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Reconfiguring a theological-spiritual vocabulary about death: Mysticism, "magic", and the case of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore[1]

ABSTRACT

Even to the most casual reader, J.K. Rowling's overarching story about the "Boy who lived" is about death. Since the publication of the first book of the Harry Potter series in 1997, theologians and scholars of philosophy of religion have explored this theme within the story, as well as other eschatological related themes in the series. This article explores the topic of death in the Harry Potter series within the fields of Christian spirituality and eschatology and builds on previous research in this regard. The article focuses on the nature of Christian religious language about death, using Evelyn Underhill's approach to mysticism and Jurgen Moltmann's "personal eschatology". The purpose is to indicate how the approaches to death of two main characters – Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore – could contribute to a theological-spiritual vocabulary about death, and therefore to a Christian eschatology.

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1. INTRODUCTION: MAGIC AND SPIRITUALITY; MYSTERY AND MYSTICISM

In 1911, Evelyn Unverhill published *Mysticism: A study of the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*. In this book, Underhill reclaimed mystics as spiritual pioneers and mysticism as essential to human spiritual experience. The word "reclaim" is purposeful, in this instance. Mysticism, as a form of spiritual experience and a way of religious lifestyle, developed during the 2nd and 3rd centuries as a contemplative response to the Jesus movement (Mitchell & Young 2006:87-176) and the institutionalisation of Christianity (Stewart 2011:73-90). The follow-on effects of the Enlightenment's westernised focus on reason, science, and philosophy would have gradually precluded mysticism as a form of authentic and essential human spiritual experience. Underhill published her work amidst the scientific suspicion of her time that regarded the mystical with apprehension, linking it to disease or superstition. In the preface to the 12th edition of the work, published in 1930, Underhill ([1930] 2005:4) writes:

> Since this book first appeared … the study of mysticism … has been almost completely transformed. From being regarded, whether critically or favourably, as a byway of religion, it is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man (*sic*). Whilst we are less eager than our predecessors to dismiss all accounts of abnormal experience as the fruit of superstition or disease, no responsible student now identifies the mystic and the ecstatic; or looks upon visionary and other "extraordinary phenomena" as either guaranteeing or discrediting the witness of the mystical saints. The philosophic and theological landscape also, with its increasing emphasis on Transcendence, its new friendliness to the concept of the Supernatural, is becoming ever more favourable to the metaphysical claims of the mystics.

The suspicion of Underhill's time towards mysticism as spiritual experience was not only due to an emphasis on empirical and logical science and reason. It was also related to how mystic experience was exclusively regarded as "psycho-physical accidents of trance, ecstasy, vision and other abnormal phenomena" (Underhill [1930] 2005:4).[2] She wanted to vindicate mysticism as something that provides the self a genuine knowledge of the transcendental,

2   In his work, *Jesus, Paul and Matthew: Discontinuity in content, continuity in substance*, Van Aarde (2020:138) points out that "visions", "altered states of consciousness" become "abnormal phenomena", from the perspective of modern psychiatry and psychology, which "function within modern Western categories".

coupled with the "soberness and sanity" of the contemplative saints (Underhill [1930] 2005:6).[3] Notably, as part of this argument, Underhill ([1930] 2005:105-116) affords a chapter to "Mysticism and magic" wherein she both distinguishes between (disconnects), and connects mysticism and magic with each other, in order to indicate that mysticism is sometimes associated with perceived dubious characteristics of what may be regarded as magic, for example "optical illusions" or conjuring (Underhill [1930] 2005:106). In pointing this out, Underhill wants to disassociate mystical activity from any association with the definitions of "abnormality" and "occultism" (Underhill [1930] 2005:6, 106) that may have been prevalent at the time of her work. She thereby wanted to safeguard mysticism from suspicion toward religion and anything that would have been regarded as scientifically unsound in her time. However, just as the definition of mysticism was conceived of in a reductionist fashion, Underhill points out that magic is equally conceived of one-sidedly and that there is an aspect of "mental discipline" in magic and mysticism (Underhill [1930] 2005:110), and thereby an inclination and openness towards exploring the unknown (mystery).

