

Practicing Re-Imagination: An Interview with Vanessa Zoltan of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*

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*While many of the articles in this issue address new directions in the academic study of religious practices, innovations and transformations of religious practices themselves are happening among practitioners all the time. To understand more about one way that traditional Judeo-Christian sacred reading practices are being reimagined in contemporary times, Practical Matters recently spoke with Vanessa Zoltan, co-host of the podcast [Harry Potter and the Sacred Text](#). Founded by graduates of Harvard Divinity School (HDS), each week the podcast considers one chapter of the Harry Potter series through the lens of a particular theme. Similarly to studies of traditional sacred texts, the hosts use stories, blessings, and a rotating docket of sacred reading practices to pay close attention to the text and consider its meaning for real lives and communities. And yet, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* is intentionally built to be welcoming of those of any faith, or no faith at all. Practical Matters editor Cara Curtis sat down with Vanessa Zoltan to learn more about the origins of the podcast, the community that has formed around it, and its creators' thoughts about how the project fits into a changing landscape of religious practice.*

CC: Thanks again for sitting down with me; I think this will fit really well with what we're trying to do in this issue.

VZ: I'm honored that you reached out!

CC: I'm sure you've told this story many times, but I thought it would be nice to hear about the origin story of the podcast, your memories of that, and what jumps out from that part of the story.

VZ: Yeah, it's important for me to think about because I can't remember all of it: it's like, when did an

idea occur to you? So many people helped, so many people are involved in an idea. But I was at HDS, and I was there because I'd worked in education for 10 years, and I came to the conclusion that—I'm trying to figure out how to say this in a non-offensive way—that we basically know how to educate kids. We, as a culture, know how. And America just hasn't reckoned with this original sin of slavery, and hatred of different races, so we as a culture just don't believe that black and brown children deserve to learn. And so I was just frustrated working in education. I was like, why are we talking about things that don't matter? *That's* the thing that matters.

It's not that I thought that I could fix that, it was that I wanted to go where that conversation was happening. It seemed like a more interesting conversation than a fake conversation about education. And so, eventually I did research and was like—okay, the most interesting conversations about race are happening within the field of religion. And then I just didn't think a whole lot about the fact that I'm an atheist, and I came to divinity school. And, I knew that my interest in having this conversation was tied up in the fact that I'm the grandchild of four Holocaust survivors, so I know, personally, what dumb hatred can do. We see it in this country in terms of things like water access, and education, but my family saw it differently.

And so I came to HDS and I realized, oh, this not believing in God thing is going to be hard. I started going to services, and one of the central prayers in Judaism that's at almost every service is called the Amidah. And in it, you praise God for his benevolence, and I was like: God sure as hell forgets about a lot of people. And I could just never get past about half the prayer. And so, I asked Stephanie Paulsell, one of our favorite professors, if she would teach me how to pray using *Jane Eyre*, because *Jane Eyre* is my favorite book and I only had positive associations with it. And she said *yes*. She said, "Yeah, let's do that for a semester"—so we did. And it was great. It was great to spend a whole semester reading one book, and she taught me all these different prayer methods. One of the things that we decided about treating something as sacred, is that a community says it is sacred. That you can't pray with something in a vacuum: like how you need a "gym buddy." And so she was like, "Go, find a community." I was the assistant humanist chaplain at a tiny congregation here, and so I sent it out as an announcement in the newsletter. I was like, "Hey, on Tuesday nights from 7:00 to 8:30 I'm going to be reading *Jane Eyre* as sacred." And four amazing women came, and they came every week.

And then on one of the last weeks, my friend Casper came, and he was like, "I think what you're up to is really cool. I think it would be better with a book people actually read." [Laughter.] And I said, "Ah, what book do people actually read? People read *Jane Eyre*!" And he was like, "Um, *Harry Potter*." And I thought, *oh that's good*. [Laughing again.] And I truly believe you can treat the secular as sacred with almost any book, but *Harry Potter* is uniquely qualified.

