The battle between secular culture and conservative religion is one that pervades modern society. In the face of this vehement clash, a curious collection of books has emerged that attempt to provide a means of reconciliation between faith and popular culture. The Gospel according to book series by Presbyterian publisher Westminster John Knox (WJK) Press pairs seemingly controversial artifacts of popular culture such as The Simpsons with the gospel message. These books function in a way that is similar to allegory but lacks allegorical form. This essay argues for the existence of a distinctive rhetorical strategy called transformative discursive allegory that functions to create an allegorical relationship between a secular and a sacred text. WJK’s The Gospel according to book series is shown as an example of how transformative discursive allegory functions to allow the faithful to participate in popular culture while simultaneously affirming one’s ideological beliefs as omnipresent in the world. The findings suggest that allegorical function and form are separate elements and that one can create an allegorical relationship without allegorical form or intent.

Keywords: Allegory; “The Gospel according to”; Popular Culture; Religion; Transformative Discursive Allegory

In a period in which the battle between popular culture and conservative religion, especially evangelical Christianity, appears especially vehement, an odd collection of popular books has emerged. A series of books has slowly emerged with titles such as The Gospel according to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle Earth (Wood, 2003), The Gospel according to the Bruce Springsteen: Rock and Redemption
from Asbury Park to Magic (Symynkywicz, 2008), and The Gospel according to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of America’s Most Animated Family (Pinsky, 2001). The curious nature of this series emerges from the fact that most of the popular culture subjects chosen for the series are considered controversial or objectionable by the target audience. There have been active campaigns against The Simpsons and the Harry Potter book series and few people would consider Bruce Springsteen to be the moral conscience of the religious right. Yet these books are an undeniably popular vehicle for the gospel message. This raises important questions about how such works function as arguments in linking popular culture and sacred belief.

While there are a number of works that fit this rhetorical pattern, such as The Tao of Pooh by Benjamin Hoff, Westminster John Knox’s (WJK) book series The Gospel according to represents a particularly strong and cohesive example of this phenomenon. The Gospel according to series is among the most successful works by WJK Press. According to Publisher’s Weekly (“Nonfiction Book,” 2007), the series began with the 1964 publication of Robert Short’s The Gospel according to Peanuts, which has sold more than 10 million copies, and has grown into a popular series that has become a mainstay of the Presbyterian publishing house. In 2005, David Dark’s The Gospel according to America was a Publisher’s Weekly Top 10 religion book for the year and Mark I. Pinsky’s The Gospel according to the Simpson’s debuted as a Publisher’s Weekly Top Ten Religion bestseller in 2001. In fact, the success of The Gospel according to the Simpsons is credited with having saved the once failing publisher (“Changes at WJK,” 2007). While the series began over 50 years ago, it is only in the last decade, with the focus on works more controversial than The Peanuts, that it has become a tour de force for WJK Press. The publisher now offers study-group leader guides for many of the titles in this series and one can download discussion questions to help facilitate bible studies using these books. Each book in the series takes the reader through a particular subject of popular culture and relates that subject back to biblical themes, discursively transforming the popular culture objects into biblical study guides. Such efforts suggest that the underlying appeal of this series is that these works function allegorically. However, neither the works of The Gospel according to series, nor the cultural artifacts that are addressed fit the formal definition of traditional allegorical form. As will be demonstrated in the following section, current research in allegory tends to focus either on evaluations of accepted allegorical works or defining allegory as literary form (see, for example, Fletcher, 2006). Given this focus on form rather than function, existing scholarship is insufficient to fully explain a situation in which allegorical function operates independent of allegorical form.

