

‘That Man Behind the Curtain’: Atheism and Belief in *The Wizard of Oz*¹

Justin Remes²

While there is a significant body of scholarship on Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the film’s radical religious skepticism is generally either downplayed or entirely overlooked. I am certainly not the first to note the atheistic undertones of *The Wizard of Oz*; however, the topic has received remarkably little scholarly attention.³ I wish to suggest that *Oz* is a thoroughly iconoclastic and materialist film, one that seeks to undermine supernatural beliefs of all kinds. Further, the film interrogates the nature of faith in a way that anticipates modern epistemological theories from philosophers such as Daniel Dennett and Slavoj Žižek. For Dennett, when belief itself is challenged in the modern era, ‘belief in belief’ arises as the predominant defensive posture. Along similar lines, Žižek suggests that since our culture cannot fully jettison belief, it has embraced a belief deprived of its essential qualities, a kind of ‘decaffeinated belief’. *The Wizard of Oz* embodies these epistemologies. In the wake of modernism, the film reflects the spirit of a society whose faith in the supernatural has been shaken, but who cannot yet overcome the need for belief.

Many have noted the absence of religion in *Oz*. For example, James McLachlan calls the film ‘the great secular and democratic fairy tale’ (2008, 136). Further, in Salman Rushdie’s monograph on the film, he states, ‘One of the most striking aspects of the world-view of *The Wizard of Oz* is its joyful and almost complete secularism (...) [T]he film is breezily godless’ (1992, 12). While McLachlan and Rushdie are correct to point out that *Oz* is *areligious*, they do not seem to fully appreciate just how *irreligious* it is as well. In other words, the film is not merely indifferent to religious faith, but is in fact interested in subverting such faith. David C. Downing demonstrates an understanding of this: he calls the film ‘one of the most devastating exposes of institutional religion ever to reach the screen’ (1984, 28). But this still does not go far enough. Even L. Frank Baum’s original children’s story, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), presents challenges to organized religion, yet it does not embrace the materialism and atheism that is so central to the MGM film. It will be useful to begin with an analysis of

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² Oakland University: remeseln@oakland.edu

³ For example, there is an essay by Kevin Courcey in the *Willamette Freethinker* (2008) entitled ‘The Wizard of Oz as the Ultimate Atheist Metaphor’, and there is also a secularist blog run by someone with the moniker Oz Atheist [<http://ozatheist.wordpress.com/>]. Additionally, a Listmania! list on Amazon.com (posted by S.A. Hanson) is entitled ‘Atheism for Kids,’ and *The Wizard of Oz* is the first of ten films suggested.

Baum's text, since it lays the foundation for the skepticism of Fleming's film. I will argue that Baum uses his story to critique organized religion, as well as anthropomorphic deities, but I will also suggest that it would be wrong to call the book materialistic or atheistic. The realm of the spiritual and the supernatural is alive and well in Baum's text, and recognizing this is crucial in understanding the more radical message of the MGM musical.

L. Frank Baum and Religion

There can little be doubt that the Wizard in Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a thinly veiled reference to the anthropomorphic Judaeo-Christian deity. For example, one of the book's characters, a man with an injured leg, confesses, 'I have never been permitted to see the Great Oz, nor do I know of any living person who has seen him' (Hearn 2000, 165). This is evocative of 1 John 4:12: 'No man hath seen God at any time' (King James Version). Shortly thereafter, the same injured man says, '[E]ven those who wait upon [Oz] do not see him face to face' (Hearn 2000, 165). This is clearly an allusion to Exodus 33:20, where God tells Moses, 'Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.' The injured man also proclaims, in the same passage, that Oz 'can take on any form he wishes' (Hearn 2000, 165). As Michael Patrick Hearn points out, 'God has appeared in different ways to different people throughout history, including bird, elephant, and cat. The word 'Oz' could be replaced by 'God' without falsifying the statements expressed here' (2000, 166).

