McLaren, Elsa. "Harry Potter's final adventure to get record print run." Times Online, 15 March 2007. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article1521607.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1521607.ece) (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

<sup>267</sup> McLaren, Elsa.

<sup>268</sup> Watson, Julie and Tomas Kellner. "J K Rowling and the Billion Dollar Empire." [http://www.forbes.com/maserati/billionaires2004/cx\\_jw\\_0226rowlingbill04.html](http://www.forbes.com/maserati/billionaires2004/cx_jw_0226rowlingbill04.html) (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

and leading children into witchcraft. Focus on the Family founder Dr James Dobson has spoken against Harry Potter because “given the trend toward witchcraft and New Age ideology in the larger culture, it’s difficult to ignore the effects such stories (albeit imaginary) might have on young, impressionable minds”.<sup>269</sup>

Ted Baehr and Tom Snyder claim the worldview of Harry Potter teaches a kind of moral relativism. “Disobeying rules, practicing witchcraft, consulting the spirits of dead people, and lying are all treated as praiseworthy, especially if they are successful.”<sup>270</sup> They ask the question, “are these the messages you want to teach your children?”<sup>271</sup>, particularly children entering the impressionable period of adolescence.

Abanes says that saying Harry Potter books and movies contain Christian symbolism on the level of Lewis’ Chronicles and Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy “does a great disservice to *all* of these works”.<sup>272</sup>

While acknowledging these and many other criticisms against the series,<sup>273</sup> I have found much in the books and movies that can be used for good in helping children in their faith development.

In addressing the criticism that the books promoted witchcraft and the occult, one of the early evangelical supporters of the series was Charles Colson. In 1999 he said:

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<sup>269</sup> Dobson, James. “What I think About *Harry Potter*.” <http://listen.family.org/miscdaily/A000000593.cfm> (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

<sup>270</sup> Baehr, Ted and Tom Snyder. *Frodo & Harry: Understanding Visual Media and Its Impact on Our Lives*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2003, 27.

<sup>271</sup> Baehr & Synder, 28.

<sup>272</sup> Abanes, *Harry Potter*, 158. Abanes’ reasons are (1) it cheapens what Lewis and Tolkien achieved, (2) it contradicts what Rowling herself has said about Harry Potter, and (3) it lulls people into a false sense of security about Harry Potter.

<sup>273</sup> A comprehensive selection of comments from Christian leaders, both supporting the books and warning against them, is contained in Neal, Connie. *What’s a Christian to do with Harry Potter?* Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001, 28ff.

The magic of these books is purely mechanical, as opposed to occultic. That is, Harry and his friends cast spells, read crystal balls, and turn themselves into animals – but they don't make contact with a supernatural world. ...The plots reinforce the theme that evil is real, and must be courageously opposed. ...[Harry and his friends] develop courage, loyalty, and a willingness to sacrifice for one another – even at the risk of their lives. Not bad lessons in a self-centred world.<sup>274</sup>

Others see clear connections between themes in Harry Potter and Christian truths and values. While acknowledging that “God hardly gets a look-in anywhere in the books”, Bridger believes there is what he terms a “theology of Potterworld”.<sup>275</sup> He observes:

There is...a considerable amount of traditional Christian theology implicitly reflected in the pages of Potterworld. It may not be as obvious as the theology to be found in Lewis' Narnia books, and it is certainly nothing like as self-conscious but it is there nonetheless.<sup>276</sup>

Children themselves identify clear moral and spiritual messages in the books. Eleven-year-old Taylor wrote an essay in which he outlined ten things he had learned from Harry Potter.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Colson, Charles. “Witches & Wizards” on BreakPoint radio program, 2 Nov 1999. <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=3693> (accessed 17 Oct 2007). In his 20 July 2007 broadcast, Colson stated that he personally does not recommend children read the Harry Potter books. Colson. “Potter Mania.” <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=6778> (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

<sup>275</sup> Bridger, Francis. *A Charmed Life: The Spirituality of Potterworld*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001, 85. Bridger sees this theology in two distinct forms: in the superficial vestiges of Christianity that are present in both the Muggle and magical cultures of the books (such as the celebration of Christmas); and in the themes that are characteristic of Christian theology which permeate the books at a much deeper level (such as sacrifice, mercy, redemption).

<sup>276</sup> Bridger, 85.

<sup>277</sup> These were listed as: (1) Witchcraft: Don't do this at home! (2) It's your choices that make you who you are. You may come from a bad family or a good family; but it's choices you make that make you who YOU are. I come from a good family, but I still have to make good choices to keep it going. (3) Don't think someone is bad until you hear the whole story. You could be wrong. (4) Don't let enemies provoke you. (5) Don't judge people by their race. (6) Gossip hurts people, badly. I decided never to spread or believe gossip. (7) Lots of entertainment, little bit of money! I used to entertain myself by playing video games or watching TV. Now, I learned the joy of reading. I'm also reading Chronicles of Narnia. (8) Don't take vengeance. You may feel like it, but don't. Harry could have lost his godfather if he had given in to his feelings of vengeance against someone he *thought* betrayed his parents to Voldemort. (9) Be on guard against evil. I saw different ways evil can hide itself to look good. So, I

One of the reasons the Harry Potter books have resonated with children and become so popular is that they meet children's heartfelt needs. Neal identifies eight crucial needs in children's lives<sup>278</sup> and illustrates how the Harry Potter stories speak to them. From this analysis, Connie Neal concludes Harry Potter appeals to children at these levels:

- Their love of fantasy, magic and wishes coming true
- Their longing for control
- Their desire to be the best they can be
- Their thrill in victory
- Their deeply felt emotions
- Their need to conquer fear
- Their desire to belong<sup>279</sup>

If we are to reach children, we must reach their hearts. Neal says marketers recognise this and spend considerable time and money determining what children need and want. She says those brands that are successful are so "because they found a path that satisfied one or more of those needs".<sup>280</sup>

Taking just one of the needs Neal lists as an example – the need to conquer fear – we can see how a theme in Harry Potter can be used in a child's Christian education. Children seem to enjoy scary stories. Part of the reason for this is because, by entering the story, they can work through their own fear and move toward resolution. The Harry Potter stories *are* scary and become increasingly dark, particularly in the movie adaptations.

