

Tolkien's Middle-earth and the Catholic Imagination

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A number of recent studies have focused on the Catholic themes of Tolkien's work (e.g. Pearce). This is hardly surprising, since Tolkien himself wrote to a correspondent that *The Lord of the Rings* is 'a fundamentally religious and Catholic work' (*Letters* 172). Moreover, Catholic themes are bound to resonate more for a reader from the faith community who takes his or her Catholicism seriously. I feel the author's work is indeed Catholic, but in two ways. As is well known his religion was an essential factor in his life, and Tolkien was simply true to himself in his fiction: at the same time it is 'catholic' in that he wrote for everyone. In no way was he attempting to impose his faith on anyone through his fantasy ¹.

At any rate, what interests me more than the degree of Tolkien's adherence to Catholic doctrine, is a particular sensitivity that the tradition might have imparted on his work. I am aware, of course, that 'sensitivity' is not quite the same thing as Catholic 'substance,' yet it is probably what has had the larger impact on the majority of his readers, which is why the question deserves analysis in its own right.

The artist and religious humanism

When Tolkien talks about fantasy in 'On Fairy-Stories' he adds the well-known epilogue to his discussion of 'eucatastrophe' in which he notes a sort of parallelism to the happy ending of a fairy story and the Christian story of Christ's resurrection. However, the 'far off gleam or echo of evangelium' ('On Fairy-Stories' 155) he refers to in this context is just that: something distant, and is important knowledge rather for the converted (literally, the Inklings Charles Williams, to whom the published version of the lecture was dedicated). Thus it can hardly be considered an artistic manifesto; it

The drink in their drinking-bowls seemed to be clear cold water, yet it went into their hearts like wine and set free their voices.

The guests became suddenly aware that they were singing merrily, as if it was easier and more natural than talking.

'In the House of Tom Bombadil',
The Fellowship of the Ring

was Tolkien's explication of what he felt to be the deepest nature of 'story'. In his correspondence he makes the point that certain elements will resonate for those so predisposed, but will barely have an effect otherwise. He responded to an agnostic reader who claimed to sense faith inhabiting the trilogy: 'If sanctity inhabits [an artist's] work or as a pervading light illumines it then it does not come from him but through him. And neither [would you] perceive it in these terms unless it was also with you.' (*Letters* 413) The freedom of the reader is maintained.

The above means that it might be more useful to call *The Lord of the Rings* a work of religious humanism than specifically Catholic, i.e., a work that is open to a transcendent dimension. This 'openness', in turn, is thought to be a factor that strengthens our humanity.

Consider the culminating moment of *The Fellowship of the Ring* volume from this perspective: On the top of Amon Hen Frodo feels two opposing tendencies in a simultaneously internalised and external manner:

'For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the

Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so.' (472)

Gandalf's interference (it was his 'voice') can be likened to the transcendent element in Frodo's conscience, i.e. the element that is external, but which ultimately has a liberating effect on him. This is entirely proper in religious humanism, which in Christian tradition is succinctly encapsulated in Saint Irenaeus' declaration: 'The glory of God is man fully alive.' Such a sentiment corresponds with the non-denominational claim of the psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl that we fulfill our human potential most by imitating God, roughly meaning the higher we set our sights in life the more we improve (*Homo Patiens* 104). And it is evident enough that for Tolkien the creative activity of the artist as sub-creator, with its imitation of the Primary Creator, was a vehicle for his or her being 'fully alive.'

Tom Shippey implies there is something of an evangelical mission in Tolkien's religious fantasy: since the author knew 'his own country was falling back to heathenism (if only on the model of Saruman, not Sauron), and while mere professorial teaching would make no difference, a story might.' (189) But this ignores the inconvenient fact that no one, least of all Tolkien, had predicted the astonishing success of the trilogy before it was published, so it could hardly have been considered an effective strategy for such a purpose. More to the point, as Colin Manlove has detected, the Christian fantasists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were involved in a form of praise of the 'richness of divine creation' (214). With Tolkien, however, what is noticeable is how close he keeps to that creation, compared, say, to C. S. Lewis in his Cosmic

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Trilogy. The author amplifies creation rather than that which departs from it. The latter might be considered in congruence with Tolkien's more sacramental vision of the world.