In fact, the injured man does not simply say that Oz can change forms; he goes so far as to say that 'Oz can do anything' (Hearn 2000, 167). This again mirrors the biblical God, who is generally understood as omnipotent: 'With God all things are possible' (Matt. 19:26). And the parallels between Oz and God are never more salient than when Oz himself speaks: 'I am everywhere [...] but to the eyes of common mortals I am invisible' (Hearn 2000, 258). This passage not only evokes the common conception of God as omnipresent, but it also suggests that Oz (like God) is immortal.

To further reinforce my claim that Baum equates Oz with the biblical God, it is worth considering some of the language that Baum uses to describe the Emerald City, where Oz resides. A little man refers to the 'brightness and glory of the Emerald City' (Hearn 2000, 171); it is also described as a place where 'everyone seemed happy and contented and prosperous' (Hearn 2000, 177). All of this language is evocative of the Christian conception of heaven. Even the fact that the city is filled with emeralds is biblically resonant; in the book of Revelation, the throne of God is described this way: '[T]here was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald' (Rev. 4:3). And emerald is one of the precious

stones that makes up the foundations of the wall surrounding New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:19).⁴

Of course, as the book reaches its conclusion, it becomes apparent that Oz does not really exist. Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Lion must find what they desire on their own; there is no Lacanian big Other to answer their prayers. Oz is merely the convenient fiction of an old ‘humbug,’ who turns out to be ‘a very good man,’ but ‘a very bad Wizard’ (Hearn 2000, 261 & 270). Baum here asserts that the biblical God, like the Wizard, does not exist. But he also suggests that religious leaders are not necessarily evil in their deception; they are often ‘very good’ people who simply cannot deliver on their supernatural promises.

Such a reading of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* becomes even more plausible when one considers Baum’s own personal views on religion. According to Hearn, ‘[Baum’s] mother was a devout conservative Christian whose faith he often tested, and he rejected early this form of Christianity (...) Baum was both curious and skeptical about religion’ (2000, xciv). Hearn also notes that Baum ‘could not fathom the idea of a wrathful godhead,’ and this is clearly the conception of God which he is most eager to subvert in his first Oz book (2000, xciv). For example, at one point the little man outside the Emerald City warns, ‘[Oz] might be angry and destroy you all in an instant’ (Hearn 2000, 170). Such rhetoric clearly satirizes the vengeful Yahweh of the Old Testament, who floods the earth, rains fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, and visits deadly plagues upon the Egyptians. Given Baum’s own skepticism, it is not surprising that ‘[t]he few references to religion in his books [...] are unfavorable’ (Hearn 2000, xciv).⁵

In spite of Baum’s opposition to traditional Christianity, he never goes so far as to advocate atheism. As a Theosophist, he believes in the divine, even though, in his own words, his God is ‘not necessarily a personal God’ (quoted in Hearn 2000, xciii). Instead, Baum asserts, ‘God is Nature, and Nature God’ (quoted in Hearn 2000, xcii). Beyond believing in God (albeit an abstract, depersonalized god), Baum also puts faith in spiritualism. He admits to believing in ‘invisible and vapory beings [...] known as Elementals,’ and as Hearn notes, Baum and his wife ‘held séances in their home and entertained clairvoyants’ (2000, xci & xc). This is worth remembering when reading Baum’s original *Oz* book. Even though the

⁴ For additional parallels between Baum’s Wizard and the Judaeo-Christian God, see Coleman (1980, 18-20).

⁵ As a result of the apparently irreligious content of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the book has offended certain Christian fundamentalists. For example, in 1986 there was a court case in Tennessee (*Mozert v. Hawkins County Public Schools*) in which seven Christian families took issue with many of the purportedly unchristian books that their children were being asked to read at school. Baum’s text was one of the offenders, not only because it featured a good witch, but also because it taught that virtue comes from within (rather than from God). The families successfully argued that their children should be permitted to read alternate texts that did not offend their religious sensibilities (see Wood 1987, 7-17).

anthropomorphic deity of Oz is exposed as illusory, Oz itself is still real, as are its myriad otherworldly wonders (such as magic words, witches, and Winkies). Baum critiques the facile conceptions of God that have been promoted by most organized religions, but he still leaves room for the spiritual and the supernatural. There are magic tricks in Baum's text, but there is real magic too.