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learned to beware. (10) Choose your friends carefully. They influence which way your life goes. Pick good friends and keep them. Neal, 28-29.

<sup>278</sup> Those needs are: (1) hope that comes in the form of wishes that might come true; (2) a sense of control or empowerment; (3) self-esteem that comes from accomplishment; (4) affirmation of their emotions and tools to help deal with them; (5) knowledge that they can face fear and conquer it; (6) a strong sense of identity, of belonging, and of destiny; (7) love that is found in loving families; and (8) the company of good friends. Neal, 65.

<sup>279</sup> Neal, 67-82.

<sup>280</sup> Del Vecchio, Gene. *Creating Ever-Cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart*. Gretna, La: Pelican Publishing, 1997, 25 as quoted in Neal, 64.

While the books were being debated on CNN's *Talkback Live*, a Catholic priest phoned with this comment:

I find the books wonderfully valuable to teach young children about the fact that there is evil in the world. Wait until you've held a 4-year-old kid in your arms who's dying from a gunshot fired by someone who never even knew his name. Wait until you've had to stand at the bedside of a 7-year-old girl dying of brain cancer and explain to her siblings that...they're not going to see their sister again, that this is a dark and evil thing. That happens. That's the real world, and all those things have happened to me.

And I find that kids who've read Harry Potter, they come and they ask questions about the dark side and the evil, and they are encouraged by the fact the good, as in Harry Potter himself, always comes out on top, and it gives them a chance to talk about the darker things of life and perhaps come to terms with them in as painless a way as possible. I don't see that in any way negative.<sup>281</sup>

This comment backs up the finding of child psychologist Dr Glen Aylward who says that "learning to handle a little fright in small stages is part of growing up. A small fear, faced and overcome, makes way for the real end benefits of pride and accomplishment".<sup>282</sup>

The Harry Potter books and movies provide opportunity for adults to discuss with children their own fears. They also provide an opportunity to teach them what the Bible says about how we are to deal with fears in our lives and to direct them to biblical accounts of people who faced fears with God's help.

Another theme that comes through the Harry Potter series is that of love, particularly as it relates to the love of Harry's mother that protects him from Voldemort. It was her love that protected him the night Voldemort killed Harry's father and her. It is also why Harry is safe from Voldemort while he lives with the Dursleys in the real (Muggle) world. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Dumbledore explains to Harry: "While you can still call home

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<sup>281</sup> Caller identified only as Peter from Louisiana. *CNN Talkback Live*, 7 July 2000. Found at <http://www.cnn.com>. As quoted in Neal, 79.

<sup>282</sup> As quoted in Del Vecchio, 70 and quoted in Neal, 79.

the place where your mother's blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you.... Her blood became your refuge."<sup>283</sup> It is not difficult to see how this section of the book could be used as a springboard to discuss with children the themes of God's love for us and the sacrifice of Jesus.<sup>284</sup>

Neal believes the Harry Potter books can be aligned at varying points with the Bible in a way that can be both spiritually and morally useful. She observes:

Harry and his friends grow in goodness and develop virtues within the community of Gryffindor, with the support of good families like the Weasleys, and under the wise, benevolent leadership of Albus Dumbledore and Professor McGonogall.<sup>285</sup>

There are times when Harry and his friends lie, cheat, deceive, and break rules for no reason. There are times when emotions become strong, and the friends are overpowered with feelings of hatred, murderous rage, jealousy and vengeance. But there is also guilt and remorse when wrong has been done, the bearing of consequences and discipline. As such, the books provide clear lessons for moral development.

Neal asserts that what makes this series useful for helping children "grow in goodness" is the alignment with biblical truth:

It helps tremendously that the characters are true to life. They are deeply drawn as real people who must grapple with the frailty of human nature that leaves them

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<sup>283</sup> Rowling, J K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003, 737.

<sup>284</sup> Gina Burkart offers some questions to guide a discussion with children about this love: The love of Harry's mother saved him, not magic. How do you know that you are loved? How do you share love with others? What does love feel like? Why is love more powerful than hate? We often hear that God is love. What does that mean to you? When has love helped or saved you? How does God's love save us? Burkart, Gina. *A Parent's Guide to Harry Potter*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2005, 42.

<sup>285</sup> Neal, 177.

prone to do wrong and with hearts that are inclined toward hatred, envy, vengeance and other less-than-virtuous traits. And yet those on the side of good persist in seeking truth, justice and to grow in goodness.<sup>286</sup>

Neal sees a parallel between the Harry Potter series and truths of the gospel as outlined in the book of Ephesians, which talks about our place in the household of faith through Christ and instructs us in how to live a righteous life. “Only after acknowledging our place in God’s household and our secure acceptance by God can we effectively proceed to ‘live a life worthy of the calling you have received’ (see Ephesians 3:14-4:1).”<sup>287</sup> Neal believes children’s understanding of this foundational truth can make the difference whether they continue or not to associate themselves with the Christian faith beyond adolescence (assuming they have been raised in a Christian family).

In the ten years Neal worked with children, her mission was “to meet kids at their point of need and lead them to maturity in Christ”. She says the key:

was not by reiterating behaviour they knew to be right or wrong, nor was it just showing them role models of other kids who chose right over wrong. The key to helping kids transition through the tumultuous junior high and high school years into a life of virtuous living had *everything* to do with the same progression laid out in Ephesians and mirrored in Harry Potter’s moral development.<sup>288</sup>

Harry’s struggles against evil can positively influence children’s moral development.

Scholastic Publishers in the past hosted a Harry Potter Discussion Chamber on their website.<sup>289</sup> One question asked children which house they thought they would be sorted into

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<sup>286</sup> Neal, 179.

<sup>287</sup> Neal, 183.

<sup>288</sup> Neal, 183-184.

<sup>289</sup> [www.scholastic.com/harrypotter](http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter). The Discussion Chamber has since been shut down and replaced with a message board.

and why.<sup>290</sup> One boy thought he would be a Slytherin because he was sneaky and would get along with students like Draco Malfoy. But, he said, Harry “seems to make you want to be in the house of Gryffindor”<sup>291</sup> because they are brave and courageous. This comment shows the influence the stories can have on helping children *want* to belong in the equivalent of Gryffindor rather than Slytherin.