The spiritual history of humanity has exhibited two possible attitudes towards the unseen (the unknown or mysterious – my paraphrasing of "unseen"). This is "the way of magic" and the "way of mysticism" that Underhill ([1930] 2005:69) indicates as two ways of attempting to get in touch with the unseen. In this, the two ways are united and similar. Both make claims to the extraordinary. However, as Underhill ([1930] 2005:69) states, "magic wants to *get*" (my emphasis) and "mysticism wants to *give*" (my emphasis). Magic is about self-seeking transcendentalism, whereas the transcendence that mysticism seeks is transcendence of the self, "in order that the self be joined by love to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love" (Underhill [1930] 2005:69). Magic is individualistic and about gaining that which was not previously possessed, whereas mysticism is non-individualistic and is not about possession, but rather, about surrender. For Underhill ([1930] 2005:70), "magic" does not necessarily entail emotion, whereas it is essential to mysticism. She emphasises that love is the method of mysticism. This characteristic of mysticism really distinguishes it from any other transcendental theory of practice:

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3   The way in which Underhill emphasises mysticism as a discipline, way of life, and contemplation links to works of later scholars on mysticism, Christian mystic spirituality, and mystical theology. See, for example, McGinn (1991), King (2001), Krüger (2006), Perrin (2011), and Howell & McIntosch (2020).

> It is the eager, outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love, not the absorbent, indrawing activity which strives only for new knowledge, that is fruitful in the spiritual as well as in the physical world (Underhill [1930] 2005:82).[4]

It is clear that Underhill both connects and disconnects magic and mysticism for the purpose of highlighting mysticism.

For the purpose of this article, I want to use and deconstruct Underhill's (dis)connection between magic and mysticism (spirituality), in order to reconstruct a foundation for a spiritual-theological and/or theological-spiritual vocabulary about death, which in essence is about embracing the mystery of death and regarding death as a teacher.[5] The reason for this undertaking and the focus on death is twofold. First, there has been a renewed intellectual, religious, ethical, and artistic interest in re-thinking humanity's approach to our vulnerability and our finitude for a number of years (see Van Wyk 2020:195-213). Doctrinal convictions about death are deeply ingrained in the Christian faith tradition, as well as within the theological discipline of systematic theology. Given this renewed interest from multiple disciplines (see Aquilina 2023; Maccormack 2024; Sumegi 2024), an interdisciplinary approach, with theology in conversation with spirituality and the Arts, among others, is necessary.

Secondly, for myself as a theologian and minister of religion, this focus is also deeply personal, as will unfold in the contribution. Suffice it to say that experience has demanded from me a more interrogated and existential approach to Christian eschatology (what I describe as a "theology of death") – an approach that is not "jarring", nor attempts to offer binary answers about a subject that is, per implication, a mystery.

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4   Underhill summarises her threefold understanding of the central "doctrine" of magic. First, magic relates to the existence of a "supersensible" (that which is above or beyond that which is apparent to the senses) medium; secondly, magic recognises an established analogy between the real and unseen world, and thirdly, this analogy may be discerned and controlled by a person's disciplined will.

5   This can be linked to Nouwen's (2010:103-122) concept of "befriending death".

2. ON METHOD AND APPROACH: USING FICTIONAL CHARACTERS OF A FANTASY BOOK-SERIES ABOUT MAGIC

I will explore and apply Underhill's approach to mysticism for the subject at hand, by using the examples of the fictional characters of the wizards, Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, as they are portrayed in the globally known Harry Potter book series by author J.K. Rowling (1997-2007). I use these fictional characters because they portray different facets of the "magic" to which Underhill has referred. More specifically (and existentially), I turn to these characters because – as will unfold in the remainder of this article – their approaches to death have been an existential resource for me personally and a useful source for a "theology of death". I have applied it in my teaching of Christian eschatology over the past decade. This is not a "new" phenomenon. Tumminio (2010) did something similar in the early 2000s at Yale University and wrote about it in *God and Harry Potter at Yale: Teaching faith and fantasy fiction in an Ivy League classroom*.[6]

The Potter books have, of course, also garnered substantial critique from sectors of the Christian church, most notably from the late Pope Benedict XVI. In 2003, the Pope stated that the Potter books will diminish children's ability to distinguish between good and evil (see Phan 2008). In the Vatican's daily newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, it was reported (Phan 2008) that Pope Benedict was concerned about how the Rowling books contribute to a "new age spirituality" and could lead to an "unhealthy interest" in satanism. The explicit reference to evil and the implicit reference to occultism is ironic in light of Underhill's previously mentioned defence of mysticism, which, at some point in time, was regarded as dubious on both these accounts. Factor in the reference to "spirituality", it is at least at this point clear why Underhill's (dis)connection between mysticism and magic is particularly relevant for the subject matter of this article. For example, it is noteworthy that one aspect of Underhill's definition of magic ("magic wants to get") could be applied to the character and villainous conduct of the wizard Voldemort (another character in Rowling's books), whereas aspects of the character and conduct of Dumbledore and Harry[7] are related to what Underhill defines as mysticism