The Materialism of Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*

This changes dramatically in Victor Fleming's 1939 film. Like Baum, the film is deeply skeptical about the claims of organized religion. But unlike Baum, the film extends this skepticism to any and all claims of the spiritual or supernatural. In spite of this, as Hearn notes, Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* has often received favorable responses from the devout: The Vatican has placed *Oz* on its list of the forty five best films, and Ray Bolger (who played the Scarecrow) authored an essay called 'A Lesson from Oz', in which he offered a Christian reading of the film (Hearn 2000, 42). Of course, like all great myths, *Oz* has a Rorschach-like quality that permits a wide range of interpretations. Nonetheless, the existence of several 'spiritual' readings of *Oz* necessitates a defense of my claim that it is a materialist film.

It will be useful to begin with a consideration of one the most fundamental changes made in Victor Fleming's 1939 film version of *Oz*. In the film, it is not merely the wizard himself who is illusory; the entire land of Oz is exposed as nothing more than Dorothy's dream. This textual alteration has garnered its fair share of criticism, particularly from Rushdie, who calls it a 'hoary, creaking cliché' (1992, 30). For Rushdie:

[T]his device—the knocking out of Dorothy—is the most radical and in some ways the worst of all the changes wrought in Frank Baum's original conception. For in the book *there is no question that Oz is real*, that it is a place of the same order, though not of the same type, as Kansas. The film, like the TV soap opera *Dallas*, introduces an element of bad faith when it permits the possibility that everything is a dream. (1992, 30; original emphasis)

Rushdie is correct to call this change 'radical', but he is wrong to dismiss it as a mere cliché. The new ending is a central part of the film's message. Unlike Baum's book, Fleming's film wants to do more than simply dismiss traditional gods as illusory. The film seeks to dismantle all supernatural beliefs, and so it becomes absolutely essential that Oz is not a real place, that it is nothing more than a fantasy in Dorothy's mind. Dorothy's famous line—'I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore'—should not be seen as a humorous understatement, but as a fallacy. Dorothy and Toto *are* still in Kansas, so she should be skeptical of her 'feeling' that she is in an otherworldly or supernatural realm. Downing's interpretation is cogent:

‘This, then, is the central thesis of the film: that the metaphysical realm posited by religious devotees is nothing more than a projection of the physical realm, a place in which psychic deficiencies may be remedied and hidden longings may be fulfilled’ (1984, 28). Rushdie may see this as a kind of ‘bad faith’, but to eliminate this component of the film would completely undermine its materialist message. The demystification provided at the end of the film thus becomes more absolute, uncompromising, and atheistic than the one in Baum’s original book.

Such materialism pervades *The Wizard of Oz*. For example, when Judy Garland’s Dorothy sings ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow’, she is giving voice to a spiritual longing, a desire to be in heaven: a place that is ‘far, far away,’ ‘where there isn’t any trouble.’ It is again worth remembering the biblical significance of the rainbow: it is a peace offering from God, when He decides never again to punish humans with a global flood (Gen. 9:13), and it appears twice in the book of Revelation, in passages describing heaven (Rev. 4:3, 10:1). Of course, as the film makes clear, there is no place ‘over the rainbow’; there is only our earthly home. And ‘there’s no place like home,’ as Dorothy says; the implication is that we should not seek a place *like* earth (only better) in some supernatural realm, since no such place exists. After all, when Dorothy *believes* she is in the heavenly Oz, she is not contented, but spends all of her time trying to go back to Kansas.

There is another sequence in the film that is not in Baum’s original text, and it too points towards a deep suspicion of spiritualism. Before her dream begins, Dorothy encounters a fortune-teller named Professor Marvel, played by Frank Morgan (who also plays the titular wizard, along with several other characters). He tells her, ‘You’d better close your eyes,’ and he uses this opportunity to glance at a photo of Dorothy with her Aunt Em. He then uses the limited information garnered from the photo (along with his skillful cold reading techniques) to convince Dorothy that she should return home. While he is good-hearted (like his wizardly counterpart in Oz), he clearly is a charlatan, someone who does not have the powers he claims to have. As happens again and again throughout the film, this scene subverts the claims of spiritualism.

