

Muggles Practicing Magic: A Digital Ethnography of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Podcast

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Introduction

It is not uncommon for non-religious people to be drawn to some aspects of religion. There are many different religions with followings that are based on fiction, both movies and novels. According to Wolfe (2015), a few of these include: Jediism, based on the Star Wars trilogies, Dudeism, based on The Big Lebowski, and The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, who refer to themselves as Pastafarians. The Pastafarians are known to have fought for religious rights to be able to practice their religion as freely as those of any other religion. This is an example of a group of people who are interested in an aspect of religion outside of any “God” a religion might be centered around.

While the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text podcast does not claim to be a religion in and of itself, it is a community based on reading fiction as a sacred text. Studies involving religious trends in America have shown that religious expression is not necessarily decreasing, but it is considerably changing. The younger generation is generally more concerned with spirituality and the journey of faith rather than on tradition and keeping the faith of their parents (Cusack, 2011). There are communities that gather together on Sunday in lieu of a church service with only the absence of faith in a higher power in common (Cimino & Smith, 2015). The evolving mindset around faith and religion is everything but straight forward. Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is one example of how these religious trends are manifesting in society today.

Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile, two graduates from Harvard Divinity school, created the podcast Harry Potter and the Sacred Text with the motto, “Reading something we love as if it were sacred” (Kuile & Zoltan, 2016). The podcast grew out of reading group in the Harvard community. Neither of the creators practice religion but both are interested in practicing faith in something, in this case they chose to

have faith that they could learn from the Harry Potter series. The focus of this podcast is for Vanessa and Casper to use a series they already loved to learn how to better live in the world. Reading the text in this way leads the creators and the listeners through journeys of reflection on culture and self. They are seeking to grow in awareness of how their thoughts and actions effect other people. This theme of people seeking to become “better” people is echoed throughout many religious and spiritual practices.

Literature Review

Evolving Religious Tendencies

It used to be thought that the developing world was becoming secularized, but Carole Cusack (2011) argues that this change was not one of moving away from religion altogether but of changing religions and the tendency towards them. Cusack focuses her studies on how religion and spirituality is influenced by the youth. The trends tend to show that youths experiment with religion and are more interested in the spiritual quest than the arrival at a certain belief. This mindset is relatively new considering that for thousands of years most people have readily accepted the religion of their parents. In Western countries, the prevalence of teenagers associated with religious tradition has declined significantly in the twenty-first century. Yet, interest in spirituality remains high as seen in the interest in the supernatural, as seen in the popularity of television shows such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Charmed. This change in religious expression is attributed to the focus of youth's lives being on enjoyment and excitement which comes from peer relationships more than family relationships. Carole Cusack discusses how youth are changing how religion is viewed by taking the spirituality aspects of religion and leaving the rules and rituals behind.

Humanism

Vanessa Zoltan, one of the creators of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is a humanist. Maggie Ardiente and Roy Speckhardt (2014) explain the growing of humanism. Humanism grew out of the movement of people with the desire to live ethical lives apart from religious motive. The Pew Forum conducted a survey that found that 16% of the United States population considers themselves unaffiliated with a religion but only 25% of that group are atheist or agnostic; the other 75% describe their religion as

“nothing in particular” (U.S. public, 2015). While the amount of the non-theist people is not significantly growing, the Catholic and Protestant population is declining. Americans are not moving away from religion, but evolving religious tendencies. The importance of religion in the lives of most Americans is in decline, which is to say that many people do not find a life purpose in religion as used to be common. Humanism answers this dilemma of giving meaning to life again without the belief in a god. The Humanism Manifesto defines values and morality derived from experience and reason-based knowledge. This gives reason to better humankind that is not based on doing what a higher power tells one and thus gives meaning to life for those without a particular religion.

Ritual without Religion.

While Humanism is becoming increasingly, widely practiced, there are many other groups that are similarly becoming more popular. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2015) describe the rise of the “New New Atheism,” that operates under the desire to create an identity for the non-believing community. This differs from the “New Atheism,” which desired to debunk all other religions. While there is no interest in belief in a god, these communities are still drawn to rituals. There is a Sunday Assembly that started in Britain and has since been growing in the United States, where people gather weekly for a secular “church” service. Some people have also taken the route of moving away from common practices that are rooted in religion such as wedding ceremonies, funerals, and even Christmas. These are substituted with secular counterparts in which “festivals of light” is the replacement for Christmas and Hanukkah. Based on a survey completed by Cimino and Smith, only 35% of atheist/humanists attend a secular ritual, while 62% would be open to the idea. This goes to show that generally humans desire community and ritual, which can be separate from religion.