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6   Other theological-philosophical explorations of the Harry Potter series include: "Heaven, hell and Harry Potter" (Walls 2004:63-76); "Beyond Godric's Hollow: Life after death and the search for meaning" (Walls & Walls 2010:246-257), and "The real secret of the Phoenix: Moral regeneration through death" (Taliaferro 2010:229-245). See also "Harry Potter and Christian theology" (Ciaccio 2008:45-58).

7   A short remark about using the first name of the one character and the surname of the other. In the book series, this is how the characters of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore are designated: "Harry" and "Dumbledore".

("mysticism wants to give"). Voldemort attempts to gain extraordinary powers and knowledge, protect himself, and be superior to every human being, even and especially also superior to death, which he regards as the ultimate weakness (Rowling 1997; 1998; 1999; 2000; 2003; 2005; 2007; see also Garret 2010:25). It is quite the opposite with regard to Dumbledore and Harry.

When Underhill defines mysticism, she emphasises mainly three characteristics that are all related to conduct (ethics), namely love, emotion, and self-transcendence (self-sacrifice) (Underhill [1930] 2005:69-89). For Dumbledore, magic at its deepest core is about the type of self-giving expressed in relationships of love, which he explains is regarded as the most ancient and the most mysterious and strongest kind of magic in existence. Dumbledore refers to this ancient, strong magic numerous times, most notably in *The Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling 2003:723-744), the fifth instalment of the series. Whilst dealing with the death of a beloved godfather, Harry finally learns something about the history and very destiny of his own life. It turns out that love is the mysterious magic that has undergirded his whole life from the beginning and that it is stronger than any wand-waving or bangs and smoke. This is clear from the magic invoked by his mother Lily Potter's sacrifice to save Harry from the Voldemort's death curse in *The Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling 1997), the reflections of his family that Harry encounters in *The Mirror of Erised* (desire spelled backwards), and the way in which Voldemort is dispelled from possession of Harry's body by Harry's memories of the relationships with friends and family in *The Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling 2003). This love relates both to self-sacrifice and embracing emotion (the three aspects Underhill emphasises in relation to mysticism). Dumbledore relates this to Harry: "the fact that you can feel pain like this is your greatest strength" (Rowling 2003:726), and later continues:

> There is a room in the Department of Mysteries. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities, and which Voldemort has not at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests … it was your heart that saved you (Rowling 2003:743).

This "magic" is much closer to what Perrin (2011:443) describes about mystical experience, namely that it is about the "encounter with the Other in the delight of being loved and loving".

In Underhill's time, a binary distinction or split between religion and the secular already becomes untenable (by her own admission, as stated in her foreword to the 12th edition). The gradual recognition of the complexity of reality, postmodern suspicion towards absolute and objective truth, and postmodern recognition of diverse epistemologies (approaches to knowledge and what is regarded as knowledge) contributed to dissolving this absolute distinction between religion and the secular. From this perspective, it could imply that there is also no impermeable barrier between "magic" and "mysticism", at least in the sense that Underhill describes it. Based on Underhill's definitions of mysticism and magic, it is possible to devise a definition of magic that is not explicitly self-serving and focuses on relationships and a reality, beyond the self. Ultimately, "love" and the wondrous mysterious quality that connects human beings to each other, and humanity to the Ultimate, the Other, or God (which is part of the definition of mystical spirituality, and spirituality, in general[8]) is also a form of magic, that is to say, mysticism and a mystic spirituality are not totally devoid of "magic".

Woven into this introduction about Underhill's approach to mysticism and her (dis)connection between magic and mysticism are the first clues as to how these characters' journey with death can serve as a source for a Christian spiritual-theological vocabulary about death. In what follows, I will discuss the meaning of "the grammar of faith language", and the content of this grammar in classic Christian theology, relating to death, before turning to Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore for a revisioning of the vocabulary of that grammar.

