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Abstract
Examines Christian aspects of Tolkien's fiction, showing how Middle-earth is a Christian world in spite of the absence of overt Christian references.

Additional Keywords
Christianity in The Lord of the Rings; God in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religious and moral aspects; Bonnie GoodKnight

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The Christian Character of Tolkien's Invented World

by Willis B. Glover

J. R. R. Tolkien cautions us against interpreting The Lord of the Rings in terms of some ulterior motive:

It is not "about" anything but itself. Certainly it has no allegorical intentions general, particular or topical; moral religious or political. The only criticism that annoyed me was one that it "contained no religion" (and "no women," but that does not matter, and is not true anyway). It is a monotheistic world of "natural theology." The odd fact that there are no churches, temples, or religious rites and ceremonies, is simply part of the historical climate depicted. It will be sufficiently explained—if (as now seems likely) The Silmarillion and other legends of the First and Second Ages are published. I am in any case myself a Christian; but the "Third Age" was not a Christian world.

There is a sense in which Tolkien is certainly correct to say that the "Third Age" was not a Christian world. Since Christ was not born until the "Fourth Age," for any previous age to be Christian would contradict the Biblical-Christian understanding of history as non-recurring. It would not make sense to call Frodo or Sam or Aragorn a Christian. One simple religious ceremony is described in the novel (II, 284-85); but if this be excepted, and whatever can be inferred from mention made of "heathen kings," Middle Earth in the Third Age is depicted without religion. God is not referred to under any name through the whole three volumes except for reference to "the One" in the background explanation of Appendix A.

There is, however, another sense in which the world of the Third Age is a Christian world simply because Tolkien is a Christian. As W. H. Auden has remarked, "the unstated presuppositions of the whole work are Christian." Despite the lack of explicit mention of God, Tolkien himself points out that the Third Age is a monotheistic world. What might escape attention is that it is monotheistic in the peculiar sense of the Biblical tradition. The God implied, and the implications are clear and emphatic, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not "the God of the philosophers." The book presents the world as the Hebrews came to understand it when they became aware of themselves as existing under a transcendent God.

Tolkien's experience of the primary world is informed by the Christian revelation, and his knowledge of the world as continually contingent upon the will of a purposeful, beneficent, and transcendent God carries over into the secondary reality of his fairy story.

By presenting the situation mainly from the limited perspective of the characters in the story Tolkien makes the forces of evil appear at first glance equal to or even greater than the forces of good; but this is only from a limited perspective. The world of Tolkien is not a dualistic world; it is the Biblical world of the good creation. Evil is presented as a corruption of the good. Even Sauron, the preeminently evil figure in the novel, we are told, had once been good; for as Elrond said, "Nothing is evil in the beginning." (I, 281) Orcs were wicked goblins bred by Sauron for his evil purposes; but they were not made by him.

"The Shadow," Frodo explained to Sam, "...can only mock; it cannot make: not real new things of its own." (III, 190) Despite the almost overwhelming threat of evil, Tolkien succeeds (it is one of his more subtle triumphs) in keeping the reality and final triumph of good as the larger context of the action. Despair is identified with evil itself as it is with sin in the Christian faith. When Sam was very near despair at one point in Mordor,

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep. (III, 199)

Tolkien also reveals, and this, too, pervades the book, that the proper response to the good creation is to enjoy it. From the hobbits and their beer to the wonders of Lothlorien, this is a major factor in the novel's charm. Typical of the group of Oxford literary Christians of whom Tolkien was a member in the forties is the following passage describing Gandalf when Pippin was surprised at his gay and merry laugh during a serious situation. Pippin turned quickly and looked at Gandalf:

...in the wizard's face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow; though as he looked more intently he perceived that under all there
was a great joy; a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth. 

(III, 31) 

One is reminded of Father Tyrrell's dictum that a Christian is a short range pessimist and a long range optimist.