Community.

To further this point of community-driven people outside of religion, Steven Tomlins (2015) wrote about an Atheist Club at a university in Canada. Many active students in this club were interviewed and asked why they joined and what the club meant to them. Overwhelmingly, the students answered with something along the lines of being in a place with like-minded people. The club was a safe place where

they could talk and argue without having to fear being judged or offending others. Some said that the club was a place where activists could rally against whichever cause they were passionate about. Tomlins points out that these students do not mention that they are trying to convert others or that they feel marginalized but rather enjoy getting together and discussing interesting things. This idea can be compared to Bible studies or religious discussion groups in a different context but with a similar foundation.

Methodology

To study the community of the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text podcast, I immersed myself into it. I first began listening in July of 2017 and continued throughout my research and into December of 2017. I utilized the website, which helps to explain the team behind the project, their purpose, and the methods used. An important aspect of my research was understanding the audience, which was achieved through the voicemails sent in by listeners. There were extra episodes produced, which consisted entirely of voicemails. These voicemails provide a window into why people listen to the podcast and into the community of the fan base.

Findings

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is a podcast devoted to reading through the Harry Potter series as if it were a sacred text. The creators, Vanessa and Casper, explain what they mean by the term “sacred” on the website. There are three components, the first is trusting the text, this means reading it, not just for entertainment, but as something worthy of contemplation without assuming it is inerrant. The second is rigor and ritual, this is the way that the text is being read. The engagement of reading the text slowing, repeatedly, and with mindful attention is what makes the text sacred. Vanessa and Casper practice this in using existing ritual ways of reading a text, which they call “spiritual practices.” The last aspect of treating the text as sacred is to read it in community, which also contributes to the sacredness of the text rather than the text being sacred itself (“Harry Potter”, n.d). This means that the creators, Vanessa and Casper, ask questions of the text, analyze the character’s choices, and apply it to their lives.. This podcast was created by people who love Harry Potter, who are not religious but desire to read something sacredly, and who enjoy thinking deeply and asking hard questions. While

the audience tunes in for many different reasons, the podcast has managed to stay consistent throughout the seasons with what it offers.

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is a weekly podcast that discusses the Harry Potter books. The podcast is on the fourth season and therefore the fourth Harry Potter book. Each season is devoted to one of the Harry Potter books, beginning with the first book and working chronologically from there. Each episode in the podcast covers one chapter at a time, this format is similar to a book club because Vanessa and Casper read the chapter beforehand and discuss it during the episode. In each episode, the team picks a theme to look at the text through as they read it. Some of these themes include imagination, pain, wonder, rivalry, innocence, and forgiveness. Each episode is titled with the single word that is the theme, followed the title of the chapter being looked at. A new episode comes out every Thursday, and the duration varies from 30 to 50 minutes depending on the discussion and the presence of a visitor.

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text website

The Harry Potter and the Sacred Text website includes all the information that a listener might need about the podcast and community. The home page of the website includes the podcast logo (pictured to the right) large and centered. Below the logo is a saying that describes the podcast's purpose, "Reading fiction doesn't help us escape the world, it helps us live in it" ("Harry Potter", n.d). Under this there is the menu to allow visitors to explore the website; the different pages include Home, About, Listen, Videos, Resources, Live Events, Get Involved, and Donate. The home page also includes a poll where listeners can vote on the 30-second recap challenge that begins each episode. Each week, Vanessa and Casper take turns giving a 30-second summary of the chapter of focus for the listeners who have not recently read the chapter. The listeners are then able to vote on the website for who they believe did a better job. After every 10 chapters, a winner is announced, and the competition continues. The other pages on the website provide information about the creators of the podcast, their methodology, links to all the episodes, an animated video for every season, resources for the spiritual practices uses, information about starting a discussion group, information on live events, and opportunities to donate to the show's production and

to the philanthropy they partake in.



