

## Introduction

I have had two seminal and transcendent reading moments in my life. The first was in the early 1970s when I was six years old. My mother had bought me *The Children's Bible* published by Golden Press and I remember flipping through it while alone in my bedroom. Something struck me when I came to pages 362 and 363. It was a picture of Jesus standing atop a mountain with His arms upraised and looking toward heaven. Flying around Him with horns, wings and cloven hooves was the devil who was pointing downwards towards a kingdom on earth. The scene was from Matthew 4, “the temptation in the wilderness.” I retrospectively realised that what captivated me in that moment was the Holy Spirit, and I became fascinated with Jesus. This fascination would eventually turn into my Christian faith and devotion to my relationship with Christ.

The second moment came in 1977 when my late cousin started raving about a book called *The Hobbit* and its sequel *The Lord of the Rings*. I grew curious and eventually bought a copy of each. I was hooked immediately and devoured both books that spring and summer. I remember finally finishing *The Lord of the Rings* while visiting my aunt and uncle in Potomac, Maryland. Some people say they remember where they were when Kennedy was shot, the first moon landing, September 11, or other major world events. But I remember my exact locations where I finished *TH* and *LotR*. When I finished *LotR* I felt like someone kicked me hard in the stomach – not only because of its melancholy ending with a broken Frodo going overseas for healing but because I realized that I had just finished the greatest fiction story I had ever read and would ever read. It was all over. There was nothing more to look forward to. Life at that moment temporarily ceased to have purpose now that I was done reading *LotR*. After a serious bout of situational depression, it eventually dawned on me that I could read Tolkien again (and again, and again) and I have done so now almost annually for nearly forty years.

At the time, I finished *TH* and *LotR* (and eventually *The Silmarillion*<sup>1</sup>,

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1. *The Silmarillion* is divided into five parts: 1) *The Ainulindalë*, which is Tolkien's version of the creation story; 2) *The Valaquenta* which is a description of the prominent “God and Goddesses” of his universe; 3) *The Quenta Silmarillion* which is the main story and history of the time before time was counted and the First Age of his universe; 4) *The Akallabêth* which

*Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* and anything else Tolkien-related that I could get my hands on, I did not see any connections between my love of Christ, the Bible, and Christianity with my love for Tolkien's works. Tolkien's world was simply the most in-depth, complex, and coolest thing ever which moved me like nothing else in reading ever had. I could not get enough of it. It was not until the mid-to-late 1990s that I started to realize just how devout of a Christian Tolkien was and just how much of his faith was deeply embedded in his works, especially in *LotR*. This understanding opened a new world for me and renewed my enthusiasm. It suddenly made so much sense to me why I fell in love with Middle-earth and had consumed any book that I could find dealing with the Christian treatment of Tolkien's works. As I reread *LotR* and his other works I saw them through new eyes and they enriched me even more than they did before.

## Facts Versus Truth

Tolkien once wrote "the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks."<sup>2</sup> For me personally, I have always found fantasy books such as Tolkien's, C.S. Lewis's, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series, and others that may be interpreted as reflecting a Christian worldview to be a primary vehicle to understand and deepen my relationship with God. Perhaps it is the medium of storytelling that speaks to my heart since Christ Himself chose stories in the form of parables to communicate profound truths. Or perhaps it is because good fantasy grounded in a Christian worldview ultimately deals with truth though not necessarily facts.

People in my life who have told me they dislike the fantasy genre have said so because they prefer books that are "more realistic." With all due respect to them, I think they miss the point of good fantasy. What is more realistic than truth? Further, what fantasy books are grounded more in truth and thus reality than Tolkien's? As his great friend C.S. Lewis once said, "When we journey to Middle-earth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it."<sup>3</sup> And what is the reality we are discovering that moves us so much? What is the gift that Tolkien is giving us through his work? Professor Peter Kreeft answers these questions poetically when he writes "...*The Lord*

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is a history of the Second Age primarily focused on the rise and fall of the kingdom of men known as Númenor; and 5) *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age* which is a summary of the Third Age. These parts are important to distinguish because when I refer to *TSil* I am referring to it as a whole.

2. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000, Letter 310, p. 400.