To explain this confusing situation, I argue that WJK’s The Gospel according to series embodies a distinctive rhetorical strategy that I call transformative discursive allegory. The works are “transformative” in the sense that they transform or manipulate existing stories to suit an ideological agenda. They are “discursive” in the sense that they transform these narratives through a discussion and manipulation of the texts. They are “allegory” by virtue of the fact they create a meaning for the text that asserts “by this is meant that” (Frye, 1957) and further expand this metaphoric
relationship by connecting with a sacred referent. The goal of such works is to create an intertextual relationship for the reader so that when the popular text is read the reader will see its allegorical relationship with sacred texts. In the case of *The Gospel according to* book series, these works function by discursively examining a popular artifact in the context of biblical myth. In essence, *The Gospel according to* books transform popular artifacts into functional allegories for the bible message. The appeal of such a transformation is twofold. First, such works allow individuals who are part of a religious tradition that often rejects popular culture to participate in it. Second, by suggesting that one can find biblical themes in secular and non-religious artifacts such as *The Simpsons, Harry Potter,* and Oprah, one reinforces the centrality of the Christian ideology. While in the case of *The Gospel according to* book series the sacred referent is the Christian gospel, the rhetorical process of transformative discursive allegory could be used to connect any ideological belief system or sacred text, such as the Torah, the Qur’an, the Declaration of Independence, or secular myths, such as the American Dream or Chicago Cubs Curse, to artifacts of popular culture that on the surface appear antithetical to such beliefs.

In this essay, I present the theory of transformative discursive allegory and argue for its function as a critical strategy meant to influence the way an audience reads a popular culture artifact to encourage them to find a specific message. I first provide a description of traditional theories of allegory and briefly evaluate the current state of allegorical research in order to distinguish allegorical form from allegorical functions. I next demonstrate that while transformative discursive allegory is not allegory in a formal sense it does function allegorically. Using this analysis, I describe how *The Gospel according to* books function as transformative discursive allegory. Finally, I assess the implications of both the book series and the theory of transformative discursive allegory.

**Understanding Allegory as a Symbolic Mode**

Before transformative discursive allegory can be defined as a unique rhetorical strategy, it is necessary to define allegory, a difficult task in itself. The word allegory comes from the Greek for “other speech,” an appropriate starting place, as allegories are often thought to be representative retellings of foundational texts (Fletcher, 1964; Kelley, 1997). However, it is important to establish that allegory cannot be defined precisely based on a limited set of specific formal characteristics (Madsen, 1994). Rather, allegory is better described as a symbolic mode (Fletcher, 1964). Fletcher argues, “[I]n the simplest of terms allegory says one thing and means another” (p. 2). In this sense, allegory can be seen as any form of symbolic representation.

Traditional approaches to allegory take a different approach and define this literary figure in a rather restricted manner. Cicero (trans. 2001) defined allegory as “a continuous stream of metaphors” (§94), suggesting it was something more than a single instance of symbolic substitution. Peter Crisp (2008) has sought to provide even more distinction between allegory and extended metaphor claiming that “We have allegory if, and only if, there is a direct reference to entities in a possible situation from which an underlying mapping then proceeds, the target never being
referred to directly” (p. 294). In other words, allegory only occurs when a referent must be discerned enthymematically. Madsen (1994) defines this relationship between the text and its external meaning, explaining that “the text was assumed to operate as some kind of code, concealing a systematic analogy with some external discourse, often a philosophical discourse,” (pp. 2–3). In the Middle Ages, the focus on philosophical discourse was replaced with a focus on religious texts, an approach that has dominated interpretations of allegory since (Madsen, 1994). Fletcher (2006) provides a more detailed definition, arguing that “allegory is a method of double meanings that organizes any utterance (in any medium) according to its expression of analogical parallels between different networks of iconic likeness. [It sets up] correspondences between a certain story, let’s say, and a set of meanings” (p. 78). Frye (1957) chooses to distinguish allegory, “a structural element in [thematic] literature” (p. 54) and the process of allegorical interpretation or “an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery” (p. 89). While scholars, such as Frye (1957) and Madsen (1994), argue that allegory should be limited to narrative genres, other scholars such as Fletcher and Kelley prefer a more open definition. Fletcher (1964) makes the argument that “the whole point of allegory is that it does not need to be read exegetically; it often has a literal sense that makes good enough sense all by itself” (p. 7). This suggests that allegory functions enthymematically for the intended audience but also has some superficial meaning for other audiences. For example, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis is generally read as biblical allegory meant to illuminate scriptural themes but may also be read as a simple children’s fantasy tale. The idea that allegorical works need only function allegorically for a select audience will become key to understanding transformative discursive allegory.

