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### Abstract

The disruption caused by a war of ideas is detailed in this paper on Pope Pius X and the Catholic Church's response to modernism in the early years of the century, and shows this controversy's clear influence on Tolkien's thinking in his letters and fiction.

### Additional Keywords

Antimodernism; Pius X, Pope; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religion

## **“Surely You Don’t Disbelieve”: Tolkien and Pius X: Anti-Modernism in Middle-earth**

**A. R. Bossert**

The early Twentieth Century was an exciting time to be raised Roman Catholic in England. Historian Sheridan Gilley writes, “Catholic England came of age, when Pope Pius X in his Constitution *Sapienti Consilio* of 29 June 1908 declared England no longer a missionary territory” (34). English Catholics witnessed the consecration of Westminster Cathedral in 1910, but the optimism of its growth and renewed strength was tainted by external persecution—a procession of the Blessed Sacrament was cancelled due to “Protestant sentiment” in 1908—and by suspicions of disloyalty among members mounted from within the Church itself (Leonard 270-1). In 1907, Pius X issued the encyclicals *Lamentabili* and *Pascendi dominici gregis* to combat what he called “Modernism,” a faith-corrupting force. In 1910, Pius X’s witch-hunt climaxed with *Sacrorum antistitum*, an oath against Modernist philosophy to be taken by all Catholic clergy and theologians. Tolkien was young when all of these documents were first published, but the scholarly fathers following the rule of St. Philip would have discussed them in the Oratory, where J.R.R. Tolkien lived and visited with his friend and guardian Fr. Francis Morgan.<sup>1</sup> An intellectually sophisticated and orthodox Catholic, Tolkien also exhibited awareness of early twentieth-century Church policies later in his life. *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings* all parallel the anti-modernist rhetoric of *Pascendi dominici gregis* in their assertion of truth in ancient stories, suspicion of historical criticism with its glamour of intellectualism, and their condemnation of a tool that is too dangerous to be used.

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<sup>1</sup> Colombe writes of the Oratorians: “The Birmingham Oratory which provided the backdrop of JRRR’s life from 1904 to 1911, was founded by Cardinal Newman and remained a stronghold of cultural Catholicism. [...] [T]he houses of the Oratory around the world are renowned for both orthodoxy and learning” (56). I would also like to acknowledge Fr. Gareth Jones of the Archdiocese of Wales for his generous assistance while I was researching British Catholicism.

Catholic Modernism is not to be confused with the larger Modernist movement in Western culture. Pius X used the term to describe what he perceived was a unified attack on the Catholic Church by its own members; “the criticism We are concerned with is an *agnostic, immanentist, and evolutionist* criticism. Hence anybody who embraces it and employs it, makes profession thereby of the errors contained in it and places himself in opposition to Catholic faith” (*Pascendi* §34).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the danger of simply “embracing” and “employing” the tools of Modernism already sounds like the hobbits’ forbidden relationship to the Ring, an object that can ensnare one simply by being carried too closely. Agnosticism and immanentism represent the negative and positive sides of Modernist thought, the former arguing human reason can only consider scientific phenomenon, the latter arguing that religion comes entirely from within the human psyche (Jodock 4). Darrel Jodock explains that “Modernism wrongly asserts, according to *Pascendi*, that religion arises out of the human subconscious and that faith has no basis outside this internal religious sentiment” (4-5). By evolutionist criticism, Jodock says the Pope means “any notion that dogma may have evolved or that it may need to change again”; related to evolution is “the historical criticism of the Bible” (5). Jodock outlines the other “heresies” of Modernism, all of which appear to be favorite topics of Tolkien’s letters to Michael: “views of faith and science, of dogma and the sacraments, of the inspiration of Scripture, of the church, and of church-state relations” (6).

This paper will first examine how Tolkien’s personal letters during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s actually reiterate language and arguments devised by Pius X. Connecting Tolkien’s religious philosophy to his fantasy reveals anti-modernist influences through *The Silmarillion* and the conclusion of *The Hobbit*, which specifically re-inscribes the anti-modernist faith in Providence despite human involvement in history. Moving to *The Lord of the Rings*, the paper shows how Pius X’s descriptions of Modernist thought resonates with depictions of Saruman and Boromir. The paper concludes by discussing how *Pascendi* might explain the disappearance of explicitly religious imagery in Middle-earth despite its retention in Tolkien’s scholarship.

Historians contain Catholic anti-modernism within fairly precise historical dates, ending it with the death of Pius X in 1914. Even those who

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<sup>2</sup> All italics in quotations from *Pascendi* are in the original.

describe the movement negatively acknowledge that its ramifications were felt throughout the century, especially in the realms of scholarship and censorship:

Although the anti-modernist reaction may be said to have ended in 1914, serious after-effects lingered on. In the crucial area of Biblical scholarship, fears had not yet calmed after the war and were aggravated by several ecclesiastical decisions. [...] Catholic exegesis was not liberated until 1943 when Pope Pius XII promulgated the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*, which sanctioned and ratified the work of moderate Catholic exegesis [...]. (Schoenl 228-229)

The most dolorous blow which Pius X struck against the phantom of Modernism was what has commonly been referred to as the Oath against Modernism, contained in *Sacrorum antistitum* (Schoenl 225). Despite its alleged effectiveness, "The anti-modernist oath was to be applied in all clerical appointments until the 1960s" (Gilley 38). The oath was finally revoked during the Second Vatican Council.<sup>3</sup> What had appeared as the vigilance of the Church against the forces of intellectual progress and theological deconstruction had come to an end, and Tolkien did not praise the change in the Church's stance regarding the scholarly approach to religious history.

