

OF FAITH AND FAIRY-STORY

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Following the enormous success of Peter Jackson's film trilogy, much conversation has centered on the religious aspects in *The Lord of the Rings* as well as in J.R.R. Tolkien's other works. Such conversation has often led to confusion stemming from the apparent lack of religious element in Tolkien's fiction. After all, no resident of Middle-earth is ever seen to attend a church, to take part in a religious ceremony, or even to speak about such matters. To some, this suggests that Tolkien simply did not include any religious ideas in his writings. This, however, is contradicted by Tolkien's own statements, not least of which when he described *The Lord of the Rings* as "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" (*Letters* 214).

Many studies attempt to investigate the spiritual themes present in *The Lord of the Rings*. *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings*, by Kurt D. Bruner and Jim Ware, is just such a work. Although interesting, these books generally have been written from the evangelical Protestant perspective, intended to demonstrate Tolkien's work as safe for an audience worried about fantasy literature that contains elements of magic or sorcery. As such, *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings* fails even to mention that Tolkien was a devout and practicing Catholic. Other attempts have tended to focus their efforts on how Christian virtues and themes can be demonstrated in the context of certain characters or events in the story, and as a result many of the themes the author actually intended are lost. However, examining the work of J.R.R. Tolkien from a specifically Catholic perspective sheds light on the rich tapestry of religious fabric at the very heart of his writing.

Tolkien's deeply rooted Catholic faith is shown through his concept of mythology and fairy-story which, for him, was a powerful and very personal form of worship. Tolkien described the fairy-story as "one of the highest forms of literature" (*Letters* 220), and "a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited" (*Letters* 188). This act of "sub-creation" was an opportunity for Tolkien to bring into being entire worlds that, while they could not have life of their own, would honor the real creation of God. Tolkien's own thoughts on the subject can be glimpsed in *The Silmarillion* account of Aulë and the making of the Dwarves. Aulë, chided by his own creator for presuming to attempt the creation of something beyond his power and authority replies, "Yet the making of things is in my heart from my own making by thee; and the child of little understanding that makes a play of the deeds of his father may do so without thought of mockery, but because he is the son of his father" (*Silmarillion* 43). Aulë and Tolkien share the same desire to create something of their own in imitation of God. Aulë made the Dwarves; Tolkien, making a play of the deeds of his father, created Middle-earth.

One scholar explains how Tolkien understood the relationship between mythology and Christianity by writing, "We have come from God, Tolkien argued, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God" (Pearce 2). This was what Tolkien loved about the various mythologies that influenced him and which occupied a great part of his academic studies. For Tolkien, each of those mythologies were the result of mankind searching for the reason of their existence. One myth, however, stood apart from all the rest for the simple fact that Tolkien believed it to have actually come true. As Tolkien explained in his essay, *On fairy-stories*, "The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories [...] But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation" (*Reader* 88). As such, an imaginary mythology that explicitly contained the Christian religion would be, to Tolkien, an unfavorable mixing of forms, like oil in water. Tolkien felt this to be a major problem with the Arthurian legends, arguing that "Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not

explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world" (*Letters* 144). In another letter, Tolkien added, "That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (*Letters* 172). As Tom Shippey noted about *The Lord of the Rings*, "[it] contains within it hints of the Christian message, but refuses just to repeat it" (210). In doing so, Tolkien felt that mythology could more beautifully and articulately convey truths that were difficult—if not impossible—to express otherwise.