Given such a diversity of definitions, it is difficult to narrow allegory, in a formal sense, to a single working definition. For this reason, Fletcher recommends that allegory is better understood as a broad symbolic mode rather than as a narrow literary genre. Fletcher defines a mode as “a fundamental process of encoding our speech” (p. 3). Thus, allegory could be understood as a process of encoding one’s speech using symbolism or metaphor. By defining allegory as a mode rather than a genre, Fletcher allows a wide variety of formats to be considered allegory but still restricts the definition of allegory to works that are encoded to achieve a specific aim. This approach is too broad for Frye (1957), who warns of the need to distinguish formal or “genuine allegory” from the position “that any thematic criticism of a work of fiction will turn it into an allegory” (p. 54). He suggests that “genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone” (Frye, 1957, p. 54). However, whether the broad or narrow approach is selected, *The Gospel according to* book series would seem to lack the formal characteristics to be considered allegory.

At the crux of the debate over the “structural elements” in allegory is the question of what relationship exists between the allegorical text and the referent implied by the text. Allegory encompasses the body of work in which one text alludes to another, more fundamental, text, however, the necessary degree and nature of this relationship is disputed. The narrowest defined relationship requires clear parallels between the
text and a referent myth or dominant societal narrative; the allegory must be an obvious retelling of the myth or narrative (Frye, 1957; Madsen, 1994). The most common and generally accepted examples of allegory in the narrow sense, such as *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queen*, deal with religious themes (see, for example, Frye, 1957; Fletcher, 1964, 2006). However, it is acknowledged that the political commentary in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is also an example of allegory (see, for example, Leyburn, 1948; Letemendia, 1992; Fletcher, 2006). From the broad perspective, almost any narrative work can be considered allegory in some sense.

In this essay, I argue that the debate over the form of allegory is not revealing in a critical sense. The real issue relates to allegorical function. Functionally, allegory is more than mimicry and literary allusion. As a symbolic mode, allegory has a clear purpose to be instructive in its structure and intent. Frye (1957) suggests that most primary allegories, along with parables and fables, are educational moralities, stories designed to impart a fundamental message or moral beyond the surface of the text. I contend this characteristic extends to all levels of allegory. Throughout history, allegories have been created and shared with certain persuasive intentions (Madsen, 1994). Philip Rollinson (1981) observes that the classical understanding of allegory was based in “the non-philosophic tradition of finding hidden meaning... committed to the assumption that there are significant meanings in Homeric story and myth, whether such meanings appear to be there or not” (pp. 3–4). In other words, allegories help the reader to learn and understand a hidden meaning intentionally placed in the text by the allegorist. In this way, allegory functions to provide a meaning beyond the surface of the text. Generally, this meaning is seen as something that is transcendent and connected to ideological convictions, religion being the most common example. It is this larger message that separates allegory from other narratives in a functional sense. Thus, the primary function of allegory is that of persuasion or education. Allegories introduce cultural values and reinforce those values in the initiated. Even from a somewhat narrow formal perspective, fables and parables are often grouped with allegory as educational moralities, further supporting the educational function of allegory (Frye, 1957; Madsen, 1994).

In addition to a purely instructional function, allegory also serves to reconcile various myths with one another as well as to resolve inconsistencies between myths and secular realities. Madsen (1994) suggests that the ancient Greeks used allegory to circumvent inconsistencies in the mythic corpus and to “uncover the wisdom of the poets” (p. 31). Romantic stories that demonstrate mythic themes continue to be a vital means of translating core cultural values from generation to generation and of sharing those themes with other peoples (Longxi, 2005). For a modern audience this function continues to be important because it allows sacred stories to have enduring resonance by placing them in a modern context. In essence, the functions of allegory may be reduced to the transmission of cultural norms and societal values through innovative narrative. Allegorical narratives themselves are not necessarily enduring; they instead serve to ensure that cultural myths themselves are able to endure. *The Gospel according to* books, however, remain a puzzle. They clearly fulfill the function of allegory, but their form does not meet even the broadest definition of the category.
Transformative Discursive Allegory

