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# J.R.R. Tolkien as a Christian for our Times

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## Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien is perhaps more popular than ever, due to the recent Hollywood instalments of 'The Lord of the Rings' films. In 1997 numerous polls were taken in England on the most important English book of the century. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy won hands down on all of these polls.[1] Many in British academia were outraged at the results. Commenting on this outrage, Joseph Pearce observes, 'Rarely has a book caused such controversy and rarely has the vitriol of the critics highlighted to such an extent the cultural schism between the literary illuminati and the views of the reading public.'[2] Literary critics were not the only ones with negative reactions to Tolkien's works. Some Christians view Tolkien's books, as well as the recent Hollywood films, with suspicion, fearing unwholesome influences from witchcraft and paganism, and maybe even Satanism.[3] We may remind such sceptics that the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis was Tolkien's biggest fan, writing in a review of his *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, 'Here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron; here is a book that will break your heart…good beyond hope.'[4]

Far from being inherently dangerous, these books are great Christian works that help feed one's faith, rather than subvert it. As a testimonial, Garrin Dickinson explains these stories'

**1** Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), pp. 1-10; and Joseph Pearce, 'True Myth: The Catholicism of *The Lord of the Rings*,' in *Celebrating Middle-Earth: The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilization*, ed. John G. West, Jr. (Seattle: Inklings, 2002), pp. 83-84.

**2** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 2; and Pearce, 'True', p. 84.

**3** Pearce, 'True', p. 85.

**4** On the back cover of J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Part II: The Two Towers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975).

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effect upon his own faith life: 'In my ongoing struggle up the path of Christian maturity, Tolkien's exposition has been my roadmap.'[5] Pearce urges that Tolkien's narratives be required reading for Christian families, right alongside Lewis's *Narnia* series.[6] I wish to suggest that rather than some Satan-influenced fantasy writer, J.R.R. Tolkien is in fact a model Christian for our times, a man who preached Christ not only through his writings, but also in his daily life; who challenged the scholarly community in his field of expertise, as an informed Christian, and who lived a life passionate for Christ. In short, Tolkien is a man, in whom 'we shall discover the soul of a Christian mystic….'[7]

## Early Life

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892.[8] Both of his parents died when he was relatively young; first his father, then his mother after he had moved to England.[9] Before her death, Tolkien's mother had converted, along with her children, from a nominal Anglican upbringing to the Catholic Church, in which they began to experience a vibrant Christian faith.[10] The vibrancy in the Catholic Church in England at this time was not unique to the Tolkiens, for it had been influenced by the copious number of converts from Anglicanism, including such notable Christians as John Henry Newman and G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton's works would have an effect upon Tolkien, at least indirectly.[11]

After his mother's death, Tolkien and his younger brother were raised by Father Francis Morgan, who became his legal guardian, and, among other things, taught the young Tolkien Christian apologetics.[12] Morgan had studied under Newman earlier in life, and this intellectual influence on Tolkien was to be profound.[13] Tolkien's faith was much more than intellectual, however, and his personal relationship with God began to transcend all aspects of his life.[14] George Sayer, friend and companion to both Tolkien and Lewis, notes that Tolkien was extremely loyal to the Christian faith Morgan instilled in him in his youth.[15] Moreover, 'The Christianity he had learned both from his mother and from Father Francis shaped his whole view of life to such an extent that sacrifices were borne willingly, if grudgingly, when they were deemed necessary to the pursuit of virtue.'[16]

**5** Garrin W. Dickinson, 'The Subversion of Middle-Earth: Tolkien's Symphony of Virtue Meets Hollywood,' *Touchstone* (October 2002), p. 26.
**6** Pearce, 'True', p. 85.
**7** Pearce, 'True', p. 85.
**8** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 12.
**9** Pearce, *Tolkien*, pp. 13 and 20.
**10** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 16.
**11** Joseph Pearce, 'Tolkien and the Catholic Literary Revival', in *Tolkien: A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy*, ed. Joseph Pearce (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), p. 117.
**12** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 26.
**13** Bradley J. Birzer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-Earth* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), p. 48.
**14** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 46.
**15** George Sayer, 'Recollections of J.R.R. Tolkien', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 14.
**16** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 31.

