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The Lord of the Rings: A Christian Refounding of the Political Order

Abstract

Examines the “severely classical moral doctrine” of *The Lord of the Rings*; discusses stewardship as “the proper subordination of Power to Care”; and approves of Tolkien’s “veiling of the Divine” by keeping overt religious references out of the work as a means of leading readers to understanding and affirmation.

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Stewardship in *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religious and moral aspects

THE LORD OF THE RINGS
A CHRISTIAN REFOUNDING OF THE POLITICAL ORDER
by Donald L. Reinken

Responsible Christians are not alone today in their concern for a defense of decency. Quite humanistic thinkers look at secular society founded on the philosophy that justice is a luxury bought with the fruits of injustice and see it as very problematic that men should do right gladly and humbly. If Machiavellianism has dimmed the moral vision, we can do worse than to imitate Plato and Aristotle in founding moral edification on the right exposition of the poets. If we are not yet strong enough to fight the sophists on the ground of their choosing, we may yet gain right understanding by reflecting critically on those works of art whose virtue we immediately sense.

Among modern works I submit as candidate for the most serious, even Christian consideration The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien. That the author was the good friend and acknowledged spiritual mentor of the late C.S. Lewis may allay much skepticism toward so strong a claim. The power of the work, of course, may only be known in the reading of it. It rouses intense enthusiasm. Of the beauty and excitement of the prose; of the rich, compact, various and complete story I may not justly speak. I note only one aesthetic virtue which happens to be significant of the seriousness and profundity of the author's vision: the descending action is exceedingly fine. Only the greatest authors know how to get down to earth again.

The story begins in the Shire of the "Hobbits", an isolated region of comfortable self-preservation and decency. "Growing food and eating it occupied most of their time". The hobbits enjoy their idyllic life with a singular lack of government and religion. Yet it is no impossible "innocence of the noble savage", a sanctity without God, that preserves their modest happiness. With gentle satire, the first chapter reveals them as fully endowed with all the human failings and meannesses of decent comfortable society. We serious readers cannot take the Shire for granted as most of its complacent inhabitants do. Our first need is to know how this world is possible. A novel might do this by the detailed unfolding of life in the Shire, but this work is an epic and performs its task in a more exciting fashion.

The tale moves into a symbolic and magical level with the revelation in the Shire of the One Ring of Power. The Dark Lord made this Ring of Dominion and put into it much of his former power. Were he to recover it, his disastrous victory would be complete. Since to hide it safely is impossible and to use it the most dangerous temptation ("absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely"), the Ring must be destroyed. It may be unmade only in the fires of its forging, in the heart of the Enemy's land of Mordor. This perilous errand is undertaken not by a mighty warrior or great wizard, but by Frodo, a simple hobbit of the quiet Shire.

The quest to destroy the Enemy's Ring interweaves with the great war against him and much else besides, for this is a complex work moving on many levels. Beside the natural dangers of their journey, the hobbits are beset by the servants both of the Dark Lord and of Saruman, the White Wizard who, though ordained to contest the power of the Dark Lord, has after long study of the arts of the Enemy turned to evil on his own account. The hobbits are helped by and rejoice in many good and fair things: the simple pleasures, their own discovered strength, and many folk, from a flustered innkeeper to the beautiful Elves who "...have their own labours and sorrows, and they are little concerned with the ways of the hobbits or of any other creatures upon

earth." Especially important are two of the hobbits' companions: Gandalf, the Grey Wizard, who has made hobbits his especial study and care; also Aragorn the Ranger, "greatest traveller and huntsman of this age of the world."

Aragorn's errand is to the defense of the city of Minas Tirith, principal bulwark of the West against the open war made by the Enemy. This city, capital of the great kingdom of Gondor, ruled for long ages by Stewards "till the King should come again", provides the other principal focus of the work. The symbolic Quest and personal trial of the hobbits is matched by the public epic of the City. Even as in Frodo's quest we see the limit of moral endeavor, so we see in Gondor the finite political good. After the Quest and War are finished, the messianic King comes to Gondor and the hobbits return to their prosaic Shire, setting it to rights without any superhuman help, "for that is what they were trained for".