Figure 1 Harry Potter and the Sacred Text logo.
Retrieved from www.harrypottersacredtext.com

Podcast Structure

In Harry Potter and the Sacred Text the episodes all follow a consistent structure. The episode begins with either Vanessa or Casper reading the first few sentences of the chapter out loud. There is soft music playing and the voice fades out as they introduce themselves and the podcast. The host who did not begin with reading tells a story from their own life, which relates to the theme of the episode for that week, and in the next episode the two will switch roles. After the story, there is a small amount of dialogue before the two transition into the 30-second recap challenge, where they take turns summarizing the chapter while the time ticks away to an audible timer. From there they dive into where they saw the theme in that chapter and discuss wherever the conversation takes them. Often the discussion includes references to other circumstances in the Harry Potter world, references to their own lives, and references to relevant topics in culture. After they have both discussed where they saw the theme appear in the text, they move into the spiritual practice portion of the episode. There are four different practices that are used on the podcast. These practices come from a variety of religions

and are adapted to be applied to the fictitious text. Throughout the season each practice is used for several episodes in a row before switching to the next practice. The spiritual practices have grown as new ones have been introduced throughout the seasons but at this point there are four that are utilized: *Lectio Divina*, *Havruta*, *Ignatian Spirituality*, and *Florailegium*. After the spiritual practice has aided in looking at the text more closely, they play a voicemail that a listener has sent in. The voicemail is typically a comment or question about a discussion from a previous episode that challenges Vanessa, Casper, and the listeners to see a situation in a different light. The voicemails also often consist of a personal story from that person's life. Each episode comes to an end when Vanessa and Casper chose a character that they would like to offer a blessing to. Vanessa challenged herself at the beginning of the podcast to only bless female characters in an act to exemplify strong females for all the women and girls listening. The blessings start with a character and then are generalized to all people who share a characteristic or circumstance with that character. The episode is then concluded with a thanks to everyone involved and a statement of what the theme will be the following week.

Tone

The tone of the podcast shifts throughout the episode. The story that is told at the beginning of the podcast can be serious or light-hearted. The tone then shifts to be playful and competitive during the 30-second recap. During most of the podcast there is a more serious tone riddled with sarcasm because it is inevitable that something serious comes up in the conversation. Vanessa and Casper are good friends who started this project together, and it shows in that they seem to thoroughly enjoy being together and respect each other's opinions throughout the entire process.

Community

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text began as a small project but has grown to be very popular. Vanessa and Casper encourage fans to be involved and have captivated a community of people who love what they are doing. Each episode includes a voicemail from someone who has called in to be part of the conversation; most of these voicemails begin with a declaration of love for the podcast. The show started going on tour in the third season where they

travel to different cities and have live shows. There are directions on the website that encourage listeners to start their own discussion groups and gives advice on how to use the spiritual practices. Many listeners have done this and chose to read Harry Potter as a sacred text or even branch out to a different novel or series. The focus is on the community and the discussion rather than on Harry Potter.

Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is dynamic and well liked. There is a weekly podcast and a website. The episodes follow a consistent structure consisting of a story, a recap, discussion, a spiritual practice, a voicemail, and blessings. Vanessa and Casper want people to think deeply and critically about the text but mostly about life. There is a focus on how to ask hard questions to better understand people and circumstance while challenging oneself to be the best person they can. A community has grown around this podcast and the creators encourage and engage with the community regularly.

Discussion

Purpose of the Podcast

Insight as to why the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text podcast was created allows one to better understand why people with no interest in belief of a higher power, remain to be interested in aspects of religion. In the teaser for the first season of the podcast Vanessa explains that she is an over-educated, atheist who is typically limited by her own cynicism. She explains that she wanted to try something new by having faith in something. To set herself up for success she chose to have faith in great books because she already had a love great books and it is easier to have faith in something one loves. She was committed to believe that the more time she spent with the text, the more gifts it would give her. This is an important distinction because the podcast was not created by two extreme Harry Potter fans who wanted to have a religion based on the Harry Potter world. It was created because both Vanessa and Casper, spent Divinity school studying a book they did not feel connected to: The Bible. By applying the methods of studying the Bible to literature they both loved, they wanted to feel the same kind of commitment to the text as people who feel connected to the Bible do because of their faith (Kuile & Zoltan, 2016). With this

goal in mind, this podcast could have been based on any other book or series. The important element is the method of reading it rather than the text itself.

These ideas that were behind the creation of this podcast are supported by Carole Cusack (2011) who studied the change in how religion is viewed in the 21st-century. Vanessa and Casper's interest in having faith in something and being committed to something they love, without seeking a traditional outlet for that desire is in line with the trends Cusack describes.

Spiritual Practices

In each episode, Vanessa and Casper use one of four spiritual practices. This means that they use a guided method of looking at the text. *Lectio Divina* is one of these spiritual practices, it is traditionally a Christian practice of sacred reading but Vanessa and Casper alter the practice to fit their purpose. It involves picking a line in the chapter at random and first discussing the literal narrative, then looking at what metaphors are hidden in that piece of the text, followed by reflecting on what the text is speaking into one's own life, and finally inviting one to take action by apply something to one's life. The other practices are *Havruta*, *Ignatian Spirituality*, and *Florallegium*. These practices are not all from the Christian faith and while they all vary in method, they are ways to engage the text on a deeper level.