Concerning the most significant aspects of his life, Tolkien himself writes, 'And there are a few basic facts, which however drily expressed, are really significant. For instance I was born in 1892 and lived for my early years in "the Shire" in a premechanical age. Or more important, I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories)….'[17] Tolkien's Christianity took on a specific flavour as he began to study the origins of Christianity in England and in Northern Europe, and as he developed his artistic abilities. Janet Blumberg takes note of this specific character of his spirituality, 'To an artist and a Christian such as Tolkien, Christian devotion entails a spirituality much more like the battlefield heroism celebrated by the Anglo-Saxons, when they based their actions not on their own survival or success, but on a personal loyalty to the goodness of a master whose goodness is best seen in the moment in which master has fallen before the enemy.'[18]

As an adolescent, Tolkien fell in love with his future wife, Edith, but was forbidden to pursue a relationship with her by his guardian.[19] Tolkien dutifully obeyed for a number of years, until he was certain that this was in fact the woman he would marry. He was, however, soon whisked away to France to fight in World War I.[20] Thus, in 1916 Tolkien found himself fighting the Germans in France at the infamous Battle of Somme, 'one of the bloodiest of the war. On the first day alone, Germans slaughtered over 20,000 French and British soldiers.'[21] He lost the majority of his school friends in the carnage of that battle.[22]

The Battle of Somme had a profound affect upon the young Tolkien, as he later explained in an interview in 1968, 'The war made me poignantly aware of the beauty of the world …. I remember miles and miles of seething, tortured earth, perhaps best described in the chapters about the approaches to Mordor. It was a searing experience.'[23] Concerning this very passage in *The Lord of the Rings*, specifically the narration of the Dead Marshes, C.S. Lewis, another veteran of the trenches, noted that, 'only someone who had witnessed the trenches of war firsthand could have written this passage'.[24] Needless to say, the seeds of some of the darker passages in Tolkien's works are to be found in the trenches.

Tolkien returned home married and began to experience a lifetime of love with his wife and later with their children. The story in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* concerning Beren and Lúthien was inspired by his wife. This story is at the very core of Tolkien's mythical world, within which is set *The*

**17** J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 288.
**18** Janet Leslie Blumberg, 'The Literary Backgrounds of *The Lord of the Rings*,' in *Celebrating*, ed. West, pp. 75-76.
**19** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 27.
**20** Pearce, *Tolkien*, pp. 37-38.
**21** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 2.
**22** Elwin Fairburn, 'J.R.R. Tolkien: A Mythology for England', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 75.
**23** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, pp. 2-3.
**24** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 114.

*Lord of the Rings*.[25] It is also the basis for the love story concerning Aragorn and Lady Arwen.[26] In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien wrote concerning what he would wish to be inscribed on his wife's tombstone:

Edith Mary Tolkien

1889-1971

Lúthien

> :brief and jejune, except for *Lúthien*, which says for me more than a multitude of words: she was (and knew she was) my Lúthien….I never called Edith *Lúthien*—but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the *Silmarillion*….the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling; the sufferings we endured after our love began…these never touched our depths nor dimmed our memories of our youthful love. For ever (especially when alone) we still met in the woodland glade, and went hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death before our last parting.[27]

Despite his wife's jealousy of Tolkien's relationship with Lewis, the latter described Tolkien as, 'the most married man he knew'.[28]

Some have hypothesized that Tolkien had a warped view of sexuality, since his stories never explicitly, or even implicitly, hint at sexual acts. Tolkien displayed a very Christian view of sex, however, as in the letter he wrote to Lewis, wherein he explained to the bachelor, 'Christian marriage is not a prohibition of sexual intercourse, but the correct way of sexual temperance—in fact probably the best way of getting the most satisfying *sexual pleasure*, as alcoholic temperance is the best way of enjoying beer and wine.'[29] Tolkien loved his children dearly; every Christmas he would write a story in the form of a letter to his children, to help them enjoy Christmas as a very special occasion. These letters were later published as 'The Father Christmas Letters'.[30]