In a letter to Michael Tolkien, dated 1 November 1963, Tolkien addresses his son's crisis of faith. He recommends daily Communion and expresses concern over those who attempt to use Biblical exegesis to deconstruct the historical Jesus:

You speak of 'sagging faith', however. [...] I have suffered grievously in my life from stupid, tired, dimmed, and even bad priests; but I now know enough about myself to be aware that I should not leave the Church [...]. If He is a fraud and the Gospels fraudulent—that is: garbled accounts of a demented megalomaniac (which is the only alternative), then of course the spectacle exhibited by the Church (in the sense of clergy) in history and today is simply evidence of a gigantic fraud. [...] It takes a fantastic will to unbelief to suppose that Jesus never really 'happened', and more to suppose that he did not say the things recorded

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<sup>3</sup> However, in 1998, Pope John Paul II issued an oath with similar themes in his *motu proprio* entitled *Ad tuendam fidem*: "To protect the faith of the Catholic Church against errors arising from certain members of the Christian faithful" (*Ad tuendam*).

of him—so incapable of being ‘invented’ by anyone in the world at that time [...]. (*Letters* 337-8)

After discussing his belief in “Petrine claims” based on the popes’ perpetual defense of the Blessed Sacrament, Tolkien concludes this portion of the letter with an explicit reference to Pius: “I suppose the greatest reform of our time was that carried out by St Pius X: surpassing anything, however needed, that the Council will achieve. I wonder what state the Church would now be but for it” (*Letters* 339). Carpenter writes that the reform is “Possibly a reference to Pius X’s recommendation of daily communion and children’s communion” and that the Council in question is the Second Vatican Council (*Letters* 450). Within the context of the letter’s discussion of daily Communion, Carpenter’s assertion about the reference to Pius X is valid; however, Tolkien’s digressions on papal authority and concerns over those who argue Jesus did not say the things recorded in the Gospels both repeat Pius X’s views against anti-modernism. As Pius X proposed, “Thus, they will not allow that Christ ever uttered those things which do not seem to be within the capacity of the multitudes that listened to Him. [...]. He did and said only what they, judging from the time in which he lived, can admit Him to have said or done” (*Pascendi* §30). What the Modernist sees as rendering Christ’s words suspicious actually make Tolkien believe; for him, the veracity of the Gospel is certain precisely because Christ’s words seem out of place with the time they were spoken.

A war between faith and history erupted again in the Second Vatican Council, and it inspired another letter written to Michael. Tolkien lays a middle-path between the forces of “primitivism,” the desire to reform the Church according to historical data on early Church practices, and “the other motive (now so confused with the primitivist one, even in the mind of any one of the reformers): *aggiornamento*: bringing up to date: that has its own grave dangers, as has been apparent throughout history” (*Letters* 394). To combat both forces, Tolkien uses the metaphor of the Tree:

‘my church’ was not intended by Our Lord to be static or remain in perpetual childhood; but to be a living organism (likened to a plant), which develops and changes in externals by the interaction of its bequeathed divine life and history—the particular circumstances of the world into which it is set. [...] For those living in the days of its branching

growth the Tree is the thing, for the history of a living thing is part of its life, and the history of a divine thing is sacred. (*Letters* 394)

The changes of the Church are all in its “externals,” suggesting its practices, not its dogma. The Tree does not describe “evolutionary” faith. History is not a changing part of the Tree. Mentioning its stewards, Tolkien writes, “but in husbandry the authorities, the keepers of the Tree, must look after it, according to such wisdom as they possess, prune it, remove cankers, rid it of parasites, and so forth” (*Letters* 394). Tolkien describes Church leaders who root out dangers to the Tree, but the imagery acknowledges that, as caretakers who must “prune,” they must be able to alter it. *Pascendi’s* Modernists see authority as a purely conservative force attempting to suppress change until being compelled to compromise.<sup>4</sup> Anti-modernism opposes the reactionary as well as the radical; one should not force the tree into a shape that scholars conjecture the tree once had nor into a shape that reformers fantasize the tree will have.

Pius X describes the Church as a tree when he illustrates the Modernist violence to faith: “Moreover they lay the axe not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root, that is, to the faith and its deepest fires. And having struck at this root of immortality, they proceed to disseminate poison through the whole tree, so that there is no part of Catholic truth from which they hold their hand, none that they do not strive to corrupt” (*Pascendi* §3).<sup>5</sup> The fate of the Tree, the backwards glance, the forced evolution, are all elements which recur throughout Tolkien’s fantasy. He shows a foul corruption of the trees in the image of Ungoliant’s fatal feeding on the Trees of Valinor in *The Silmarillion*:

Then the Unlight of Ungoliant rose up even to the roots of the Trees, and Melkor sprang upon the mound; and with his black spear he smote each

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<sup>4</sup> Pius X depicts a Modernist view of authority:

Now it is by a species of compromise between the forces of conservation and of progress, that is to say between authority and individual consciences, that changes and advances take place. The individual consciences of some of them act on the collective conscience, which brings pressure to bear on the depositaries of authority, until the latter consent to a compromise, and, the pact being made, authority sees to its maintenance. (*Pascendi* §27)

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Pearce also compares Tolkien’s image of the White Tree to fellow Catholic G.K. Chesterton’s description of the Church as Tree (Pearce 119).

