

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/3/8/17090084/a-wrinkle-in-time-faith-christianity-movie-madeleine-lengle/>

COPIED OFF INTERNET on 3-21-2023 re Facebook post

Madeleine L'Engle's Christianity was vital to *A Wrinkle in Time*

The new Disney movie has excised L'Engle's faith.

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This week, an adaptation of one of the most banned children's books of all time, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, will hit movie theaters nationwide. The story follows Meg Murry, a [moody but brilliant young girl](#) who travels to another planet under the auspices of three mysterious supernatural beings to save both her long-lost physicist father and, later, her prodigy baby brother Charles Wallace.

While the big-budget, [Ava DuVernay-directed film](#) will probably not prove as controversial as the 1963 book, that may be because of the decision to avoid religious undertones. But *A Wrinkle in Time*'s use of religious themes made it both controversial and one of the most thought-provoking children's stories in modern fiction. A recent interview with Jennifer Lee, the film's screenwriter, suggests that the religious angle of *A Wrinkle in Time* will be [largely excised](#). "I think there are a lot of elements of what [L'Engle] wrote that we have progressed on as a society," Lee told an interviewer who asked about the faith element of the book, "and we can move on to the other elements."

It would, however, be a shame to lose it. L'Engle's distinctively Episcopalian theological approach is what makes *A Wrinkle in Time* so challenging — and so rich.

Conservative Christians have seen *Wrinkle* as "demonic"

Much of the opposition to *Wrinkle* and its sequels comes from conservative Christians, who see *A Wrinkle in Time* as promoting witchcraft or demons and "undermining [Christian] religious beliefs." According to the American Library Association, *A Wrinkle in Time* has consistently scored high in its ["top 100 banned books"](#) rankings alongside such other controversial YA novels as Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and the *Harry Potter* series in being banned from several public schools.

Much of the controversy around *A Wrinkle in Time* centers on one particular passage in the text. The mysterious Mrs. Who (who, alongside Mrs. Which and Mrs. Whatsit, serves as Meg and Charles's guide and protector) explains to Meg and her love interest, Calvin, that a number of important figures in human history have already made significant contributions in fighting the "darkness" that Meg will soon have to. Mrs. Who (who speaks in various biblical, Shakespearean, and historical quotations throughout the novel) quotes the Gospel of John, bolded below, prompting a realization from our protagonists.

"Who have our fighters been?" Calvin asked.

"Oh, you must know them, dear," Mrs. Whatsit said.

Mrs. Who's spectacles shone out at them triumphantly, "**And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.**"

"Jesus!" Charles Wallace said. "Why of course, Jesus!"

"Of course!" Mrs. Whatsit said. "Go on, Charles, love. There were others. All your great artists. They've been lights for us to see by."

"Leonardo da Vinci?" Calvin suggested tentatively. "And Michelangelo?"

"And Shakespeare," Charles Wallace called out, "and Bach! And Pasteur and Madame Curie and Einstein!"

Now Calvin's voice rang with confidence. "And Schweitzer and Gandhi and Buddha and Beethoven and Rembrandt and St. Francis!"

For L'Engle's conservative critics, this passage suggests that Jesus Christ was just one special or gifted human among many, and that important religious figures from other faiths (such as Buddhism) were no more or less important. That passage alone garnered *Wrinkle* a [1990 ban](#) from an Alabama school district.

Even critics for secular media, like the New Yorker's Lucy Tang, often take that famous passage as being indicative of L'Engle's own views. "To be reductive," [Tang writes](#), "L'Engle's life philosophy is the kind of happy religious pluralism in which Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and even scientists can live together in peace."

***A Wrinkle in Time* is deeply informed by its author's Episcopal Christianity**

But the irony is that despite its supernatural figures, *A Wrinkle in Time* is a deeply Christian book, informed by not just L'Engle's spirituality but her specifically Episcopalian background. For most of her life, L'Engle was a devoted Christian (she served as librarian and writer in residence at New York City's [St. John the Divine](#) church) and her specific vision of Christianity was central to *A Wrinkle in Time*'s climax.

For L'Engle, who died in 2007, the heart of Christianity was paradox. A vast unknowable God, who defied comprehension, was at the same time a fragile human being: the Jesus Christ who died on the cross. In her 1996 series of reflections, *Penguins and Golden Calves*, L'Engle [wrote](#):

What I believe is so magnificent, so glorious, that [my belief] is beyond finite comprehension. To believe that the universe was created by a purposeful being is one thing. To believe that this Creator took on human vesture, accepted death and mortality, was tempted, betrayed, broken, and all for love of us, defies reason. It is so wild that it terrifies some Christians who try to dogmatize their fear by lashing out at other Christians, because a tidy Christianity with all answers given is easier than one which reaches out to the wild wonder of God's love, a love we don't even have to earn.

In other words, L'Engle's Christianity was about balancing seemingly impossible ideas — paradox — and discovering and maintaining faith, in spite of the seeming chaos of the surrounding world. It was about accepting both that God was bigger than the easy answers many people, including Christians, seek, and that the heart of Christianity lay, in some sense, in the love and vulnerability that were expressed when an almighty God became Jesus on earth.