While these practices are being used to better engage the text of a fiction series, they are originally based in religions of faith. This is an interesting dynamic because the creators of this podcast have no interest in growing to know a god more deeply or a scripture that is inspired by a god, but the practice of looking at a text in that way is what they are interested in. The focus is not to better understand J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series, but the goal is to use the text to better understand themselves. This mindset is not unique to the creators of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. Cimino and Smith (2015) study how atheist communities continue to seek rituals. People who do not believe in a higher power, are not always against all things associated with such faiths, many appreciate community and ritualistic festivals that are not associated with a religion. This is seen in the secular Sunday meetings and in celebrating the festival of the lights in place of Christmas. In a similar

way, Vanessa and Casper are seeking to find a deeper meaning and connection to the story of Harry Potter by choosing to use historically religious methods, but rebranded to fit their personal needs. It is not necessarily important that these spiritual practices are traditionally Christian or Jewish because they are tools used to be look at a text deeply and to mindfully apply it to life. This points directly towards the idea behind the podcast because they too take existing religious rituals and adapt them to a new context.

Living in the World

An additional aspect to the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text podcast is that is constantly commenting on culturally relevant topics. There have been many instances when conversation has centered around huge topics such as feminism, politics, body image, LGBTQ+ community, bullying, race, education, and of course religion. Using the text to address these kinds of issues is a way of using it learn and grow. Vanessa and Casper make sure to note that the text is not perfect. There are many instances when the characters fail in loving, in equality, and in values. The purpose of reading through the Harry Potter series sacredly is not to learn how to live in the world based on how the characters do; the purpose it to start conversations and to grow in self-awareness. The quote on the website's home page, "Reading fiction doesn't help us escape the world, it helps us live in it" ("Harry Potter", n.d), can be understood in this way. They are not reading Harry Potter to escape the problems of the world but to improve the world.

Vanessa is a humanist and humanism is another example of how people are interested in having morals apart from religion (Ardiente & Speckhardt, 2014). The focus is on contributing to society in a positive way for the sake of being a good person rather than following religious rules to please a higher power. The cultural commentary in the show provides a space where people can wrestle with the hard realities of this world by starting conversations and processing terrible events. This is part of how Vanessa and Casper have set out to read the Harry Potter series as a sacred text because a question that is frequently asked is, "what is the text asking of you?" This is the application portion of learning from a text and for this podcast the roots are found in humanism rather than in a faith-based religion.

Community

The community of followers of the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text podcast is dynamic. Some of the regular listeners were drawn in because of a deep love for Harry Potter and enjoy the opportunity to reread the books and talk about the characters. Others are drawn to the idea of reading something sacredly because they do not feel connected to a faith or a book of faith in a way that lends to learning from it. Many other listeners enjoy the types of meaningful conversations that occur on the podcast and enjoy thinking about new perspectives. These are not mutually exclusive groups because many listeners enjoy multiple aspects of the podcast. There are people of faith and not of faith that call in to leave voicemails. There are children and elderly people who listen and people all over the world. This podcast has drawn a large gathering of followers because it offers community, meaningful conversation, and is centered around a book series that already has large fan base. The voicemails sent in often include personal stories about how a concept discussed on the show related to a situation in their life. The community is vulnerable and supportive of each other and it is made easier because of the nature of the medium. There is anonymity in a podcast because the listeners only hear voices and never see faces. Additionally, the international following makes it almost certain that a voice will not be recognized. Vanessa and Casper are also extremely open and tell many stories about their lives which creates a safe environment for the listeners to also share.

This community rallied around the podcast is similar to many other communities that are drawn together by a single thing in common. Many very different people may join a club because they all share a similar interest. In Tomlins' (2015) study of the Atheist Club on a college campus, he found that the members of the club enjoyed the company of like-minded people where conversation about interesting topics was continuous. Community is always being sought in different ways and many people have found community in this podcast.

Conclusion

Vanessa Zoltan and Casper ter Kuile began this project of reading through the Harry Potter series as if it were a sacred text because they do not practice religion but still wish to practice faith and commitment

to something. The project includes adapting existing spiritual practices to the study of the series and is highly invested in the community that has formed around it. By referencing culturally relevant topics, this podcast is aimed at helping people to live in the world in a way that is not faith based. This seemingly outrageous idea is supported by many religious trends seen in the United States. The desire for connection, commitment, community, and rituals are not reserved for religious groups. These desires are widespread and this podcast is only one example of how they are being met.

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