Some of the lighter episodes in the book become more than release from tension by their contribution to this major theme of the novel. Who could fail to delight in the bath song of Frodo and Pippin as they enjoyed a hot bath after the perilous flight to Bucklebury with the Black Riders in pursuit?

Sing hey! for the bath at close of day
That washes the weary mud away!
A loon is he that will not sing;
O! Water Hot is a noble thing!

*    *    *

O! Water cold we may pour at need
down a thirsty throat and be glad indeed;
but better is Beer, if drink we lack,
and Water Hot poured down the back.

*    *    *

(I, 111)

The Ring itself, with its intrinsic evil power to corrupt whoever had it, was a corruption of the good magic of the elves who had forged the other rings for the better ordering of the world. Sauron, a superhuman being so far gone in evil that he was no longer able to assume any attractive bodily form, had escaped back to Middle Earth, "a spirit of hatred borne upon a dark wind." Learning by deceit the secrets of the Elven smiths, he forged a ring that would give him power over the rings forged for elves and dwarves and men.

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.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them,
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

Sauron's power was growing, but he struck out at his enemies too soon and was defeated and the Ring cut from his finger by Isildur, King of Arnor.

Subsequently the Ring was lost, and Sauron as he grew again in power sought for it. But the Ring was found by Gollum and passed from him to the hobbit Bilbo and then to Frodo, who is the hero of the tale. The evil magic of the Ring was such that it corrupted whoever possessed it. But the evil was very slow to act unless the Ring was used for power over others; and its own power was proportionate to the innate power of him who wielded it. Thus the simple and good-hearted hobbits withstood the evil when greater folk might have succumbed; but even the hobbits did not escape completely.

In the meantime Sauron had so increased his strength that no force on Middle Earth could long withstand him without the power of the Ring. The fear of Sauron was that one of the Great who opposed him--Gandalf, the wizard, or an Elven Lord or a king of men--would get the ring and achieve a power great enough to overthrow him. His only hope if he could not find the Ring himself was to strike before its new possessor could realize its full power. The danger to Sauron was real and he lived in a terrible fear. The story of how his fear brought his downfall is a study in the ultimate weakness of evil. The Council of Elrond (the good guys) understood Sauron's motives and how he would analyze the situation; but Sauron was unable to conceive of any motives strong enough to withstand the desire for power. The good can understand evil, but evil cannot understand good. That was the fatal weakness of Sauron. (The same deficiency is seen in the fallen wizard Saruman. (II, 187))

The reality and ultimate victory of good and the self-defeating nature of evil dreams of power are the moral backdrop before which the action of the novel takes place; but in the presence of immediate and apparently overwhelming evil strength it is hard to keep faith in the final sovereignty of good. At least one character in the story is reduced to despair in the face of inordinate dangers. Nor were the dangers unreal. The final defeat of evil did not guarantee victory over it in any particular episode of the struggle or in the lifetime of any particular person. The meaning of oracles and prophecies is not clear enough or complete enough to remove doubt of the outcome in any particular circumstance. The Council of Elrond had no assurance that their decision would not lead to the destruction of all they valued in Middle Earth, and this posed for them a very subtle temptation. Several members of the council were capable with the power of the Ring of overthrowing Sauron and destroying his evil works. Why not use the Ring for this good purpose? Perhaps it had been given them for this end. But the Wise knew that he who would overthrow Sauron with the power of the Ring would be so corrupted by it that he would become an evil greater than Sauron had been before him. It was a cruel dilemma and made worse by the fact that the dangerous Ring could be destroyed only by taking it back to the furnace where it had been forged in the very heart of Mordor, Sauron's land. Since sufficient military power was not available, this task had to be accomplished by other means. In the face of an apparently impossible situation the council did not despair but acted with what hope it could muster. The task was entrusted to that Fellowship of the Ring after which the first volume of the novel is named: four hobbits, an elf, a dwarf, two valiant men, and a wizard.

