

The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and *The Lord of the Rings*. Edited by Paul E. Kerry. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011. 310pp. ISBN 9781611470642. \$80.00.

The Ring and the Cross is a collection of fifteen papers—plus a dense historiographical introduction—dedicated to exploring and debating the Roman Catholicism of J.R.R. Tolkien, and most especially its place in the analysis of his fantasy writings. It should be noted that the subtitle of the book’s cover and that of its cover page differ; the former gives *Christianity and “The Lord of the Rings”*, while the interior has *Christianity and the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien*. The latter affords the more accurate scope, as the essays involve a range of works from Tolkien’s *legendarium*. Details from his critical and personal writings are also brought in, however, as well as a great deal of biographical information. The purpose of the collection—perhaps a little misrepresented by the categorical air of its title—is described by editor and contributor Paul E. Kerry as “a personal effort to bring together opposing views” (7). *The Ring and the Cross* by no means purports to offer a definitive or exhaustive examination of its topic, something that might easily fill several volumes and fall short even so; as Kerry writes, “[t]his collection is not designed to close off discussion and debate, but rather is an effort to show how lively, engaging, and productive the question of Christian influence on Tolkien’s literary works remains” (46). The civility of the discussions—another of Kerry’s aims, and not something easy to achieve with such a controversial topic—is for the most part well kept.

Ranging in length from four to twenty-two pages, the papers are relatively concise; several were originally conference presentations, and one was a newspaper article. As is to be expected with any collection, there is a certain amount of overlap and repetition, as well as variation among depth of insight, quality of argument, and commitment to documentation. Use of secondary sources is generally modest. The editor’s own Introduction is by far the most informative paper in *The Ring and the Cross*, though as a survey of past positions, as well as 60 pages in length—almost thrice that of the longest essay—it has the advantage. Used in conjunction with the volume’s index and collective bibliography, it affords a commanding overview of the many issues, quandaries, and opportunities of Christianity-centered Tolkien scholarship. Kerry’s coverage includes the place of the collection’s own papers within existing debates.

The essays are divided between two eponymous sections. The first three papers of “Part I: The Ring” represent an exchange between Ronald Hutton and Nils Ivar Agøy—fundamental to this collection—concerning the presence of Tolkien’s own Christianity in his imaginative works. The instigator is Hutton’s “The Pagan Tolkien”, which was originally delivered at the 2005 Tolkien Society conference. It is deft and provocative, arguing that, while Tolkien is Christian, his fictive mythology is not; Hutton even goes so far as to discredit Tolkien’s own claims about the Christian content of his stories, arguing that “apparent allusions to the Virgin [Galadriel] or to the Host [*lembas*] were detected by other Catholics, and he seized upon them as useful ammunition in his defense of his book against accusations of atheism or agnosticism” (59). Agøy’s “The Christian Tolkien: A Response to Ronald Hutton” represents a Lutheran theologian’s attempt to refute a thesis that, he claims, is “built on sand, and therefore [...] must fall” (85). Though Agøy agrees with Hutton that Tolkien’s letters are often misused as evidence to support positions about his fiction, he argues that Christian elements were deliberately and clearly worked into Tolkien’s *legendarium* from the beginning, and not simply alleged or reworked. This prompts a concluding rebuttal, “Can We Still Have a Pagan Tolkien: A Reply to

Nils Ivar Agøy”, in which Hutton reiterates his original position and claims that Agøy is exemplifying how Tolkien’s works “can be made to seem compatible with Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, by a process of argument based on emphasis and interpretation” (91). Hutton’s response seems overly exasperated with some of the formal aspects of Agøy’s essay, especially since Hutton’s style in his second paper—though this time composed for print—adheres to the more casual style of his original.

Following these is Stephen Morillo’s “The Entwines: Investigating the Spiritual Core of *The Lord of the Rings*,” which attempts to argue that “the spirituality in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and for that matter in the rest of his Middle-earth fiction, even *The Silmarillion*, is not, in any significant or specific way, Christian” (106). Morillo professes himself a lifelong atheist, something he claims to have allowed him to approach Tolkien in an impartial fashion; a few sentences later, he declares, “I am not a Tolkien scholar” (107), and that, as such, he will not be referring to any secondary sources. Such disclaimers seem to have excused the author from dedicating any appreciable effort to his task. With all due respect to Morillo as a scholar of Anglo-Norman history, this particular paper is so superficial, impressionistic, and—to pun on its title—hasty, that the editor would have done better to drop it from the collection altogether.