CC: That's beautiful, the whole story. And the thread that makes me think of is community. It's so apparent from the podcast that it includes not only you all as hosts, but also your producer Ariana, Stephanie Paulsell, the musicians, and the volunteers, and then the listening community. How do you think the fact of having these multiple layers of community has shaped the podcast, your experience of it, what it's become?

VZ: To some extent I think I've created my perfect community, because I'm an introvert, and I don't

like to leave the house. And so I get to engage with people, and then I get to go home. I grew up as a pretty typical Jew where you only went on High Holiday services, and going to live shows feels like that: like, wahoo, all these people, and now I'm going to go home to my room. [Laughter.] But the layers of community are incredible. We now have thirty local groups that meet across the world, and we have a closed Facebook group that has 1,500 people in it, who are just constantly talking to each other. And I don't go to those groups—I'm in the Facebook group, but I'm never commenting or anything. And that's incredibly meaningful. We say that we will only know that this podcast is truly a success when there's a baby that came from the community. [Laughing.] So we really tried hard to put some structures in for people to meet each other, because it's unsustainable for it to be based around us. It can't be based around our personalities—it has to come from the practices. It becomes cult-like if it's about the leaders. And so we're very much not the leaders. We are the text that people meet about, but we are also completely separate from it. Which feels sustainable and good.

And then the thing to me that's so meaningful about the community is just how we would be bad without it. When we decided to switch from a small reading group/class to the podcast, we went and met with all of our favorite professors, and said, "How do we do this?" There are just so many people who we met with, and now we're in that kind of dialogue with our listening community. I have learned so much about things I've said poorly. I worked in education, and 15 years ago in education, you said that someone "had autism," not that they "were autistic," and I think we've gotten a hundred emails saying, "That's not true anymore, Vanessa." So you get to stay up on things that are not in your field.

And then the other really nice thing is that I shared a story about something that my best friend did for me, and she now gets fan mail, which I love. People write in saying, "Please thank Kim. I started antidepressants because of Kim." So it feels like Kim is a part of it, and other people, because we tell stories on every episode. So it feels like so, so many people are a part of it. It literally wouldn't exist without a team of people, and then it certainly would be much worse if we didn't have such amazing listeners.

CC: Yes—and along with that, something else I was really excited to talk about is that process of bringing people in, or creating a space that can hold a diversity of folks in terms of their journeys with religion. And especially, creating a space that is doing this sacred reading but is welcoming in people who don't believe in God or are alienated from that world. And so I'm wondering if there are reactions or things you typically hear from those folks, and/or practices that you all engage in to create a space that's welcoming to them as well as folks who are like, "Well, the Bible's really important to me, and I'm unsure about this from that angle."

VZ: The title of our project sounds so kooky: "*Harry Potter* is a sacred text!" But, its accidental genius is that you have to buy in if you're going to listen. And so I think that true haters just don't start it. If you are totally not open to religion, a die-hard atheist, you avoid the word "sacred." And if you're devoutly religious and would be offended by something other than the Bible being treated as sacred, you're also not going to listen. What we do have is these people who are right on the margins of that, and who just love *Harry Potter* so much that they're like, "Okay, I guess I'll go with this." Some of my favorite comments that I get speak to

this. I used to be a part of an atheist community, and I think everyone knows this, but atheist communities are often incredibly toxic for women. So I hear from a lot of women who are like, “I am an atheist and it’s just so nice to hear a woman talk about atheism”—and to have someone who is respectful and loves religion talk about atheism.

And then the other thing I love to hear is people who say, “I have been traumatized by my church” —you know, I’m queer and Baptist, grew up in the South,”—like read from a script—”but your podcast has helped me come back to religion.” You know, not in their congregations of origin. And *that* feels like a really lovely thing. So, people leaning into their atheism or people leaning back into their religion feels like a lovely thing.