3.   THE GRAMMAR OF FAITH AND THE GRAMMAR OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE ABOUT DEATH

In his article, Smit ([2000] 2002:94-96) indicates that Christian faith, which attempts to follow God's own speaking in some way(s), "speaks its own language". According to Smit ([2000] 2002:94-96), this "speaking" is integral to the tradition of Christian theology, because theology is in service of this language. Grammar refers to the rules according to which words are arranged

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8   "Spirituality" as a term or phenomenon is notoriously difficult to confine to a single definition, as pointed out by, for example, Kourie and Kretzschmar (2000:1, 11-12) and Sheldrake (2014:5). There is a diverse application of the term in a variety of contexts. Although Sheldrake argues that the historical origins of the word "spirituality" are Christian, he also indicates how debates about the connection or disconnection between spirituality and religion (in general) have increased (Sheldrake 2014:8). Nowadays, spirituality can also refer to a holistic approach to life, or to practices such as meditation which is focused on spiritual discipline and transformation or to the values to which we ascribe (Kourie & Kretzschmar 2000:12) or to a connection with a deeper or higher reality. Both Holder (2011:1-2) and Schneiders (2011:15-17) emphasise that a definition of spirituality is determined by one's objective in studying or practising it.

and sentences constructed. It governs the building blocks (vocabulary) of a language: its nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives, and so on. In this regard, what may be referred to as doctrine, in the field of Christian systematic theology, is indeed a "language" or *the* language (grammar) Christianity employs to articulate its core tenets. In the same way that a language is dynamic, these core tenets of Christianity cannot be static dogmatic constructs. Rather, these foundational "building blocks" express a specific and dynamic language to say something about Christianity and about God. This "grammar of faith", which, for me, is a more nuanced way to define the scope, content, and task of systematic theology (or dogmatics), was born from the experience of the early church, became part of their liturgy (rites of worship), and then became systematised as "rules of faith", as Smit points out in highlighting the link between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* (what we pray, is what we confess and believe, and that is the foundation of our theory [thoughts] and practice [ethics]) (Smit 2004:888-889). Therefore, this rule of faith, this doctrine, this systematic theology is a dynamic "grammar of faith". This is a crucial argument in this article, because it paves the way for an exploration of the dynamic possibilities of a theological-spiritual grammar of faith about death.

In both Christian theology and systematic theology, the term "eschatology" is used to broadly refer to Christianity's grammar of faith regarding death. The term is used to group together a number of convictions and confessions about humanity's destiny and faith as well as theology's responses to human finitude, the realisation of Christian hope, the fruition of God's presence in Christ, a cosmic reconciliation between God, humanity, and the created order, and the "restoration of all things" (Thiselton 2015:337-389; see Bauckham 1999), or also described as Christian theology's grammar of faith relating to "the last things" (McGrath 2017:426-446). In some instances, this grammar includes a rather large discussion of (emphasis on) the immortality of the soul as well as heaven and hell (as "space" or "place") something which Borg (2011:10-17) describes as a heaven-and-hell framework. In his opinion, this framework has infiltrated the Christian language to the extent that it almost determines its grammar and vocabulary, in general. More specifically, this framework can dominate Christianity's grammar of faith about human finitude. This, in turn, implies an almost exclusive emphasis on an apocalyptic eschatology, which makes use of vivid imagery, as encountered in Revelations, to paint a picture of human destiny that is situated within a punishment-and-reward framework. In this framework, the Greek philosophical notion of an immortal soul is paramount, and this, in turn, is linked to a continued existence after death. At this point, time and space as points of reference become important matters in this specific grammar of faith, because this framework is based on attempts to use a time-and-space existence (a contingent existence) as matrix to envisage a future existence that is, per implication, outside the bounds of time and space, and not constrained by contingent limitations. Following

this, the dimensions of the spaces of heaven and hell, as well as speculation about a thousand-year waiting period (millennialism) also become part of this grammar (see McGrath 2017:442-443).

The common thread of all of these different "building blocks", the glue, as it were, of this grammar is humanity's struggle to "face up to death, our own death, and the death of other people" (Moltmann 2000:239). In this regard, a classic Christian approach to death is to regard it as an "enemy", as is expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:26: "the last enemy to be destroyed, is death".[9]

A so-called heaven-and-hell framework does not, however, constitute the entirety of Christianity's grammar of faith about "the last things", nor does it constitute the only possible approach to it.[10] In this section, I want to bring aspects of Moltmann's eschatology into conversation with the dis(connection) between Underhill's understanding of mysticism and magic, specifically her emphasis on love, and bring all of this to bear on the character and conduct of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore, and their approaches to magic and death.

