

## **Making a Religious Community delivered by Rev. Michelle Collins on July 27, 2014**

It had been a long weekend of apartment hunting in a new city, and Joanne was heading back home on the train. The train ride wasn't too long, so she had kept her packing light and hadn't brought much with her onto the crowded train as she made her way to a window seat. She was just fine, until the train groaned and lurched to a halt. She didn't know they'd be sitting there for all of four hours waiting for the train to be fixed. She also didn't know that her life was about to change. As she sat on the train and waited, the idea for a new story simply fell into her head. Joanne had been writing pretty continuously since about age six, but this was the most exciting idea she had yet. As she recalls, she was too shy though to ask anyone around her for a pen to write any of it down, so she just sat back and let the ideas bubble up in her mind.

This is an origin story, the origin of the Harry Potter series – the image of was that of Harry himself and Joanne, better known as J. K. Rowling, is the author of the series. Many movements and religions have origin stories, which are often well-known and cherished. Whether true or myth, they are central to the identity of the movement or community. For the early Christians, I would say a significant origin story is the conversion story for Paul, when his vision of God transformed him from a persecutor into an evangelist who founded many of the early churches. The Quakers look to George Fox's vision atop Pendle Hill where God showed him "a great people to be gathered."<sup>1</sup> Islam's origin story is where the Prophet Muhammad received revelations from God by the archangel Gabriel, in a cave. The cave is seen as a sacred place and can be visited today.

Unitarians and Universalists likewise have our origin stories, but since our faith bubbled up and evolved in a lot of different ways, I've had trouble narrowing them down. Perhaps the execution of Michael Servetus as a heretic or maybe the stories around Universalist John Murray's first sermons here in America, which Rev. Josh will be preaching about in a few weeks. Another moment which we have depicted in a surprisingly pervasive piece of art is the signing of the Edict of Torda in 1568 by King Sigismund of Transylvania – it's the first time Unitarianism was specifically called out for tolerance and free practice. And congregations and religious communities have their own origin stories too – oddly, they often involve living rooms, meetings of people to talk about forming a church, gathering not in caves or on hills but in living rooms.

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer, *A Place Called Community*.

If we were to go about trying to define what a religion is and see what seemed to fit, there are a couple of ways that we might do this. One way is to look at religion as having certain core elements – creeds and statements of belief, sacraments like communion and baptism, scriptures, or people with special roles. So by this way of looking at it, something would be a religion depending on how much it matched up with having these basic elements.

But there's another way of looking at religions though, where instead of being based on whether what elements a movement or community HAS, we look at what a movement or community DOES.

By this more function-based definition of religion, there are a few categories of things that religion or a religious community does for its members. Social, resources, and, for lack of a non-theological word for it, and a transcendent function. Social – providing an experience of community and having shared beliefs and values. Resources – having a set of resources, like rituals and symbols and origin stories, which form a shared identity and help folks live with meaning and purpose. And transcendent – a medium through which people can experience the sacred or that which is beyond themselves.

At first glance, these might seem to be a bit dry, but we can have all sorts of fun with them! Rather than saying something's a religious community because it has certain things or looks a certain way – a pretty narrow definition – we can look at anything and see whether it might do some of these things!

So why not, the world of Harry Potter? You heard the origin story already, and there's plenty more attached to it, Rowling's publication attempts, her jumping from job to job while trying to provide for her daughter as a single parent, her favorite table in a coffee shop where she liked to write... and the themes in the books and inspired by the books touch on deep human issues, friendship, loyalty, good and evil, perseverance, hope, despair, death, trust...

But to really get an idea of its religious potential, we have to take a step farther back – and look at the fans of the Harry Potter series. They, I'd say, make up a religious community.

I'll leave it to you to consider other fandoms, Dr. Who, Star Trek, sports fans, Oprah fans, comic book fans, all sorts of fans, and see whether they also might be religious communities. For today, we'll look at the fandom of Harry Potter.

A religious community has certain social functions. To even be a community, there are some people who are in it and some who aren't.

To look at fans, there are folks who aren't fans; there are casual fans; and there are committed fans. (and that pun was intentional!) Casual fans are different from non-fans in that they are familiar with the source material – they've read the books and seen the movies, at least once if not more than that – and they'd recommend it to friends. Casual fans may have come to midnight book release parties, although they didn't plan any, and they might make a pilgrimage to a particular site from the story if they happen to be in the area. Committed fans – and there are varying degrees – are part of closer communities with other fans, maybe discussion boards, conferences, opening day of the new Harry Potter land at Universal in Florida – or if they couldn't be there opening day, they got kicked off the fence blocking off the area when they were trying to climb it to get a better look. 😊

There's even been an element of secrecy involved – kind of like the early Christian practice of drawing a fish to see if someone else was in the group too. Melissa Anelli, webmistress of the Leaky Cauldron fan site, kept her identity as a Potter fan secret from folks she worked with for fear of being made fun of. And the books were even released with alternate covers, so that folks could read them in public without looking like they were reading a children's book!