CC: To me, it’s incredible to think about the communities that have formed, those folks from different ends of the spectrum finding each other and being in community—because we all know that many of us just don’t really talk to people that are different from us.

VZ: Right, right. I keep saying this: I would love for someone to write a thesis on us. The thing that I’m most interested in is whether or not what we’re up to is effective chaplaincy. Because a lot of our chaplaincy at this point happens in our inbox. Is email an appropriate form of chaplaincy? Or are these local reading groups, with no trained facilitators? We’ve applied for a couple of grants to be able to run facilitative leadership workshops for our groups, but we don’t have the money yet. So I’m like, are these terrible for people?

CC: That’s really interesting, because I know there is more and more work around digital and online communities—but email is a whole other angle, and it makes a lot of sense for you guys. Do you all try to individually respond?

VZ: We were. We can’t anymore, for a few reasons. It was unhealthy for me to read so many things about myself—or really, it’s that I’m bad at responding (“Screw you! You don’t like my voice? Stop listening to our podcast!”). That kind of thing. So we no longer respond to every email. We read every single one, and we respond with resources to the ones that seem to be in acute crisis. I’d say we respond to over 60%. We don’t respond to negative emails, and we don’t respond to fan theories, just because there’s a Facebook group for that—and they’re fun to read, but we don’t need to respond.

But if somebody is sharing something really personal, we respond with a sort of “bearing witness” message: thanking them for sharing their story, responding to the story a little bit. And that’s it. And I don’t know if we should think of our email inbox as a kind of void that people can just send things into—like I believe in the magic of writing and trusting that that process was enough for them—or if we’re doing something wrong. We have a responder up saying we read every email but can’t respond to them all, so we’re managing expectations. I just think our email inbox would be interesting for a grad student, because all the data is there. Someone do it!

CC: Yeah—and hearing you talk about it, all the principles align with my understanding of the

foundations of pastoral care: you can't fix, you have to just be there. But I also hear you in this dilemma of, this is a totally new format—so, what are we doing?!

VZ: Well, and with a real relationship, like when I was a congregational chaplain, when one of our members was in the hospital, I would go visit them. And then the community would coordinate things like making sure there was soup in their fridge when they got home. And then you asked us to do your wedding, and you came to a funeral with us. And there's none of that.

CC: Right, so it really sounds like this is where it's at the very edges of being figured out.

VZ: But our perceptions of these things have changed. Ten years ago, there was an HBO comedy where Lisa Cooper was playing an online therapist, and it was about how funny that was. But I have a friend now who is a new mom on maternity leave, and she's really struggling, and she can't go to therapy—and she Skypes with her therapist, and it's so helpful. And ten years ago, it was a joke. But what a gift that a mom who can't get out of the house can still talk to her therapist. So I don't know if we're doing a disservice to the world of chaplaincy, or if we're on the cutting edge of something. [Laughing.] I don't know!

CC: It's really interesting to hear how you all are figuring that out, (VZ: or, not figuring it out!) well, in process! But I wanted to go back to pick up on a thread you were talking about when you said you loved hearing from women atheists—just because one really lovely part of the podcast has been your choice to always bless a female character in the “blessing” section of each episode. And then, this new podcast you and Ariana are running called the “Women of *Harry Potter*.” So I wanted to hear a bit about your process of coming to that decision originally, and then whether you've changed in how you've thought about it over the course of the podcast, this new piece, and just in general how this feminist piece is fitting in for you.