The specific aspect of Moltmann' eschatology on which I want to focus is the content of his "personal eschatology". Moltmann's *The coming of God: Christian eschatology* (1995, English translation in 1996), is divided into different sections, providing a much broader vocabulary about "the last things" than a reductionist heaven-and-hell framework. Moltmann ([1995] 1996) presents his theology about the "last things" in four different sections, namely reflection of the content of eschatology "today" ([1995] 1996:1-46); four sections about four different "eschatologies": a personal eschatology ([1995] 1996:47-126); a historical eschatology ([1995] 1996:129-256); a cosmic eschatology ([1995] 1996:257-320), and a divine eschatology ([1995] 1996:321-340). The last three sections present a grammar of faith about human and cosmic reconciliation, the conviction that "God will be all in all" (see also Bauckham 1999), and that the future is liberated from human history, which entails a transcendence of contingent time and space (resurrection), and the realisation of Christian hope (Bauckham 1999:278-289).

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9   New Revised Standard Version.

10   In this regard, see also the work of Venter (2015:105-117), in which he discusses contemporary trends in Christian eschatological reflection, which include radicalising future orientation (in which eschatology is not an appendix to the remainder of theology), prioritising a hermeneutical approach (in which there is a theological critical questioning of how humanity projects its hopes on heaven and hell), engaging alterity (which includes perspectives and disciplines which have not been part of traditional and conventional discourse), considering the potential of the God symbol (which includes the mandate to explore the implication of religious plurality for Christianity's vision for a cosmic destiny), and the final trend – facing the political – which includes a serious consideration of what the scope of Christian hope is amid oppression.

3.1 Developing a "personal" eschatology

In the development of my own "personal eschatology" and for the purpose of teaching a course on Christian eschatology at a public university in South Africa, I have repeatedly returned to the work of Moltmann. I am convinced that Moltmann's personal eschatology almost acts as a framework for the remainder of his work on the subject, because of the existential and straightforward language and the way in which his personal eschatology entails "facing up" to the reality of death, as expressed in his shorter essay entitled, *Is there life after death?* (Moltmann 2000:238-255). Within a personal eschatology, as implied by Moltmann, our grammar of faith about the "last things" and the questions we have about death are not about the power to continue a hyperbolic earth-like existence or to invest our unfulfilled quests for punishment, godly judgement, and reward in the existence of an afterlife. The way in which Moltmann approaches this specific aspect of our grammar of faith is focused on love. Moltmann's "personal eschatology", to my mind, is a theology of death, as it cuts to the proverbial bone of the questions we have about death, and the reason we have those questions in the first place:

> What remains of our lives when we die? … Where are the dead? Why do we ask? What are we asking about? Does death have any meaning? … we ask [these questions] when we pause in the midst of life's 'ever-rolling stream' and search for the thing that sustains us. We ask about the future when we stand at the grave of someone we love … at the same time, we are asking about a meaningful, liveable and loved life before death … (Moltmann 2000:238-239).

When Moltmann considers humanity's existential (spiritual – my interpretation) quest about whether death has a cause, origin or reason, he discusses two views that have developed in the history of Christianity (Moltmann 2000:239). One view holds that death is the result of humanity's sin of turning away from God and that death may, therefore, also occur because of violence (humanity's broken condition). However, not all deaths (of all creatures) are related to their sin, as for example, mass victims of violence and death due to natural disasters. The second view holds that death in itself is not punishment, nor an evil in itself – it is a natural end to earthly life. Mortality is then a symptom of an imperfect reality. However, Moltmann (2000:241) ultimately indicates a third way, or approach to death, namely that

> the death of the living must be seen neither as 'sinful', nor as 'natural', but as a fact that provokes grief over transience, and longing for the eternal life of the future world.