Unlike Baum, Fleming did not appear to be religious or spiritual in any sense, and *The Wizard of Oz* may very well represent his hard-headed materialist vision. Several caveats should be offered here, however. First of all, Fleming’s own views on spirituality are not easy to discern. His films rarely deal directly with religion, and when they do (as in his final film, *Joan of Arc* [1948]), the director’s personal proclivities are not transparent. Michael Sragow’s recent Fleming biography is detailed and well researched, but there is very little information on Fleming’s relationship to religion

(2008).⁶ Aljean Harmetz briefly notes that Fleming ‘had no apparent religion,’ but her use of the modifier ‘apparent’ suggests that there is room for doubt on this subject (1984, 147). Regardless of Fleming’s personal views, however, it should be remembered that even though Fleming is credited as the director, several other filmmakers (George Cukor, Richard Thorpe, and King Vidor) also contributed their talents. And this is not to mention the several elements in the film that come from various screenwriters, songwriters, producers, etc. Here I must concur with Rushdie—who calls *The Wizard of Oz* an ‘authorless text’ (1992, 16)—one which (perhaps unintentionally) argues that life itself is an authorless text.

Oz and Belief

Oz makes a case for materialism and rationality, but it remains quite nuanced in its views on religious beliefs. It does not merely denounce faith as a childish delusion; rather, it demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the psychology and power of faith. In particular, several scenes in the film demonstrate the centrality of what philosopher Daniel Dennett has called ‘belief in belief’ (2006, 200).⁷ Dennett persuasively argues that many in the modern secular age no longer really believe in the metaphysical claims of religion, but they do not feel comfortable jettisoning these beliefs. They cannot simply say, for example, ‘I do not believe in God’; instead, they feel the need to continually redefine the word ‘God’ so that they can still profess some kind of belief. This, Dennett suggests, results in a move ‘away from concrete anthropomorphisms to ever more abstract and depersonalized concepts’ (2006, 205).⁸

Belief in belief is the central epistemological stance in *Oz*. Consider, for example, the scene in which Dorothy meets the Scarecrow. Their conversation reveals that they have doubts as to whether or not the Wizard is really going to help them. When the Scarecrow asks if the Wizard will

⁶ Sragow does briefly suggest that several of Fleming’s films foreground themes of ‘Christian salvation,’ although the implications of this are never fleshed out (Sragow 2008, 241). Sragow’s biography also points out that Fleming sent his daughters to Sunday school, even though he was ‘not a churchgoer himself’ (Sragow 2008, 387).

⁷ I would argue that ‘belief in belief’ is closely tied to early Christian tradition. The Old Testament does not emphasize the importance of belief nearly as much as the New Testament does; in fact, in the Old Testament, belief is often seen as a vice: ‘The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going’ (Prov. 14:15). By contrast, the concept of belief is ubiquitous in the Greek scriptures, and it is almost always seen as a virtue. Consider Jesus’s words in Mark 9:23: ‘If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.’ Notice that Jesus does not claim that one should believe in certain things because they are true; rather, he points to the pragmatic benefits of belief itself. Additionally, in the New Testament, belief becomes the *sine qua non* of salvation. Jesus states, ‘[I]f ye believe not that I am he [the Son of God], ye shall die in your sins’ (John 8:24).