Setting the collection back on track is John R. Holmes’s “‘Like Heathen Kings’: Religion as Palimpsest in Tolkien’s Fiction,” which investigates the meaning of “heathen” as it appears in *The Lord of the Rings*. Readers will recall that the word is uttered by Denethor just before his self-immolation (and attempted burning of Faramir), and repeated by Gandalf in his rebuke of the steward. Surveying etymologies available to Tolkien, Holmes argues that its use in the text is not anachronistic, as has been charged, nor even necessarily religious; on the contrary, it can be understood to refer simply to “the predecessors of the Gondorians who burned their dead rather than burying them like respectable Third-Agers” (122). Though well-structured, Holmes’s position is highly debatable, especially given the Númenóreans who worshipped Morgoth. His numerous philological parses also do well to remind us of the exhilarating intricacy of the web of words, but in speaking of words as palimpsests, we must acknowledge that we cannot often read what has been written over—that connotations have been lost, not simply replaced—and that this absence serves as a most tantalizing canvas for our own semantic projections.

Affording a modest meditation is Ralph C. Wood’s six-page “Confronting the World’s Weirdness: J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Children of Húrin*”. In considering the nature of the Anglo-Saxon value *wyrd* (“fate”) and its pertinence to Túrin Turambar, Woods argues that “life is woven through with both chance and necessity,” and that “a prudential humility [...] is the only faithful way to engage these often weird processes [...]”(150). The essay is short and sweet, though in this case an etymological element might have proved enriching. As strange a force as it may seem, *wyrd* is not a lexical alien; it is cognate with the Old English verb *weorðan* ‘to become, turn out,’ as well as the Latin *vertere* ‘to turn [around], change, alter, overthrow’. Such a consideration reinforces Wood’s position that fate in Anglo-Saxon literature, as well as in *The Children of Húrin*, seems something impersonal and perfunctory—more so than, for example, the Roman *fortuna*, a force so fickle and malicious as to be often personified. In pre-Christian Old Norse–Icelandic cosmology, however, *wyrd* is, in a sense, personified—in the form of the Norn Urðr.

Catherine Madsen’s “Eru Erased: The Minimalist Cosmology of *The Lord of the Rings*” argues that “the theological underpinnings of *The Silmarillion* were deliberately omitted from *The Lord of the Rings*”, something Madsen declares is “relatively easy to show” (152). As with

some other papers in the collection, Madsen's argument is oriented by an extremely confident opinion about the quality and position of *The Silmarillion* vis-à-vis Tolkien's earlier (that is, prehumous) works—essentially that it is marginal, confounding, and even to an extent artificial and disappointing. As she admits, the position is one held by many people who awaited publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977 as an explanation for *The Lord of the Rings*. She argues that

[i]f *The Silmarillion* in some form had been published along with *The Lord of the Rings*, as Tolkien wished, the cosmological underpinnings would have been available to his readers from the beginning; there would now be no debate about their relation or relevance to the tale of the Ring. (156)

For those who were born to find both books on the shelf, however, there never was a debate to begin with; *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* do indeed coexist, and sing to each other harmoniously enough. This will be the rule as time progresses, suggesting that Madsen's position is more generational than conceptual.

The final paper of Part I is “The Ring and the Cross: How Tolkien Became a Christian Writer” by Chris Mooney. Originally an article in *The Boston Globe* in December 2002, it challenges the appropriation of *The Lord of the Rings* by certain Christian groups and commentators.

The theologically oriented second part of *The Ring and the Cross*—“The Cross”—begins with Carson L. Holloway's “Redeeming Subcreation,” a patient, articulate attempt to show how sub-creation is “compatible with and even informed by Tolkien's faith” (178). Holloway's paper implicitly addresses what Kerry calls in his Introduction “The Trap” (19-20)—the theological dilemma Tolkien faced as a Christian when he invented a non-Christian secondary world. Apart from making a strong case for sub-creation as something Tolkien hoped would be redeemed and accompany him into the afterlife (as allegorized in “Leaf by Niggle”), Mooney's paper is also important for demonstrating straightaway—and in the face of some of the smugger skepticism of the first section—the great sensitivity and finesse of which Christian interpretations of Tolkien's works are capable. Jason Boffetti shares Mooney's position in “Catholic Scholar, Catholic Sub-Creator,” arguing that, “[a]lthough [Tolkien's] inspirations for the stories might have been pre-Christian, his aspirations were thoroughly Christian” (198). Where this particular paper shines is in its conceptualization of fictional reality, especially the relationship of secondary worlds with the primary: “[...] alleged novelty is impossible as the fodder for even the most radical and distorted flight from given reality will still be founded in the only reality we know. Imagination will forever be grounded in experience” (199). This position supports Boffetti's argument that the *legendarium* represents manifestations of Tolkien's own engagement with the gift of Creation.