The most important of those truths was, to Tolkien, "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death" (*Reader* 85). He defined this idea as the Eucatastrophe, a sudden joyous (and often miraculous) turn of events. It was the fairy story's highest function, echoing that moment in history that Tolkien felt to be most important. "The Birth of Christ," he wrote, "is the eucatastrophe of Man's history" (*Reader* 88). It was a moment when all Humanity was crushed by sin and despair, estranged from its Creator and with seemingly no hope for salvation. The birth of Christ changed all of that in one extraordinary moment and was (in the same words that Eönwë used to hail Eärendil), "...the looked for that cometh at unawares, the longed for that cometh beyond hope!" (*Silmarillion* 249). Thus, the sudden joyous turn of a fairy-story is a powerfully symbolic moment that reminds us of The Eucatastrophe in a way that gives "to the child or man that hears it, [...] a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality" (*Reader* 86). The notion of eucatastrophe is critical to Tolkien's vision and is designed to remind us of the Resurrection of Christ by providing a glimpse (though small) of that great joy in the context of an enjoyable story.

Exemplifying this quality of eucatastrophe, Tolkien's cosmogony begins with what is essentially a retelling of Genesis and the Catholic understanding of Creation in *The Silmarillion*. Ilúvatar, corresponding to the one true God, first creates the Ainur, or "Holy Ones," which correspond to the Catholic concept of angels. Ilúvatar gives to the Ainur a musical theme and commands them to make a beautiful music, allowing each one to adorn the theme with his own thoughts and devices. In *The Book of Lost Tales*, in an older version of the story than that presented in *The Silmarillion*, Ilúvatar's reasons for this command are made explicit:

Then said Ilúvatar: 'The story that I have laid before you, and that great region of beauty that I have described unto you as the place where all that history might be unfolded and enacted, is related only as it were in outline. I have not filled all the empty spaces, neither have I recounted to you all the adornments and things of loveliness and delicacy whereof my mind is full. It is my desire now that ye make a great and glorious music and a singing of this theme: and (seeing that I have taught you much and set brightly the Secret Fire within you) that ye exercise your minds and powers in adorning the theme to your own thoughts and devising. (50)

The "Secret Fire," also referred to as the "Flame Imperishable," is easily compared to the Catholic concept of the Holy Spirit. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The Word of God and his Breath are at the origin of the being and life of every creature: It belongs to the Holy Spirit to rule, sanctify and animate creation, for he is God" (203). The Trinitarian view held by the Catholic Church says that the Holy Spirit is consubstantial with the Father and Son, one of three distinct personifications of a single God. The act of God sending his Holy Spirit (also often envisioned as a flame) to give animation and Life to the world, as rendered by Tolkien, can be seen when Ilúvatar says, "I will send forth into the Void the Flame Imperishable, and it shall be at the heart of the World, and the World shall Be" (*Silmarillion* 20).

However, when the Valar descended into the world they found it unfinished. As Tolkien describes his fictional Genesis, the fashioning of the world was completed over many ages as mountains were raised up, valleys made low, and the habitation of the Children of Ilúvatar slowly

prepared. One will undoubtedly notice a difference between this account of creation and that present in the biblical Book of Genesis in which creation was finished in six days. However, the Catholic understanding of Genesis is not a literal interpretation, nor was it Tolkien's. Genesis is highly regarded as a Book which tells *that* God created the world and that He has a specific purpose for Mankind, but it does not say *how* God created the world. About the books comprising Genesis, the Catholic Church writes, "The inspired authors have placed them at the beginning of Scripture to express in their solemn language the truths of creation—its origin and its end in God, its order and goodness, the vocation of man, and finally the drama of sin and the hope of salvation" (*Catechism* 85). The story of Adam and Eve— symbolically important— tells us that an event transpired in the early history of Mankind to estrange us from the Creator, a point when Mankind "chose himself over and against God" (*Catechism* 112). Tolkien held a similar view, not accepting Genesis literally, but viewing the book as an important mythological story, a beautiful account of creation that expresses fundamental truths much like the mythology he himself was creating. As he wrote:

Lewis recently wrote a most interesting essay...showing of what great value the 'story-value' was, as mental nourishment – of the whole Chr. Story (NT especially). [...] His point was that they do still in that way get some nourishment and are not cut off wholly from the sap of life: for the beauty of the story while not necessarily a guarantee of its truth is a concomitant of it, [...] I do not now feel either ashamed or dubious on the Eden 'myth'. It has not, of course, historicity of the same kind as the [New Testament], which are virtually contemporary documents, while Genesis is separated by we do not know how many sad exiled generations from the Fall, but certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of 'exile'. (*Letters* 109)

This sense of exile is one of the most important themes in *The Silmarillion*. The Noldor experience a definite fall from grace when they rebel against the Valar and are exiled from the bliss of Valinor. Men seem to have endured a fall of their own, though less explicitly; those wandering into Beleriand are said to have escaped some shadow in the East which once held dominion over them and which still weighed heavily on their hearts and minds. That Tolkien should include a version of the fall and exile from paradise in a story primarily about Elves was to be expected. "After all," Tolkien wrote, "I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode...There cannot be any 'story' without a fall—all stories are ultimately about the fall—at least not for human minds as we know them and have them" (*Letters* 147).

On the subject of the Fall and the purpose of death, *The Silmarillion* and the Catholic Church seem, at first glance, to be at odds with one another. The Church teaches that death is a consequence of sin, a punishment for Mankind's first disobedience. *The Silmarillion*, on the other hand, represents death as a gift from God "which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy" (*Silmarillion* 42). On closer investigation, however, the two views agree with and even complement each other. *The Silmarillion* is "written" from an Elvish point of view. It is understandable that in their eyes Mortality—a release from grief and sorrow—would be a wonderful gift. As Tolkien explained: It should be regarded as an Elvish perception of what *death*—not being tied to the 'circles of the world'—should now become for Men, however it arose. A divine 'punishment' is also a divine 'gift', if accepted, since its object is ultimate blessing, and the supreme inventiveness of the Creator will make 'punishments' (that is changes of design) produce a good not otherwise to be attained. (*Letters* 286)

In this way, death is both a punishment and a gift, the reason why Mankind's first sin is named "the happy fault."

Regarding angels, the *Catechism* states, "With their whole beings the angels are *servants* and messengers of God" (96). In this, we see noticeable similarities between the angels of Catholic doctrine and the Ainur. Both are tasked with assisting God's work, though the angels of Tolkien's mythology play a more active role in creation. Still they are only agents of the One, the source of all things, as evidenced by Ilúvatar's promise to Melkor that "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite" (*Silmarillion* 17). Summarizing the role of Angels, the Church writes:

Angels have been present since creation and throughout the history of salvation, announcing this salvation from afar or near and serving the accomplishment of the divine plan: they closed the earthly paradise; protected Lot; saved Hagar and her child; stayed Abraham's hand; communicated the law by their ministry; led the People of God; announced births and callings; and assisted the prophets, just to cite a few examples. Finally, the angel Gabriel announced the birth of the Precursor and that of Jesus himself. (*Catechism* 97)

The distinction between the Valar (those Ainur gifted with greater power and authority) and the Maiar (servants of the Valar who assist them in their work) is practically identical to the Catholic distinction between the Archangels and the "lesser" angels. Among these lesser angels are such characters as Sauron, Olorin and the rest of the Istari, Eönwë the herald of Manwë, and the Balrogs. With this in mind, the scene with Gandalf on the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm takes on special significance. Gandalf announces himself to be "a servant of the Secret Fire" (*Lord of the Rings* 322), and thus a servant of Ilúvatar or God. Far from being a scene in which a "wizard" of common literary use battles a generic demon, it is one in which an angel reveals his usually hidden power in a fight against a fellow and fallen angel.