As well as assisting in a children’s moral development, the Harry Potter series can also be a tool for evangelism...a “parable of the saving grace of Jesus”.<sup>292</sup> Neal used Harry Potter’s theme of sacrifice (Harry’s mother, Lily, dying so that Harry could live) to explain the love of God and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus to her neighbours, 10-year-old Sarah, her sister Tullie and her father. After that conversation, Neal reports:

[the father] could no longer think of the first Harry Potter book without considering Jesus Christ had died for him, took the curse of death in his place, rose from the dead, giving us authority over and protection from the real invisible forces of evil in this world.<sup>293</sup>

Within a few months the sisters had accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour and were attending church.

As children were waiting with anticipation for the next book in the series to be released and reading it almost as a community, the books provided (and I think still do) an opportunity for adults, who were also reading the books, to connect with the world of children. Burkart discovered this to be the case with her own children. Not only did the books provide topics for “powerful discussions” with her children, but they also provided opportunities for her and

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<sup>290</sup> Students at Hogwarts are ‘sorted’ into one of four houses by the Sorting Hat.

<sup>291</sup> Neal, 186.

<sup>292</sup> Neal, 193.

<sup>293</sup> Neal, 198.

her children to bond. “These weren’t the usual ‘How was your day?’ discussions – not that those are bad. We had found a common and entertaining meeting ground.”<sup>294</sup> While Burkart reports she facilitated and led the discussions, they all contributed “enthusiastically and equally. I shared with and learned from them just as much as they shared with and learned from me. Our relationship deepened to a new level.”<sup>295</sup>

Such discussions are important and enable children (and adults) to process and learn from the moral and faith themes being raised in a book or movie. Talking about what we have read or seen allows us to clarify and internalise the story’s lessons and apply them to our own context. Burkart agrees: “Just as Harry relies on Dumbledore at the end of each adventure to make sense of what has transpired, we can rely on each other to make sense of the stories and talk about the lessons we learned.”<sup>296</sup> This is aligned with Johnston’s dialogue and appropriation approaches to movie watching.

The Church of England has published a guide to help children’s workers approach the Harry Potter series in this way. *Mixing it up with Harry Potter* contains 12 sessions that draw on parallels between events and themes in the Harry Potter world and the world of 9 to 13-year-olds. The sessions cover topics such as sacrifice and mercy to everyday issues such as fitting in and boasting.<sup>297</sup>

Author of the guide, 24-year-old Owen Smith, says:

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<sup>294</sup> Burkart, 110.

<sup>295</sup> Burkart, 110.

<sup>296</sup> Burkart, 20.

<sup>297</sup> Smith, Owen. *Mixing It Up With Harry Potter: 12 sessions on faith for 9-13s*. Church House Publishing, 2007. <http://www.chpublishing.co.uk> (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

There's nothing better than a good story to make people think, and there's plenty in the Harry Potter books to make young people think about the choices they make in their everyday lives and their place in the world.<sup>298</sup>

I believe Harry Potter provides helpful themes and discussion topics to point children to Jesus and to help them in their faith development. Darren Cronshaw believes we need more books like Harry Potter "to model for us the formation of identity, the power of choices, the victory over evil, the fun of humour, and the values of the gospel".<sup>299</sup>

Bridger concludes:

Far from amounting to a denial of the Gospel, the Potter series – through its morality, implicit theology and metaphysics – opens a way to encourage children and adults alike to move beyond the literary creation of Potterworld to ask questions about truth and reality in a way that would have been taboo a generation ago. If that is not opening the door to the Gospel, I don't know what is.<sup>300</sup>

## *Selected Comic Book Superheroes*

Life can be scary for children of any age, including 10-12 year olds. As already noted, a crucial need of children is to conquer fear.<sup>301</sup> As children face fears and uncertainties, they

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<sup>298</sup> Alberge, Dalya. "Church preparing to preach Potter's missionary message." *The Times*, 18 July 2007. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article2093579.ece> (accessed 17 Oct 2007).

<sup>299</sup> Cronshaw, Darren. "Harry Potter and the Living Stone: A consideration of Gospel themes in J K Rowling's Books I to V." *Zadok Paper S127* Spring 2003, 9.

<sup>300</sup> Bridger, *A Charmed Life*, 137.

<sup>301</sup> A national survey of 600 children aged 10-14 conducted by the Australian Childhood Foundation in April 2007 revealed the main fears of Australian children today. Several key themes emerged from the study's finding. Children fear for the future of the world. They are particularly concerned for the environment. Over half the children surveyed worry about not having enough water; 44% are nervous about the future impact of climate change; 43% are worried about air and water pollution. Almost a third of the children (31%) are worried they will have to fight in a war when they get older. More than a third (36%) are apprehensive about terrorism. A quarter of children believe the world will end before

may dream of having a hero to help them – someone who can set the world right or at least walk beside them through the scary situation.

Michael Brewer believes nobody does heroes better than comic books.

As far as I can see, there's just one drawback with these caped adventurers: they aren't real. That leaves us in a bind. Flesh-and-blood heroes aren't big enough to save us, and comic book heroes are make-believe. Fortunately our fictional heroes point beyond themselves to someone both real and super.<sup>302</sup>

Filmmaker Leo Partible recalls his early encounter with comic-book heroes:

I learned about integrity and the American dream from Superman and Captain America; commitment from Batman, social justice from Green Lantern, Green Arrow and Daredevil; the importance of family from the Fantastic Four and the X-men; loyalty and friendship from the Justice League; and sacrifice from Phoenix and Ferro Lad, superheroes who died in the line of duty. I especially identified with Superman as an immigrant, Batman as a perfectionist and Spider-Man as the underdog.<sup>303</sup>

Partible attributes comics to awakening his first “spiritual stirrings” as a 12-year-old.

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the get much older. Children fear for their community is under threat. Half the children (51%) did not feel welcome in shops and cafes. A substantial proportion of them were really worried about being teased (57%), not fitting in with friends (54%) and being bullied (52%). More than a half (57%) worried about what others thought about them. 4 in 10 stated that they do not ever feel like they are doing well enough. Tucci, Joe, Janise Mitchell & Chris Goddard. “Children’s Hopes and Fears: Modern childhood in Australia.” Ringwood, Vic: Australian Childhood Foundation, 2007.