## Christian Witness in the Academy

Gandalf, one of Tolkien's most famous characters, said, in *The Return of the King*, '(I)t is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till.'[31] Tolkien lived these words in his own life, which is one of the reasons his family was so important to him; they were an essential part

**25** Stratford Caldecott, 'Over the Chasm of Fire: Christian Heroism in The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, pp. 22-23.
**26** Caldecott, 'Over', p. 25.
**27** Tolkien, *Letters*, pp. 420-421.
**28** Sayer, 'Recollections', p. 14.
**29** Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 60.
**30** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 42.
**31** J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Part III: The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p. 190.

of his Christian ministry. Tolkien proved an important influence in the circles in which he interacted with others, in the fields that he knew. This is true in his academic pursuits as well as with family and friends. In 1915, before shipping off to war, Tolkien earned first class honours in his English Language and Literature final exam, which practically guaranteed him an academic position after the war.[32]

Tolkien was to become a professor of English at the University of Oxford. While it was rare for Oxford professors to receive standing ovations, these were frequent occurrences for Tolkien, despite the fact that he often mumbled during his lectures.[33] The University of Oxford, former home of the 'father of Comparative Religion', F. Max Müller, provided many challenges to Tolkien's faith. These challenges notwithstanding, while it is true that 'Decades as an Oxford don brought him into contact with every shade of opinion…he remained convinced of the objective truth of his religious convictions'.[34] Indeed, Tolkien frequently criticized his fellow scholars for their anti-religious methodologies. He would fully agree with Peter Kreeft's statement that, 'some truths are so obvious that only experts can deny them'.[35] Or, as Tolkien himself quipped, 'The dwarf on the spot sometimes sees things missed by the travelling giant ranging many countries.'[36]

In a parable he wrote, in an essay on *Beowulf*, Tolkien deftly criticized these literary critics:

> A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of

**32** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 37.
**33** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, pp. 4-5.
**34** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 23.
**35** Peter Kreeft, 'Wartime Wisdom: Ten Uncommon Insights about Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*', in *Celebrating*, ed. West, p. 32.
**36** J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 10.

that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.[37]

Although this parable is focused against trends in *Beowulf* scholarship at the time, it would probably summarize Tolkien's feelings towards certain trends in biblical scholarship as well. This fact becomes even more poignant when it is realized that the longing for the sea may be compared to the longing for heaven in Tolkien's works and even in the Old English texts which inspired Tolkien's vision.[38]

Tolkien's career was as an English philologist at Oxford, with a specialty in Mercian, a dialect of Anglo-Saxon.[39] In actuality, Tolkien was one of the world's foremost authorities on the English language, as well as the numerous dialects of that tongue's ancestors.[40] He had a passion for philology, the study of language.[41] He fell in love with the study of Gothic, Anglo-Saxon, and Welsh at an early age.[42]He had specifically felt an attraction to the history of the British Isles, and consequently their languages and literature.[43] Tolkien studied a number of different languages, including: Afrikaans, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Finnish, French, Gallic, German, Gothic, Greek, Hebrew, Icelandic, Italian, Latin, Norse, Old Slavonic, Spanish, and Welsh. He mastered all the dialects of Old and Middle English.[44] Tolkien even invented his own languages for his stories, creating them so they would evolve as real languages would evolve; he created at least 3 different fully-functional languages for his Middle-Earth.[45] One of the ways he brought his Christian faith into this aspect of his scholarship was to emphasize the importance of the Bible for preserving languages.[46]

Furthermore, Tolkien translated the book of Job from French into English (although he consulted the Hebrew text) for the Jerusalem Bible.[47] Within the book of Job is found a dissonance between appearances and reality.[48] Tolkien relies on this theme throughout his own literary works. In addition, Tolkien worked meticulously to be faithful in his translation, ergo the consultation of the Hebrew text, and at the same time, he used his skills as a philologist and literary artist to write a beautiful translation.