Tree to its core, wounded them deep, and the sap poured forth as it were their blood [...]. But Ungoliant sucked it up [...] the poison of Death that was in her went into their tissues and withered them, root, branch, and leaf; and they died. (*Silmarillion* 76)

Later, in the *Akallabêth*, the Númenóreans are given a seedling of Celeborn, made in the image of Telperion, the first White Tree consumed by Ungoliant, yet: “Sauron urged the King to cut down the White Tree, Nimloth the Fair, that grew in his courts, for it was a memorial of the Eldar and of the light of Valinor. At first the King would not assent to this, since he believed that the fortunes of his house were bound up with the Tree” (*Silmarillion* 272). Reduced to superstition, the faith of the Númenóreans wanes, and “the King yielded to Sauron and felled the White Tree, and turned then wholly away from the allegiance of his fathers” (*Silmarillion* 273). As in Pius X’s depiction, Ar-Pharazôn’s pride destroys an image of faith and unchanging history since the tree Nimloth represents the historic connections back to Valinor and the creation of Arda. Faith and history are inextricably entwined for Tolkien because history, like myth or any narrative, transmits the stories of the past. Pius X’s Modernists weaken that transmission by using textual studies to show how Biblical variations indicate a change in the epistemological truth in order to suit a community’s contemporary needs (*Pascendi* §34).<sup>6</sup>

Both Melkor and Sauron set elves and men against the Valar with anti-hierarchical rhetoric that rewrites the past. Melkor’s rhetoric of power and bondage is akin to the liberation from authority which *Pascendi*’s Modernists offer through their re-scripting of history:

[A]mid his fair words others were woven [...]. Visions he would conjure in their hearts of the mighty realms that they could have ruled at their own will, in power and freedom in the East; and then whispers went abroad that the Valar had brought the Eldar to Aman because of their jealousy, fearing that the beauty of the Quendi and the makers’ power that Ilúvatar had bequeathed to them would grow too great for the Valar to

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<sup>6</sup> Biblical scholarship was, of course, able to reach a compromise in 1943 with Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* (Jodock 11). However, Tolkien directly tackles core assumptions of “textual studies” in “On Fairy-Stories” when he describes the need to move beyond the historical approach for a fuller understanding of a story: “there remains still a point too often forgotten: that is the effect produced *now* by these old things in the stories as they are” (“Fairy-Stories” 126-8).



govern [...]. [N]ow the whisper went among the Elves that Manwë held them captive [...]. (*Silmarillion* 68)

Melkor's dastardly lies to the Elves ultimately lead to their capture and transformation into Orcs (*Silmarillion* 50). Sauron apes Melkor's creative devices in the *Akallabêth*, informing the Númenórean kings that the Valar are jealously guarding the keys to everlasting life. Sauron lies to the Númenóreans to make them hate the Valar: "It is he whose name is not now spoken; for the Valar have deceived you concerning him, putting forward the name of Eru, a phantom devised in the folly of their hearts, seeking to enchain Men in servitude to themselves. For they are the oracle of this Eru, which speaks only what they will" (*Silmarillion* 271-2).

Glaurung the dragon is far more subtle—he remains true to historic fact but colors history in such a way as to destroy Túrin's faith. The dragon places a negative spin on Túrin's history, shaming the spellbound warrior: "Evil have been all thy ways, son of Húrin. Thankless fosterling, outlaw, slayer of thy friend, thief of love, usurper of Nargothrond, captain foolhardy, and deserter of thy kin. [...] Thou art arrayed as a prince, but they go in rags; and for thee they yearn, but thou carest not for that" (*Silmarillion* 213-4). Glaurung's words sting because they all point to historic fact, but they are all willfully flawed interpretations of those facts that depict Túrin as having been malicious towards those whom he betrayed unwillingly. As Jodock notes, *Pascendi* fears the self-fulfilling prophecies of the Modernist who holds that all interpretation is based on the needs of flawed humans without fully acknowledging its own biases.<sup>7</sup> The dragon echoes Melkor's and Modernism's deceitful promise of liberation when enchanting Túrin: "Nay! At least thou art valiant [...]. And they lie who say that we of our part do not honour the valour of foes. See now! I offer thee freedom" (*Silmarillion* 214).

This is not to say Melkor or his minions are allegories for Modernism or even that Tolkien is consciously using *Pascendi* as a source. Tolkien's villains use Modernist tactics, but they are not symbolic representations of Modernism itself. Tolkien merely recognizes that they are

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<sup>7</sup> Jodock writes: "Over against those Modernists who claimed that historical investigations of the Bible were objective and independent undertakings, it asserts [...] [t]heir judgments regarding what is/is not historical are made on the basis of *subjective* standards" (5).

strategies by which to destroy faith, and the destruction of faith is key to Melkor and Sauron’s success in the war against Eru and the Valar.

The quiet crisis of faith that troubled the Church of the early Twentieth Century also rears its head at the conclusion of *The Hobbit*. The tale’s denouement repeats themes regarding the power of history in a way that favors anti-modernist rhetoric. According to Pius X, the Modernist saw man’s involvement in writing history as making it thoroughly suspect; man’s role does not allow any room for supernatural forces beyond him:

From this it is inferred that God can never be the direct object of science, and that, as regards history, He must not be considered as an historical subject. [...] But how the Modernists make the transition from *Agnosticism*, which is a state of pure nescience, to scientific and historic *Athiesm*, which is a doctrine of positive denial; and consequently, by what legitimate process of reasoning, starting from ignorance as to whether God has in fact intervened in the history of the human race or not, they proceed, in their explanation of this history, to ignore God altogether, as if He really had not intervened, let him answer who can. (*Pascendi* §6)

The middle-class suburbanite content with comfortable living in a tidy hobbit hole, Bilbo comes to doubt ancient lore and prophecy, but not, as one might expect, through complacency. Bilbo loses faith in the old stories because he has been part of one. He has seen that the cosmos works in messy ways and hinges significantly on free choices made by individuals. Surely, then, any system that is reliant on flawed and thieving hobbits, any system that allows people to make morally baseless actions and yet retain their titles, must be itself a flawed and self-serving system. Gandalf would have Bilbo believe otherwise, and that, despite the occasional error, all is as it was meant to be:

“Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!” said Bilbo.