<sup>302</sup> Brewer, H Michael. *Who Needs a Superhero? Finding Virtue, Vice and What’s Holy in the Comics*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2004, 9.

<sup>303</sup> Partible, Leo. “The Divine Image.” In *Behind the Screen: Hollywood insiders on faith, film and culture*, Spencer Lewerenz and Barbara Nicolosi, eds, Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2005, 68-69. Partible also found encouragement from Spiderman. “I especially identified with Spider-Man, who was a superhero, yes, but also a young adult trying to cope with underachievement and disappointment. If I was having a bad day, Spider-Man’s was even worse. If I got a low grade on a class report, Peter Parker could best me by losing his job at the *Daily Bugle* for turning in blurred pictures of Spider-Man’s skirmish with Doc Ock, catching the blame of New York City for the latest round of power outages, and failing every course at Empire University because he missed too many classes.” (Brewer, 5.)

...People are always looking for answers to the big questions, like 'What am I doing here?' I was no exception, only comic books did a better job of giving me answers than many of the sermons I had heard from priests and preachers. Comics hooked me with living colour and fast-paced action, framing a fantastical world of good and evil where I could witness how courage, the exercising of one's unique gifts, and divine intervention could save the day.

Comics seemed to whisper of God's plan for humanity, and gradually I began to see Jesus as the ultimate superhero. He created the universe. He became the God-man, with amazing abilities and powers beyond mere mortals. On earth he commanded the weather, cast out demons, raised the dead. Like other heroes, he came from humble beginnings and grew up with surrogate parents, Mary and Joseph.... He became renowned for standing up for truth and justice, and performed amazing feats like changing water to wine or telling off the establishment by saying even outcasts like prostitutes would make it into heaven before them. Like Spider-Man or Batman, Jesus was considered a menace to authorities. He had skirmished with humankind's greatest enemy, Satan, the first villain to plot world domination. As mirrored by the greatest superhero stories, even friends abandoned Jesus at the hour of his sacrifice. ...He told us how to become new creatures, promising someday we would be transformed and able to do the things he could.<sup>304</sup>

Partible observes that the early comic books reflected the times and upbringings of their mostly young Jewish and Roman Catholic creators. Superheroes characterised essential biblical values.<sup>305</sup> "The tone of the stories may have grown darker over the years, but their moral heart remains intact."<sup>306</sup>

Probably no other comic book story parallels the Gospel story as well as Superman. For this reason, I wish to focus on this story in this section.

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<sup>304</sup> Brewer, 5.

<sup>305</sup> Partible lists these as doing good deeds in secret, a respect for authority, loyalty, patience, kindness, fighting for truth, sacrifice for a friend or neighbour, rejecting the use of power for personal gain, defending the weak and the powerless, the importance of family, taking a stand for justice. Partible, 69.

<sup>306</sup> Partible, 69.

In an interview with *Wizard* magazine, *Superman Returns*<sup>307</sup> director Bryan Singer said, “Superman is the Jesus Christ of superheroes”.<sup>308</sup> Even fictional character Homer Simpson, a favourite of 10-12-year-old children, regularly confuses Superman with God.<sup>309</sup>

Gary Engle agrees there are Christian parallels:

Superman is like nothing so much as an American boy’s fantasy of a messiah...[He has come] from heaven to deliver humankind by sacrificing himself in the service of others. He protects the weak and defends truth and justice and all the other moral virtues inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition, remaining ever vigilant and ever chaste.<sup>310</sup>

Stephen Skelton recalls going to *Superman: The Movie* as a child and remembers it being like a religious experience:

It was epic, mythic, even evangelistic. A heavenly father sends his only son to save the Earth. The movie impacted us in ways we couldn’t describe. It communicated a message that we longed to hear and were desperate to have confirmed, but didn’t yet comprehend why. We were children. Which is why the movie came to mean even more to us as we grew older. For me, it has meant the most in the last few years.<sup>311</sup>

The similarities between Superman and Jesus are myriad, as David Bruce outlines on his website [hollywoodjesus.com](http://hollywoodjesus.com). Here are some of the parallels Bruce identifies from *Superman* (1978):

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<sup>307</sup> *Superman Returns*. Warner Bros Pictures, 2006.

<sup>308</sup> Cotton, Mike. “The Wizard Q&A: Bryan Singer.” <http://www.wizarduniverse.com/movies/supermanreturns/000131776.cfm> (accessed 9 Oct 2007).

<sup>309</sup> Mark Pinsky made this observation on a Public Broadcasting Service ‘Religion and Ethics’ television program on 27 July 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1048/feature.html> (accessed 25 Oct 2007).

<sup>310</sup> Engle, Gary. *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend!* New York: Collier Books, 1988 as quoted in *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, Stephen Skelton, Eugene. Oreg: Harvest House Publishers, 2006, 162.

<sup>311</sup> Skelton, *The Gospel*, 11.

- Superman and his father share the last name of El, which is the Hebrew name for God.
- Superman's father, Jor-El, blesses his son with words that sound very biblical: "We will never leave you...All that I have, I bequeath you, my son...You'll carry me inside you all the days of your life...the son becomes the father, and the father...the son."
- Superman has both a human family and a heavenly origin. Superman's earthly parents, Martha and Jonathan, were modelled after Jesus' earthly parents, Mary and Joseph.
- Superman's enemy is a villain called Lex Luthor, a name suspiciously like Lucifer. Luthor presents to Superman a worldly kingdom similar to Satan's temptation of Christ (Matthew 4:8-10).<sup>312</sup>

As evildoer after evildoer is caught and convicted, Superman demonstrates what Michael Mautner calls "a remarkable capacity for effecting personal salvation".<sup>313</sup>

While this salvation certainly comes to those *in* the story...it can also be true of those *outside* the story – the readers. As Scott Beatty points out, the appeal of the Man of Steel, as always, draws us upwards to something – or Someone – greater:

With the timeless character of Superman, Siegel and Shuster didn't just create the world's most beloved comic book hero. They created the ideal hero, who with unflagging virtue and undefeatable optimism inspire every single one of us to want to be just like him.<sup>314</sup>

In Entertainment Weekly magazine, when asked what *Superman Returns* was about, director Singer explained, "It's a story about what happens when Messiahs come back..."<sup>315</sup>

The movie indeed draws heavily on the story of the Second Coming of Christ and saviour motives. There are also two "resurrection" scenes in the movie.