Tolkien's tale may be read as a parable of the need to adapt means to ends and of the difficulty of abiding by this when the end seems of very great importance. The end must justify the means if the means are to be justified at all; but one is aware in Tolkien's story that there is a meaning and a plot transcending and including the struggle in which we
may be immediately involved and that action is not defensible which contradicts the overarching purpose in which our own historical setting is but an episode. We are aware of such a purpose, but it remains a mystery: we do not know explicitly the future or the ultimate goal; we know the larger purpose primarily as a certain moral quality which is authoritative and regulative. Gollum was spared when killing him seemed a more rational act in terms of the explicit historical goal; and Tolkien makes clear in the end that sparing him was intended as part of a transcendent scheme. This is done subtly, without reducing the mystery or even indicating explicitly whose intention it was that so far outreached the ken of the actors in the novel. (See, e.g., the reference to Gollum in I, 269.)

The teleological hints and references are especially effective in creating a contingent, created world without direct reference to the Creator. It may seem strange that a monotheistic world should be described without a single mention of God; but this very device results in a world like the one known in the Biblical tradition. One is aware of the world as acted upon without a single mention of God; but this very device reduces the cosmos itself to a dependent, penultimate status. The source of meaning and unity in the world is, on this view, the purpose of God and not a telos inherent in the world itself. Modern science and modern philosophy are more dependent historically on this concept than has been commonly recognized.5

In the modern world faith in the transcendent God has waned, but the world has remained desacralized. Modern atheism finds the world profane, "dead, " without meaning or purpose.6 The response of modern humanism to this development has been to see man himself, either individually or corporately, as the source of meaning and purpose; the success of this effort is, of course, variously evaluated. One reason for the attraction of Tolkien's work is surely that it satisfies vicariously a nostalgia for a more meaningful world without making any demands of faith or change in belief.

Tolkien's success in conveying the idea of a God who is utterly distinct from the world and is yet active in history is a very great literary achievement. It is not hard to talk in poetry or novels about people's belief in God; but to introduce God himself presents problems because a literary presentation is likely to make God one actor among others inside the created order. Not only Milton, but even the Bible has had some difficulty here.

The suggestion of a providential direction of events is given often enough in the book to set the whole background of action. Use of the passive voice in teleological passages gives a sense of depth and mystery and creates the kind of qualitative difference between the immediate and the transcendent that the devout believer experiences between his faith and his knowledge of the particular situation he is in. Early in the first volume Gandalf told Frodo:

There was more than one power at work, Frodo . . . 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. (I, 55)

Elrond told the council at Rivendell that they had been "called" to the council, but that he had not called them. Who did is not specified, and thus the impression is left of an inscrutable director who was somehow in control. (I, 255)

Gollum, it is repeatedly suggested, may have a predestined part to play which is not known even to the Wise. Yet in the novel, as in the Christian faith, the sovereignty of God is not presented as a fate which deprives men or hobbits of freedom or which renders their decisions inconsequential. One gets instead the idea of a dialectical, historical world in which the future is being hammered out between the mutual responses of the sovereign purpose behind events and creatures who are making real decisions and acting with significant effect.

The historical dimension of the Third Age contrasts strikingly with the ahistorical nature of some other invented worlds: Brave New World, for example, or 1984 or Walden II. The difference may be attributed to the stronger influence of the Biblical tradition on Tolkien.

