

The Transcendent in Tolkien

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J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth, by Bradley J. Birzer, *Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2002. xxvi + 219 pp.*

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN of J.R.R. Tolkien's accomplishment during the past half century, with critics struggling to understand the powerful grip exercised by the English fantasist's writings upon readers. Some Tolkien-focused criticism has been enlightening, much has been repetitive, and a small but far-reaching portion has been outright silly, with commentators projecting their own fears and insecurities into Tolkien's works and his readers.

Hostile commentators sensed something they simply did not like in *The Lord of the Rings* (3 vols., 1954-5) and Tolkien's other works: something that appealed to tradition, rightful authority and the high role of virtue as an element of lawful authority, as well as the goodness of earthy lives lived close to the soil, in close community and on ancestral holdings. It is a tale in which the corruptive nature of unlimited power is illustrated, in which ethical distinctions are made, and in which humble people take up arms to defend their land. To the liberal imagination, this is all reprehensible; and such writers as Edmund Wilson, John Le Carré, and Germaine Greer smelled the transcendent element in Tolkien's works the way a dog

smells death—and with the same response. Only they called it not *the transcendent*, but craven *escape* and *fascism*—apparently believing that the taking down of weapons from the wall to defend one's home and land is the first step on the road to becoming a goose-stepping worshipper of the total state.

Since the mid 1990s, more sympathetic critics—those who are more likely to embrace Tolkien and look along his works, rather than at them, so to speak—have focused upon the signal role the author's Christian (and specifically Catholic) faith played in the writing and apprehension of Tolkien's canon. After all, in 1953 Tolkien himself wrote to a friend, Father Robert Murray, to state that his as-yet-unpublished *Lord of the Rings* “is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work.” Joseph Pearce's *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (1998), a special issue of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* (January-February 2002), which features an especially insightful essay by editor David Mills, and (in a latent sense) T.A. Shippey's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000) have gone far toward explicating the depth of Tolkien's faith and its influence upon his work. This critical emphasis extends at least as far back as the mid 1950s, when C.S. Lewis, reviewing *The Lord of the Rings*, praised Tolkien's accomplishment in the “sub-creation”—about which more later—of an ordered world. A little over a decade later, in 1968, Russell Kirk praised the Ring trilogy for having “captured the imagination of a generation starving for moral apprehension”—words that are as true today as when Kirk wrote them a generation ago.

One of the latest contributions to the study of Tolkien's works of fantasy as an expression of his faith is Bradley J. Birzer's *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*, which is pervaded by a remarkably Kirkian sense of measured critical discernment, eloquent statement, and evidence of a broad range of reading on the subject. Indeed,

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Dr. Birzer gives every indication of having read and ably apprehended everything of significance written by and about Tolkien, and that is no small accomplishment. In addition to the Kirkian aura about this work, there is also a sense that Pearce's writings on Tolkien's accomplishment have worked some measure of beneficent influence. There is about this work and Pearce's worthy introduction a strong sense of affinity with Tolkien and his works, a shared sense of like sympathies and courtesies—all "the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature," as Edmund Burke put it.

As Birzer demonstrates, while many people of every religious persuasion have enjoyed *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings*, there is something more than a deeply moving read in Tolkien's complex mythology of Middle-earth, with its men, wizards, elves, orcs, dwarves, and other creatures. This becomes startlingly plain when these works are examined within the fuller context of Tolkien's letters, *The Silmarillion* (1977), and his little-known, unpublished sequel to the Ring trilogy, an unfinished fragment called "The New Shadow," along with several other works. Of these lesser-known works, the most important is a short "Job-like conversation" titled "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth," which Birzer deems "possibly Tolkien's most theological and profound writing in the entire legendarium, and ...essential to one's understanding of Tolkien's mythological vision."

And indeed it is. For those unfamiliar with this short work, "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" is a complex discussion between the Elven king Finrod and a human wise-woman, Andreth. Finrod asks why it is that men are so short-lived, while Elves are nearly immortal—this though the two races share an almost identical biological nature. In answer, Andreth expresses

her belief that Melkor, a deceiving, fallen member of the Valar—angelic beings created by the supreme being, Ilúvatar—must have marred the entire human race, changing its nature and shortening the lives of men and women. Finrod replies that only Ilúvatar would have the power to effect such a change, and He would never do such a thing to his creation. No, men are not marred but deceived and self-deceiving: they are beings made for immortality—"born to life everlasting," as Andreth puts it—and beloved by their Creator, but fallen into error and evil. Andreth asks if Ilúvatar will then suffer Melkor, predecessor of the evil Sauron, to be the natural lord of life? No, explains Finrod, for Ilúvatar Himself will descend into Arda (the created world) to redeem it, bringing about good even from Melkor's sinfulness. When Andreth asks how Ilúvatar could descend into His creation without destroying it, Finrod answers that it is well within the wisdom and power of Ilúvatar to take the form of one of His created beings in order to enter into the world to accomplish His ends. The greater can descend into the lesser while retaining its nature; the lesser cannot effect its own redemption.