The Catholic imagination in Middle-earth

There can be little doubt that belonging to a particular faith community influenced the religious humanism of Tolkien's work, at least encouraging a particular sensibility. In the author's case, this sensibility can best be called the Catholic imagination, which finds enchantment and wonder in the world: 'Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures,' enthuses Andrew Greeley, author of *The Catholic Imagination*. 'But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.' (Greeley, 1)² This sensibility can readily be recognised at numerous points in *The Lord of the Rings*, as in the extract introducing this essay, where enchanted water seems a vehicle of grace.

What prompts such a perception of the world? For the theist, the religious imagination has two contrasting, but ultimately complimentary aspects. The theist's picture of God focuses in turn on His transcendence and on His immanence. That is, one focus relates to God's distance to His creation, the other to His nearness. The theologian David Tracy (cf. Greeley 5) claims both these perceptions of God influence the religious imagination, although for different faith communities one or the other might have more significance. He calls imagination that stresses God's distance dialectical, while the one that stresses closeness is analogical, since it tends to multiply metaphors and stories about God³. Furthermore, Tracy studied the language in the works of a number of prominent Catholic and Protestant thinkers. Although there are no hard and fast rules, the ten-

dency is that theologians in whom the dialectical sensibility dominates tend to be Protestant, while those with an analogical leaning are more often Catholic. Neither the analogical nor the dialectical imagination is superior, and at times act as a corrective to each other, at least for theists. The Greeley study examined the matter in ordinary Catholic believers and discovered evidence of the analogical imagination permeating their lives in many different ways, necessarily varying in individuals.

It should be borne in mind that Catholics have also tended toward the dialectical imagination at times. Think of Blaise Pascal as he pondered the immensity of the universe and despaired of finding a place for God in the void. Contrast this to Tolkien's description of the Earth as depicted in Ilúvatar's vision to the Ainur: 'And this habitation might seem a little thing to those who consider only (...) the immeasurable vastness of the World [i.e. universe], which still the Ainur are shaping, and not the minute precision to which they shape all things therein' (*Silmarillion* 18). We see here a dynamic picture of creation: the Biblical Genesis, which ends creation on the sixth day, is in a sense updated⁴. More to our point, compared with Pascal's *horror vacui*, Tolkien concentrates on the beauty of what is and sees within it the glory of God's creation. In other words, two quite different 'Catholic' sensibilities: one dialectical, the other analogical.

For Catholics, since God Himself became incarnate in Creation, the world has a sacred dimension. This in part is represented by the sacraments and translates into a sacramental vision of the world. Greeley feels it is hardly surprising the Church had a comparatively tolerant attitude toward the nature religions it came into contact with in the first centuries of its existence. There is the famous letter of Pope Gregory the Great concerning the mission to the Anglo-Saxons, whose culture Tolkien so loved:

'When Almighty God has brought you to our most reverend brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people,

namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them.' (Quoted in Greeley 11)

This wise policy of acculturation, sensitive in its own way toward natural theology and the nature religions has not always been dominant in Church policy, but one can see how important it was for Tolkien. In a sense, he blamed the Normans for unnecessarily 'destroying the temples' of the Anglo-Saxons, so to speak, and set about recreating their mythology, not to mention visiting Celtic, Nordic and Finnish temples, to name a few.

In *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* Peter Ackroyd reminds readers that there was no clean break with centuries of vibrant pre-Reformation Catholic culture in England and further claims that its 'inheritance is buried just below the surface of our own time' (178)⁵. Regarding the analogical imagination that particularly concerns us here there is the difficulty in that the Anglican tradition, especially in its high form, is fairly close to Catholicism. In a similar fashion to the latter, high Anglicanism is not iconoclastic and possesses a developed liturgy, both of which influence the sensibility of the faith community's adherents. This means that British readers of *Mallorn* might easily find elements of the analogical imagination in various non-Catholic works of their national literature. To add to the confusion, Greeley feels that differences occur between high church teaching and the logic of its sacramental sensibility: in the question of sex, for instance. 'In theory, Catholicism says that sex is good, but in practice the Church has yet to shake the Platonist notion that sex is dirty' (57) And of course this 'Platonist notion,' closely related to the dialectical imagination, had a much stronger sway in Tolkien's youth, arguably also affecting his depiction of Middle-earth's sexuality⁶.