Transformative Discursive Allegory is best understood as a rhetorical strategy or critical intervention that serves to extract allegorical themes from works of popular culture by relating them to a sacred or ideological referent. A key feature of traditional allegory is that the instructional function is an intentional element included by the author for the express purpose of introducing and reinforcing key cultural themes. As noted above, Frye (1957) argues that “genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone” (p. 54). In the case of those popular culture artifacts addressed by transformative discursive allegory, this intentionality is absent. Such works are neither allegorical in form nor do they function allegorically without additional interpretation. Transformative discursive allegory provides the necessary critical translation, acting as a reading guide that shows an audience how to find “hidden or sacred” meaning in a secular text.

While some scholars choose to describe allegory as a genre (Madsen, 1994; Rollinson, 1981), such a classification requires an interpretation of genre that is too broad to be useful for transformative discursive allegory. As a formal category, genre is best understood in the terms outlined by Campbell and Jamieson (1985) who define genre as “composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic” (p. 21, emphasis added). The focus on form is the key weakness when applying this definition to transformative discursive allegory, which lacks any unifying form that repeats across members. There is no precise form of transformative discursive allegory; rather transformative discursive allegory fulfills a rhetorical function by creating an allegorical relationship between a sacred text and a secular text. Transformative discursive allegory creates and defines a connection between a representative text from popular culture and referent that is connected to the sacred or an ideology. Authors of The Gospel according to series vary the arrangement of their texts with formats ranging from episodic to thematic; however, they all work toward the same end of connecting worldly entertainment with religious messages.

The repetition of similar goals found across examples of transformative discursive allegory suggests that it is more useful to concentrate on unifying purpose than rhetorical form. Such a focus indicates that it is best to understand transformative discursive allegory as a rhetorical strategy. It is “the means of persuasion” (Parrish, 2000, p. 42) or the rhetorical argument that establishes a specific relationship between the sacred and profane that defines transformative discursive allegory. This understanding allows the scholar to evaluate transformative discursive allegory for its effectiveness as an argument rather than adherence to a prescribed rhetorical form.

In order to establish the relationship between the sacred and the secular, a transformative discursive allegory must find and defend the points of intersection between texts that on the surface appear antithetical. This relationship therefore must be established through analogy or synecdoche. If an author or critic is able to point out a single plot point in the secular text that bears a resemblance to an element
of the sacred, he or she may be able to create an argument for a connection between the two. For example, one could find a scene of a character driving a nail into a fence and draw a connection to the crucifixion, which in turn implies the entire gospel story. The sacred story that is tapped into may be either a traditional religious narrative or a secular ideological story that is in some sense sacred for the people who tell it, such as Marxism or feminism.

In many respects, the synecdochal relationship suggested by transformative discursive allegory builds upon the analogy laid out by Burke (1970) in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, “between ‘words’ (lower case) and ‘The Word’ (in capitals)” (p. 11). Burke argues that there is an inherent transcendence in language that is “exemplified with thoroughness in the dialectics of theology” (p. 10). This transcendent quality suggests an ambiguity of meaning in language that can be used to support arguments for multiple layers of meaning in virtually any text. While Burke focuses on the ways in which this symbolic power of language can be examined in a secular and largely theoretical vein, critics focusing on transformative discursive allegory identify the connection with the sacred and extend the duality of meaning in language to larger elements of culture. The use of transformative discursive allegory establishes a connection between secular texts and sacred meaning.

In the case of the religious, the argument that the sacred permeates all elements of the world serves to strengthen the religious message. The holy is omnipresent and therefore infuses everything. For example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, echoing a belief held by most Christian denominations, argues “the desire for God is written in the human heart” (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994, §27). Further, it states that this desire drives a person to come to know God through the encounters with the created world, including the artistic creations of humanity (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994). Transformative discursive allegory’s key strength is in its ability to establish a connection to the sacred or ideological message within texts that on the surface appear antithetical to such a message.