There were numerous other ways in which Tolkien brought his Christianity

**37** Tolkien, 'Beowulf', pp. 7-8.
**38** Blumberg, 'Literary,' pp. 79-80, where she notes, 'the link between yearning for the sea and Art itself, Art as the mediation that embodies love for the beauty of this world and desire for those far-off gleams of a higher world'.
**39** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 3.
**40** Pearce, *Tolkien*, pp. 36-37.
**41** J.R.R. Tolkien, 'A Secret Vice', in *Monsters*, ed. Tolkien, pp. 198-223; and J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Translating Beowulf', in *Monsters*, ed. Tolkien, pp. 49-71.
**42** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 32.
**43** J.R.R. Tolkien, 'English and Welsh', in *Monsters*, ed. Tolkien, p. 162.
**44** See especially, Tolkien, 'English', pp. 162-197.
**45** Sayer, 'Recollections', p. 15.
**46** Tolkien, 'English', p. 165.
**47** Clyde S. Kilby, *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Pub., 1976), p. 54.
**48** Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes (Life as Vanity), Job (Life as Suffering), and Song of Songs (Life as Love)* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 65.

to bear on his scholarship. Tolkien's Christianity informed his analysis of Old and Middle English texts. These documents in turn informed Tolkien's myth-making, as he admits, 'If I may once more refer to my work, *The Lord of the Rings*, in evidence: the names of persons and places in this story were mainly composed on patterns deliberately modeled on those of Welsh….'[49] He was likewise influenced by High Medieval literature as by Anglo-Saxon literature.[50] This was bound to have an affect on Tolkien's spirituality as well, as Blumberg explains,

> Like Anglo-Saxon literature, High Medieval literature coincided with a time of intense Christian spirituality and renewal; the *Pearl*-poet, for example, shows the influence of the Wycliffite revival going on at Oxford in the poet's lifetime, with its critique of ecclesiastical legalism and its dual emphasis on salvation by grace and on the availability of a vernacular Bible.[51]

This '*Pearl*-poet,' of which Blumberg speaks, was central to Tolkien's academic research, as she observes, 'Tolkien, while intimately acquainted with all of the great works and movements of the High Medieval period, used his own scholarly life to work primarily on the works of a lesser-known (but equally brilliant) English contemporary of Chaucer, the nameless Northwest Midlands poet who wrote *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*….'[52]

These sentiments are supported by Tolkien's own words:

> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains the best conceived and shaped narrative poem of the Fourteenth Century, indeed of the Middle Age, in English, with one exception only. It has a rival, a claimant to equality not superiority, in Chaucer's masterpiece *Troilus and Criseyde*. That is larger, longer, more intricate, and perhaps more subtle, though no wiser or more perceptive, and certainly less noble. And both these poems deal, from different angles, with the problems that so much occupied the English mind: the relations of Courtesy and Love with morality and Christian morals and the Eternal Law.[53]

Tolkien was able to bring his Christianity to bear in many aspects of his professional work as an English philologist. He argued that non-Christian mythology was an attempt at expressing some of God's truth.[54] This becomes important when trying to understand his views concerning the original meeting of Christianity and the non-Christian European North. He believed that the Christianity which the first English converts encountered was neither fatalistic nor dualistic.[55] Blumberg brings the most salient features of this culture to the fore, instructing, 'When you think of the

**49** Tolkien, 'English', p. 197 nt. 33.
**50** Blumberg, 'Literary', pp. 67 and 71.
**51** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 72.
**52** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 71.
**53** J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', in *Monsters*, ed. Tolkien, p. 105.
**54** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. xxiii.
**55** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 69.

legacy of what Tolkien absorbed from Anglo-Saxon literature, then think of a dark and fatalistic worldview that does not fear darkness or run away from the battle. Even in defeat, what matters is *mod*—the inward goodness that gleams out more strongly ("mod shall be the more") when we are being overwhelmed and defeated.'[56] This is central to the understanding of Christianity in this culture. Tolkien understood that, 'In this Old English setting, what God suffers on the Cross reveals God's generosity and goodness, God's truly faithful inwardness, in a manner in which no other event or action could do.'[57]