⁸ One might think, for example, of the apparent pantheism of L. Frank Baum, who equated God with nature. What would it even mean to disbelieve in this kind of god? Any debate about the existence of a pantheistic god would seem to rely more on semantics than metaphysics.

give him brains, Dorothy responds, 'I couldn't say,' but she adds, 'Even if he didn't, you'd be no worse off than you are now.' Even though she does not fully believe in the Wizard's power to help the Scarecrow, she suggests that the Scarecrow should still put faith in the Wizard, that he should still follow her to the Emerald City *as if* he knew the Wizard was real. Dorothy's sentiment is analogous to Pascal's wager. For Blaise Pascal, belief in God is a wager worth making, since 'if you win you win everything, if you lose you lose nothing' (1995, 123). Dorothy and the Scarecrow decide to make the wager and believe in the Wizard, just in case.⁹

Consider also the scene in the haunted forest. Since the film will eventually expose the entire experience as a dream, there is no reason why it cannot indulge in supernatural conceits in the meantime, and it does so by suggesting the (quasi-)existence of spooks. In the forest, the Straw Man asserts, 'I believe there's [sic] spooks around,' to which the Tin Man replies, with characteristic skepticism, 'That's ridiculous! Spooks! That's silly!' The lion, frightened, asks the Tin Man, 'But don't you believe in spooks?' As soon as the Tin Man says 'No,' he is whisked up in the air and dropped to the ground, presumably by a spook. This prompts the Lion to chant, almost ritualistically, 'I do believe in spooks! I do believe in spooks! I do, I do, I do...' The Tin Man has presumably been punished for his lack of belief, and so the Lion must assert his belief with unusual force. If he had no doubts about the existence of spooks, there would be no reason to protest so much. But it is the Lion's very lack of belief that necessitates his belief in belief: he believes that he *should* believe in spooks (and express such belief), even if he does not fully accept their existence. Still, the Scarecrow and the Lion are never whisked away by spooks, which again suggests the film's ambivalence towards faith. Belief in the supernatural realm may be a delusion, but expressing these beliefs brings comfort, reassurance, and (ultimately) stability.

But nowhere is the concept of belief in belief more evident than in the meeting with Oz himself. Again, as in Baum's book, doubts about the Wizard's existence are foregrounded well before his eventual exposure as a charlatan. (For example, when told by a gatekeeper that 'no one has ever seen the great Oz,' Dorothy bluntly asks, 'Well then, how do you know there is one?' There is no answer to this question.) But remarkably, even after the Wizard is exposed as a humbug, the protagonists still put faith in

⁹ Interestingly, Dorothy's faith appears to have strengthened by the time she speaks with the Tin Man. When he questions whether or not the Wizard will really give him a heart, Dorothy responds naively, 'Oh, but he will. He must. We've come such a long way already.' The Tin Man seems understandably unconvinced by this non sequitur, but he is interrupted by the Wicked Witch before being able to voice any skepticism. What is crucial here is the fact that Dorothy is unable to express any logical reason for believing in the Wizard's power; she simply claims that she has offered evidence of her own belief (by coming 'such a long way') and that this should be sufficient.

him. When Toto pulls the curtain to reveal that Oz is not an omnipotent deity, but merely a small old man putting on a show, the so-called wizard cries into the loudspeaker, 'Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!' On the surface, the line is a pathetic attempt by Oz to mask the obvious truth that he is a fraud. But what is often overlooked is the fact that Dorothy and her friends *listen* to this apparently absurd advice: that is, they clearly *do* overlook the fact that the wizard is simply a man behind a curtain, since they continue to demand that he grant their wishes, even after it becomes clear that he is incapable of doing so. After all, when the man admits that *he* is the one behind the smoke and mirrors of the great Oz, Dorothy's immediate response is 'I don't believe you.' She tries to maintain her belief in the wizard even when the evidence against it is overwhelming. And she is not alone. Her companions clearly feel the same way, since they are not outraged at the powerless trinkets he gives them (a fake degree in 'thinkology', a medal of courage, and a ticking clock shaped like a heart); instead, they express gratitude for these gifts.