3. Devon Brown, *The Christian World of The Hobbit*, Abingdon Press, 2012, E-book.

*of the Rings* is a gift of divine grace, an opening of the curtain that veils Heaven to earthly eyes, a tiny telepathic contact with the Mind of God.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The “Experience” of Tolkien**

Reading and rereading *LotR* and Tolkien’s other works helped me through some very tough times when I needed a place of comfort to retreat to in my youth. My experience is not unique. As the late Stratford Caldecott points out, “Many return to *LotR* again and again for refreshment of the soul – perhaps even for the kind of healing the author must have experienced writing it.”<sup>5</sup>

Tolkien is able to bring us this comfort through *LotR* because he introduces and draws us closer to both the Person of Christ and the nature of reality as sacramental in a subtle yet extremely powerful way. Middle-earth is “gloriously haunted by the Presence of a Person ‘who is never absent and never named.’”<sup>6</sup> and allows us to experience Christian sacramentality through its beauty and holiness.<sup>7</sup>

Naturally, as evidenced by so many Tolkien biographies, experiencing his work leads to greater curiosity about the man. In addition to being a devout Christian, he was also a committed family man with his priorities in order. He went to Mass every day, loved his wife and four children, performed his professional work and then worked on his great mythology when time permitted. Perhaps if Tolkien had been a self-centred man who put his art before his faith, family, and work, we may have had more works to enjoy than we do. However, I suspect the beauty of his writing, in large part, is due to it coming from a man who loved God and his family first.

### ***The Lord of the Rings* and Hints of Christianity**

Even as a young reader who first read *The Lord of the Rings* as a great adventure story and who knew some of the basics of Christianity, I found some clear clues that *LotR* had at least some Christian elements. For example, Tolkien writes in the opening chapter that the “long expected party” celebrates both Bilbo’s one hundred and eleventh birthday and Frodo’s thirty-third. He explains that the thirty-third birthday for all hobbits is significant because it means in hobbit culture that they are coming of age. I remember knowing, even as a youth, that thirty-three was the accepted age

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4. Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, Ignatius, 2005, p. 143.

5. Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003, p. 5.

6. Jim Ware, *Finding God in The Hobbit*, SaltRiver, 2006, pp. 167-168.

7. Craig Bernthal, *Tolkien’s Sacramental Vision*, Second Spring, 2014, p. 289.

when Christ was crucified.

Of course, this alone is not enough to claim that *LotR* is a Christian work. But there were more clues. I recall perusing the appendices at the end of *The Return of the King* and seeing that the Fellowship started their quest on December 25, Christ's date of birth. I knew from reading *LotR* that the Ring was destroyed on March 25, which is traditionally considered in Christendom to be the date of the first Good Friday, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and also the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel visited Mary to announce the conception of Christ (see Luke 1:26-38). But all that Tolkien said in the narrative concerning when the Fellowship left Rivendell was that "It was a cold grey day near the end of December."<sup>8</sup> Professor Tom Shippey makes an interesting point that the main action of *LotR* take place between Christmas, December 25, and the Annunciation, March 25. He states that the latter is also the date Adam and Eve fell and the effects it leads to are the purpose for the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

There are more allusions, such as Barliman Butterbur having to pay "thirty silver pennies" to Bill Ferny as recompense for the hobbits' stolen ponies. It is hard not to associate Bill Ferny's act of treachery being "rewarded" with thirty pieces of silver with that of Judas's compensation by the Jewish leaders for betraying Christ. An even more overt nod to Christian tradition is Faramir's prayerful looking to the west and offering a form of grace before the meal when he says "we look towards Númenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be."<sup>10</sup>

### **Is Christianity in *The Lord of the Rings* Intentional or Unintentional?**

There are many hints of Christianity in *The Lord of the Rings* and it legitimately raises the question of whether this was Tolkien's true intent. Was he, like his friend C.S. Lewis, deliberately trying to insert Christian messages into his work? It would seem not, since in *LotR* (and *TH* and *TSil*) men, elves, dwarves, and hobbits do not have organized religion. God is not even mentioned in *LotR* except for a brief reference to "the One" in the appendices.<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, we have the author's answer to this question:

"*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like

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8. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Houghton Mifflin, 1954-5, 1965-6, p. 272.

9. Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000, pp. 208-209.

10. Op. cit. [8], p. 661.

11. Op. cit. [8], p. 1013.

“religion,” to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. However that is very clumsily put, and sounds more self-important than I feel. For as a matter of fact, I have consciously planned very little; and should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know.”<sup>12</sup>

Tolkien essentially believed that as human beings our creative capacity, especially for writing fantasy, reflects God, our Creator since God created us in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26).<sup>13</sup>

Tolkien coined the term “subcreation” to describe what we do when we create works of art or anything else. He believed that despite our “fallenness”, sin, and sinful choices, we still retain this creative ability in our nature because it is God’s nature that He put within us.<sup>14</sup> Further, Tolkien believed that the fairy story or fantasy story was one of the highest forms of subcreation. He did so because he believed that the Gospel was the greatest “story” of all; the ultimate fairy story. I put story in quotes because for him it was a story that is true, or better stated, the ultimate truth, God inserted Himself into human history. God is revealed to us, in part, through story, so good fantasy stories can be an echo of this ultimate revelation.