“Of course!” said Gandalf. “And why should not they prove true? Surely you don’t disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don’t really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!” (*Hobbit* 305)

Passive voice allows Tolkien to dodge answering what power other than “mere luck” managed Bilbo’s “adventures and escapes,” requiring the audience to assert or deny its own faith. Who or what one decides Gandalf believes guides the universe does not advance the plot, but it does challenge the reader to put their own faith into action. In the realm of literary scholarship, one can applaud Tolkien for his poetic ambiguity and the rhetorical acrobatics needed to appeal to a general audience. However, *The Hobbit* was meant to do cultural work—and here that work is to draw readers’ attention to the health of their own spirituality. Gandalf’s statement does not lead into a deep philosophical discussion on the nature of Providence, and Bilbo Baggins would probably not be the hobbit to pose a sophisticated counter-argument to the existence of higher powers. Bilbo merely replies, “Thank goodness!” (*Hobbit* 305). Gandalf’s argument is in the negative—“surely you don’t disbelieve”—demanding that he state the opposing view at the same time as dismissing it. Gandalf’s speech addresses those who dismiss the truth of divine powers at work in history, both in the past and as it unfolds in the present—those who have adopted a more modern paradigm. Gandalf speaks with exclamation points and interrogatives; the wizard is surprised to find Bilbo, our unlikely hero, is also our innocent heretic. Pius X classifies Modernists as open rebels, hidden cabalists, or well-intending but confused Catholics. It appears as if Bilbo’s correction by Gandalf exposes the barrel-rider as one of those good-natured and benevolent creatures who has unwittingly fallen into a dangerous way of looking at the world. Melkor’s lies are stealthy and immortal.



The usefulness of *Pascendi* is more pronounced in *The Lord of the Rings* as Tolkien further develops the rhetorical and intellectual qualities of characters like the villainous Saruman and the tragic Boromir. Saruman, like Melkor and Sauron, begins by hiding his intentions, but, unlike them, never willfully leaves the Council or the order. Gandalf must thrust him from the ranks of the heroes. Similarly, Saruman’s lackey Wormtongue does his worst villainies posing as Théoden’s councilor, corrupting a hero from within his own home. These characters are malevolent, fully aware of the darkness

they generate. Though falling to the seductive Power of the Ring, Boromir nevertheless has good intentions.

*Pascendi’s* descriptions of the Modernist aptly suit the figure of Saruman. The encyclical discusses how the Modernists conceal themselves in the Church and how the Pope must warn his flock about their presence: “We must now break silence, in order to expose before the whole Church in their true colours those men who have assumed this bad disguise” (*Pascendi* §3). Saruman is first “exposed” as corrupt precisely through his “true” coloration: “I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered” (*LOTR* 252). Gandalf discovers that what appears white has been shattered into many colors—Saruman’s identity is destroyed. Saruman is an enemy within whose disguise has fallen off; as Gandalf says, “You were head of the Council, but you have unmasked yourself at last” (*LOTR* 253). Saruman’s role is to head a Council that is supposed to be both spiritual and secular, since the wizards are stewards of life and knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Saruman continues to disguise himself in more benevolent attire even after Gandalf has published his wickedness. Éomer warns Aragorn that Saruman appears like Gandalf, as if to be received as the true steward: “It is ill dealing with such a foe: he is a wizard both cunning and dwimмер-crafty, having many guises. He walks here and there, they say, as an old man hooded and cloaked, very like to Gandalf, as many now recall. His spies slip through every net, and his birds of ill omen are abroad” (*LOTR* 426). The Modernist, as Pius X argues, also has many guises: “[I]t must first of all be noted that every Modernist sustains and comprises within himself many personalities: he is a philosopher, a believer, a theologian, an historian, a critic, an apologist, a reformer” (*Pascendi* §5). While promoting scholasticism, Pius also warns his reader that the Modernist, too, attempts to pose as the one who seeks to give aid:

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<sup>8</sup> Shippey describes Saruman as a politician: “Saruman, indeed, talks exactly like too many politicians. It is impossible to work out exactly what he means because of the abstract nature of his speech; in the end it is doubtful whether he understands himself” (75). Political language need not be limited to the field of politics, and, indeed, Pius X is uneasy about the quick alliances that Modernists make with the State, believing the modernist logic concludes “as faith is to be subordinated to science, as far as *phenomenal elements* are concerned, so too in temporal matters the Church must be subject to the State” (*Pascendi* §25).

Yes, these very Modernists who pose as Doctors of the Church, who puff out their cheeks when they speak of modern philosophy, and show such contempt for scholasticism, have embraced the one with all its false glamour because their ignorance of the other has left them without the means of being able to recognise confusion of thought, and to refute sophistry. (*Pascendi* §41)

Saruman's "bad disguise" confuses Aragorn's party and leads the heroes to mistake Gandalf as Saruman and attack him in Fangorn, just as Modernists cause confusion by posing as "Doctors." The reference to the "glamour" of modern philosophy and the "contempt for scholasticism" also resonates with Saruman's altered fashion sensibilities, forsaking the purity and wholeness of white for the shimmering and eye-catching variety of the spectrum. Despite uncovering Saruman's confederacy with Sauron, Gandalf does not attempt to take his life when the opportunities arise. Instead, he offers his former head the opportunity to repent.