Thus the defense of decency proves to be political education in the ruling art, and that education is not in injustice and cruelty but in heroism and sacrifice. The education and development proceed not merely in the careers of many of the characters, successes and failures alike, but also in the movement of the work from the categorical renunciation of power to the "Return of the King".

The relation of this education to the world is expressed in a conversation between two of the hobbits at a point where one, Merry, has performed his great exploit in the War and is newly healed. His friend Pippin speaks first:

"Fill up while I run and see about some food.
And then let's be easy for a bit. Dear me!
We Took and Brandybucks, we can't live
long on the heights."

"No," said Merry. "I can't. Not yet,
at any rate. But at least, Pippin, we can
now see them, and honour them. It is best
to love first what you are fitted to love,
I suppose: you must start somewhere and
have some roots, and the soil of the Shire
is deep. Still there are things deeper
and higher; not a gaffer could tend his
garden in what he calls peace but for them,
whether he knows about them or not. I
am glad that I know about them, a little."
(Volume III, page 146)

There is a definite parallel with the Republic's myth of the cave. From a love of the things at home, there is an ascent to the heights where one sees that on which the loved things depend and so preserves them. (The hobbits, being "erotic" rather than philosophic, make their return from the heights voluntarily.)

The political function of the education of the hobbits is brought out in an exchange between Merry and Gandalf the Wizard near the end of the homeward journey:

"Well, we've got you with us,"
said Merry, "so things will soon be
cleared up."

"I am with you at present", said
Gandalf, "but soon I shall not be. I
am not coming to the Shire. You must
settle its affairs yourselves; that
is what you have been trained for."

Do you not yet understand? My time is over: it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so. And as for you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now. Grown indeed very high; among the great you are, and I have no longer any fear at all for any of you.'" (Volume III, page 275)

So far as we have gone, we would have only the modesty of the hobbits to save us from these texts being seized on by humanists to preach self-adulatory sermons on "Man's coming of age." The true coming of age is not a loosing of restraints but a putting away of childish things. This work teaches a severely classical moral doctrine about what a man may and must do. Moreover, that teaching is accomplished in a poetic framework which is Christian, albeit elusively so, yet ineluctably so.

We may begin our explication of Tolkien's moral doctrine by repeating from another aspect the distinction between eros and understanding already raised when we mention the myth of the cave. To use terms more proper to Tolkien, let us then speak of "Power" and "Care". "Care" which belongs to the concrete and particular, we may reasonably associate with Charity or "Love", as we now translate St. Paul. Love serves all things; "Power", by contrast, masters and uses all things. Power, as modern man knows and worships it, is rooted in universal and abstract "scientific" knowledge, unrestrained by any loyalty to the concrete and particular. This power based on science, which we have embraced as "the conquest of nature for the relief of men's estate", we may recognize in the modern world as the principle of the steam engine and of the thermonuclear missile; the principle of mass communication and of the professionally manipulated election campaign. If anything at all is to be learned from Tolkien, and much may be learned, it is that Power, liberated as it now is from Care, is wholly evil for man.

The proper subordination of Power to Care, the teaching that kingship is stewardship, is neatly expressed in a jesting line which, significantly enough, follows hard upon the overthrow of Saruman, the wizard who had understanding but not Love: "All wizards should have a hobbit or two in their care--to teach them the meaning of the word, and to correct them".

We may see the constructive nature of Tolkien's political philosophy on the obvious symbolic level. Rather than restricting ourselves to the One Ring alone and the simplistic renunciation of power this suggests, we must consider all the Great Rings of Power. These are, as the epigraph tells us:

"Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie."