It is in this context that Tolkien reinterprets *Beowulf*. Tolkien argues that the author was a Christian.[58] The shift from pre-Christianity to Christianity is not complete in *Beowulf*, but it is begun, Tolkien maintains.[59] He elaborates, 'Its author is still concerned primarily with *man on earth*, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme no Christian need despise.'[60] This bespeaks the text's 'pagan' origins; nevertheless, 'As the poet looks back into the past, surveying the history of kings and warriors in the old traditions, he sees that all glory (or as we might say "culture" or "civilization") ends in night.'[61]

No solution is provided, instead, 'We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old tales who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more *poetically* because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair.'[62] The author, according to Tolkien, was familiar with the pre-Christian traditions of this region. However, as a Christian himself, he had no cause for despair. Tolkien concludes, 'He could view from without, but still feel immediately and from within, the old dogma: despair of the event, combined with faith in the value of doomed resistance.'[63]

Tolkien critiqued another scholar more directly; F. Max Müller. Müller was a German comparative philologist who, like Tolkien, taught at the University of Oxford at the turn of the century. He is commonly known as the father of *religionswissenschaft*, the 'science of the study of religion', which in conjunction with *religionsgeschichte*, 'history of religion' popularized by Sigmund Freud, came to be known as 'Comparative Religion'. Müller argued that mythology was 'diseased language', and that was the origin of religion as well. Verbs were used to describe the behaviour of objects like the sun and moon, and gendered nouns were used to name these objects. Down through the ages, people forgot that these were merely words and attributed the idea that these objects were

**56** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 66.
**57** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 66.
**58** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 58; Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 35; and Tolkien, 'Beowulf,' p. 23.
**59** Tolkien, 'Beowulf', p. 23.
**60** Tolkien, 'Beowulf', p. 23.
**61** Tolkien, 'Beowulf', p. 23.
**62** Tolkien, 'Beowulf', p. 23.
**63** Tolkien, 'Beowulf', p. 23.

divine. Tolkien critiques Müller, countering his theory of religion's origin.

Tolkien grants, 'the making of language and mythology are related functions'.[64] Nevertheless, he was also influenced by Owen Barfield's theory that language derived from mythology, and not vice versa.[65] Colin Duriez explains, 'Like C.S. Lewis, Tolkien was persuaded by the view of their mutual friend, Owen Barfield, that language and symbolism have become increasingly abstract through history. In Tolkien's beginning, there are real elves (and a real Númenorean civilization). Now there is merely an elven quality to human life, which some can see clearly and others fail to perceive it at all.'[66] Tolkien addresses Müller directly in his 1939 Andrew Lang lecture entitled, 'On Fairy-Stories'.[67]

Tolkien remarks, 'Max Müller's view of mythology as a "disease of language" can be abandoned without regret….You might as well say that thinking is a disease of the mind. It would be more near the truth to say that languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology.'[68] Tolkien's potent criticism for Müller's theory, which proves difficult for such a theory to answer, concerns the origin of the personification itself, if there is no being out there. He points out, 'Let us assume for the moment, as this theory assumes, that nothing actually exists corresponding to the "gods" of mythology: no personalities, only astronomical or meteorological objects. Then these natural objects can only be arrayed with a personal significance and glory by a gift, the gift of a person, of a man. Personality can only be derived from a person.'[69]

Tolkien has his own theology of fantasy to go along with these criticisms. He argues that fantasy is an escape into reality. He contends that fantasy helps us to see things as they actually are, the way we experienced those around us upon our first meeting; beautiful and exciting.[70] In response to a critic who condemned fantasy, Tolkien responded with the following poem:

> Although now long estranged,
> Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
> Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
> and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
> Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
> through whom is splintered from a single White
> to many hues, and endlessly combined
> in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
> Though all the crannies of the world we filled
> with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
> Gods and their houses out of dark