Pius X writes that he first showed the Modernists mercy, hoping to redeem them from their errors:

Once indeed We had hopes of recalling them to a better sense, and to this end we first of all showed them kindness as Our children, then we treated them with severity, and at last We have had recourse, though with great reluctance, to public reproof. [...] They bowed their head for a moment, but it was soon uplifted more arrogantly than ever. (*Pascendi* §3)

Similarly, Gandalf and Frodo both offer Saruman opportunities to repent. During his confrontation in Orthanc, Gandalf tells Saruman: "I do not wish to kill you, or hurt you, as you would know, if you really understood me. And I have the power to protect you. I am giving you a last chance. You can leave Orthanc, free—if you choose" (*LOTR* 568). Saruman rejects what he sees as surrender, only to reject future mercies. Frodo stays Sam's hand even as the hobbits uncover the atrocities which Saruman has inflicted on the Shire: "No, Sam! [...] Do not kill him even now. For he has not hurt me. And in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil mood. [...] He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it" (*LOTR* 996). Frodo even calls the wretched Wormtongue to repentance: "You need not follow him. I know of no evil you have done to me. You can have rest and food here for a while, until you are stronger and can go your own ways" (*LOTR* 996). The mercy of the

pope, wizard, and hobbit arises from pity that they express towards their fallen enemies. Pius writes:

These men are certainly to be pitied, and of them the Apostle might well say: *They became vain in their thoughts . . . professing themselves to be wise they became fools* (Rom.i.21,22); but at the same time, they excite just indignation when they accuse the Church of torturing the texts, arranging and confusing them after its own fashion, and for the needs of its cause. In this they are accusing the Church of something for which their own conscience plainly reproaches them. (*Pascendi* §33)

Gandalf also expresses pity towards the former head of the Council:

You have become a fool, Saruman, and yet pitiable. You might still have turned away from folly and evil, and have been of service. But you choose to stay and gnaw the ends of your old plots. Stay then! But I warn you, you will not easily come out again. Not unless the dark hands of the East stretch out to take you. (*LOTR* 569)

While Gandalf echoes Pius X’s pity for the fallen intellectual, the same scene also contains *Pascendi*’s accusation regarding seeing one’s own guilt in others. Saruman accuses Gandalf of treachery and deceit; yet, just as Pius X turns the Modernist argument against itself, Gandalf retorts: “The treacherous are ever distrustful” (*LOTR* 568).

For Saruman, history is a means to power, of finding the Ring for his own acquisition. Gandalf uses ancient lore to protect the world from its own undoing. As already seen in *The Hobbit*, the figure of Gandalf (though indeed apparently changed since his days hiding in trees with Bilbo), evangelizes on the value of the supernatural underpinnings of the real world. Echoing his correction to Bilbo in *The Hobbit* and invoking the hidden force that guided Bilbo through his “adventures and escapes,” Gandalf says to Frodo:

“There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master. [...] Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire!

“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.” (*LOTR* 54-5)

Gandalf finds assurance in the history's "meaning," in an unseen will that attends to the world, which is precisely the kind of thing that the anti-modernist upholds and fears the Modernist seeks to destroy. Frodo is skeptical. At the idea that the "something else at work" might be an encouraging thought, the hobbit replies, "It is not. [...] Do you really know it all, or are you just guessing still?" (55). Frodo questions Gandalf on his authority and knowledge, to which the wizard retorts, "I knew much and I have learned much. [...] But I am not going to give an account of all my doings to *you*" (*LOTR* 55). Though willing to give Frodo empirical proof through fire, Gandalf pulls rank. Gandalf's thoughts fail to encourage, because Frodo has begun with the assumption that Gandalf's knowledge is suspect. Frodo ignores his faith in the stories of Gandalf and Bilbo once he is himself burdened by their reality. Pius X writes that the Modernist commits a dastardly error by denouncing the supernatural in the name of history and science. In effect, Pius X is concerned that the Modernist must obliterate faith before conducting biblical exegesis or theological research—what Tolkien might describe as destroying a thing to learn more about it, as when Gandalf criticizes Saruman's new robes:

"White" [Saruman] sneered. "[...] the white light can be broken."

"In which case it is no longer white," said [Gandalf]. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom." (*LOTR* 252)

Tolkien personally reiterates this position in his essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in the allegory of the researchers who destroy the tower that looks upon the sea to learn how it was built.<sup>9</sup> The contention between knowledge and faith lies near the heart of Tolkien's Middle-earth.

The intellectual assumes the superiority of cold knowledge over faith, and it is this pride that eventually casts Saruman down the spiral steps of Orthanc. Indeed, both *Pascendi* and *The Lord of the Rings* attribute pride as the primary sin of the intellectual. *Pascendi* delivers a lengthy diatribe

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<sup>9</sup> Tolkien writes, "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 [...]. But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea" ("Beowulf" 8).

against the Modernist’s pride that reads rather like a character sketch of Saruman:

But it is pride which exercises an incomparably greater sway over the soul to blind it and plunge it into error, and pride sits in Modernism as in its own house [...]. It is pride which fills Modernists with that confidence in themselves and leads them to hold themselves up as the rule for all, pride which puffs them up with that vainglory which allows them to regard themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge [...] which begets their absolute want of respect for authority, not excepting the supreme authority. (*Pascendi* §40)

Saruman’s pride blinds him to his own weakness, as Gandalf already has the ability to cast commands on the fallen wizard. It is pride that prevents Saruman from repenting in his last meeting with Gandalf (*LOTR* 961).