Not all the Rings are evil. On the contrary, concerning the Three Rings we are told:

"Those who made them did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained." (Volume I, page 282)

One must give full weight to the final clause of purpose. It is the caring for and preserving the world which is the basis of legitimate power. What is evil is power perverted from means to end, namely the Nine Rings of strength given to sorcerer-kings, the Seven Rings of the

Dwarves, whose besetting sin is avarice, and, finally, the Enemy's own One Ring of domination.

What we have said concerning the evil of Power as an end rather than means is only a first step in explicating Tolkien's doctrine. It would be perilous to assert that the legitimization of power follows simply from its use "to preserve all things unstained". Even as a court, before attempting to decide or do justice, must first know that a case is within its jurisdiction, so we are to do only that to which we are called. Gandalf has the last word on this:

"Yet it 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. What weather they shall
have is not ours to rule."

(Volume III, page 155)

The exercise of power is legitimate, then, only in our appointed task, that is, action is proper to our own circumstances.

Another propriety is central to the work, namely, that power exercised be proper to the nature of the actor. The Rings of Power are, qua magical rings, means of power extraneous to the user. Consider how Sam, Frodo's servant, resists the Ring when it tempts him with fantasies of conquering and redeeming the ruined land of Mordor:

"In that hour of trial it was the
love of his master that helped
most to hold him firm; but also
deep down in him lived still un-
conquered his plain hobbit-sense;
he knew in the core of his heart
that he was not large enough to
bear such a burden, even if such
visions were not a mere cheat to
betray him. The one small garden
of a free gardener was all his
need and due, not a garden swollen
to a realm; his own hands to use,
not the hands of others to command."

(Volume III, page 177)

In this connection it is also important to note that Sam does, by the humble use of his own hands, become in a sense a king and a saviour-- of his own land.

On the symbolic level, we note the danger of the Rings of Power in their primary aspect as rings of invisibility. Invisibility enhances power precisely insofar as it takes away responsibility for action. One may compare in this context Plato's discussion of the Ring of Invisibility in Book II of the Republic where he uses the myth to argue that the possessor of such a ring would work the greatest injustice. Tolkien presses the myth a level beyond Plato's passing use. One who uses the ring for the appearance of invisibility, that is, for the enhancement of power by the denial of one's proper nature, in the end becomes truly invisible; he ceases to be and becomes a mere actor and not a person. A suitable text for these ideas is Gandalf's first warning about the Rings:

"...But the Great Rings, the Rings
of Power, they were perilous. 'A
mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the

Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness. And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he fades; he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later--later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last--sooner or later the dark power will devour him."

(Volume I, page 56)

The mistrust of unnatural "Power" implies a depreciation of the "scientific" calculation by which modern man, having arrogated to himself sovereignty over all things, conducts his use of "Power". Hear on the contrary Tolkien's warning against man's arrogation:

"Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends."

(Volume II, page 221)

Rather it is the occasion which teaches us. As is said upon Frodo's claiming the Quest, "Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it? Or if they are wise, why should they expect to know it, until the hour is struck?"

The modern supremacy of detached calculation is replaced with a concrete insight into the inwardness and fitness of the things which the ancients denoted as Prudence or Practical Wisdom. Tolkien often uses the Jewish and Christian term 'heart' in a cognitive sense to express this divination for the guidance of conduct. Thus Gandalf, arguing against the slaying of the evil Gollum, goes on from "the wise can not see all ends" to say:

"'And he (Gollum) is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill...'"