Michael Tomko's “‘An Age Comes On’: J.R.R. Tolkien and the English Catholic Sense of History” considers the influence of English Catholicism—in particular that of Oratorian thinkers—on the sense of history and passage of time in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien himself claims to have looked upon history as a “long defeat,” a phrase originally found in a speech by Galadriel, and which serves so well to describe the attrition of goodness and beauty in Middle-earth. Tomko not only examines how this perspective informs the ubiquitous sense of loss and ruin in *The Lord of the Rings*, but also argues that a revival of sorts—analogue to the English Catholic revival of Victorian England—dawns during the journey from Weathertop to Isengard. Thus, while the efforts of Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn, and their allies must even in success cause

the world to dilapidate, there remains, as with the English Catholic experience, a hope and will to “transform the age through acts of faith, hope, and love” (222).

“*The Lord of the Rings* and the Catholic Understanding of Community” by Joseph Pearce considers the potential influence of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc’s ‘distributist’ philosophy on Tolkien’s “sociopolitical and sociocultural vision” (225). Pearce’s contention is that Tolkien’s pre-mechanical romanticism corresponds to the anti-industrialism of Chesterton and Belloc as conveyed in their respective *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Servile State*, works which were published “during the formative years of Tolkien’s life” (225). This influence is alleged to inform even Tolkien’s perspectives on reality and sub-creation.

Next is editor Paul E. Kerry’s own “Tracking Catholic Influence in *The Lord of the Rings*.” Addressing the major issue of his Introduction, Kerry contemplates the very idea of looking for Catholicism in Tolkien’s greatest work, challenging in particular the aversion many critics—even some Catholics—have towards the idea. His appeal is in favor of looking for and identifying such influence, especially for those inclined to do so, arguing that

[d]etermining influence is difficult and complicated. But such complexity does not mean that influence cannot be shown, much rather it carries with it the challenge of careful reading, skilled scholarship, and sensitive analyses when staking such claims. (244)

Ultimately, however,—and Kerry’s opening paragraphs show he is well aware of this—the debate has little to do with Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* specifically. Instead, it begs the place of real-world faith and religious orthodoxy in the practice of literary criticism, particularly that involving fictional worlds. The critics who read this paper will likely feel a strong inclination toward one side or the other; Kerry’s appeal to both lies in his composure and his eloquence, as well as his recognition that “[r]eaders are informed by who they are [...]” (244).

Marjorie Burns’s “Saintly and Distant Mothers” was originally presented as the Scholar Guest of Honor speech at the 2008 Mythcon. A source analysis, it considers the potential influence of Victorian fantasy writer George MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* on Tolkien’s portrayals of Varda, Galadriel, and Éowyn. Though the paper is thoughtful, its inclusion in this collection seems tenuous, lying in a somewhat peripheral consideration of the Virgin Mary’s correspondence to MacDonald and Tolkien’s female characters. Altogether, Madsen emphasizes these women as remote and impersonal matriarchs, as opposed to the domestic variety of maiden Éowyn too disdains to become.

The last paper of the collection is Bradley J. Birzer’s “The ‘Last Battle’ as Johannine Ragnarök: Tolkien and the Universal,” a look at the eschatology of Tolkien’s various mythological sources, as well as an analysis of how Tolkien’s understanding of the Apocalypse in his own *legendarium* changed over time. It is a confident and wide-ranging piece— of all the collection’s papers, it is also the one most fully intended for a Catholic audience. It must be said that some of Birzer’s positions on Old Norse–Icelandic poetry, particularly the meaning of *edda* as “soulful utterance” (267, 279), are rather whimsical according to established scholarship. His affiliation of the word with the mythological poems most fully contained in the Codex Regius manuscript is also misguided, since the *Elder Edda*, as it is still often known, seems only to have been named *edda* in the seventeenth century because of some of the material it appears to share with the thirteenth-century (prose) *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*.

As a contribution to a—if not *the*—polemical area of Tolkien studies, *The Ring and the Cross* is commendable not only for looking at both sides, but also for reflecting those many shades in between where most opinions fall. The collection’s civility and single-volume format

more than likely bely the true friction and disparity of opinions on its topic, but the willingness to publish together is at least a willingness to engage one another, and that can never be a bad thing.

© 2011 by Harley J. Sims