That the Modernist and fallen wizard do in fact have excellent mental faculties and commendable intellectual strength, that they are actually superior to many men, partly contributes to the pity which their proud falls generate. Intellectual pride is not Saruman’s weakness alone. Denethor’s fall comes from his pride in his station as Steward of Gondor and from his belief that he has superior knowledge of events to come through his gazing in the *palantír*. When Aragorn marches on the Gates of Mordor, the Mouth of Sauron parleys with him. His first statement exposes Sauron’s hubris: “Is there anyone in this rout with authority to treat with me? [...] Or indeed with wit to understand me?” (*LOTR* 870). Pride in *The Lord of the Rings* arises from secret knowledge and intellectual superiority—the sense that one’s own wisdom grants one liberty under an ignorant authority. Paradoxically, those who believe they are free from authority due to their knowledge are really submitting themselves to the source of their knowledge, which becomes Sauron, since he controls the images in the *palantír*. Despite the Modernist notion that knowledge would liberate the people from the control of authority, it condemns the people to domination by scholars.

The comparison between Saruman and Pius X’s description of Modernism becomes most sinister when juxtaposing the methodologies of the wizard and the Modernist. Pius X finds Modernist rhetoric to be most threatening to the Church when it proposes the inevitable progress of



democratization and socialization of human institutions. He puts in the mouths of Modernists a revolutionary language that delivers an ultimatum to Church authorities to evolve with the changing world or face certain extinction:

It is for the ecclesiastical authority therefore, to shape itself to democratic forms, unless it wishes to provoke and foment an intestine conflict in the consciences of mankind. The penalty of refusal is disaster. For it is madness to think that the sentiment of liberty, as it is now spread abroad, can surrender. Were it forcibly confined and held in bonds, terrible would be its outburst, sweeping away at once both Church and religion. Such is the situation for the Modernists, and their one great anxiety is, in consequence, to find a way of conciliation between the authority of the Church and the liberty of believers. (*Pascendi* §23)

The speech bears uncanny resemblance to the rhetoric of Saruman when he first attempts to persuade Gandalf to join in allegiance to Sauron:<sup>10</sup>

"I said *we*, for *we* it may be, if you will join with me. A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. [...] There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means." (*LOTR* 252-3)

Modernist rhetoric also resonates with the enchantment of Saruman's voice, appealing mostly to the audience's sentiments of experiencing something beyond itself:

[W]hen one of their number falls under the condemnations of the Church the rest of them, to the horror of good Catholics, gather round him, heap public praise upon him, venerate him almost as a martyr to truth. The young, excited and confused by all this glamour of praise and abuse, some of them afraid of being branded as ignorant, others ambitious to be considered learned, and both classes goaded internally by curiosity and

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<sup>10</sup> When Sauron speaks, "men wondered, for all that he said seemed fair and wise" (*Silmarillion* 271).

pride, often surrender and give themselves up to Modernism. (*Pascendi* §42)

The first time Saruman speaks to the party that confronts him in Orthanc, Tolkien describes the audience as being enchanted and convinced by his seeming wisdom, so much so that they wish to align themselves with it, like the youth who are “excited and confused”:

Mostly they remembered only that it was a delight to hear the voice speaking, all that it said seemed wise and reasonable, and desire awoke in them by swift agreement to seem wise themselves. When others spoke they seemed harsh and uncouth by contrast; and if they gainsaid the voice, anger was kindled in the hearts of those under the spell. (*LOTR* 564)

Tolkien continues to describe the power of the voice when Saruman offers Gandalf one last chance at an alliance:

So great was the power that Saruman exerted in this last effort that none that stood within hearing were unmoved. But now the spell was wholly different. They heard the gentle remonstrance of a kindly king with an erring but much-loved minister. But they were shut out, listening at a door to words not meant for them: ill-mannered children or stupid servants overhearing the elusive discourse of their elders, and wondering how it would affect their lot. Of loftier mould these two were made: reverend and wise. It was inevitable that they should make alliance. Gandalf would ascend into the tower, to discuss deep things beyond their comprehension in the high chambers of Orthanc. (*LOTR* 567)

Saruman’s words themselves seem to echo the alleged rhetoric of the Modernist:

“But you, Gandalf! For you at least I am grieved, feeling your shame. [...] Even now will you not listen to my counsel? [...] For I bore you no ill-will; and even now I bear none, though you return to me in the company of the violent and the ignorant. [...] Much we could still accomplish together, to heal the disorders of the world. [...] For the common good I am willing to redress the past, and to receive you.” (*LOTR* 567)

While Saruman is not speaking in exactly the same context as the Modernists and while Pius X gives his imagined opposition the benefit of

the doubt regarding their sincerity, there are further striking parallels in the rhetoric of the rebellious wizard and scholar. Pius X writes that the Modernists attempt to gain sympathy by professing grief at the Church's ignorance and "rough" tactics:

They have no bitterness in their hearts against the authority which uses them roughly, for after all it is only doing its duty as authority. Their sole grief is that it remains deaf to their warnings, because delay multiplies the obstacles which impede the progress of souls, but the hour will most surely come when there will be no further chance for tergiversation, for if the laws of evolution may be checked for a while, they cannot be ultimately destroyed. (*Pascendi* §27)

Gandalf finds the strength and wisdom to prevent himself from falling prey to Saruman's voice, but he is concerned that his companions will not. Before entering Orthanc he warns them, "are you yet wise enough to detect all his counterfeits?" (*LOTR* 562). The threat of Saruman is that he really is more intelligent than his average victim, and Gandalf's greatest peril lies not in Saruman himself but in the power he might have over his companions.