Tolkien's mythology also expresses the fall of the angels. It comes into the heart of Melkor, the most gifted and powerful of all the Ainur, to weave devices of his own imagining into his music, themes that are not in accord with the original theme of Ilúvatar. Melkor continued on this ruinous path and fell "through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless. Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use, until he became a liar without shame" (*Silmarillion* 33). Melkor seduces many of the other Ainur to his service and they too reject the original purpose for which they were created. The Catholic understanding of the fall of the Angels is very similar:

Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God...Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called 'Satan' or the 'devil.' The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing. (*Catechism* 110)

More important to Tolkien's purposes are descriptions of a great purpose behind the Fall and a promise that exceptional good will come from this event:

Although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God and his kingdom in Christ Jesus, and although his action may cause grave injuries—of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature—to each man and to society, the action is permitted by divine providence which with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history. It is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity, but 'we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.' (*Catechism* 111)

The ultimate good is, of course, the Eucastrophe of the Resurrection, a victory that "has given us greater blessings than those which sin had taken from us" (*Catechism* 117). The idea that God takes all things (including evil) and uses them for the completion of his Divine Plan forms the cornerstone of Tolkien's mythology and directly affects everything that happens in *The Silmarillion* and his other works. Of Melkor's evil, Ilúvatar promises, "And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the

secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory" (*Silmarillion* 17). In an earlier version of the story, Ilúvatar's comments continue:

Through [Melkor] has pain and misery been made [...] cold without mercy, been born, and death without hope. Yet this is through him and not by him; and he shall see, and ye all likewise, and even shall those beings, who must now dwell among his evil and endure through [Melkor] misery and sorrow, terror and wickedness, declare in the end that it redoundeth only to my great glory, and doth but make the theme more worth the hearing, Life more worth the living, and the World so much more wonderful and marvellous, that of all the deeds of Ilúvatar it shall be called his mightiest and his loveliest. (*Lost Tales* 52)

Indeed, many of the greatest miracles in *The Silmarillion* are born out of evil days. The death of Beren and Luthien was tragic, but led to their return and the introduction of an Elvish strain into Men, "part of a Divine Plan for the ennoblement of the Human Race" (*Letters* 194). The fall of Gondolin and the evil working of Fëanor's oath was more tragic still, but from it came Eärendil, his miraculous sailing to Valinor, and the great eucatastrophe of the First Age in which Thangorodrim was overthrown, Melkor was finally and utterly defeated, and the exile of the Noldor was ended. In this way, the prediction of Manwë came true, that "even as Eru spoke to us shall beauty not before conceived be brought into Eä, and evil yet be good to have been" (*Silmarillion* 98).

Confusion over the role of the Valar and their relation to pagan deities is common for readers of Tolkien's works. The narrative device was "meant to provide beings of the same order of beauty, power, and majesty as the 'gods' of higher mythology, which can yet be accepted [...] by a mind that believes in the Blessed Trinity" (*Letters* 146). As such, the role of the Valar was certainly influenced by mythologies that contained a multitude of gods; a god of the sea (similar to Ulmo), a god of the air (such as Manwë), etc. Tolkien did not, however, view these beings as worshipful; Middle-earth was not a pagan world. Of the Valar, Tolkien writes:

But they are only created spirits—of high angelic order we should say, with their attendant lesser angels—reverend, therefore, but not worshipful; [...] For help [the people of Middle-earth] may call on a *Vala* (as *Elbereth*), as a Catholic might on a Saint, though no doubt knowing in theory as well as he that the power of the Vala was limited and derivative. (*Letters* 193)

The fact that some have called the Valar "Gods" is presented as a mistake, a misunderstanding of their nature. Because the mythological history of Middle-earth "is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet," we must imagine that Middle-earth became our own world (*Letters* 220), a world which slowly forgot the wisdom borne out of the West in much the same way as did the Númenóreans. In time, the various stages of divine revelation gave Mankind a truer understanding of God's nature. But at the time that Tolkien's mythology takes place, none of this had yet happened, and so Middle-earth is considered a "monotheistic world of 'natural theology,'" at least by the Elves and those Men who are learned in such matters (*Letters* 220).