The greater story of Middle-earth, of which *The Lord of the Rings* is a large part, illustrates the working out of this story, which Birzer calls "the central explanatory text of the theology of Tolkien's mythology." The trilogy tells of the fading and redemption of a fallen world in a history of acts illustrating the divine, as well as the permissive, will of Ilúvatar. As readers of the books (and viewers of Peter Jackson's ambitious film adaptation) know, the tale recounts the near-hopeless quest by the *Fellowship of the Ring* to carry the utterly corrupting Ring of Power to the land of Mordor, there to cast it into the fiery chasm within Mount Doom in which it was forged. All through the journey of Frodo Baggins, Samwise Gamgee, and their companions, there occur words

and deeds that reflect the truths reflected in the story of the Incarnation. In a key passage, Birzer writes:

As Tolkien told Father Murray, the entire story of *The Lord of the Rings* reflects God's grace, but while God is always present, he is never named. For example, when Frodo asks Gandalf how the Ring came into his possession, Gandalf answers: "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought." In *Unfinished Tales*, Gandalf declares that what one calls chance is really one's will accepting Ilúvatar's direction. When Elrond calls the council to order, deciding what to do with the Ring, he says: "Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are met here, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world."

But beyond these hints, Birzer adds, "God remains off stage in *The Lord of the Rings*. He is, rather, contained within the very fiber of the story."

For example, the seemingly imprudent mercy shown by the hobbits to the treacherous Gollum leads in time to the destruction of the Ring. Had Gollum not been present at the Crack of Doom at the crucial moment, Frodo would have claimed the Ring for his own and attempted to flee from Mordor—and almost immediately he and the Ring would have been seized by the Nāzgul and borne straightaway to Sauron, to suffer slow torment and death, with the Ring once again on the Dark Lord's hand. The armies of the West, battling Sauron's forces before the gates of Mordor, would have been utterly destroyed, and all the lands of the kindly West would have come under the Dark Lord's sway. In the end, as Gandalf foretold, even Gollum had a part to play in the

quest, which saved Middle-earth from darkness and destruction, for a time.

Birzer notes other glimpses of the Incarnation through the "splintered light" of myth in *The Lord of the Rings*, such as the death and resurrection of Gandalf into a new, indestructible life, the theme of the rightful king's return, in the character and deeds of Aragorn. Still another key reflection Birzer mentions is the undeniably Marian aspect of the Elvish Lady Galadriel—an aspect made vividly clear in Peter Jackson's film version of the story, in a scene in which actress Cate Blanchett's Galadriel, dressed in pure white, raises her hand in a benedictional gesture of farewell to the Fellowship as they depart from Lórien by boat. Immediately beforehand, she has given Frodo a gift, "the light of our most beloved star, Eärendil," and said, "May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." Here, the parallel with a similar passage from the opening chapter of the Gospel according to St. John—declaring that the Light has come into the world, a Light which the darkness has not yet overcome—is quite clear.

In that same chapter of St. John's Gospel, the apostle writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Christian dogma teaches, and reason affirms, that God is the creator of the world and everything in it, including humanity, "His prize creation. As Birzer takes care to note, Tolkien explicitly believed that God has instilled within man a like creative impulse, enabling him to participate (to some extent) in the act of "sub-creating" new worlds and new vistas through literature and the arts. (This, in part, is what is meant by the Scriptural claim that man is created in the image of God.) A devout Catholic for most of his life, Tolkien took seriously the role of sub-creation as his vocation—to the incalculable benefit of his many readers.

Earlier there was mention made of

Russell Kirk. Reading Dr. Birzer's timely book, it is apparent that there is an intriguing thesis yet to be written on Tolkien's affinities with and influence upon Kirk. Each, as Birzer describes Tolkien, "passionately hated tyranny, whether it came from the Left or Right of the political spectrum." Each responded to old tales, old loyalties, old roads and houses, and the old faith. Each considered modernity a blight, the reign of "King Whirl": a carnival of ever-accelerating, mindless activity, which needlessly destroys all that is good and homely and noble. Unchecked mechanization is Saruman unbound. Birzer notes, "For Tolkien, modernity was committed to the denial of God as the author of man and the world. And once man denies God, he denies his true self. When Harvey Breitt of the *New York Times Book Review* asked Tolkien in 1955 what made him tick, Tolkien responded: 'I don't tick. I am not a machine. (If I did tick, I should have no views on it, and you had better ask the winder.)'" In saying this, Tolkien was not simply being flippant or curmudgeonly. For in truth, "Tolkien, on the whole, despised mechanization, arguing that it reflected modernity's attack on nature, its attempt to dominate and subjugate all aspects of the given world." Further, both Kirk and Tolkien viewed small farming—agrarianism, in Kirk's lexicon; Distributism (owing much to G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc) in Tolkien's—as perhaps the ideal way for men to live: close to the land and the turn of the seasons, in fellowship with God, creation, and the small community of souls. Finally, both Tolkien

and Kirk were lovers of trees, viewing them as beautiful and wise: a proud counterpoint to the gadgetry and mechanism of the modern world. At one point, Birzer quotes Clyde Kilby as having written, "He 'had loved trees since childhood and pointed out the trees he himself had planted'"—a statement that could apply to either Kirk or Tolkien.

In a passage many readers have found astonishing upon first reading it, Chesterton once claimed that George MacDonald's fantasy story *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) was, of all the stories he had ever read, "the most real, the most realistic; in the exact sense of the phrase the most like life." By this he meant that truth is conveyed more effectively by way of myth than by any syllogism, and that in that sense MacDonald's little masterpiece had rung true with his own heart, mind, and spirit. Readers of Birzer's fine study will see with fresh eyes how Tolkien's legendarium of Middle-earth likewise restores myth to its rightful place, not as a purveyor of "lies breathed through silver," but as a conduit of truth. *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* is rounded out by a well-selected bibliography of secondary sources, with most of the entries citing fairly modern studies of Tolkien's works.

J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth belongs with the works of Shippey and Pearce as a "must-have" for any student or interested reader seeking to understand more fully perhaps the most remarkable writer of the twentieth century—and not only to understand, but to enjoy: a sterling accomplishment for any writer.