In addition to strengthening adherence to the sacred, transformative discursive allegory also permits engagement with the seemingly profane. Tillich (1946) notes that a need to separate the sacred and the secular has been an increasingly persistent belief in Christianity since the First World War when cultural developments were perceived as a threat to religious hegemony. This belief, that by becoming too much a part of the world one loses one’s faith, is now pervasive in modern evangelical Christianity and is a large reason for the strong stance such groups take against seemingly innocuous cultural artifacts such as *The Simpsons*. In her book *Home Invasion: Protecting Your Family in a Culture that has Gone Stark Raving Mad*, Rebecca Hagelin (2005), a prominent member of the Heritage Foundation, attacks the secular for teaching “our children to rely on their own wisdom and judgment formed by endless hours of sexualized programming, situational ethics, and group thinking” (p. 8). For Hagelin and people like her, popular culture is an enemy that perverts truth and should therefore be avoided. However, it is also true that it is difficult and lonely to be the only one not taking part in secular society. One can also see this difficult balance in other conflicts between the pull of popular culture and
ideological convictions such as in the cultural censorship in modern communist China. A principle appeal of transformative discursive allegory is that it makes it possible for people with strong religious or ideological viewpoints to participate in the secular world.

Transformative discursive allegory clearly is not a traditional formal allegory nor is it simply analogy. It is instead an argument for a special relationship between the sacred and the profane that allows the secular to be read and experienced as an allegory for the sacred or ideological. Transformative discursive allegory can be identified and separated from both formal allegory and basic analogy by the presence of four key characteristics. First, transformative discursive allegory functions as a rhetorical strategy, a kind of critical intervention, rather than a rhetorical form. However, as a strategy, transformative discursive allegory does not take on the structural form of a narrative that one would expect in formal allegory. Second, transformative discursive allegory employs a comparative argument between the sacred or ideological and a specific artifact of popular culture that on the surface lacks sacred or ideological meaning. This comparative argument between the sacred or ideological and the profane is generally made through synecdoche or analogy. Third, transformative discursive allegory argues for the omnipresence of the holy or ideological in the secular world. Finally, transformative discursive allegory allows participation in the secular world without contamination by the profane. By examining texts through the lens of transformative discursive allegory, one can better understand how works such as The Gospel according to series function for their audience.

Transformative Discursive Allegory in The Gospel according to Book Series

Several key features define The Gospel according to book series and indicate the works function allegorically via transformative discursive allegory. First, all the works focus on a connection between a secular subject and a core biblical myth. All of the authors acknowledge that the works they are discussing were not written as biblical allegory and actually may appear antithetical to the gospel. The argument is then expanded to indicate that the lack of apparent biblical parallel is only on the surface, suggesting a deeper analysis will reveal parallels with the faith. The works are then reinterpreted to demonstrate the gospel message. Such efforts give readers of The Gospel according to books license to enjoy the original popular culture artifact because it has been shown to reinforce their core beliefs, rather than challenge them.

As established above, transformative discursive allegory is a rhetorical strategy that creates an argument for an allegorical relationship between a sacred or ideological text and a secular artifact. This purpose is made clear by Neal (2002) in her analysis of the Harry Potter book series when she asserts that since her conversion she has “endeavored to communicate the Bible message in fresh ways so that those who have never really heard it can apprehend it” (p. x). Neal (2002) further defends her strategy by asserting, “the method of using something familiar to the culture to relate unfamiliar spiritual truth has been used by Christians back to the time of Christ” (p. xi). Neal’s (2002) argument, that she is attempting to establish a relationship
between that which is culturally familiar and religious truth in order to reveal that truth, shows that she is consciously creating an allegorical relationship in order to achieve her rhetorical goals.