The other great tragedy which the pope observes is the fall of well-intending lay people, and, indeed, one of the most tragic scenes of Tolkien's trilogy is the fall of his well-meaning, but thoroughly misguided Boromir. According to *Pascendi*, Modernism makes strong appeals to concepts both of personal liberty and nigh-patriotic civic duty. This appeal creates a rift between Church and State in which the pope sees Modernists giving the needs of the State the higher priority:

The State must, therefore, be separated from the Church, and the Catholic from the citizen. Every Catholic, from the fact that he is also a citizen, has the right and the duty to work for the common good in the way he thinks best, without troubling himself about the authority of the Church, without paying any heed to its wishes, its counsels, its orders—nay, even in spite of its reprimands. To trace out and prescribe for the citizen any line of conduct, on any pretext whatsoever, is to be guilty of an abuse of ecclesiastical authority, against which one is bound to act with all one's might. (*Pascendi* §24)

The pope’s paraphrase of the Modernist view of interactions between the religious and secular in the public sphere would not have sat easily in Tolkien’s ear, since he was himself wary of any discussion of the “State” as Tolkien wrote to Christopher on 29 November 1943:

My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)—or to ‘unconstitutional’ Monarchy. I would arrest anybody who uses the word State (in any sense other than an inanimate realm of England and its inhabitants, a thing that has neither power, rights nor mind)[...]. (*Letters* 63)

His concern parallels Pius’s: the reification of a body of government and its people into the “State” as an individual entity makes it a rival to one’s loyalties. Over-patriotic concern for the welfare of the State manifests itself in Boromir, whose love of Gondor and ultimate allegiance to his State outweighs even his concern for Middle-earth or the wisdom and authority of the Council. In Tolkien’s universe, true heroes risk their nation’s welfare for an even greater good.<sup>11</sup>

Boromir’s motives are not inherently evil, and his arguments are temptingly logical. Like the well-meaning Catholic whom *Pascendi* holds has been seduced unwittingly by Modernism, Boromir does harm precisely when he least intends it:

“Yet may I not even speak of it? For you seem ever to think only of its power in the hands of the Enemy: of its evil uses not of its good. [...] What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!” (*LOTR* 389)

Boromir’s logic and reason undermine the arguments of Gandalf and Elrond. Boromir says, “And they tell us to throw it away! [...] I do not say *destroy* it. That might be well, if reason could show any hope of doing so.

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<sup>11</sup> Rhetoric of liberty and the state appears when Éowyn demands to go to war: “I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will?” (*LOTR* 767). Aragorn replies, “Few may do that with honour” (*LOTR* 767). Though the situation is obviously more complicated, Éowyn ignores the authority of the “state” for what she believes is a greater good, i.e. honor.

It does not. [...] Surely you see it, my friend? [...] You say that you are afraid. If it is so, the boldest should pardon you. But is it not really your good sense that revolts?" (*LOTR* 389). Boromir has constructed a Modernist argument in miniature. There is no hard evidence of the Ring's evil; no one has tried to use it. The prohibition of the Ring depends entirely on faith in the Council, just as prohibition against Modernism depends entirely on allegiance to the Pope. Though Pius X would have the intellectualism of Modernism stamped out because of the dangerous misuse of reason, its proponents would dismiss him and continue to wield it. Once Boromir even imagines using the Ring, he falls under its spell, just as Pius X imagines the scholar sliding down the slippery slope of Modernism. Perhaps Boromir's benevolence (ill-expressed as it is) moves Tolkien to offer Boromir the chance to repent, which the warrior wisely takes. Boromir's fall and redemption follows a pattern found in *The Hobbit*. Bilbo, Thorin and Boromir fall to the seduction of worldly things, Boromir to the ring, the hobbit and the dwarf to the Arkenstone. All three redeem themselves: Bilbo by giving the Arkenstone to the men and elves as a bargaining chip for peace negotiations, Boromir and Thorin by a valiant last stand against orcs and goblins. Their actions prove the sincerity of their repentance. None of the three truly understand the nature of lore when they first set out. Bilbo, Thorin, and Boromir are so preoccupied in their own minor spheres that they forget the greater worlds at stake. Tolkien even makes a point of showing that Boromir contrasts to Faramir in his ignorance of arcane knowledge; Boromir, like a hobbit, has not taken the time to really study anything beyond his immediate needs.

The vulnerability of ignorance is a theme repeated throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. The Men of Rohan and Gondor, and most pathetically, the hobbits of the Shire, all render themselves susceptible to the lies of darkness through their inexperience with the powers of Middle-earth. What is at stake in *The Lord of the Rings* manifests itself through the scouring of the Shire: the suffering of the hobbits when their land is destroyed and people forced to submit under the rule of "Sharkey"—the new identity of Saruman. His fascist domination over the hobbits might find parallels in Pius X's warning against Modernists' claim to speak for the people: "[I]t is necessary for them to remain within the ranks of the Church in order that they may gradually transform the collective conscience—thus unconsciously avowing that the common conscience is not with them, and that they have no right to

claim to be its interpreters” (*Pascendi* §27). According to Pius X, “the people” are content with the Church. Despite Modernist claims that Church authorities are oppressing the people, the Modernist agenda imposes itself on the desires of those it claims to liberate. Hobbits are perfectly content with the status quo before Saruman’s unasked for “improvements” ruined the hobbits’ way of life. Most hobbits quietly go along with Saruman until rallied to re-establish the comfortable order they knew.