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<sup>312</sup> <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/superman.htm> (accessed 19 Oct 2007).

<sup>313</sup> Mautner, Michael E. "From the Pit to the Peak: Superman and The Ascension of America" <http://supermanthruthetheages.com/americanway/thesis.php> (accessed on 29 October 2007).

<sup>314</sup> Beatty, Scott. *Superman: The Ultimate Guide to the Man of Steel*. New York: DK Publishing, 2002 as quoted in Skelton, *The Gospel*, 162.

<sup>315</sup> Skelton, Stephen. "Superman Returns: The building blocks of a sermon." <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/article.asp?ArtID=9560> (accessed 20 Aug 2007).

As the story begins, Superman has ascended into the heavens, returning to his home planet Krypton to see if he is in fact “the only son”. While hovering over Earth in the silence of space, the voice of his father reminds him of his heavenly mission. “They can be a great people, Kal-El; they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the Way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you—my only son.”

When Superman and Lois finally meet face to face for the first time in five years, she reveals her anger at him for his unexplained disappearance. In his absence, she had written a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial, “Why the World Doesn't Need Superman.” Lane bluntly tells Superman, “The world doesn't need a saviour. And neither do I.” To which Superman replies, “You wrote that the world doesn't need a saviour. But everyday I hear people crying for one.”

After seeing *Superman Returns*, Skelton reports his non-believer friend as saying, “This movie spoke more to me about Jesus than *The Passion of the Christ*.” Skelton attributes the spiritual impact of *Superman Returns* to the fact that “unlike the straightforward Passion – which was obviously about Jesus Christ and therefore could be easily dismissed by a nonbeliever – my friend never saw this one coming until it was already speaking to his heart”.<sup>316</sup> This demonstrates what Kierkegaard calls the “indirect method” of communication referred to earlier.

While 10-12 year old children should not be viewing *The Passion of the Christ* due to its high level of violence and adult themes, the point Skelton makes is as valid for children as adults.

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<sup>316</sup> Skelton, “Superman Returns”.

A movie (or book) containing such underlying themes and clear gospel parallels may well spark a spiritual connection and draw the viewer or reader into an encounter with God.

Brewer notes:

The spiritual hunger for heroes is woven into the fabric of the human creature. Our Maker built us with a persistent longing for a rescuer who will save us from injustice and suffering. We dream of a champion who will lift us and lead us home. In our bleakest moments, we pray for someone to save us from ourselves.

Religion is the deepest expression of our longing for a saviour, but all our hero stories finally point in the same direction. Every heroic saga, legend, and myth is ultimately a variation on one universal story: When all seemed lost, a hero stepped in to rescue us from the evil around us and within us. As it turns out, this story happens to be true, and the hero is absolutely real.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Brewer, 10.

## Chapter 6

### Principles in practice

In an investigation on the *use* of film and literature in the Christian education of children, some assessment of current practices and resources is needed.

#### *Movie-based children's curriculum*

Since 2004, Children's Pastor Sue Allison has been writing movie-based curriculum for Careforce Church Mt Evelyn's Kidsforce program<sup>318</sup>. Allison comments:

Up until then we used movie clips to illustrate Bible lessons. But with Pixar movies, we discovered the movies themselves had a message. So we began using movies as the focus, with the God story paralleled with it.<sup>319</sup>

The first movie-based curriculum series was based on *Finding Nemo*<sup>320</sup>. Allison describes this movie as an "incredible Christian parable that unfolds like Jesus' parable of the Lost Son." That gospel story was therefore used as the Bible story with the movie.

When Allison watches a movie she thinks may be suitable to build curriculum around, she looks for key themes and a Bible story that parallels the movie story. With *Cars*<sup>321</sup>, Allison identified themes of arrogance, persecution and the idea of being struck down and having to stay put until it was time to move on again. She says, "It was like the story of Paul, so we used that as the Bible story for the series."

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<sup>318</sup> Kidforce is the church's Sunday morning program for children in Grades 3-6. [www.careforce.org](http://www.careforce.org).

<sup>319</sup> From a personal conversation with Sue Allison, 22 October 2007.

<sup>320</sup> *Finding Nemo*. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

<sup>321</sup> *Cars*. Walt Disney Pictures, 2006

A typical program begins with an introduction of the theme by showing a clip from the movie. For the first session in a series, the clip might run for up to 10 minutes; in subsequent sessions the clips are shorter. This is followed by engaging the children in a physical game to help create atmosphere and build on the theme. In the series based on *Cars*, Allison had the children racing radio-controlled cars. There were also AFX tracks around the room.

The children are then asked to say what they observed in the earlier clip and the teaching point of the day is then introduced. In the *Cars* series, the theme was “180 Degree Turnaround” and was linked with Paul’s conversion. The Bible story is presented in a creative way, through drama or puppets. For *Cars*, leaders re-enacted the story of Paul’s conversion. Before the story is presented, the children are invited to look out for similarities between what they are about to see and what they saw in the movie clip. The children are then placed in small groups and helped to explore how to apply the teaching to their life.

Sometimes the whole session is devoted to engaging the children in the theme, rather than working through a program. For the *Finding Nemo* series, the first session involved children painting and decorating Nemo cushions, which were used in subsequent sessions.

Allison believes the movies provide powerful images for the children and help them identify with the theme or situation that is then explored from a biblical perspective. This was particularly the case with the *Robots*<sup>322</sup> series. In the movie, Rodney makes a mistake in the kitchen and plates get broken. “After watching that clip,” Allison says, “we asked the kids, ‘Have you ever made a mistake? What did it feel like?’ The kids responded openly and honestly about situations they had been in and how they had felt.”

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<sup>322</sup> *Robots*. 20th Century Fox, 2005.

The Bible story that was used with this movie was the story of Peter's denial of Jesus.<sup>323</sup>

Leaders talked about how we all make mistakes and how we might feel when we do wrong. As children shared their experiences, Allison recounts: "it became clear that the self-confidence of many kids had taken a battering. The movie became a key to unlocking what was going on inside the kids' lives."