Evidence of such strategic intent can be seen in all the books of The Gospel according to series. McDowell (2007), in his book The Gospel according to Star Wars, concludes a brief discussion of general theological issues with the reflection that

This [theological problem] may all seem a long way from evaluating the SW [Star Wars] movies, but it is all important to indicate what features should guide our reflections and to encourage those who might otherwise reject this book outright to find ways of getting out of these movies as much theology as is possible. (p. xxi)

Pinsky (2001), author of The Gospel according to the Simpsons, argues that his book is meant as “a distillation, an interpretation and analysis of material about God, faith, and religion contained in the approximately 275 episodes of The Simpsons” (p. 13). McKee (2007), in The Gospel according to Science Fiction, presents his rhetorical intention “as an overview and a guide that explores a few exemplary cases. The goal is to give the reader a starting point for his or her own explorations into literature and theology” (p. xv). It is important to point out that none of the authors directly state the intention of transforming popular culture artifacts into a biblical allegory. However, by arguing that they intend to show how one can pull theological lessons from secular objects, they are clearly asserting an allegorical relationship between the sacred and the profane.

As a rhetorical strategy, transformative discursive allegory uses comparison in general and synecdoche in particular to establish an allegorical relationship between the sacred and the secular. The effort to demonstrate the presence of biblical parallels is especially clear in Neal’s book. Neal (2002) takes the Harry Potter books chapter by chapter, explicitly drawing out the connection between the key action and dominant themes within the fantasy series to comparable action within the gospels and similar themes in Christian teaching. For example, Neal observes that

In both Harry Potter’s story and the Christian story, the villains have the same aims. Professor Quirrell was a false teacher who came to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone, kill Harry, and destroy all that was good when Voldemort returned to power. However, those on the side of good set themselves against these aims. Jesus went on to say, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10b). (p. 34)

While the average reader might not immediately see a connection between the biblical themes of the fall and the redemption of Christ with Harry Potter’s fictional battle with a possessed teacher over a stone that can provide immortality, Neal (2002) draws it out, showing that one can find evidence of the biblical story in the children’s fantasy tale.

A key element to Neal’s (2002) argument is the separation she maintains between the fantasy world of Harry Potter and the truth of the Bible. Thus, while Harry Potter can serve as an allegorical reminder of the gospels, it is not a substitute for the
scripture. McDowell (2007), in *The Gospel according to Star Wars*, makes this argument even more directly. While McDowell asserts that “claims by Christians that Lucas’s creations are devilish or a form of New Age propaganda are ridiculous” (p. 19), he also asserts that the Force is not God or the divine but a plot device that encourages the audience to “begin asking questions about [the divine’s] existence” (p. 17). McDowell clearly distinguishes between “the Force,” a power in a fictional universe, and its parallel in the divine presence of God in the universe. He also acknowledges that an audience, particularly a skeptical one, can be encouraged to consider the value of such a belief by first considering it in the context of an appealing fictional narrative.

The dominant way that the analogy is made between the sacred and the profane is in synecdochal argument. Thus, it is not necessary that Pinsky (2001) creates an argument that *The Simpsons* is an inherently religious show nor does he need to focus only on those episodes that retell biblical narratives (there are episodes that reenact stories such as Exodus and Noah’s Ark). Instead, an author such as Pinsky may draw from a single plot thread to show a parallel to an element of the gospel story. This works for transformative discursive allegory in large part due to the fact the gospel is often accessed through synecdoche. That is to say, the faithful often perceive the whole gospel message from single biblical episodes. Thus, in *The Gospel according to books*, any biblical element that can be identified will in turn imply the full biblical message to an initiated reader. Symynkywicz (2008) puts this quite well when he concludes that “in opening our eyes to the movement of life all around us, the words of Bruce Springsteen can allow us to glimpse, just a little more plainly, the ministrations of the Spirit across the face of our world” (p. xv).