VZ: The choosing to bless women—I just love limitations, they create the opportunity to see things that you wouldn't otherwise get to see. And that's always exciting. I was an English major, learned a lot from feminist theory, and a lot of my favorite books are retellings from the woman's point of view. I love retellings because I love spoiled books—like the *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood, where she retells *The Odyssey* from the point of view of the women back home. And like *Longbourn* by Jo Baker, which is a retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* from below-stairs. I always like that. And when we started the podcast—Hillary was about to become president. And Harvey Weinstein was just a jerk. And so the reason for the Women of *Harry Potter* podcast is that it's become more and more important to me personally. Accidentally! But the books that I'm drawn to right now: I keep reading these feminist memoirs, just constantly. Jessica Valenti, Lindy West, Roxane Gay—I just can't get enough of them. It's an exciting moment in feminism: there were like 30 years where there wasn't as much of a feminist movement. And there is, again. It's just super exciting. There is all this content: I'm in the middle of the Lorena Bobbitt documentary, and I loved the *Slow Burn* season about the Monica Lewinski scandal. So I feel like we're in this moment of retelling stories from the women's point of view. Like when the Monica Lewinsky scandal happened, it was all about Bill Clinton. And when Lorena

Bobbitt cut off John Bobbitt's penis, it was like, "That poor man!"

And so, it's just an exciting moment in feminism where we are telling these stories that speak to the question, "Where was the woman?" And so I've really enjoyed putting my attention toward that in the *Harry Potter* books. You know, Joanne Rowling was told by a publisher to call herself "J.K." because little boys weren't going to read a book about a little boy wizard written by a woman. So it's just exciting to me.

CC: Yeah. And has there been community feedback on that? Or what has that been like?

VZ: I don't get a lot of comments on it, which also means I don't get a lot of negative comments on it, aside from a couple men saying, "You call yourself a humanist? Men are humans too!" (And actually, I don't call myself a humanist anymore. It's not a political stance, it's not an interesting word to me anymore.) I've heard some positive things about it, but generally, it's similar to the barrier to entry of getting into the podcast: I announced the plan for it on the first episode, so people who have real feelings about it just don't really engage with Episode 2. I've heard a couple lovely comments about how people were resisting the word "feminist" and now they feel more comfortable with it.

CC: Yeah, that's really cool. And this also makes me think, more broadly: you all have talked on the podcast about the process of choosing the sacred reading practices that you do. Could you talk about that a bit, both the process of choosing them and the process of adapting them for the podcast format, working with them over time, etc.? [Editor's note: please see <http://www.harrypottersacredtext.com/spiritual-practice-resources> for more information and resources related to the practices discussed in the following conversation.]

VZ: So Havruta was the only one I knew before doing this. And the other ones we had teachers teach us. Like, really simply. So Stephanie taught me Lectio Divina when we were doing our independent study on *Jane Eyre*, and I just kept hating some of the God language around it. Like, "What does God want you to do with this passage?" I'm like, "I don't know! Kill babies?" It made me grumpy. And so, you know, Stephanie is always wise, and said, "If the question isn't helping you, ask yourself a different question." And so, she and I adapted that one together, to make it more inclusive. And that sort of gave me permission to do that. And Casper uses a word that may actually come from Krista Tippett: "spiritual technologies." All technologies are meant to be adapted: we all use knives slightly differently. And as long as it's chopping, safely, it doesn't really matter.

So Stephanie really gave us permission to do that, and now we invite teachers on to teach us new practices, and then with the help of our producer Ariana, and some thought, we adapt it for the podcast. And some of them evolve over time: I feel like we just recently got good at doing *Floralegium*. We just added a step in our practice where we talk about why that quote sparked at us, and that's been really helpful. But it took us like three years to get there. So it's definitely a continuous process.

The only hard-and-fast rule we have about the sacred reading practices is that while we love having other guests on to teach us about non-Judeo-Christian practices, we do not want to be appropriating other cultures, so we do not continue those practices on our own. I feel very confident owning the Jewish stuff,

Casper feels very confident owning the Christian stuff, and at this point I will do the Christian practices even when I'm doing something on my own—I feel very much like they're mine at this point. But, [Buddhist] chanting, for example: chanting is a great practice that I will never lead.

CC: And I've appreciated how you've explained that on the podcast, because I think that's a thing that might not occur to everyone. So I've appreciated the thoughtfulness with which you've said: these practices are wonderful, and this is why we're not doing them.