What Allison is observing here is the way children can readily identify with and relate to movie characters and situations. As they relate to movie or book, it is as though they are given permission to open up to what they are experiencing themselves. They can work at their own situations in the imaginative world of the movie or book and then bring solutions back into the real world. This is a potent example of the power of storytelling to affect change in a child's life.

Allison finds children can identify behaviours they see in a movie with their own. In *Shrek*,<sup>324</sup> Donkey has friendship issues. Allison found that children openly discussed their own friendship issues after watching the movie clip.

Each movie-based series at Careforce Church runs over four sessions. There are two series a year, timed strategically around other events that are aimed to reach out to kids in the community. The series are seen as something attractive that the children can invite their non-church-going friends to.

Allison has also used the curriculum in outreach events, specifically in an after-school mission in the local primary school. "This program had great appeal to kids in the

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<sup>323</sup> The series was used in the lead-up to Easter.

<sup>324</sup> *Shrek*. DreamWorks SKG, 2001.

community,” says Allison. “Out of the Grade 3 to 6 population in the school of 120 kids, 90 came to the program!”

Allison attributes the positive response to the mission to the movie, in this case *Robots*. Publicity about the program said it would be based around the *Robots* movie and that Christian teaching would be included. “Parents knew the movie. Even though they knew there would be Christian input, they felt it would be a safe environment for their kids to be in.”

### *Grief and loss support program*

Seasons for Growth<sup>325</sup> is a support program for children who have experienced some level of change, loss or grief in their lives. The program provides opportunities for each participant “to integrate, at his/her development level, the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to understand and to cope with [this] change, loss and grief”.<sup>326</sup>

The program utilises a range of activities, techniques and resources to help children “not only to value who they are and the particular ‘story’ they have, but also to modify where necessary their thinking, attitudes, beliefs and constructs about life and to ‘take charge’ of their behaviours.”<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> [www.goodgrief.org.au](http://www.goodgrief.org.au).

<sup>326</sup> *Seasons for Growth Companion Manual*. North Sydney: The Mary MacKillop Foundation, 2002, 4.

<sup>327</sup> *Seasons for Growth Companion Manual*, 4

One resource the program suggests is children's literature, particularly picture books. As a trained Season for Growth Companion,<sup>328</sup> I have used some of the books suggested to help the children identify and explore the themes being discussed.

In Session 5 of the eight-week program, participants are helped to develop skills to assist in processing their grief. Part of that includes helping children explore their feelings and to understand that these feelings are normal. Children often need permission to experience the emotions and to learn how to deal with the behaviour that might result, for example, from their anger.

I use Judith Viorst's picture book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*<sup>329</sup> in this session. The book recounts a day in the life of 'Alexander' who, from the moment he wakes up and finds chewing gum in his hair, knows it is going to be a horrible day. After a day when everything possible seems to have gone wrong for him and he wishes he could escape to Timbuktu, Alexander goes to bed. The book concludes:

When I went to bed Nick took back the pillow he said I could keep and the Mickey Mouse night light burned out and I bit my tongue.  
The cat wants to sleep with Anthony, not me.  
It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.  
My mum says some days are like that.  
...Even in Timbuktu."<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> A Companion is a facilitator for Seasons for Growth groups of between four to seven participants. Children are grouped according to age: usually 6-8 years, 9-10 years, 11-12 years. The groups I have facilitated comprised 9-11 year-olds.

<sup>329</sup> Viorst, Judith. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Sydney: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1997.

<sup>330</sup> Viorst.

The children quickly identify with the feelings of resentment and frustration that Alexander was experiencing, and openly share feelings they have experienced in relation to their sense of loss.

In Session 6 the children focus on the importance of remembering special people, places, times and events, specifically as they relate to the subject of the children's loss. I find Mem Fox's *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*<sup>331</sup> to be a superb resource to help children reflect on memories that were significant to them. This picture book recounts how a small boy helps a lady in an old people's home conjure up her lost memories.

### *Religious Education in School*

In the United Kingdom, religious education is conducted in assemblies. Damaris has produced assembly outlines that link children's films to biblical stories.<sup>332</sup> Themes covered by these outlines include Believing and Belonging; The World and our Community; Stories and Characters; and Times and Seasons.

For the subject *Being Special* (Believing and Belonging), an outline is provided using *The Incredibles*.<sup>333</sup> An opening activity places Smarties in water to reveal that, despite their different colours, they are the same on the inside. The activity helps children realise that, while they are all different, they have one thing in common – they are all special.

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<sup>331</sup> Fox, Mem. *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*. Gosford, NSW: Scholastic, 2005.

<sup>332</sup> [www.dramaris.org/cm/home/primaryaol](http://www.dramaris.org/cm/home/primaryaol) (accessed 22 Oct 2007).

<sup>333</sup> *The Incredibles*. Buena Vista Pictures, 2004.

A clip from the movie shows Bob (Mr Incredible) being made to feel very small by his boss and feeling alone because he is different. This leads into an exploration of the story of Zacchaeus, a man whom people thought was a “nobody” but whom Jesus saw as special. Discussion questions, activities and songs help children identify what makes them special, particularly in the eyes of God. Ideas on how children can value and appreciate the difference in each other are also presented.<sup>334</sup>

These ideas could be adapted for the Australian context of religious education in schools. The link between issues children are dealing with in the classroom, movies and the Bible make them a useful resource.

### *Family Movie Night*

*Movie Nights for Kids*<sup>335</sup> provides parents with ideas on how to use movies to reinforce and teach Christian values in the home. John Fornof explains: “We want our kids to learn to think critically about what they view, while they enjoy a good story with some take-away values.”<sup>336</sup>

For each movie, the book provides a list of the key themes which form the “moral heart of the movie”; any questionable content that parents need to be aware of; questions to spark dialogue; and follow-up activities to help children relate further with the message of the movie.

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<sup>334</sup> <http://www.damaris.org/cm/primaryaol/1005> (accessed 22 Oct 2007).

<sup>335</sup> *Movie Nights for Kids*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004.

<sup>336</sup> *Movie Nights for Kids*, 1.

Fornof stresses the premise of *Movie Nights for Kids* is not about parents preaching to their children. It's about discovering truths together. "*Finding Nemo* is a good example. Kids can witness the dire consequences of disobedience. But we parents can pick up an important truth as well: Being overprotective can suffocate our children's growth."<sup>337</sup>

One movie included in the book is *Treasure Planet*,<sup>338</sup> which I have found particularly engaging for 10-12-year-old boys. The book suggests the themes of this movie are: loyalty, self-sacrifice, the importance of father, greed and true wealth, integrity, judging character, honesty, courage, extending mercy, self-confidence, and finding your purpose.