Elsewhere Ackroyd also makes the point, half in jest, that humor and transcendence are almost the same thing (Onega 215). This intuition is quite apt for the analogical

imagination. Greeley discusses the effect of the liturgical imagination on Christian culture, and certainly the liturgy involves elements of elevated play. Tolkien himself approved of an early review that recognized in his 'Catholic work' 'an elaborate game of inventing a country' (*Letters* 196). In the light of the above, it is hardly surprising that the Catholic sensibility finds beauty to be close to the truth. This view almost approaches a doctrinal stance, since it is even expressed in the most recent edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in its discussion of the Seventh Commandment⁷. It is worth mentioning that Tolkien himself complained that in our times "goodness is itself bereft of its proper beauty" ("*On Fairy-Stories*" 151), and we may surmise that in his Middle-earth he made an effort to restore the balance.

Academic scholars are generally reluctant to discuss beauty in a literary work. Pertinently, in her review of Peter Jackson's *Two Towers* (2002) in the weekly *Human Events*, writer Marian Kester Coombs declares the film presents Middle-earth as possessing remarkable beauty (*URL*⁸ below). This may be a judgment one can argue with, but it can be said of any film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* that, no matter how faithful otherwise, if it lacked beauty something essential would be missing.

Contrasting with the perception of the orthodox Christian (in which icons, for instance, generally conform to strict canons) beauty for a Catholic has no clearly defined form, since 'artists are sacrament makers, revealers of God-in-the-world, and there is no artistic medium that is excluded from this invitation or opportunity.' (*Shafer, URL* below) As Ingrid Shafer also points out, the Catholic imagination is highly visual. This quality certainly applies to Tolkien's prose: one of the reasons it has inspired so many illustrators is easily traced to its visually evocative nature. Thus fantasy, with its quest to bestow visible shape upon invisible desires, is a valid form in which to search for beauty, and has been a part of that search since Dante and earlier. To some extent in common with Dante, fantasy is essentially comedy for Tolkien: one might say, with its cul-

mination in eucatastrophe, in some ways also a Divine Comedy.

Even thematically experiencing beauty is a liberating force in *The Lord of the Rings*. This does not have to be the extraordinary beauty of Lothlorien. Relative beauty can elevate a traveller. After having traversed the wastelands before the Black Gate of Mordor, Frodo and Sam reach Ithilien, a comparative paradise with many new plants and fragrances. Although their unwilling companion Gollum coughs and retches at this richness, "the hobbits breathed deep, and suddenly Sam laughed, for heart's ease, not for jest." (*Two Towers* 305)

Yet if beauty is akin to truth, what happens when art seems to go against truth? Tolkien was not afraid to explore the boundaries of his convictions. This is evident enough in 'A Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen' from Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*, where, to a large degree, death as the 'Gift of Ilúvatar' it is supposed to be is questioned. As Helen Armstrong persuasively argues (10-12), in that passage Tolkien seems close in spirit to Simone de Beauvoir's insistence that death is an 'unjustifiable violation' for everyone, which the author even once claimed to be the dominant theme of the trilogy⁹. If this poignant exploration of doubt and despair is relegated to the appendixes in the novel, the theme is promoted to a central position in the First Age story 'Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth' in the posthumously published *History of Middle-earth* volume *Morgoth's Ring*.

For Catholics, a sense of community is of major importance¹⁰. The hobbits possess a strong feeling of community, along with an un-Puritanical sense of the good life. On the journey to destroy the One Ring, the hobbits encounter various other communities, which demonstrates the fact that community does not imply uniformity. Tolkien also explores different building blocks of community, such as the importance of friendship¹¹. Compared to a typical adventure story where fellowship or camaraderie might also play a role, in Tolkien we find a profound treatment of genuine friendship. One that goes beyond questions of class solidarity, for instance. Sam refers to Frodo as 'Mr. Frodo' to the

very end, and there can be no doubt of the profound quality of their relationship.

Another point of the Catholic sensibility also worth pointing out is the value it places on authority. With the ubiquitous emphasis on individualism throughout much of society this intuition seems difficult for many to accept. Nonetheless, authority properly understood and carried out actually fosters genuine individualism. A number of social theorists indicate that rampant individualism reduces us to social atoms, thus increasing our vulnerability to power. Gregory Wolfe reminds us that '[p]ower is based on external constraint whereas authority is based on consent.' (*URL* below)

Tolkien is not naïve, and demonstrates that authority can be abused. But in Gandalf, among others, he depicts genuine authority. The humanity of Gandalf gains him much respect, while his obvious spiritual authority is based on persuasion. At the profoundest level it nurtures the individuals that avail themselves of it, and the wizard helps all around him draw upon their inner resources more deeply than often they themselves imagined possible. Gandalf illustrates an Aristotelian sense of wisdom that does not allow him to despise common (i.e. 'hobbit') sense, although he realizes the latter requires guidance.