VZ: Right. We've gotten a couple requests—and this came from the community, it wasn't something we had specifically articulated to ourselves—but somebody wrote in and said, "It would be great if you taught us more about religion." And we thought about it, and we were like, "Well, we're not a world religion podcast." And we're not experts in world religions. We could read you Wikipedia entries, but there are probably great podcasts out there about world religions.

CC: Right. And if this podcast is a gateway to that interest, that's fantastic!

VZ: Right. But we're not religious educators. That's not what we do. So questions like that are really helpful. You're like, "Hey, *should* we do that?" And then you're like, "No, and this is why." And it helps you figure out who you are and who you're not.

CC: Yeah. And it's great to hear you guys think through your process and be transparent about that. And this has been a great conversation overall. One thing I wanted to make sure we got to, because it ties back both to what you guys are doing and to what our journal is about, is this idea of practice. There's this idea from the Aristotelian tradition about how engaging in a practice over time changes you and shapes you. So zooming out as a closing question, as you look over your time with this podcast over the last few years, are there ways that you feel like you've been shaped or changed by this practice? Anything you might not have expected?

VZ: Oh yeah. First of all, I think I now believe in just doing things. That feeling of, I don't know how this will end, but I'll know it by its fruits. And the process will change it. Which makes you just a little bit believe in magic. "I'm just gonna do this thing, and we'll see what happens!" And it's just made me much more willing to do practices and to see them as blessings. Like I always walked my dog, but now I'm like, "No, this is my sacred time," where I listen to an audiobook or podcast, and am focused on another creature, and it's changing my body—I am now someone who walks five miles a day every day, and my quads are reflected in that. And seeing that not as a chore, but as part of me.

And so we're working on this [romance novel project](#). And there's an app where you can upload a chapter a week until you finish a romance novel. And I was like, "I have no idea what this process will give me, but I'm going to do it." I'm only a couple of weeks in, but it's so fun to just have to put words to the page. And so I think I'm more open to the mystery, rather than I used to do things assuming I knew why I did them. And

this new way I think creates more space in your life to quit things, because you're like, "I'll know this by its fruits, and this is stressing me out, and that's all it's giving me." But it's really created space for me to become more experimental. As someone who loves being home and is a real homebody, that's been a real gift to me.

CC: And that ties back really well to what you were saying about the reading practices. Saying, "We added this piece to *Florallegium*, and it got so much better." And I'm similar, I like to have a plan, so that's really cool to hear about opening to that process.

VZ: Yeah. Because I never could have guessed what that *Jane Eyre* independent study with Stephanie was going to give me. So I've really learned about experimenting with things. Which is really what chaplaincy is: it's about being present, and not knowing what a conversation is going to bring you.

And it's not always going to be pleasant. Like in treating *Jane Eyre* as sacred, I realized it is in many ways a racist, colonial, oppressive book. I still love it, but it's not always going to feel good. And I walk the dog in terrible weather. So it's not always pleasant.

CC: Yeah. And in my experience with the *Harry Potter* series, similarly, it's helped me face some of those uglier sides of characters, where you go, "Man, I'd really like to just stay with my image of Dumbledore from the first six books," and not really wanting to have to deal with everything you find out about him. But I think being able to hold all sides of people in a more intentional way is a good practice to cultivate.

VZ: And they really are great books. I think that's the other thing this has taught me, too. *Harry Potter* books, before doing this podcast, they were not "my books." I liked them, but I didn't grow up with them. I'm a little too old and just missed it. And I just believed in Casper. Casper said that they would work, and I was like, "Casper's great!" And they've ended up being such a gift to me. They're so good, I love them so much now, and that was just a leap of faith.

CC: Yes, and I love that idea of going with something because you believe in a person; I share that. We're about out of time, but thank you so much again for chatting with me. This has been great.

VZ: Thank you! It's been a pleasure.