**64** Tolkien, 'Secret', p. 210.
**65** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 30.
**66** Colin Duriez, 'The Theology of Fantasy in Lewis and Tolkien', *Them* 23 (February 1998), p. 47.
**67** J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Monsters*, ed. Tolkien, pp. 109-161.
**68** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', pp. 121-122.
**69** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', p. 123.
**70** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', p. 146.

and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we're made.[71]

Tolkien believed that this form of human creativity reflected divine creativity, and was hence a function of our being created in the image of God. The highest form of this mythmaking is the 'eucatastrophe', the sudden unexpected joy when all appears lost.[72] As he explains, 'the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn"…it is a sudden and miraculous grace….'[73] He is quick to point out that the euchatastrophe 'does not deny the existence of *dycatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure…it denies…universal defeat….'[74] It is in Tolkien's application of this to Christianity, that we find his largest influence on C.S. Lewis.

C.S. Lewis, arguably the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century, converted to Christianity in large part because of his discussions with J.R.R. Tolkien; the other major influences being G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, Owen Barfield's discussions, Hugo Dyson's conversations, and the positive responses of sceptical colleagues to Christian claims.[75] The influence of Tolkien on Lewis can be gauged by the fact that Lewis dedicated his famous book *The Screwtape Letters* to Tolkien.[76] While a professor, Tolkien formed a club, which Lewis joined, where they would read Icelandic sagas.[77] Tolkien and Lewis thus became great friends, and ended up forming the renowned Inklings.[78] Tolkien had such a decisive influence on Lewis's conversion to Christianity that Pearce has gone so far as to suggest that 'without J.R.R. Tolkien there might not have been C.S. Lewis, at least not the C.S. Lewis that has come to be known and loved throughout the world as the formidable Christian apologist….'[79]

What Tolkien, along with Hugo Dyson, did for Lewis, was to explain that Christianity had many of the characteristics of other myths, only it was a true myth. Christianity was a myth that entered the actual world; it entered history.[80] As Tolkien elegantly wrote:

> The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspi-

**71** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', p. 144.
**72** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', p. 153.
**73** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', p. 153.
**74** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', p. 153.
**75** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, pp. 7-8; Walter Hooper, 'The Other Oxford Movement: Tolkien and the Inklings', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 185; Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 57; and Pearce, 'True,' pp. 87-88.
**76** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 89.
**77** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 55.
**78** Pearce, *Tolkien*, pp. 55 and 64.
**79** Pearce, 'True', p. 88.
**80** Pearce, 'True', p. 88; and Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 58.

> ration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfilment [sic] of Creation. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation….It has the pre-eminently 'inner consistency of reality'. There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits….To reject it leads to either sadness or wrath.[81]

What Tolkien did is show how non-Christian mythology was merely 'God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using images of their "mythopoeia" to reveal fragments of His eternal truth'.[82] What was most incredible was that he held the same was true for Christianity, with the exception that the poet in this instance was God, and God used as images real individuals and real history.[83] To say that this discussion had a profound effect upon Lewis is to understate the magnitude, for it transformed Lewis's life from a relatively new theist (having been an atheist for a long time) to a Christian.

As for Tolkien's own mythology, namely as found in *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, many critics have ignored his Christian faith when discussing these works.[84] While it is true that these works are less overtly Christian than Lewis's *Narnia* series, they could have originated only in a Christian imagination.[85] Tolkien's faith was central to his myth, unconsciously so at the outset, but conscious in the revisions, as he conceded to a close friend.[86] Colin Gunton holds that, '…Tolkien's depiction of the war of good against evil has too many interesting parallels with the biblical story of Christ's victory on the cross to be ignored'.[87] The origins of the myth lie in a multitude of influences, from Homer, to the Norse sagas, to the Old and New Testaments.[88] Duriez comments that 'Tolkien's world in general is replete with Christian heroes and yet it is a pagan world'.[89] One important aspect of the novels is their strong sense of absolute moral values, which transcend time and culture.[90] While there is no unambiguous 'religion' in the narratives themselves, they are 'inherently a biblical universe'.[91]