The third characteristic of transformative discursive allegory is the argument that the sacred or ideological permeates the world. Neal (2002) opens her book, *The Gospel according to Harry Potter*, with the disclaimer that her most basic motivation in writing the book is to “communicate the Bible message in fresh ways so that those who have never really heard it can apprehend it” (p. x). She acknowledges that many see the Harry Potter series as promoting the occult and that the author of the series, J. K. Rowling, has asserted that the series is meant to be a simple fantasy story and does not intentionally promote any major ideology, Christian or occult. Neal (2002) further acknowledges that people tend to find what they are looking for in books and that this is as true for parallels to the gospel as well as parallels to the occult. Neal (2002) does not pretend to offer a *correct* reading of the Harry Potter book series that *proves* that it is a biblical allegory but instead proposes an alternative reading that allows Christian readers to see “the parallels between the fantasy story told in the Harry Potter books and spiritual teachings and happenings in the Bible, declared to be true with regard to the real world” (p. xv, italics in original). Pinsky (2001) is equally defensive in *The Gospel according to the Simpsons*. After conceding that “nowhere was the initial uproar [against *The Simpsons* television program] louder than in America’s pulpits” (p. 5), Pinsky muses that “you can find God in the funniest places” and acknowledges that he has found “God, faith, and spirituality in abundance on *The Simpsons*” (p. 6). Nelson (2005) is less apologetic in *The Gospel*
according to Oprah, focusing on the many qualities in Oprah that demonstrate the divine and arguing that “[Oprah] translates what religions would term transcendent into something that is inspiring but secular” (p. xix). Similar themes dominate all the works in the series. The authors of these books do not pretend to believe that the popular artifacts under consideration deliberately parallel the Bible. Instead, they argue that the biblical story is so powerful that it permeates secular life and that it can be found in even “the funniest places.”

For example, Nelson (2005) takes her reader through a series of Oprah’s more endearing characteristics, transforming her into a living example of Christ’s earthly mission. Key to this argument is the idea that reminders of the biblical message occur throughout the secular world and connections to the scriptures abound. Wood (2003) highlights the sometimes less satisfying elements of this connection in his book *The Gospel according to Tolkien*. Wood suggests that Tolkien chose a less romantic ending for his Lord of the Ring Trilogy where “the Quest is completed not by Frodo the brave but by the greed-maddened Gollum as he bites the Ring off Frodo’s finger,” arguing that while a traditionally heroic “ending would have provided us with a traditional hero whom we could have exalted and claimed as one of our own, it would also have assured us that evil can be defeated by dint of human and hobbit effort” (p. 73). Such a conclusion is not acceptable because it runs counter to the core religious messages Wood assures us are to be found in Tolkien’s work. The allegory is not one in which Frodo plays the Christ role but one in which the core battle of the power of good over the coercive allure of evil plays out and humans escape only through the grace of a higher power.

Finally, transformative discursive allegory allows the audience to partake in popular culture without defiling themselves or feeling as though they have given in to vice. This is accomplished largely in the way *The Gospel according to Tolkien* books argue, for instructional purposes, in the constant presence of the divine. This is an important feature, as many of the works addressed in this series have been perceived as threats to the faith. Neal’s (2002) *The Gospel according to Harry Potter* is a prime example. According to the American Library Association (2008), J. K. Rowling, author of Harry Potter book series, was among the top ten most challenged authors (in terms of attempts to censor or ban her work) from 1990–2004. Most of these challenges came from individuals concerned that the Harry Potter book series would inculcate youth into the world of the occult and therefore constitute a threat to traditional Christianity. At the same time, the Harry Potter series was a phenomenal success, with each book in the series finding its way to the bestsellers list and a multi-billion dollar enterprise developed around the books, including movies, video games, clothing, and toys. Given the popularity of the series, it is reasonable to assume that people, especially children, would want to read these books. Neal (2002) creates the argument that allows for such participation by changing the way one looks at the Harry Potter Books, concluding that “surprisingly, Harry Potter has more useful parallels to the gospel than almost any other piece of literature I have seen in decades” (p. xi). The implied argument here is that if one can find parallels to the Christian narrative, then a work such as Harry Potter is no longer a threat and one can safely
read the books and watch the movies without fear of the occult or separating oneself from the Christian faith.

Just as traditional formal allegory often functions to create a connection between an enjoyable secular story and a core myth central to how a member of a society is expected to live, one finds similar instructive content in the discourses of The Gospel according to books. In this case, the allegorical function is achieved through transformative discursive allegory rather than formal similarities. This is especially clear in the books that discuss how spiritual themes are exemplified in the seemingly mundane actions of the popular characters that exist in a purely narrative realm such as The Simpsons. Pinsky (2001) evaluates how a variety of spiritual themes play out in the Simpson home, observing, for example, how the Simpson family prays before every meal and concludes that prayers are not always the most reverent but are a genuine reflection of how many of us truly act. Pinsky also argues that The Simpsons are spiritually instructive not because they are shining examples of the faithful but because they are human examples of the faithful. They have the same shortcomings and face the same pitfalls as those of us living in the real world. However, as an animated creation they also provide an opportunity to examine how we measure up in a safe and distanced reflection.