How can this be explained? It is best understood in the context of a famous story about Niels Bohr, the Nobel prize-winning physicist. There are several versions of the story with superficial differences, but Slavoj Žižek's telling is particularly instructive:

Niels Bohr [...] provided the perfect example of the way that such a fetishist disavowal of belief works in ideology: seeing a horseshoe on his door, the surprised visitor said that he isn't superstitious and doesn't believe that such things bring luck, to which Bohr snapped: 'I don't believe in it either; I keep it there because I was told that it works even if one doesn't believe in it!' What this paradox renders clearly is the way belief is a reflexive attitude: it is never a case of just believing, one has to believe in belief itself. (Žižek 2007, 306)¹⁰

Is this not precisely the attitude that the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion have toward Oz? They cannot *really* believe in Oz's powers; after all, he has admitted that he is 'a very bad Wizard.' But they still believe in belief. They still believe that Oz's cheap trinkets might work even if they do not really believe in them.

What we are left with, then, is not only a belief *in* belief, but also a kind of belief *without* belief. In other words, belief as such is dead, but its specter lives on. Belief is still professed, but all that remains is a semblance or trace of the original conviction.¹¹ Again, Žižek provides a useful formulation:

¹⁰ For a slightly different version of the story, see Pinker (2007, 331). The existence of several different versions of this anecdote might cast some doubt on its veracity, but don't worry: the story works even if one doesn't believe in it.

¹¹ The fact that it is possible for belief to be simultaneously absent and present has been noted by many philosophers. Derrida, for example, sees belief without belief as a critical

We no longer ‘really believe,’ we just follow (some of the) religious rituals and mores as part of the respect for the ‘life-style’ of the community to which we belong (recall the proverbial non-believing Jew who obeys kosher rules ‘out of respect for tradition’). ‘I do not really believe in it, it is just part of my culture’ effectively seems to be the predominant mode of the disavowed/displaced belief characteristic of our times. [...] On today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. [...] Along the same lines, what the Politically Correct tolerance is giving us is a decaffeinated belief: a belief which does not hurt anyone and does not fully commit even ourselves. (Žižek 2004, paras 5 – 7)

This decaffeinated belief—this belief without belief—is everywhere in *The Wizard of Oz*, even in the film’s conclusion. When Dorothy finds herself back in Kansas, she tries to tell her family about her voyage, but Aunt Em silences her, saying, ‘You just had a bad dream.’ Dorothy replies, ‘But it wasn’t a dream. It was a place.’ When she tells the farmhands and Professor Marvel that they were all there, they laugh. Aunt Em tries once more to convince Dorothy that she has been dreaming, but Dorothy protests: ‘No, Aunt Em. This was a real, truly live place.’ As she continues to describe her experience, she is again met with laughter. But when she indignantly asks the central question—‘Doesn’t anybody believe me?’—Uncle Henry responds by saying, ‘Of course we believe you, Dorothy.’ Her family and friends offer a kind of ‘decaffeinated belief’. They do not really believe her, of course, but they do not wish to shake her faith. Believing in belief, they allow her to maintain her delusional inner conviction that Oz is real.

It is worth noting that ‘decaffeinated belief’ has likely been around as long as belief itself; similarly, belief in abstract (rather than anthropomorphic) deities certainly pre-dates the modern era. (One thinks of the connection made between God and the Word in the opening verse of John, for example; or later, Spinoza’s move toward a kind of pantheism.) Nevertheless, Žižek and Dennett are correct to suggest that various forms of diluted belief have taken on special force in modern times. It has been difficult for many (particularly in the especially religious United States) to come to terms with the serious challenges to the supernatural offered by Darwin, Marx, and Freud. When Hegel and Nietzsche declared the death of God, believers scrambled to put God on life support, re-defining ‘God’ in abstract ways to make belief seem more defensible. Few intellectuals could still argue for traditional conceptions of God in the post-Darwin era (for example, God as a divine watchmaker, pace William Paley), but belief itself

element in cinematic spectatorship: ‘[E]ven though I know that it’s all “fictitious” or “imaginary,” I am still caught up, moved, I identify, “I believe in it,” etc. Without believing, I believe’ (2001, 86).

refused to become extinct; God mutated into more arcane, abstract notions in order to survive the skeptical spirit of modernism. It is this simultaneous loss of belief *and* maintenance of belief in the modern era that is captured perfectly in Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*.

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