This implies that the human struggle is not between life and death, but between *love* and death (my emphasis). In light of this actual struggle of humanity, the "where are the dead?" question is a personal question, linked with the hope for some form of continued communion with the ones we love, after they die. Moltmann's personal eschatology echoes Underhill's emphasis on the method of mysticism, namely love. Moltmann's emphasis on love, in turn, is similar to Dumbledore's approach to magic. However, embracing death as a mystery, and learning from that mystery, that is, embracing death as a teacher, is something I recognised as a possibility only while re-reading Moltmann's work amidst and after my own journey with the Harry Potter narratives.

As undergraduate students, we were prescribed Moltmann's *Coming of God* in our 4th year of theological study. At the end of that year, I started to read the Harry Potter books, and this journey continued for several years. When I had to consider the curriculum and prescribed work of a course about eschatology, of which I would be the teacher and not the student, I returned to Moltmann's work. Upon re-reading his work, some aspects thereof were much clearer to me. It was as if I had a broadened vocabulary for articulating my grammar of faith about Christian eschatology, and death – that did not entail making death an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). The themes relating to death in Harry's story provided me with that vocabulary. I neither searched, nor attempted to search for God, or find Christian theological themes in the Harry Potter narratives, as Granger (2006) did, for example, in *Looking for God in Harry Potter*. Rather, it inadvertently happened that Harry's journey with death, which specifically includes the wisdom of the character of Albus Dumbledore, had inversely provided me with a spiritual and theological vocabulary and framework for understanding Christian theology's grammar of faith about approaching finitude. In so doing, I developed a spirituality and grammar of realistic "faith" regarding the mystery of death, not as enemy, but as friend and teacher. In a very existential and almost brutal way, this eschatology/grammar/theology of death that I was developing, was tested with the unexpected passing of my younger and only brother, at the age of 33 years in January 2016. Since then, I have often argued that one's grammar of faith about death almost acts as a litmus test for one's entire theology.

The next section focuses on portraying in slightly more detail how my personal eschatology was developed, by incorporating the work of J.K. Rowling, thereby indicating how the latter (and Harry and Dumbledore's examples) can serve as a foundation for the development of a spiritual and theological grammar of faith about death.

4.   A VOCABULARY FOR EMBRACING DEATH: TWO CASE STUDIES

Even to the most casual reader, Rowling's story about the *Boy who lived* is about death. She also publicly acknowledged this during and after writing the series (Dickman 2017; see Caetano 2015:113-117; Van Wyk 2020:207).[11] Virtually every important plot in the seven volume-story revolves around death.

• The death of Harry's parents, and his mother Lily's sacrifice (sealing the magic that protects Harry) (Rowling 1997);[12]

• The existence of something like the philosopher's stone and the promise of resurrection and immortality it presents to corrupted wizard Voldemort (Rowling 1997),[13]

• The death of Cedric Diggory (Rowling 2000),[14] which culminates in Voldemort returning to the wizarding world;

• The death of Harry's godfather Sirius Black, which culminates in Harry learning about the prophecy concerning his birth and how Voldemort's downfall is related to his connection with Voldemort (Rowling 2003);[15]

• The death of Albus Dumbledore, which ultimately turns out to be a form of assisted self-death (Caetano 2015; Rowling 2005);[16]

• The death of Hedwig, Harry's owl-companion, when she blocks a death-curse (*Avada Kedavra*) from reaching Harry (Rowling 2007);[17]

• The death and bravery of Dobby, the house-elf, while trying to save Harry and his friends from the Death Eaters (Rowling 2007);[18]

• The death of Severus Snape, which turns out to be an ally of Harry (Rowling 2007);

• Harry's attempt to face death, in order to defeat Voldemort's evil, and finally,

• The death of Voldemort himself (Rowling 2007).[19]

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11   See "Rowling: Mom's death influenced Potter book" (2006). [Online.] Retrieved from: https://www.today.com/popculture/rowling-moms-death-influenced-potter-book-wbna10787533 [3 October 2024].

12   See *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

13   See *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

14   See *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

15   *See Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

16   *See Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*.

17   *See Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

18   See *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

19   See *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

4.1   Three approaches to death

There are three approaches to death in the journeys of these characters, as depicted in the series.