Fletcher (1964) observes that allegory “suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting given interpretation” (p. 7). In the case of The Simpsons, the “doubleness of intention” is added through the interpretation of Pinsky’s (2001) reading rather by the show’s writers. It is through arguments about how The Simpsons reflect the reality of the gospel in contrast to its intentions that Pinsky is able to make the leap transforming The Simpsons into a gospel allegory. For example, Pinsky examines how temptations for marital infidelity are treated in the series by looking at three cases where a major character was provided the temptation and opportunity to be unfaithful concluding that

These three temptations of adultery, though exaggerated to be sure, nevertheless together embody familiar situations that provoke infidelity in the non-cartoon world. In each case, the sanctity of the marriage vow is tested fundamentally—and preserved. Another victory for traditional family values. (p. 111)

Additionally, it is a victory for the seventh commandment “Thou shall not commit adultery.” Thus, Pinsky is able to argue that episodes of The Simpsons function as biblical fables that instruct the viewer how to properly and realistically respond to the temptations that may come one’s way. The stories in The Simpsons are shown to demonstrate how one is to go about addressing the trials and tribulations of living the gospel in a secular world much the same way biblical parables demonstrated how one was to live as the Chosen people in an occupied territory. In so doing, Pinsky and the other authors in the series make works of popular culture accessible to the faithful.

Overall, The Gospel according to book series provides an excellent example of how an author can re-read a text to create an allegory for strategic purposes. More
specifically, *The Gospel according to* books provide an example of the four key characteristics of transformative discursive allegory. Through these characteristics, *The Gospel according to* books create allegory where it did not previously exist in order to advance an argument and to maintain an ideology through strategic rhetoric.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between religion and popular culture is one of increasing importance as religion, especially conservative Evangelicalism, becomes increasingly entangled in social policy, while popular culture continues to test the limits of what can be accepted in what used to be called “polite” society. While there are numerous pop culture artifacts created by and for those who profess a strong religious conviction such as the *Left Behind* book series and Christian music in every genre from easy listening to rap, the reality is that much of popular culture remains within the realm of the profane. Further, books such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* are significantly more popular than religious literature in terms of sales and critical ratings (e.g., the *New York Times* bestseller lists, Amazon.com’s top sellers, and book awards). Bruce Springsteen is far more popular than Christian pop star Amy Grant. There is no evidence that *Davey and Goliath* or *VeggieTales* will surpass the popularity of *The Simpsons*. The appeal of popular culture is strong but so are the religious convictions of those for whom *The Gospel according to* book series is most popular.

Transformative discursive allegory helps to explain how members of ideological movements, evangelical Christians in the examples considered in this critique, have adapted and co-opted popular culture artifacts and shifted the way in which these artifacts are viewed so that committed individuals may enjoy them without betraying their core convictions. Examples of such efforts go beyond religion and WJK’s *The Gospel according to* series. Transformative discursive allegory may also be able to explain works such as Open Court Publishing’s series *Philosophy and Popular Culture*, which pairs major philosophical theories with popular culture artifacts and John M. Barry’s use of extended metaphor in his book *Politics, Football, and Other Blood Sports* to name just a few possibilities beyond the religious milieu.

In this essay, I argue that the works of WJK’s *The Gospel according to* book series are an example of a unique rhetorical form that I call transformative discursive allegory. I assert that transformative discursive allegory represents a rhetorical strategy in which a rhetor critically interprets a text that is not formally allegorical as an allegory, thus allowing the ideologically convicted to participate in profane popular culture without violation of their ideals. Transformative discursive allegory represents an instructive tool for understanding the sometimes strained relationship between the sacred and the profane in modern society.

**References**


