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Teaching Oz in Religious Studies – Part I

Carol B. Duncan, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

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The Mythos of Oz

This year, 2024, marks two milestones of Oz, an American mythos based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In the first instance, it is the eighty-fifth anniversary of the MGM movie musical *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and in the second, the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of the musical theatre production, *The Wiz*. Beginning in 1974, *The Wiz* toured in selected cities in the US before its groundbreaking promotional television advertisement and premiere on Broadway in 1975. It went on to commercial and critical success winning multiple awards. Significantly, a reboot of *The Wiz* began touring in the fall of 2023, originating at the Hippodrome Theatre in Baltimore, where its life as a stage show began in 1974. It will return this spring, 2024, on Broadway. Such is the power and endurance of the mythos of Oz that 124 years after Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion set off to "follow the yellow brick road" in search of the Wizard of Oz, audiences are willing to "ease on the down the road," in a reboot of *The Wiz*.

I was first introduced to Oz as a recently arrived immigrant child from the Caribbean in the 1970s. Classmates in my elementary school in Toronto told me, and other newly immigrated children, that *The Wizard of Oz* would be televised. Before the advent of cable television, streaming services, and the Internet, the viewing of the 1939 MGM musical starring Judy

Garland as Dorothy Gale was regarded as a yearly ritual amongst my childhood friend group. Reading L. Frank Baum's books followed after viewing the 1939 film. This was my first introduction to the world of Oz, and the story of Dorothy's mythic journey, as something other than casual viewing for entertainment. Unbeknownst to me and my playground friends, the viewing on television and its discussion and reenactment at recess the next day was part and parcel of a ritual of retelling and performance in which the story became our own.

We were thrilled when *The Wizard of Oz* was chosen as our school's musical play in the mid-1970s. Cast as Dorothy, sixth-grade me saw more than a glimmer of my own story of uprootedness, as a recent immigrant from the Caribbean to Toronto, in Dorothy's plight as a stranger in a strange land trying to find her way home. The messages of empowerment, good overcoming evil, strength in the company of friends who are with you on a long and challenging journey, and help from wise, good, and powerful beings like Glinda, were comforting. While we learned iconic songs from the 1939 movie like "Over the Rainbow," and "Follow the Yellow Brick Road," we also heard references to Oz in the rock group Toto's "Tinman," and Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road." Significant, too, was the popularity of an adaptation of the myth of Oz in the Broadway musical, *The Wiz*, and its film adaptation in 1978. These were among the first broader popular cultural references to the myth of Oz.

Decades later, in January 2000, I introduced an undergraduate course, "Religion and Popular Culture," at Wilfrid Laurier University. In designing the course, I returned to my earlier fascination with the mythos of Oz. This time, through the lenses of religious studies and cultural studies, I viewed Oz as mythos – recognizable in its symbols and storylines yet malleable enough to be reinterpreted from multiple vantage points. In teaching that course, I was able to focus on broader themes of mythmaking and American civil religion through exploring Oz as a kind of urtext of American popular culture, visible in multiple movie and theatrical productions since its initial introduction as a novel by L. Frank Baum. Oz was both a mythical landscape of terror, wonder, and possibilities as expressed in numerous theatrical and film productions and popular songs, and a secular sacred text of the United States. Its endurance is enabled by the malleability of meaning attributed to its symbols.

L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was the first in a series of books. The children's book, featuring its story of young Dorothy Gale living with her aunt and uncle on a Kansas farm who gets whisked away by a cyclone to the magical land of Oz, has become a touchstone of American fantasy literature. There are nods to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. These books feature young girls who are whisked away to other landscapes beyond the mundane and everydayness of their daily lives. They must endure trials during their journeys and eventually return wiser and stronger in some way. Oz is revealed to be a carnivalesque huckster hiding behind gimmickry. "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," says Oz, as Toto, Dorothy's animal companion, pulls the curtain to reveal his fraud.

Baum's narrative uses fairytale elements evident in the British late-nineteenth-century children's literature genre but places them in a specifically American landscape – the Midwest and the state of Kansas. The element which pulls Dorothy to another world is drawn from the

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midwestern landscape itself – a cyclone which whisks her up and out of the farm and Kansas. From there, Dorothy's adventures begin with her landing on and killing the Wicked Witch of the East and acquiring the magical shoes coveted by the witch's sister, the Wicked Witch of the West (they are silver in the book but red in the film). She confronts her adversary, the witch's sister, and begins her journey. Dorothy does not realize that she has had the power to return home all along because of the magical properties of the shoes. Her companions – the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion – who accompany her to meet the purportedly all-powerful Wizard of Oz also have desires which they hope that Oz can fulfill. The friends eventually discover that what they desired was within them all along. It is that quality of self-discovery and empowerment from within which, arguably, is the source of the power of the myth of Oz. This emphasis on empowerment from within resonates with notions of self-mastery and/as self-discovery which are key elements of the American Dream when articulated as the perfectibility of the individual self in the best of all possible worlds.

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