4.1.1 Albus Dumbledore: Death is a journey and mystery is not to be feared

Dumbledore has an open-minded, almost adventurous perspective on death, while thoroughly respecting the mystery that could accompany it. In most instances, death and love are also intertwined for Dumbledore. In the first instalment of the series, Voldemort – in his diminished and parasitic state of existence – attempts to obtain the philosopher's stone, used to create the *Elixir of Life*, which makes the drinker immortal (Rowling 1997:212-215). Voldemort fails to obtain the stone and resurrects himself with it. At that moment, he is doomed to continue his existence in a state of half-life, which he has done since he tried to murder Harry's parents when Harry was a child. The philosopher's stone was created by a centuries-old friend of Dumbledore, Nicholas Flamel. Upon Voldemort's failed attempt to obtain it, Dumbledore recommends to his friend that the stone be destroyed, to prevent further attempts (Rowling 1997:215). Upon hearing this from Dumbledore, Harry becomes concerned that this implies that Flamel will die, because the source of his immortality will no longer exist. To this, Dumbledore replies: "To the well-organised mind, death is nothing but the next great adventure" (Rowling 1997:215; see also Caetano 2015:122). This implies that the mystery of death is an adventure that should be embraced, rather than an uncertainty that must be feared and overcome.

This approach is echoed in the final instalment of the series, when Harry and Dumbledore meet each other in a mysterious "in-between" space, which turns out to be King's Cross Station, symbolising a half-way station in humanity's journey of life and death. Harry is presented with the option to stay, or to leave and go back to the world of the living, where he has the opportunity to defeat Voldemort for good. When asked by Harry, where he will go from here if he decides to stay, Dumbledore replies with a twinkle: "On!". In a way, this is the most profound expression of the mystery of death, and of embracing that mystery – a wisdom that ultimately influences Harry's approach to death.

4.1.2 Harry Potter: Death is a fellow-traveller and does not have to be overpowered

Harry's approach to the mystery of death is intertwined with love and self-transcendence (sacrifice), which is a testament to how Harry embraces his own vulnerability and emotion in the connectedness and transformation that relationships of love entail. He is, of course, reminded of the power and magic

of love by Dumbledore, but maybe more than Dumbledore and infinitely more than Voldemort, Harry has an innate tendency towards selflessness. This is clear in two very specific moments during the series. First, the reflections that Harry encounters in the mirror of Erised ("desire" spelled backwards). Reflecting on their deepest and most desperate desires, the vast majority of people look into the mirror and see images of their own self-actualisation or their own prowess or desires for special treatment, gifts, power, and knowledge. Harry sees images of both his parents and his family, which indicate that his deepest wish is connections of love, not power (Rowling 1997:143-157).

The second example of Harry's selflessness and, by virtue, his approach to death is his approach to finding and using the hallows – "mythical" magical instruments which together will make their bearer a master of death. These magical instruments consist of the invisibility cloak (to hide from everything and everyone – even death); the elder wand (the most powerful wand ever created), and the resurrection stone (which has the ability to summon loved ones from death). In the last instalment of the series, these three objects appear within a fictional tale of "The three brothers" (Rowling 2007:329-332). The story was told to children of wizarding families as a type of fairy tale. It turns out, however, or rather, it is implied that the tale has some historical origins and could be based on three actual powerful wizards that existed in the history of the magical community. A story within a story, the tale ultimately becomes a type of reality. Each one of the main characters, Dumbledore, Harry and Voldemort, is in some way confronted with the possible use of one of these magical instruments. Ultimately, Harry is the only one who does not use any of them to cheat death or to try and overpower or outsmart it. Rather, Harry uses the hallows to help him embrace death, in an act of love similar to the sacrifice his mother made. He uses the hallows to sacrifice himself to Voldemort in the hopes of freeing the rest of the magical community from Voldemort's hold. Later, in a scene described directly after this act of sacrifice, Harry and Dumbledore find themselves at the "in-between station" at King's Cross (as described previously). Dumbledore lauds Harry for being able to use the hallows in this way, as Dumbledore knows that even he was lured by the possible power of those hallows.