Before watching this movie as a family, the book suggests reading Stevenson's original 1883 novel *Treasure Island* together, or at least an updated version of it. Having the background for the original story makes the adaptation in *Treasure Island* that much more interesting.

The list of 'talking points' to aid discussion following the movie include the following:

- John Silver is what people call a 'sympathetic villain'. Even though he is greedy, he is kind and can recognize Jim's potential for greatness. So why do you think John doesn't want to hug Jim? Would you trust John Silver if you were Jim? Read Proverbs 17:13-20 together. What does the Bible say here about friends?
- What is it that changes John Silver? (Parents, did love for your children change you? Tell them how.) Read together about love in 1 John 4:7.
- What does Jim's mum say he needs most? Why is that so important? Of all the role models Jim could choose, why do you think he chooses John Silver? Who is the best role model you could choose? (The One who says "follow me" in Matthew 19:21.<sup>339</sup>) If you were to pick a grown-up to be like, who would that be? Why?

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<sup>337</sup> *Movie Nights for Kids*, 3.

<sup>338</sup> *Treasure Planet*. Walt Disney Pictures, 2002.

<sup>339</sup> The book is suggesting parents guide their children to this answer. Such an inclusion illustrates the cultural assumptions made about biblical literacy that do not necessarily apply in Australia. I am not sure many Australian children, even those who attend church, would readily equate the best role model they could choose with Jesus.

- Would you like to have a robotic arm or leg like John Silver? It seems it might be fun at first, but how would you feel if you lost your arm or leg and there weren't any futuristic replacements for you? Do you know anyone who doesn't have a certain part or is different in some way? How do you think they feel when they can't do things others can? What did Jesus think of people who are different? Read Matthew 10:29-31.<sup>340</sup>

One of the follow-up activities picks up the theme of recycling. The book suggests God is also involved in "recycling old, familiar lives and making them new"<sup>341</sup>. It encourages parents to talk about their conversion to Christianity and how God made their old life new.

Jenny Cowley has written similar resources for families in the Australian-produced *KidsWise* magazine.<sup>342</sup> One covers the movie *Shark Tale*.<sup>343</sup> Cowley offers some questions to initiate discussion following viewing the movie as a family: Why do you think Oscar wanted to be at the top of the reef? What did he do to get there? How do you think Lennie felt about Oscar lying? and more. She then suggests for parents to talk about how important we are to God, how he loves us the way we are, how we don't have to earn his love, how pretending to be like others will not make us better people. Cowley then suggests activities to show how each member of the family is valued.<sup>344</sup>

I find this approach to be an inspiring and useful resource for parents, which could also be adapted and used in other ministry contexts. It offers a way to use movies to entertain as well as encourage faith development and provides a model that could be used with any children's movie.

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<sup>340</sup> *Movie Nights for Kids*, 149-150.

<sup>341</sup> *Movie Nights for Kids*, 150.

<sup>342</sup> *KidsWise* in a quarterly magazine for children's ministry workers produced by Scripture Union Australia.

<sup>343</sup> *Shark Tale*. DreamWorks SKG, 2004.

<sup>344</sup> *KidsWise*, Issue 11, 2005.

## *Movie Events*

*More Than a Movie*<sup>345</sup> provides ideas to build a 2-hour program around films. An opening activity sets the theme of the movie and introduces a biblical concept that will be explored. An active game or activity is provided for an intermission time to connect with the biblical theme. At the conclusion, the biblical theme is further developed and explored with discussion questions and activities. Room decorating ideas and snack suggestions are also provided.

This resource could be useful for a stand-alone children's program, a multi-generational event or as an evening program in a children's or family camp. Some of the program outlines assume the children are Christian and would therefore be suitable as a discipleship tool, but not as an outreach program unless adapted.

I have led children's programs based around movies, adding games, competitions and activities to round out the program into an afternoon event. These programs have been used more as a contact point with children and families who have attended our more outreach focused programs, those who are part of our Sunday morning or school-based ministries or as a means of making contact with new children in the community. It would be possible to adopt the model suggested in *More Than A Movie* and make these events more intentional in helping children engage with a biblical theme gleaned from the movie. The question would need to be asked if this is what the purpose of these events is. Do they simply provide an opportunity for us to provide a fun afternoon for the children in our community, or do we see them as a means to impart Christian values and teaching? Both aims are valid.

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<sup>345</sup> *More Than a Movie*. Loveland, Colo: Group Publishing, 2005.

## *Camps*

Cowley has led movie-based camps in Tasmania for past five years.<sup>346</sup> For each three-day camp, Cowley chooses a theme around which she builds the program of Bible stories, games, crafts and activities. For *Shrek*, the theme was “Jesus knows what it is like”, reinforcing the fact that Jesus has experienced similar circumstances to those we find ourselves in, so he understands.<sup>347</sup>

Cowley normally writes the program so that the children watch the movie in sections, with the Bible stories and activities introduced accordingly. By the end of the camp, the children will have seen the entire movie.<sup>348</sup>

Throughout the camps the children work in small groups, where they look at particular Bible passages that build on the input from the teaching program. Cowley reports this is usually the time when the hard questions are raised and addressed.

## *Movie Illustrations for Short Talks*

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<sup>346</sup> Camps have been based on *Shrek*; *Ice Age* (20th Century Fox, 2002); *Shark Tale*; The Chronicles of Narnia: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Walt Disney Pictures, 2005); and *Cars*. Personal email from Jenny Cowley [jenny.cowley@sutas.org.au] 26 October 2007.

<sup>347</sup> Within the overall theme of the camp, the following themes and their associated Bible stories were explored: feeling pushed out (the woman at the well, John 4:3-42); facing dangerous and scary situations (Jesus calming the storm, Luke 8:22-25); looking out for friends (Jesus walking on water, Matthew 14:22-33); not feeling good about yourself (the woman caught in adultery, John 8:3-11); when friends let you down (Peter’s denial about being Jesus’ friend, Luke 22:54-62); and forgiving others (Jesus reinstates and forgives Peter, John 21:3-17).