Conclusion

Obviously Catholicism does not hold a monopoly on a number of the sensibilities discussed above; it is largely their constellation that places them under the same umbrella. It has been suggested that the Catholic imagination as presented by Greeley, on whose conception I largely base my analysis, 'enables Catholics to be more human, or at least to give freer and fuller expression to their humanity.' (*Neuhaus* 81) The nineteenth century literary historian Hypolite Taine simply called it the 'old imagination.' In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien has embodied the Catholic imagination in a new form and rendered a profound expression of the humane that resonates beyond the confines of any single faith community.

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Notes

1. This point was made in all sincerity by Tolkien's son, John, a Catholic priest, in *JRRT - A Film Portrait of JRR Tolkien*.
2. In stressing the continuing importance of enchantment for Catholic imagination Greeley challenges the secularisation theories that have dominated the last hundred years and more, especially in the social sciences. 'I find no persuasive evidence that either modern or post-modern humankind exists outside of faculty office buildings. Everyone tends to be pre-modern.' (p 2) Some sociologists of religion have begun to agree with Greeley and consider a process of de-secularisation is presently underway, which does not mean traditional religions are necessarily regaining their former importance, in some cases it is just the reverse.
3. Greeley sees the analogical imagination as drawing upon the faculty cognitive psychologists assert in their claim that metaphors are 'fundamental tools for human knowledge.' (p 6)
4. Tolkien claimed we get our opinion about God both from Revelation and 'contemplating the world about us.' (*Letters 400*) The latter would no doubt include contemporary knowledge of the world, thus the dynamic creation story of the Music of the Ainur with its modern ring.
5. In his study Ackroyd places Tolkien in the English visionary tradition (45), as well as citing him as an exemplar of the 'old [Catholic] imagination' (177).
6. The Church was generally friendlier toward eroticism before the Reformation. Marital liturgies like the Sarum ritual in England included blessings of the marriage bed 'and a prayer that the bride be compliant and vigorous in bed.' (*Greeley 61*) If in his article 'Hobbit Sex and Sensuality in The Lord of the Rings' Daniel Timmons is correct in his assessment of the sexual practices of the hobbits, perhaps they had their own version of this pre-Reformation rite.
7. In Catholic tradition this is the commandment concerned with bearing false witness.
8. URL refers to the electronic address of internet or electronic database texts that supplied in the reference list.
9. I myself find the ending of the tale open-ended rather than one of complete despair. After the initial breakdown, a stay in the former Lorien may have had a soothing effect on Arwen. At any rate, the stone city of men would hardly be the place for Arwen to recover from her grief. Moreover, even if this were not so, I think Tolkien instils part of his religious vision in the symbolic ending 'and there is her green grave, until the world is changed...' (Return of the King 390). It closely echoes the end of Hurin's mother Morwen, after whom the isle Tol Morwen 'stands alone in the water beyond the new coasts that were made in the days of wrath of the Valar' (*Silmarillion 230*). Both cases indicate a divine sign of sorts. Indeed, their similarity rather indicates the continuation of Arwen's earthly despair to the very end, after which 'Iluvatar' somehow granted her special mercy. In a conventionally Christian understanding, neither Arwen nor Morwen (especially the latter) are particularly salutary characters, so the special favour Iluvatar indicates on their behalf seems more in line with what might be called a theology of hope inherent in Tolkien's work. (I discuss this sensibility in my 'Tolkien's Eschatology of Hope: From Ragnarok to Joyous Subcreation'.)
10. In fact, one of the primary complaints of the Reformers was that the Church placed a community of people between God and the individual soul (*Greeley 123*). What historically followed was the stress 'secularisation' placed on the individual and his or her autonomy. An interesting question is whether the recent cautious swing toward the intellectual respectability of communitarian interests is in part responsible for a similar critical rapprochement with Tolkien's work. Certainly Patrick Curry, one of the author's vigorous non-Catholic apologists, has a marked communitarian bias.
11. Although she doesn't actually mention friendship, feminist critic Kara Gardner claims Tolkien creates characters that offer 'a model for masculinity that is strongly pro-feminist. [He] reminds us that the most honourable tasks for a man are creating, healing, protecting.' (URL below) While I cannot vouch for the critic's feminist instincts in regards to Tolkien, friendship has become a topic feminist philosophers are prone to contemplate (cf. Friedman 11 note1).

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