Christianity naturally flowed into Tolkien’s work because of who he was and what he believed. As he himself stated, the religious element in *LotR* is absorbed into the story itself and its symbolism. The transcendent truths of Christianity bubble up throughout this story.<sup>15</sup> But Tolkien was telling a story, not proclaiming a message. Both philosophically and personally he was not comfortable with direct evangelical messages. We see this in a letter he wrote where he explicitly said, commenting on his own personal nature, that he expressed what he feels most deeply in tales and myths.<sup>16</sup>

By his own admission, *LotR* and his related works are stories set in a pre-Christian age so they can pre-figure Christianity and reflect it, but not express it in full. Many find *LotR* and Tolkien’s other works to have a pervasive sadness. The author states that this comes from the absence of Christ and thus the absence of a means for redemption and salvation. To be fair, this sadness is also the result of the influence on Tolkien of Norse myths where heroes fought heroically despite the inevitability of Ragnarök.<sup>17</sup> Tolkien imagined *LotR* and his other stories of Middle-earth to take place in our

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12. Op. cit. [2], Letter 142, p. 172.

13. J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, HarperCollins, 2008, E-book.

14. Op. cit.

15. Kurt Brunner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings*, Tyndale, 2001, p. x.

16. Op. cit. [2], Letter 340, p.172.

17. Matthew Dickerson, *A Hobbit Journey*, Brazos Press, 2012, E-book.

deep past in time long before Christ as he describes in both the prologue and appendix D of *LotR*. He states in one of his letters that the events of *LotR* take place more than 6,000 years ago.<sup>18</sup> He explored incorporating the idea of God incarnating, though not in *LotR*. Within *Morgoth's Ring*, Volume X of *The History of Middle-earth* series, there is a fascinating tale called *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* (*The Debate of Finrod and Andreth*). Finrod is an immortal elf and Andreth is a mortal woman and they speculate about Ilúvatar, God, eventually incarnating to heal the world.

Tolkien's Christian worldview pushed itself up of its own accord.<sup>19</sup> Because he was a Roman Catholic, his understanding of Christianity was sacramental in nature. With this understanding, some have speculated that he longed to smuggle a vision of goodness and truth into the readers' lives and that he achieved this through sacramental theology, and the understanding that there is holiness that hovers over all things.<sup>20</sup> However this is not apparent at first due to how Tolkien, by his own admission, tells his stories: "I have deliberately written a tale, which is built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas, but is not an allegory of them (or anything else)."<sup>21</sup>

*LotR* contains many elements of Christianity but does not repeat it.<sup>22</sup> It is permeated with a sense of eternity, of the objective order of good and evil, and of an all-wise providence (the sense that God somehow orders all things, even apparent coincidences). We see in *LotR*, the spirit of courtesy, the respect for women, the determination to protect the weak, the virtues of courage, fortitude, prudence, and justice. These are patterns of goodness present in the Gospels.<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes, both readers and critics misunderstand the Christian aspects of *LotR* and Tolkien's other works. I would argue that this is in part because Tolkien's depth of understanding of Christianity was more profound, his understanding of language as a professor and philologist was unrivalled, and thus he saw deeper than most. Some have written that the Christian understanding of *The Lord of the Rings* by many is forced and misguided to some degree. For example, Ronald Hutton writes in his essay, *The Pagan Tolkien*, "...while I am happy to accept Tolkien as a Christian author with reference to his personal beliefs, and to some of his published work, I do not think this can be done simply and straightforwardly, with reference to his mythology."<sup>24</sup> Some Christians have rejected *LotR* as a Christian work using

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18. Op. cit. [2], Letter 211, p.283.

19. Op. cit. [15], pp. xiii-xiv.

20. Paul E. Kerry (Editor), *The Ring and the Cross*, Farleigh Dickinson, 2011, p.22, quoted from Kerry Dearborn, "Theology and Morality" 98, 96.

21. Op. cit. [2], Letter 211, pp.283-284.

22. Op. cit. [9], p. 210.

23. Op. cit. [5].

24. Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Tolkien, The Ring and the Cross: Christianity in the Lord of*

a similar, and even stronger arguments. Ministry leader Eric Barger writes, “I have come to the final conclusion that those wishing to be consistent with scripture should completely abstain from endorsing, reading the books, or watching the motion picture adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*.”<sup>25</sup>

Craig Bernthal argues that critics such as these lack an in-depth sacramental understanding of Christianity and thus mistakenly attribute aspects of Tolkien’s work such reverence of the living beauty of the natural world and other aspects as pagan. In his response to Patrick Curry’s assertion that “Catholicism desecralizes the world, and so Tolkien looked to paganism for succour,” he argues that this “gets everything backwards.” He points out that the sacramental understanding of Christianity inherent in Catholicism is what Tolkien drew upon and what made his world “grace-filled.”<sup>26</sup> It may be noted that the early Church, and probably Tolkien himself, saw pagan myths as incomplete pointers to the truth of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Professor Matthew Dickerson further points out that what Tolkien did in *LotR* is not too different from what St. Paul did when trying to convince the Athenians about the truth of Christ. Paul used the Athenians’ pagan understanding of their “Unknown God” to guide them to a conversation about his “known God” in the Person of Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps Humphrey Carpenter sums it up best:

“Some have puzzled over the relation between Tolkien’s stories and his Christianity, and have found it difficult to understand how a devout Roman Catholic could write with such conviction about a world where God is not worshipped...Tolkien cast his mythology in this form because he wanted it to be remote and strange, and yet at the same time not to be a lie. He wanted the mythological and legendary stories to express his own moral view of the universe...So while God is present in Tolkien’s universe, He remains unseen.”<sup>29</sup>

## **The Contents of this Book**

The Christianity in *LotR* is both intentional during the initial writing and subsequent rewriting and drafting; and is unintentional in that it also flowed unconsciously into his work due to who he was. It is embedded, or absorbed, so deeply in the story it is often not consciously recognized, or at least not immediately, but instead unconsciously experienced and felt. Ironically,

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*the Rings*, Madison Teaneck Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001, p.68.

25. <https://www.ericbarger.com/lotr.c.c.2.htm>. [Accessed 30 May 2018].

26. Op. cit. [7], p.35.

27. Matthew Dickerson & David O’Hara, *From Homer to Harry Potter*, Brazo Press, 2006, pp. 32-33, 50-51.

28. Op. cit. [17].

29. Op. cit. [3].



this actually makes his work *more* Christian rather than *less* Christian. In my book *Sacramental Living: Understanding Christianity as a Way of Life*, I make the same argument as the late Father Alexander Schmemmann, a respected and revered Priest and author, when he wrote that Christianity was meant to be the end of religion because religion is only needed when there is a wall of separation between God and man.<sup>30</sup> *LotR* does not have explicit religion in it because it was written by a man who experienced Christianity as a complete way of life, not something compartmentalized into a service once a week. Because these barriers of separation did not exist in his mind and heart, it comes through in his worldview reflected in his work.

In this book, I highlight much of the Christian element that I believe Tolkien deliberately infused into *LotR* and what I believe he unconsciously poured into the story due to his worldview. I also take the liberty to discuss elements of Christianity that struck me in *LotR* that I cannot claim he intentionally or unintentionally put in the story. Certain things I read simply affected me as Christian. Tolkien acknowledged that *LotR*, once created, was no longer his, in one of his letters: “Of course The L.R. does not belong to me. It has been brought forth and must now go its appointed way in the world, though naturally I take a deep interest in its fortunes, as a parent would of a child. I am comforted to know that it has good friends to defend it against the malice of its enemies.”<sup>31</sup>

Professor Craig Bernthal in his book *Tolkien's Sacramental Vision* makes the point that despite many books written on the Christianity in Tolkien's works, it is still not a universally accepted way of approaching Tolkien's writings. He goes on to describe several of the books that do tackle this subject and admits that what he wrote is not completely new but his contribution focuses strongly on the Catholic sacramentality of Tolkien's work.<sup>32</sup> I share the same sentiment. My contribution is a very deep dissection of *The Lord of the Rings* though I do reference Tolkien's other works where needed. Further, I discuss aspects of his work that I have not found in the many wonderful books I have read that Bernthal references. This should not be understood as me being negative toward other works. Rather, since Tolkien was a philologist who understood language more than most and was so deliberate with his words, I take a very exacting approach in this book in the spirit of the Professor. Though I do reference and quote other works, for the most part I use Tolkien's books, the letters he wrote that were compiled by Humphrey Carpenter, and accounts of direct conversations with him as my primary sources.

This book is divided into two parts: 1) Christian Ethos and 2) Christian

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30. Father Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, SVS Press, 1963, pp. 19-20.

31. Op. cit. [2], p. 365.

32. Op. cit. [7], pp. 18-20.



Typology. Ethos is a Greek word meaning character that is used to describe the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community, nation, or ideology. In Part 1 I deal with how *The Lord of the Rings* reflects many of the guiding beliefs within Christianity.

Christian typology, in its formal understanding, is essentially a term that points to the predictive relationship of the Old and New Testaments. In other words, the people, events, or statements of the Old Testament are viewed as types that pre-figure and point to the person, life, and events of Christ and His revelation in the New Testament. For example, Abraham being willing to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, the son of the promise made to him by God (see Genesis 15 18, 21 and especially 22) is a “type” pointing to the ultimate sacrifice God will make by sacrificing His beloved son, Jesus Christ. In Part 2, I broaden the definition of typology as I endeavour to demonstrate people and events in Tolkien’s work that are types of Christ, the Eucharist, Mary, and others.

My hope is that you will enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it

Michael Haldas