Karl Barth is right to call the creation stories in the Bible "saga" and not myth. Mythological matter from their own past or from other cultures is used by the Biblical writers, but they use it to make a very different point. Western culture has so strong and so basic a sense of history that when we read the myths of a cosmological religion and culture, the narrative form makes it easy for us to read into them our own sense of history. This is a serious misunderstanding. As Professor Eliade has pointed out, the myth was an effort to escape from the terror of historical existence into a timeless world of unchanging relationships. The whole point of the pagan cosmological myth is that the pattern eternally recurs. Tolkien's account of his imaginary world is, like the Bible stories, more like saga than myth; if we think of it as a fictional mythology, we need to remember that it is myth with a difference: it is a genuinely historical mythology. No event or situation is ever repeated or ever will be. History is irreversible and moves on to an unknown future that no myth can describe. The defeat of Sauron did not restore Middle Earth to some kind of Third Age norm-
Tolkien makes frequent references to previous history, even to events of the First and Second Ages. These give historical depth to the narrative and are one of the ways he makes his imaginary world believable—not, of course, as literal history, but as the kind of secondary reality that is the matter of fairy tales. Tolkien is very skillful in this. His references to the past, except for one or two of the longer poems about it that the general reader is likely to find tedious, are clear and brief; yet one gets the impression, not of a single "past heroic age," but of real depth perspective in time. These glimpses of bygone events can hardly be called digressions because they are introduced so naturally to explain the present situation. And the principle of explanation is historical, not mythological. There is a sense of historical continuity. The barrow downes are the result of a specific battle in the distant past. The existence of the Riddermark and the relationship of Rowan and mines of Moria, the towers at Cirith Gorgor—it would be tedious to multiply examples—were given historical explanations. Even the origin of tobacco could be dated and its first Shire cultivator named! The most common pattern of explanation in the book is historical. These explanations are fragmentary, but they are numerous enough and sufficiently related to one another to give, even without the appendices, the sense of a past continuous with the present and far vaster and richer in detail than what is explicitly mentioned. The impression is much like our awareness of our own history in the primary world: fragmentary, very partial, but enough to suggest a continuous development out of a past that stretches back beyond the horizon of our knowledge of it.

The uniqueness, however, of the Biblical (now Western) sense of history is not its awareness of the past but its open-endedness toward the future; and this too is unequivocal in the novel. There is never the suggestion of a return to the past. The future is unknown, at least in detail, but it will not be like the past. Tolkien's novel is a "history" not only in that its form is a narrative based on documents (e.g., The Red Book) that indicate a continuity with our own time, but also in that presents events through which a future is being created by the actions of rational creatures. The novel is more Christian and Biblical than the ordinary sense of history in the modern West in that it assumes and implies a moral order and an unnamed Authority to which the actors are responding positively or negatively which also acts in the creative process in ways that remain inscrutable to the limited visions of the createurly actors. At the Council of Elrond Gandalf says: "...it is not our part here to take thought only for a season, or for a few lives of Men, or for a passing age of the world. We should seek a final end of this menace, even if we do not hope to make one." (I, 280) The source of this obligation is not made explicit, but since Tolkien has told us the world of the Third Age is a monotheistic world and that Gandalf is an angel, that is, a messenger, we do not have to guess. The obligation is from God.

Eric Voegelin in the first volume of his Order and History points out that the unique development of historical consciousness among the Hebrews develops from their awareness of existence under a transcendent God. Creation itself is an act of God, and the world continues because of His continued activity. Man transcends the rest of creation in his capacity to respond to the transcendent God; and man in his transcendence is free and a sub-creator. History transcends nature because God does and because history is fundamentally a dialectic between God and his free creatures. In contrast to the classical effort to understand history in the context of nature, the Bible understands nature in the context of history. The perspective one has on this question is crucial for the problem of freedom in an ordered world. Modern Western man has retained a Biblical insistence on a radical and transcendent freedom of man; but his efforts to confine human freedom in a context of natural order has produced contradiction. The Biblical idea is of Augustinian size and was much more influential in the late Middle Ages and early modern times than it has been since the seventeenth century. Its neglect in modern times has contributed to the impoverishment of theology. The few recent theologians who have given significant attention to it (Barth, Langdon Gilkey, and R. R. Niebuhr are the only ones known to the layman writing this paper) have perhaps got less of a hearing than the historians of science and certain specialists in the intellectual history of the Middle Ages (Pierre Duhem, Michael B. Foster, Francis Oakley, A.C. Crombie, A. R. Hall, Ernest A. Moody, Anneliese Maier, etc.) who have called attention to the relation of this corollary of the doctrine of creation to the modern understanding of the hypothetical nature of scientific knowledge. This last idea is not, of course, even implied in The Lord of the Rings, but Tolkien's work of art does present a Christian view of the world in a different light and thus contributes to the understanding of a major source and ingredient of modern culture. It would not be surprising, indeed, if W. H. Auden, Tolkien, and other literary figures turn out to be more significant explorers of the Christian tradition in our age than the theologians.