## The Christianity of Middle Earth

*The Lord of the Rings* has had a profound impact on many lives. Stephen

**81** Tolkien, 'On Fairy', pp. 155-156.
**82** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 59.
**83** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 59.
**84** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 102.
**85** Stratford Caldecott, 'The Reflection of Christian Truth in the Mythopoetic Imagination of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien', *Epiphany Journal* 14, no. 4 (1994), p. 80.
**86** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 103.
**87** Colin Gunton, 'A Far-Off Gleam of the Gospel: Salvation in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 133. See also p. 130.
**88** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 53.
**89** Duriez, 'Theology', p. 48.
**90** John G. West, Jr., preface to *Celebrating*, ed. West, p. 10.
**91** Blumberg, 'Literary', p. 76.

Lawhead recounts that in its pages, he saw 'the visible trail of God's passing, the hallowed glow of his lingering presence'.[92] Bradley Birzer sees a parallel between Augustine and Tolkien in that, 'Much as St. Augustine had, Tolkien confronted a world and culture that seemed to many on the verge of collapse. And, as with St. Augustine, Tolkien hoped that his myth would serve as…a return to right reason.'[93]

*The Hobbit* originated as a story for his children, but, after he shared the text with his friends at the Inklings, they, primarily Lewis, encouraged him to publish the story as a book.[94] *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien's jewel among texts, began in the trenches of World War I, and possibly some parts earlier. It is Tolkien's creation story, containing numerous parallels to Gen. In *The Silmarillion*, 'The creation looks forward to an end.'[95] Saturated with hints that God is in control of all that goes on in the wide world, we see that even evil can be transformed into good by the Lord, as Kreeft observes, 'Divine providence is like a French chef, using spices from decayed organisms to make good food even better.'[96]

The fall of Satan is depicted in Tolkien's narrative, as well as other biblical motifs. Pearce takes note:

> The allegory becomes even less mistakable when Tolkien describes the war between Melkor and Manwë, who is clearly cast in the role of the archangel Michael….The parallels between Melkor and Lucifer are made even more apparent when Tolkien explains that the name, Melkor, means 'He who arises in Might'—'But…they name him Morgoth, the Dark Enemy of the World.' Similarly, Lucifer, brightest of all the angels, means 'Light Bringer,' whereas Satan, like Morgoth, means 'Enemy.' Tolkien's intention, both as a Christian and as a philologist, in identifying Melkor with Lucifer is plain enough.[97]

Creation, for Tolkien, began like the uttered word, through music; just as Genesis depicts God creating via speaking, in *The Silmarillion* creation takes place as the music unfolds. As we read: 'Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days. Then the themes of Ilúvatar shall be played aright, and take Being in the moment of utterance, for all shall then understand fully his intent in their part….'[98] Later in the narrative we see Melkor's fall, but also how even this ill turn of events will simply become a part of Ilúvatar's great masterpiece:

> Then Ilúvatar spoke, and he said: 'Mighty are the Ainur, and mighti-

**92** Stephen R. Lawhead, 'J.R.R. Tolkien: Master of Middle-Earth', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 165.
**93** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 67.
**94** Richard Jeffery, 'Root and Tree: The Growth of Tolkien's Writings', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 148; and Pearce, *Tolkien*, pp. 65-66.
**95** Gunton, 'Far', p. 136.
**96** Kreeft, 'Wartime', p. 43.
**97** Pearce, 'True', p. 90.
**98** J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 4.