<sup>348</sup> The exception was the Narnia camp, where the movie was watched in its entirety and then explored in sections through the rest of the camp.

There are a growing number of resources that contain suggested movie clips that can be used to reinforce a Bible lesson.<sup>349</sup> While the clips can be used as listed and incorporated into other curriculum or lesson, the books usually offer ideas on how to introduce the clip as a stand-alone with discussion questions and activities to follow.

*Movie Clips For Kids*<sup>350</sup> is one example. Clips are listed according to Bible stories they can be used to illustrate, from creation to Saul's conversion.

For the story of Jesus' temptation (Matthew 4:1-11), the book suggests a clip from *Toy Story 2*.<sup>351</sup> In trying to save another toy, Woody is stolen from his home and friends by a selfish toy collector. While at the toy collector's home, Woody finds that he's part of a valuable collection of toys. The other members of the collection try to convince Woody to join them for display in a Japanese museum.

The following is suggested as a way of linking the clip with the theme of resisting temptation:

Ask: What bait was used to hook Woody? Why was it so tempting for him? What kinds of things tempt you?

Say: Did you know that Jesus was tempted just as we are? Being tempted isn't sin. It's what we do with that temptation that matters. Jesus had made his mind up ahead of time that he would not take Satan's bait. God wants us to decide ahead of time that we will not take the bait. Think about the things that tempt you. Decide ahead of time not to take the bait. That will make it easier to say no!<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Besides the resources referred to in this paper, I have also reviewed the following: *Movie Clips for Kids: The Sequel* (Loveland, Colo: Group Publishing, 2004); *Video Talks for Kids* (Senseman, Patricia Alderdice. Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 2000); *Group's Blockbuster Movie Illustrations* (Belknap, Bryan. Loveland, Colo: Group Publishing, 2001); *Group's Blockbuster Movie Illustrations: The Sequel* (Belknap, Bryan Loveland, Colo: Group Publishing, 2003). The last two resources are specifically for ministry with teenagers, however many of the movies and discussion ideas could be used with 10-12 year olds.

<sup>350</sup> *Movie Clips for Kids*. Loveland, Colo: Group Publishing, 2002.

<sup>351</sup> *Toy Story 2*. Buena Vista Distribution, 1999.

<sup>352</sup> *Movie Clips for Kids*, 40.

A craft activity is suggested to reinforce this concept followed by a summary comment to say to the children.

*Children's Ministry Magazine*<sup>353</sup> includes a short 'Reel Time' devotional idea in each issue, using a clip from a movie to illustrate a talk on a topic, such as humility or forgiveness. An activity, discussion questions and key points to cover are included.

Using a movie clip to illustrate a concept or a lesson, much the way a preacher uses illustrations in his sermon, has a place. However, based on the research presented in this paper, I believe such use lessens the impact a film may have on a child than if they were to watch the complete movie and be "captured" by its themes. I agree with Wangerin that isolating a movie clip to reinforce or illustrate a single point limits the movie's ability to speak into the viewer in its totality. However, this use of movies can still be effective.

## Websites

There are a growing number of websites that contain resources for using movies. While not necessarily specific for children, suitable children's movies are often included.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> *Children's Ministry Magazine* is an interdenominational magazine for Christian adults who work with children from birth to Grade 6. It is published bimonthly by Group Publishing, Loveland, Colo.

<sup>354</sup> Websites I have reviewed include: CultureWatch [www.culturewatch.org](http://www.culturewatch.org); Hollywood Jesus: Pop Culture from a Spiritual Point of View, [www.hollywoodjesus.com](http://www.hollywoodjesus.com); Movie Glimpse [www.movieglimpse.com](http://www.movieglimpse.com); Movie Parables [www.christiancritic.com](http://www.christiancritic.com); MovieWeb, [movieweb.com](http://movieweb.com), contains film clips that can be downloaded and used in programs; Plugged In Online, the on-line version of Focus on the Family's *Plugged In* newsletter [www.pluggedinonline.com](http://www.pluggedinonline.com).

## Conclusion

The presupposition in this paper is that connecting something in popular culture with biblical truth is a valid and powerful means of engaging children with biblical truth and helping them in their spiritual formation. We start with what is familiar, the world in which they live, and then build bridges into the unfamiliar.

This is what Paul modelled in his preaching on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22ff). As he walked around Athens, he noticed an altar dedicated to an unknown god. He started with what was known and familiar with his audience, and used it to explain to them about the Creator/Redeemer God.

As I have demonstrated in this paper, movies and literature can do the same work in the lives of children today. They can provide a cultural connection to faith.

We discovered as we explored children's spirituality that children have a rich capacity for spirituality. Children are on a journey – a journey through developmental stages, but also a spiritual journey in which they may experience God and awakenings to his presence.

Imagination is a vehicle God may use to bring about those experiences and awakenings. Imagination provides a dimension for grasping truth, particularly through the creation of alternative realities as presented in stories.

We identified the significant role stories have in bringing about change and growth in a child's life and the contribution they can have to a child's spiritual formation. This was evidenced in the examples surveyed of Disney movies, the Chronicles of Narnia and Harry

Potter series, and comic book heroes. We then saw these principles being expressed practically in various contexts: children's curriculum; a grief and loss support program; religious education in school; family movie nights and events; camps; and short talks.

Imagination is the key to unlocking the power of story. As such it can be a powerful ally in children's Christian education. However, Bridger reminds us that a Christian use of imagination must be allied to Christian beliefs:

The imagination of children...cannot, per se, generate the gospel or regenerate the soul. We can peek into heaven only by grace and even then we can understand what we see only by means of the Word. But imagination can, at least, take us to the window and encourage us to peer in. That is its role. Imaginative worlds, alternative realities, and paracosms can enable us to identify, perhaps playfully, matters of ultimate significance (to use Fowler's language). And they can conjure up characters and images that embody these fundamental matters. They can even point us to religious questions. But they must be harnessed, somehow, to revealed truth for them to be fully vehicles of revelation.<sup>355</sup>

We can and should embrace the use of movies and literature in the Christian education of children. Movies and literature can provide us useful and valid tools with which to engage with children as we join with them on their spiritual journey.

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<sup>355</sup> Bridger, *Opening Windows*, 20.

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