Revealing another indication of the importance of Catholic themes in his fiction, Tolkien often turned to the Lord's Prayer when discussing the nature of Frodo's failure to destroy the Ring at Mount Doom. A few readers complained that Frodo should have been punished (or executed, as one angry reader suggested; see *Letters* 234) for his betrayal rather than honored as a hero. Tolkien's response to this gives a good deal of insight into his feelings about how one should (or should not) be judged:

Frodo indeed 'failed' as a hero, as conceived by simple minds: he did not endure to the end; he gave in, ratted. I do not say 'simple minds' with contempt: they often see with clarity the simple truth and the absolute ideal to which effort must be directed, even if it is unattainable. Their weakness, however, is twofold. They do not perceive the complexity of any given situation in Time, in which an absolute ideal is enmeshed. They

tend to forget that strange element in the World that we call Pity or Mercy, which is also an absolute requirement in moral judgement (since it is present in the Divine nature). In its highest exercise it belongs to God. [...] I do not think that Frodo's was a *moral* failure. At the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum—impossible, I should have said, for any one to resist, certainly after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted. (*Letters* 326)

The scene with Frodo at Mount Doom reads much like the Lord's Prayer, particularly in regard to its last two petitions, "Lead us not into temptation," and "But deliver us from Evil." According to Tom Shippey, the scene was meant to be a "fairy-story exemplum" of those petitions (143). The original Greek of the first petition means both "do not allow us to enter into temptation" and "do not let us yield to temptation" (*Catechism* 751). Of this prayer, Tolkien wrote, "Lead us not into temptation &c' is the harder and the less often considered petition. [...] [Frodo] is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his 'will': that is against any choice he could make or would make unfettered, not under the duress" (*Letters* 233). In making this petition, Catholics pray for final perseverance and that they would be protected from situations in which they would be broken by overwhelming temptation.

Temptation, however, remains a constant force in the world and sooner or later all must fall victim to it. As Tolkien put it, "But one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good'" (*Letters* 252). It is for this reason that the last petition, "But deliver us from Evil" takes on such overwhelming importance. It is Providence that delivers Frodo from the Evil with which he is burdened. It is the hand of God that intervenes at the very moment of his failure. Tolkien wrote:

Frodo had done what he could and spent himself completely (as an instrument of Providence) and had produced a situation in which the object of his quest could be achieved. His humility (with which he began) and his sufferings were justly rewarded by the highest honour; and his exercise of patience and mercy towards Gollum gained him Mercy: his failure was redressed. (*Letters* 326)

Taken together, the scene on Mount Doom exemplifies the two main hopes of the petitions: the strength to resist evil and, when evil is too much to bear, deliverance from it.

If we look at Tolkien's work from a Catholic perspective, it is easy to see that *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* are indeed the fundamentally religious and Catholic works he claimed them to be. They offer a rich tapestry of Christian themes, woven together so as not to be a sermon, but rather to express truths in ways that can make a lasting impact on his readers. In that he succeeded. Toward the end of his life, Tolkien wrote this to a literary critic:

You speak of 'a sanity and sanctity' in the L.R. 'which is a power in itself.' I was deeply moved. Nothing of the kind had been said to me before. But by a strange chance, just as I was beginning this letter, I had one from a man, who classified himself as 'an unbeliever, or at best a man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling...but you', he said, 'create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp'. I can only answer: 'Of his own sanity no man can securely judge. If sanctity inhabits his work or as a pervading light illumines it then it does not come from him but through him. And neither of you would perceive it in these terms unless it was with you also. Otherwise you would see and feel nothing, [...]' (*Letters* 413)

Tolkien's works based in Middle-earth are neither sermons nor simply regurgitations of Catholic ideas and themes. Nevertheless, they provide intensely spiritual tales. As the reader mentioned in the quote above realized, a definite sanctity inhabits the very heart of these stories. Without question, they are the fundamentally Catholic works Tolkien intended them to be.

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