The social bonding around being fans is widespread though. Whether it's connecting around content in the series and debates about content in the series or about issues raised by the series or even just connecting because you share a love for something – social bonds can be immediate once you know your shared identity as fans. I have a sweatshirt with a Hunger Games logo on the back, and I can't tell you how many times I've gotten a, "is that a Mockingjay on your shirt?" question upon which we instantly start talking about either the series or something else, but on a closer level to each other. The same has happened to me with other Potter fans as well.

A religious community also provides resources – a set of resources that give a community identity and help to make meaning and make sense of challenges. The fandom of Harry Potter certainly gives this. There are clothes that create a shared sense of identity – robes and wands and such. There is music – not the movie music but more than 300 garage band style Wizard Rock bands. And there are rituals that give form and structure to the community.

When I joined the Leaky Cauldron fan website myself, I went through a series of rituals. I was sorted into my house – the faction-like identity at Hogwarts – this is a mainstay in the fan community. (I'm Slytherin, by the way.) I identified what animal my Patronus would be – an animal shaped spell that protects the person casting it from depression-like creatures. I had the option of either choosing my wand or letting an automated

program do it for me. And I named my favorite relationship that either existed or I wished would exist in the series. There are whole fan sub-cultures around each of these relationships! These rituals give structure to the fan community and a shared sense of identity.

But even more, there's a transcendent function of religious community. Not only is it about connecting with something larger than oneself but also finding a sense of hope there. To me this is where the religious community aspect really comes true, where we see why we even bother organizing into communities like this. Not only do the books themselves struggle with the triumph of good over evil, but these fan communities inspire working for the greater good also. Before the release of the last book, Rowling donated a note card with clues about the upcoming book for auction with the proceeds going to charity. The Leaky Cauldron fan site held a collection to bid for the card, but here's the catch. They agreed in advance that whether they won the auction or not, their collection would be donated to the same charity. It turns out that they didn't even come close, even though they collected a sizable amount for it.

The books inspire a sense of hope that has had a good deal of staying power. In a way it makes sense because it's a classic good versus evil and hero archetype in the story, but in another way it just doesn't make sense. How does this clueless awkward boy who is really only a mediocre wizard inspire this much hope?

Harry Potter isn't just a hero archetype, he's also a savior figure, too. Even though he bumbles about doing it, he saves a lot of people through the storyline. But the persona created for him is quite striking. There've been reviews of cinematic Christ figures done, and some folks have even drawn up lists of common characteristics in these Christ figures. It's remarkable how much they have in common, things that aren't necessarily historically accurate but are commonly recognized in the screen adaptations of Christ figures.

These include things like having some sort of prophecy about their savior identity, not discovering their identity until a little later in life, coming from a poor background, having some special ability that sets them apart, and the ever present blue eyes. On one listing of 25 of these attributes, Neo from The Matrix gets nearly all of them – he's just missing the blue eyes. Superman might get a perfect score. By my counting, Harry Potter has 15 of them, plus 4 kinda's, so 19 of the 25 cinematic Christ features. These savior figures make for particularly compelling stories, ones that inspire hope and a sense of balance amongst uncertainty. A friend told me how in the months following 9/11, she returned again and again to reading the Potter series for comfort and hope.

And good versus evil and savior movies and stories tend to get a lot of traction during times of large scale uncertainty, economic or otherwise.

In the Harry Potter fan community, there are things that create social ties, there are resources and features that build a sense of identity and meaning, and there are themes of hope and altruism that it inspires. It's a religious community, built through its functions and the things that it does for its members.

This is what makes a religious community – it's the things that we do that make it a community, and it's the things that we do that make it a religious community. Community is what we do together, and as we craft meaning and purpose for our lives and touch on things greater than ourselves, we craft a community that we can call religious. Community is what we do when we work to fit ourselves together, leaving our edges uncut like the uncut stones on Bezalel's mailbox for God. Community is the work that we do to make it when we fit ourselves together.

We have rituals and traditions here that remind us of the identity that we've crafted. Today we've sung particular favorites for our church – Scott helped me with some ideas for what they'd be – and our chalice lighting by Albert Schweitzer is one that we've used a lot over time. Now we don't have to make what we do particularly religious. We could just get together and share coffee and talk about what's going on in the world and what we read in the news this morning. We could just get together and do good things in the world and good things to care for each other. But we do more than that. When we invest meaning in what we're doing, we're making it religious. When we connect it with our faith and with a greater purpose, we're making it religious. When our small groups grapple with deep questions and remind each other of hope, we're making it religious. (By the way, that's why we include some of the questions we do in the sessions – to help make that happen!)

Why do we bother? Why do we even bother to do this extra work to make it religious, and to be a religious community? It certainly takes more to do, that's for sure. It's because being in a religious community does something for us because we are a part of it. It might not be obvious all of the time, but I think it really does something for us and calls us to be something greater than just ourselves and our own thoughts alone. Belonging as part of a religious community touches on core human needs, emotional needs, spiritual needs, needs for belonging, needs for the care of others, needs to push ourselves, to risk, and to be able to share about our risks and grow further. Why bother making a religious community? So we can make meaning and purpose and grow, grow towards that which we may call God, and deepen our calling as human beings in the world. May it be so.