While this spiritual tradition — and focus on paradox — can be found in representatives of all denominations, it has a special place in mainline or progressive Protestant traditions, like L'Engle's own Episcopalianism. From the Danish pastor and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose *Fear and Trembling* and *Practice in Christianity* dealt explicitly with the idea that faith was an “offense to reason,” to Paul Tillich, who argued that the way we traditionally think about God as a “being” risked turning God into a mere object, mainline Protestant thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries have dealt with the same themes L'Engle explored in her fiction.

Certainly, *A Wrinkle in Time* deals with both paradox and radical vulnerability. In its climax, as Constance Grady has already [noted for Vox](#), Mrs. Whatsit tells Meg to embrace her “faults” — her anger, her brokenness, her ferociously protective love for her baby brother, which makes her an outcast at school — as a “gift.”

(To underscore this even more strongly, Mrs. Who elsewhere recites another Bible passage from 1 Corinthians: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”)

In the climactic scene with IT, the story’s main villain, an evil disembodied brain that has Meg’s brother in its clutches, Meg’s vulnerability gives her strength. What IT wants is to make human beings the same. Only by acknowledging her vulnerability, her brokenness, and even her *faults* — the things that make Meg human and unlike everyone else — can Meg learn to express love for Charles Wallace:

And that was where IT made ITs fatal mistake, for as Meg said, automatically, “Mrs. Whatsit loves me; that’s what she told me, that she loves me,” suddenly she knew. She knew! Love. That was what she had that IT did not have. She had Mrs. Whatsit’s love, and her father’s, and her mother’s, and the real Charles Wallace’s love, and the twins’, and Aunt Beast’s.

And she had her love for them.

But how could she use it? What was she meant to do? If she could give love to IT perhaps it would shrivel up and die, for she was sure that IT could not withstand love.

But she could love Charles Wallace. She could stand there and she could love Charles Wallace. Her own Charles Wallace, the real Charles Wallace, the child for whom she had come back to Camazotz, to IT, the baby who was so much more than she was, and who was yet so utterly vulnerable

It’s true that a lot of young adult stories, sacred and secular, are about the power of love. But L’Engle goes further. She highlights the mysteries of the universe as something far greater and more wondrous than Meg (or we, the readers) can comprehend. The centrality of its greatest paradox — that seeming “weakness” can be a form of strength, as evidenced in *Wrinkle*’s climax — is deeply rooted in her Christian mysticism.

L’Engle was clear that she never saw herself as a dogmatically Christian writer. In a [2000 PBS interview](#), she stressed, “I am a writer. That’s it. No adjectives. The first thing is writing. Christian is secondary.”

But it’s impossible to separate L’Engle’s sense of wonder — that the universe is rich with meaning, even when it seems totally chaotic, and that this meaningfulness is an act of love on

the part of a divine creator — from her sense of faith. As L’Engle wrote in her 1972 series of reflections on art, *Walking on the Water*:

We trust as [Medieval mystic] Lady Julian of Norwich trusted, knowing that despite all the pain and horror of the world, ultimately God’s loving purpose will be fulfilled and “all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.” And this *all-wellness* underlies true art (Christian art) in all disciplines, an all-wellness that does not come to us because we are clever or virtuous but which comes as a gift of grace.

L’Engle’s Christian perspective has been all but excised in this *A Wrinkle in Time*, as Vox film critic [Alissa Wilkinson notes](#). There’s a long precedent of Hollywood shying away from questions of faith in big-budget adaptations of children’s stories. Within mainstream film, both C.S. Lewis’s (deeply Christian) *Chronicles of Narnia* and Philip Pullman’s (deeply antitheistic) *Golden Compass* were stripped of their religious overtones when they were adapted for the silver screen, ultimately diminishing both adaptations.

This may be, in part, due to the demands on big-budget fantasy “family” films to easily lend themselves to theme park rides and [merchandising sales](#), something harder to do with films that take a divisive or complicated approach to faith. “Good triumphs over evil” is a lot more salable and straightforward than “the universe exists because God became man,” even if the paradox of the latter lends *Wrinkle* its existential weight.

What that leaves us with, as [Wilkinson writes](#), is a stark division between films that stay safely in their secular lane and films crafted specifically to appeal to the sensibilities of evangelical audiences. The films that *do* take faith seriously tend to be maudlin, “faith-based” ones like *God’s Not Dead* — films that pacify, rather than provoke, their intended audiences.

The enduring power of L’Engle’s work shows us how rich and emotionally challenging stories that take the big questions about good, evil, love, and suffering seriously can be. For L’Engle, taking those questions seriously was at the heart of her faith *and* her art.

As she wrote in *Water*: “Almost every definition I find of being a Christian is also a definition of being an artist ... art is an affirmation of life, a rebuttal of death.” Her approach to storytelling was an act of vulnerability, love, and faith no less Christian than Meg Murry’s final defense of Charles Wallace. What a pity the film couldn’t show both.