To pursue the sense of history in the novel a bit further, it may be noted that the Ring itself is a historical being. It is a product of historical purpose and action and its meaning is a historical meaning. Like a kingdom or a poem or an economic institution or a new technique for refining iron it has become a
part of that "second nature" that Pascal identified with custom but that is better called culture. Once created it became a part of the context of subsequent historical decision and achievement. But sinful purposes (Tolkien stuck to the less theological word "evil") had entered into its creation and continued in the Ring a kind of historical life of their own. At least a part of its demonic power was like that of the institutional of slavery or that present in a morally more ambiguous historical creation like nationalism. Whether for good or evil, historical creation has consequences for subsequent history; it is thus that past and present are linked together in historical continuity, and evil, or sin, as well as justice achieves a corporate existence. A sense of every age's dependence on the past and responsibility for the future is very strong in the author of the Ring books. Sam found it easy to think of the great adventures he and Frodo were involved in as a story like the stories of past adventures he had delighted in; and with a sudden insight he recognized that all the stories were a part of one big story and that he was taking part in the same story as his heroes from the past. (II, 321)

Another interesting thing about the Ring is that it had no interest for and no power over Tom Bombadil. There is no more enigmatic character in the novel than Tom. When Frodo asked him, "Who are you, Master?" the answer he got was (in part): "Eldest, that's what I am... Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving..." (I, 142) Clearly he is to be identified in some way with nature; was he a personification of nature or merely a kind of nature spirit? The former seems to fit better, but the spatial limitation of his power argues against it. Does he perhaps represent a previous state of human innocence before the knowledge of good and evil? There are problems with that too. However such questions are settled, in some way he represents nature, and Tolkien uses him to identify the essentially historical by contrast. Tom asked about the Ring, but did not seem to take it very seriously; moreover, it had no power over him. It did not make him invisible, and, when Frodo put it on, Tom could still see him. The affair of the Ring was history, and Tom's was not a historical existence. At the Council of Elrond one of the elves suggested that they ask Tom Bombadil to take the Ring and hide it in the Old Forest. Gandalf answered that, if Tom could be persuaded to, he would not understand the need and would soon forget it or even more likely throw it away "Such things have no hold on his mind." Other elves pointed out that Sauron would soon discover where the Ring was and expressed the opinion that Bombadil would not be able to stand against him. "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself. And yet we see that Sauron can torture and destroy the very hills." (I, 278-79)

This is the Biblical, Christian, Western understanding of history as transcending nature itself and even exercising control over it. Glorfindel said, "I think that in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First, and then Night will come." (I, 279) Glorfindel, it should be noted, did not predict such an outcome; the Council did not despair. But historical decision is ultimately what determines nature and not the other way round. In Tolkien's "monotheistic world" the mysterious Authority which is in control of history is One for whom nature itself is a historical act. This is peculiarly Biblical, but it is not made explicit in Tolkien's book. It may be pointed out that the modern West, in so far as it is atheistic, has retained a sense of history as transcending and controlling nature, but without God the transcendent action must be by man alone. There are serious problems in this attitude that it would be inappropriate to discuss here; but the attitude is observable on all sides--nowhere, perhaps more obviously than in scientific humanism. The problem our culture has in relating our compelling sense of historical existence with our equally compelling belief in the ordered world of science is, among other things, a failure of imagination. We have not achieved a consistent imaginative grasp of reality. Art may, with this kind of problem, accomplish more than philosophy; by a carryover of imaginative grasp from secondary to primary world, the Ring books may contribute to a richer and more valid way of being aware of the world.