Tolkien’s published materials do not offer any direct or authoritative framework by which to interpret the text religiously.<sup>12</sup> However, in his notes to the *Athrabeth*, Tolkien observes that his dialogue has come perilously close to deforming Christian mythology: “Query: Is it not right to make Andreth refuse to discuss any traditions or legends of the ‘Fall’? Already it is (if inevitably) too like a parody of Christianity. Any legend of the Fall would make it completely so?” (*Morgoth’s Ring* 354). Even in a seemingly transparent allusion to Jesus Christ, Tolkien restrains himself from outright asserting his Christianity in the text. Andreth, the human wise-woman, disregards some of the most Judeo-Christian aspects of her people’s lore with a cynical distrust, though her own objectivity is made suspect. Tolkien’s question is not whether he should include his Christianity; it is whether he should “parody” Christianity.

What is to be made of an author who professes his Catholicism and yet makes no overt references to it in his fantasy texts? *Pascendi* is unflinching in its assertion of censorship laws requiring Catholic bishops, booksellers, and publishers to end the dissemination of Modernist literature, even instituting “Councils of Vigilance” to crush any sprouts of potential heresy. Particularly dangerous was any attempt to “revise” Catholic thought, as *Pascendi* condemns anything with the adjective “new”:

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<sup>12</sup> In the frequently extracted lines from his letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien writes that he avoids overt Christianity but that his mythology is compatible with Christian faith: “On the side of mere narrative device, this is, of course, meant to provide beings of the same order of beauty, power, and majesty as the ‘gods’ of higher mythology, which can yet be accepted—well, shall we say baldly, by a mind that believes in this Blessed Trinity” (*Silmarillion* xiv). In the same letter, he dismisses Arthurian romance because “it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion” (*Silmarillion* xii).

*It is impossible to approve in Catholic publications of a style inspired by unsound novelty which seems to deride the piety of the faithful and dwells on the introduction of a new order of Christian life, on new directions of the Church, on new aspirations of the modern soul, on a new vocation of the clergy, on a new Christian civilisation. (Pascendi §55)*

Though the Councils of Vigilance passed out of fashion, *Pascendi* had tremendous influence on the Roman Catholic *Index of forbidden books* for the greater part of the century. While silencing overt Catholicism widens audience appeal in an Anglican nation, Tolkien's silent Christianity in Middle-earth also avoids presenting theologically questionable material to his own Church. Granted, the *Index's* primary function was to hunt down theological texts, not browse books on the science-fiction/fantasy shelves; however, the *Athrabeth* becomes a parody because it drags the sacred realm of the Primary Creation's spirituality into the realm of the profane Sub-Creation. Tolkien knows better than to re-write what God has already written.

If God were manifest in the story, the author would make too strong of an assertion. Instead of challenging the audience to accept its own beliefs, Tolkien would demand that it accept his, which is precisely the kind of domination he is trying to avoid. Domination is the power of the Ring—it is not the power of the artist, the sub-creator. Sub-creation offers an even better explanation for why Tolkien avoids bringing God directly into the Middle-earth. As sub-creator of a fantasy, Tolkien's task is to generate a new world and make it believable based on the laws he defines.<sup>13</sup> To bring God into *The Lord of the Rings* would make God subject to Tolkien's own imagination—justifying the Modernist argument that notions of God arise from human opinion.

Christianity is, however, clearly present in Tolkien's scholarly essays "On Fairy-Stories" and "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *Beowulf* lends itself to a discussion of Christianity, given the Christian interjections inscribed into the medieval manuscripts. Tolkien's digression on the Gospels comes as an epilogue when discussing the role of fantasy: "There is no tale

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<sup>13</sup> Tolkien writes, "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode" ("Fairy-Stories" 140).

ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath” (“Fairy-Stories” 156). In these essays where poetry and history intersect, Tolkien does not allow himself to divorce his academic persona from his religious persona, a separation expressly condemned in Pius X’s *Sacrorum antistitum*:

I also condemn and reject the opinion of those who say that a well-educated Christian assumes a dual personality—that of a believer and at the same time of a historian, as if it were permissible for a historian to hold things that contradict the faith of the believer, or to establish premises which, provided there be no direct denial of dogmas, would lead to the conclusion that dogmas are either false or doubtful. (*Sacrorum antistitum*)

Tolkien neither directly asserts nor denies the truth of the Gospels. He merely says people want to believe it and will be sad if they cannot. The essay forces the reader to consider his or her own position. Tolkien’s unwillingness to push Christian, or more specifically, Catholic truths on his reader need not be read as a scholarly cynicism or as an expression of an author wavering in his own conflicting interests. Tolkien beats the monstrous critics and the cynical Modernists at their own game by showing how scholarly approaches reinforce the truths behind stories instead of merely deconstructing them. His lack of zealotry despite this literary crusade may be due to his upbringing in the Oratory. He praises his guardian Father Francis Morgan for letting him acquire an education outside of the Catholic schools:

I owe a great deal (and perhaps even the Church a little) to being treated, surprising for the time, in a more rational way. Fr Francis obtained permission for me to retain my scholarship at K[ing] E[dward’s] S[chool] and continue there, and so I had the advantage of a (then) first rate school and that of a ‘good Catholic home’—‘in excelsis’: virtually a junior inmate of the Oratory house, which contained many learned fathers (largely ‘converts’). (*Letters* 395)

Father Morgan’s sensibilities reflect the Oratorian commitment to fulfilling one’s vocation in connection with the world. As historian D. Aiden



Bellenger writes, "Newman saw the Oratorian way of life as proposed by St Philip Neri as a halfway house between the secular and the regular priesthood" (159-60). Oratorians look beyond the world, but interact directly with the world. Gandalf does not compromise with Saruman, but he does not hide from the world either. Neither Gandalf nor Tolkien can force the world to change its course, so both must speak to it in its own terms if they are to persuade it from self-destruction.

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