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July 17, 2011: Is Harry Potter Secular?

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Title: Is Harry Potter Secular?

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7/17/2011—Believe it or not, I did not come up with this question. It was asked, more or less, by Jewish Pantheist (what he calls Nondual Judaism in his book *Everything is God*) Jay Michaelson in *Religion Dispatches* (*The Trouble with Harry (Potter)*). Having just seen the last movie, and loving the series, I'm glad to have this excuse to write about it. Michaelson's point is that religious conservatives are right to mistrust the Potter series because there is no God. All the power is this-worldly. Even the "resurrection" in the movie occurs because of an object and would not have occurred without it: "The closest the series ever comes to something like providential grace is in the case of Gryffindor's Sword, which twice appears out of thin air to aid heroes in distress. Yet, we are told, this too is the result, not of any super-human force, but of Gryffindor's own power." I'm not sure whether I agree with Michaelson, or disagree, or whether we disagree about terms. There is no God in Harry Potter, but good and evil do not stand on the same footing. Neville Longbottom makes the point at the end of the movie—Voldemort will fail despite his powers because he is seeking something that is wrong. Michaelson misses the providential grace that structures everything in the Harry Potter series. Dumbledore states the role of grace: "Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it." This is Jesus in Matthew 7:7: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find." Michaelson might say that all of this is this-worldly. But monotheism at its heart is not about a separate, supernatural being—or else Mordecai Kaplan would have been a pantheist, which he was not. Monotheism teaches that there is more to this world than meets the eye. Somehow good is structured in to the matter of the universe. And it will triumph over evil. Or, as nonpantheist Martin Luther King, Jr. put it: "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Now ironically for me, this is secularism, hallowed secularism. And there isn't any dualism because this world is all there is. Yet the alternative to the supernatural is not pantheism, at least not as I understand the term.