4.1.3 Voldemort: Death is an enemy and a weakness

The final approach to death is in stark contrast to both Dumbledore and Harry. Derived from the French "*vol de mort*" (theft or flight from death) (Caetano 2015:122), Voldemort uses magic as "might" (in reference to the new motto of the Ministry for Magic when Voldemort takes control of the wizarding world [Rowling 2007:198]). When Voldemort is informed as a child that he has magical abilities, his first inclination is to use it for self-enrichment (stealing toys from other children he wanted but could not afford), to protect himself

from pain, and to hurt others who might pose a threat to him or have hurt him in the past (hurting children who bullied him). Dumbledore informs him about his abilities and recognises something dangerous in the child. From that point on, Voldemort (born Tom Riddle) uses magic to make himself both invulnerable and all-powerful. The ultimate threat is death (and the mystery and finitude it represents), and the ultimate power, conversely, is immortality. Voldemort journeys into the recesses of dark magic more than any other wizard in living memory and ultimately creates the horcruxes, which function in the Harry Potter series as the direct antithesis of the hallows (Rowling 2005:460-479). The horcruxes are physical objects, imbued with dark magic to hold a piece of the maker's soul. Their purpose is to act as a type of recharge battery or a recall button that will act as stimulus to bring people back to life if they are so unfortunate to die (Voldemort's perspective). To create a horcrux, however, requires an act of unspeakable darkness (evil), because horcrux magic requires one to split one's soul into different parts, and the only way to harm one's soul to the point of breaking it, is to murder someone. Voldemort does this on purpose on six occasions, and accidentally a seventh one. In this regard, Voldemort creates an egocentric immortality (Caetano 2015:122; see Granger 2008), which Caetano (2015:122) describes as follows:

> rather than trusting in an eternal afterlife, the Dark Lord (Voldemort) pursues a more literal immortality, privileging his obsession with self and worldly power (egomania) over other human lives. The mutilation of his soul in pursuit of this egocentric immortality is the crime that garners him the title of the series' most despicable villain, while those who inversely sacrifice their own lives for others –Lily for Harry and Harry for his comrades at the Battle of Hogwarts – earn the title 'masters of death.' They master death because they do not fear it – and in Rowling's view this is a very sage attitude to take.

5.   IN CONCLUSION: THE "ART OF A SPIRITUAL LIFE" AND EMBRACING THE MYSTERY OF DEATH – A "MAGIC" THAT RECONFIGURES THE HERMENEUTICAL HORIZONS OF A THEOLOGICAL-SPIRITUAL VOCABULARY ABOUT DEATH

I have always grudgingly used the word "conclusion" at the end of a contribution such as this, because, in a modernistic way, a certain pattern is expected in an article that makes a scholarly contribution. Not this time. Instead, I will provide a summary and a reflection. Developing one's grammar of faith about death is a deeply existential and spiritual undertaking and a mystical one at

that. In this regard, it is also a multifaceted one. Death, by implication, is a mystery that is closely linked to the "art of a spiritual life" (in reference to Underhill's ([1930] 2005:8) definition of mysticism). Reportedly, according to the 5th-century mystic, Benedict of Nursia, keeping death in front of one's eyes (reflecting upon it daily) is the key to an abundant life.

In this article, in essence, I recounted my own existential "re-reading" of Christianity's eschatology from the perspective of a focus on a theology and spirituality of death, which does not make death an enemy to be defeated. I did this with the help of a children's book series. I indicated the possible dangers of regarding death as an enemy. Like Voldemort, one forgets to live, and abuse power for the sake of one's own image and ego. The danger of the Christian church making death an enemy is visible in an occasional overemphasis on eschatological punishment and reward, and over-romanticising life, at the expense of dealing with trauma and facing up to one's finitude. Life has meaning because there is an end to it, like a frame of an artwork. It provides the broken human condition with the necessary scope for meaning and flourishing.

I demonstrated how a reconfiguration and deconstruction of a grammar of faith about the "last things" is possible. I used Underhill's (dis)connecting between magic and mysticism, which illustrates that "knowledge" and spiritual (theological) knowledge cannot be constructed along binary lines. I used Moltmann's personal eschatology, which is indicative of an existential and equally nonbinary approach to the "last things". Ultimately, "magic" is at the heart of these matters: the magic and mystery of love and loving in spite of death and finitude. Our human imagination is sometimes able to provide us with a vocabulary when our rational minds cannot.

This is how and why the case of Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore (and Voldemort) is so particularly poignant. The approaches to death I encountered in the Harry Potter narrative existentially influenced my approach to my own mortality and finitude, and, in turn, had a life-changing effect upon my interpretation and re-interpretation of Christian theology's grammar of faith about death. Because of this, I can understand and teach the core aspects of Christian eschatology nowadays. When my brother passed away, I had a spiritual-theological vocabulary that enabled me to assign meaning to his death and ultimately conduct his funeral service myself. In this regard, death becomes a spiritual and theological teacher.

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