> est among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Ilúvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.'[99]

If *The Silmarillion* is Tolkien's masterpiece, his jewel among texts, then the story of Beren and Lúthien is his jewel among jewels. As Caldecott explains, '…Beren and Lúthien, [are] at the very core of the mythological system of which *The Lord of the Rings* is merely a fragment….'[100] This tale is a romantic adventure from start to finish. As in Song, it may mirror the divine pursuit of our soul. Lúthien 'follows after Beren in much the same way as the divine assistance which comes to us at crucial moments in our own individual Quests'.[101]

*The Silmarillion* is not Tolkien's only narrative with Christian parallels. *The Lord of the Rings* is saturated with hints of Jesus. As Pearce mentions, 'though Tolkien makes never so much as a glancing reference to Jesus Christ in a single paragraph of all *The Lord of the Rings*' thick volumes, His face is glimpsed on virtually every page….subconsciously he was so saturated with the Christian concept of reality that it permeates his myth profoundly.'[102] In many different ways, scholars have noted how Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn are Christ-figures.[103] To their number, Samwise Gamgee may be added as well.

Gandalf may be seen as a Christ-figure in that he sacrifices his life to save his companions.[104] He is later 'resurrected,' returning from the dead, clothed in white, having undergone a powerful transformation.[105] Aragorn is a Christ-figure, in that he too descends to the realm of the dead, and returns. Furthermore, Aragorn is the rightful heir to the throne of Middle-Earth, as Jesus is the rightful heir to the throne of the Davidic kingdom, although both are humble in appearance. Frodo as a Christ-figure may be seen in the burden he must bear on behalf of all Middle-Earth, carrying his 'cross', the ring bound for destruction. Finally, Sam may be seen in this role, when he has to bear Frodo's burden, and both descend into Mordor, which is analogous to the realm of the dead.

While Tolkien's works may not be blatantly theological, they deal with the Christian message of salvation, broadly understood.[106] The message is that happiness is not to be found in this world, but in the world to come in eter-

**99** Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, p. 6.
**100** Caldecott, 'Over', pp. 22-23.
**101** Caldecott, 'Over', p. 25.
**102** Pearce, *Tolkien*, pp. 82 and 94.
**103** Sheridan Gilley, 'Christianity and Fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings', *The Modern Churchman* 25, no. 1 (1982), p. 51; and Kreeft, 'Wartime,' p. 45.
**104** J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Part I: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 430.
**105** Tolkien, *Two*, pp. 151 and 241.
**106** Gunton, 'Far', p. 125.

nity.[107] In a letter Tolkien once wrote:

> If you do not believe in a personal God the question: 'What is the purpose of life?' is unaskable and unanswerable….So it may be said that 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….We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendour.[108]

The true saviour of Middle-Earth is this One God, 'who works through love and freedom of his creatures…using even our mistakes and the designs of the Enemy…to bring about our good'.[109] At root, *The Lord of the Rings* is a 'mystical Passion Play', where the bearing of the ring, which represents sin, reminds us of the crosses we must carry; 'The mythological Quest is a veritable Via Dolorosa.'[110] Within his narratives we find a vivid depiction of the results of the fall, as well as its reversal.[111]

## Conclusion

We owe a debt to Tolkien, for his stories, for Lewis, and for his incredible witness to Christ. He is a model of a Christian for our times. We may deservedly call him, 'a poet of the Kingdom'.[112] In fact, as Birzer points out, Tolkien 'reached far more people with his Middle-earth mythology than did any of the other Christian humanist thinkers, including Lewis. Outside of the scriptural authors, he may be the most widely read Christian author of our time.'[113] In 1973, at the age of 81, J.R.R. Tolkien left this life for the next. He was buried with his wife, below a tombstone which reads: 'Edith Mary Tolkien, Lúthien, 1889-1971. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Beren, 1892-1973.'[114] Let us imitate Tolkien by being Christ's faithful witness to our family, our friends, and our colleagues. In such a way we may honour Tolkien, who, like the man in his parable, has built for us a tower, from the top of which we may 'look out upon the sea'.

**107** Kevin Aldrich, 'The Sense of Time in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 100.
**108** Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 400.
**109** Caldecott, 'Over', p. 32.
**110** Pearce, 'True', pp. 92-93.
**111** Gunton, 'Far', p. 137.
**112** Robert Murray, 'J.R.R. Tolkien and the Art of the Parable', in *Tolkien*, ed. Pearce, p. 50.
**113** Birzer, *J.R.R.*, p. 136.
**114** Pearce, *Tolkien*, p. 207.