The sense of historical existence which the creatures of the Third Age share with modern Western man does not give a blueprint of the future either real or illusory. The end remains a mystery, and no matter how strong one's faith that God or science or goodness or Marxian dialectic will finally prevail, there remains the sometimes almost overwhelming threat of proximate evil in the immediate context of one's existence. Despite the overtones of transcendent purpose, Tolkien is successful in portraying the agony of decision in which the outcome of various possible courses of action cannot be known. Frodo's decision to go alone to Mordor, Aragorn's decision to follow the captured hobbits, Sam's decisions when Frodo had fallen victim to Shelob, and many other instances are handled so convincingly as to shed light on the nature of the reader's own personal decisions. With great skill Tolkien preserves the tension between the hazards of decision by limited creatures and the sense that "there are other powers at work far stronger." (I, 420)

Frodo pointed out to Sam that in the old stories one would not want the characters to know the outcome. (II, 321) Not knowing the outcome is what made decisions real and gave them moral seriousness. The gigantic struggle between good and evil is presented as transcending the events of this novel, but the actions of each character acquire a depth of
meaning by relation to it. Repeatedly, however, the uncertainty of the immediate situation leaves little basis for decision except a sense of what is ethically right. (II, 41)

As is proper to a fairy story, good and evil are more clearly distinguished than is common in recent literature. With a few exceptions the reader is not in doubt as to who are the good guys and who are the bad. Yet ethical subtleties are not lacking. In two or three notable instances the evil have a chance to go straight, and at least one of the major characters does. Boromir, a valiant prince of Gondor, yielding to a great and subtle temptation, betrayed the fellowship of the Ring; but his repentance as he lay dying shortly after is interpreted as having wiped out his fault.

As badly corrupted as Gollum was, we are reminded repeatedly that he was not yet wholly bad and that his reform was to be hoped for. Gollum never did reform, but at one point he came very close. Professor Tolkien has commented that the part of his story that grieves him most is the failure of Gollum to repent in that incident just before they reached the lair of Shelob when he seemed on the verge of doing so and was interrupted by Sam's suspicious alarm. (II, 324)

In this novel the good usually choose good; but their choices are real; the possibility of evil, of betraying the good, is always there, and the reader is made conscious of it. Tolkien does not present ethical obligation in terms of static abstractions or rules but as arising dynamically from our existence in particular historical situations. When Frodo exclaimed, "I am not made for perilous quests... Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" Gandalf replied, "Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have." Ethical obligation arose from the capacity to respond to a situation "given" in history. Later in the story Lady Eowyn asks, "...may I not now spend my life as I will?" "Few may do that with honour" was Aragorn's response. (III, 57) Ethics is not here a matter of self-fulfillment, not even the realization of "our better selves"; ethics here, as in the Bible, has to do with relationships to others that occur in our historical existence, and to which some response must be made.

In one sense of the word this is "existential" ethics; but it is existential in the ancient, Christian sense in which obligation has a source which, though personal, is external to us. Recent, atheistic existentialism may be understood as an effort to secularize this sense of personal historical existence.

A few characters in the novel do choose evil and enter upon a long course of moral degeneration. Gollum is an obvious case, though his degeneration had gone far before the time of the novel. Saruman the White, head of the White Council, was tempted by ambition for power and yielding entered upon a long destructive road to perdition in which he came close to carrying all Middle Earth with him. Yet Saruman considered at first that if he could gain possession of the evil power of the Ring he could and would use it for good. He was willfully self-deceived, and his de-