(Volume I, page 69)

In marked contrast to the modernists' arrogance is Gandalf's acceptance "for good or ill". This surrender of human arrogance and reliance upon what is not of our own ordering and comprehending is not and cannot be a surrender of man to an evil or meaningless universe. Man's primal sing is not self-defense against happenstance chaos, but rebellion against the natural order. To speak of the natural order raises the question of the Orderer, and here we are come to Providence, the deepest theme of The Lord of the Rings. Throughout the treatment of Providence there is a veiling of the secretum as, for example, in Gandalf's explanation of the finding of the Ring:

"'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."
(Volume I, page 65)

To have the plot turn upon the more or less recognized workings of Providence is superficially the easiest thing for the author of fiction to do. Inasmuch it is the hardest thing for the reader to appreciate. The critic can barely do more than commend these turns to the reader's reverent attention, that he may see therein not contrivance but a true telling. In such spirit one must consider the meaning of the climactic event where the Quest is fulfilled, not by Frodo's virtue (he fails of perfection at the last test), but mediately, by his prophetically spoken curse. The faithful will assent to and the unbiased may recognize a supreme poetic telling that Providence accepts the loyal, but insufficient, finite good of its creatures; weaves it with the vainly rebellious evil of others its creatures; and achieves good beyond human power or foretelling.

The veiling of the Divine governing and ordering the world leads to the assertion that this epic, wherein there is virtually no overt religious practise of reference to God, is nevertheless a powerful testimony to Him. There are two reasons why this teaching should not be blatant. Firstly, the nature of a mystery itself requires that we allow ourselves to be led by it into concrete understanding, rather than that we approach it upon our own preconceived terms. Consequently, the path will not declare its direction to one who has not yet travelled it. Theological formulae can convey truth only to those who have already believed. The second reason for so great an apparent silence about God in a book which is about Him is that it is addressed to a "secular" age and audience. Even as the medieval language led from a vulgar superstition to God, Tolkien's modern language must lead from a vulgar irreligion to God. This epic is written for us and as such must begin from the "godless" surface where twentieth-century man thinks to live and move and have his being.

These two reasons--the not merely discursive communicability of theology and the unfortunate mental language now prevailing--imply that we cannot hope to discuss the theological basis even so briefly as we have sketched the moral doctrine itself; the matter and the time forbid. Any convincing information on such matters can come only from the serious reading of the work itself. I can here only point to such guideposts in the work as have seemed to me to lead inevitably away from any merely "secular" interpretation.

I begin with what seems the unique example of a religious practise in the work: a moment's silent grace before meat, facing west, which is explained by the host thus:

"So we always do, we look to Númenor that
was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is,
and to that which is beyond Elvenhome
and will ever be." (Volume II, pages 284-285)

This formula, though it begins with a reference not to the Eternal Beginning, but to an Atlantis-like legend of human pride and fall, ends like the Gloria Patri on the "ever shall be, world without end". The comparison of the traditional formula and Tolkien's captures the essence of the difference between the Biblical view and any modern restoration. The Bible begins and ends with God. A contemporary understanding of necessity begins with the human things and only at best ends with God.

This same passage may be taken as a clue to one of the most prominent aspects of Tolkien's imagery--his geographic polarization. The East-West dichotomy, with evil in the East of Middle-earth and freedom in the West, is writ large all over the work. We are here invited to lift up our eyes and look further West beyond the mortal arena, for it is only by looking in the direction (and not "East") that we may understand what

divides the world. A lively sensitivity to Tolkien's poetic use of the East-West symbolism will awaken us to his sense of God's intervention in and governance of this Middle-earth.

Nor is this intervention expressed by a merely static geographical polarity. There are Elves, exiles from West oversea, wandering for a while in Middle-earth, teaching and caring, belonging to both the seen and unseen worlds. A careful reflection upon the Elves amounts to a recovery of doctrine concerning the Angels, the mighty messengers of God. It is in the poetry, yea the hymns, of the Elves that one can find many of the clues to Tolkien's poetic cosmology. The passage of the Elves west at the end of the Third Age and the ostensible ending of the tutelage of Middle-earth means that the work does not end in a theophany, but in a drawing of the veil. The Messiah does come into his kingdom, but is not here proclaimed son of God. A veiling, however, is not a denial of the truth but rather an affirmation so fashioned that our blinded eyes can, strangely, see. Whosoever truly journeys with Frodo to the mystery in Mordor and West oversea cannot say in his heart, "There is no God."

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