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## "But Grace is Not Infinite": Tolkien's Explorations of Nature and Grace in His Catholic Context

Phillip Irving Mitchell

Dallas Baptist University, TX

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### Abstract

Adds to our understanding of Tolkien’s created theology and the place of Faerie in his sub-creation by examining contemporary real world theological debates which might have influenced his thinking, including discussions of the supernatural like Pius XII’s 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*.

### Additional Keywords

Catholicism; Grace; Nature in J.R.R. Tolkien; Pius XII, Pope. *Humani Generis*; Supernatural in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religious beliefs



“UT GRACE IS NOT INFINITE”:  
TOLKIEN’S EXPLORATIONS OF  
NATURE AND GRACE  
IN HIS CATHOLIC CONTEXT

PHILLIP IRVING MITCHELL

“Of course I do not mean that the Gospels tell what is *only* a fairy-story; but I do mean very strongly that they do tell a fairy-story: the greatest. Man the story-teller would have to be redeemed in a manner consonant with his nature: by a moving story.”—J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters* 100-101; to Christopher Tolkien

“Others destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision.”—Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950)

PAUL KERRY’S RECENT EDITED VOLUME, *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and The Lord of the Rings*, reminds us that the role of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Roman Catholicism in interpreting his work continues to be a subject of a lively debate, especially in regards to the use of his letters. Whether there might be a Pagan, as well as a Catholic Tolkien, whether *The Lord of the Rings* can or should be read as a great Christian work, even while many readers remain unaware of Tolkien’s religion, are questions that, I suspect, will continue to be discussed for some time to come.<sup>1</sup> My goal in the following is not to insist upon the normativeness of positions that can be acquired from Tolkien’s letters, or even to argue for the legitimacy of such readings, though my essay perhaps assumes this. Neither do I intend to focus upon the correspondences between *lembas* and the Eucharist, the Marian echoes in Galadriel and Varya, or the Christian kingship of Aragorn. Instead, I want to draw attention to a Catholic context that made such theological readings possible, one that supported Tolkien in affirming the separate validity

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ronald Hutton and Nils Ivar Agøy’s exchange on this issue in *The Ring and the Cross* (57-105), as well as John R. Holmes’s insightful reading of the layering in Tolkien’s use of “like heathen kings” (122-126).

of the pagan, even while positioning it within his larger Catholic structure of beliefs. Thus, with some hesitation, I cite the ubiquitously quoted 1951 letter to Robert Murray, then training to become a Jesuit:

But, to tell you the truth, though praise (or what is not quite the same thing, and better, expressions of pleasure) is pleasant, I have been cheered specially by what you have said, this time and before, because you are more perceptive, especially in some directions, than any one else, and have even revealed to me more clearly some things about my work. I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace [...]. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters* 172)

Notice that Tolkien wrote back to Murray, thanking him for having "revealed to me more clearly some things about my work" and himself admitting that this involved "the order of Grace." What I will argue is that the positioning of pagan and Christian elements was at the heart of Catholic concerns with nature and grace, and that Tolkien, grateful to have Murray help him discover that such grace was present in his long labor, would see the order of Grace as calling for an account of the relationship of natural and supernatural in his secondary worlds.

In the following I am not attempting to establish direct influences on Tolkien's thought, though I do note connections and friendships as they arise. Instead, I am concerned with establishing that the Catholic Tolkien moved in educated circles that would have shaped his general concerns with the theological implications of what he had already created. As he told W. H. Auden, "I don't feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief" (*Letters* 355). Furthermore, he felt that it is "some test of the consistency of a mythology as such, if it is capable of some sort of rational or rationalized explanation" (*Letters* 260). Tolkien's Catholic context would have inclined certain readers (including himself and Robert Murray) to notice and locate nascently Christianizable elements in "pagan" cultures, and this impulse (though it may appear as terribly exclusive and judgmental to non-Christian readers) in Tolkien's context was actually concerned with showing how a Catholic Christian could hold on to and praise the good in those non-Christian cultures. Thus, he would have been concerned with offering a secondary world that had some consistent treatment of its natural and supernatural ends. It would have been, if not quite normal, at least not beyond the pale of acceptability for the Catholic Tolkien to offer a praiseworthy pagan world that was different from a Christian culture yet that anticipated the future promises of Christ, as well as a

pagan culture that contained numerous elements that bore striking analogies to more explicitly Catholic ones, all the while insisting on their actual and functional differences.

### **A Singular Beatitude?**

Within educated Roman Catholic circles, mutedly in the 1920s and 30s, more fractiously in the late 40s and 50s, and culminating in positions taken at Vatican II in the 60s, Catholic theologians, as well as Catholic thinkers and writers, debated the meaning of nature and grace, and they held this debate in both Thomist and Augustinian terms. That Tolkien has been associated with both Augustinian and Thomist theologies should not surprise us.<sup>2</sup> The theology and philosophy of Thomas Aquinas was held at that time to be the perfection of Christian reflection, and Neo-Thomism was what was taught in the Catholic seminaries and schools. At the same time, the strong Augustinian tradition made comparisons with the later inevitable, and public figures in French and English Catholicism felt the need to address both lines of thought. The particular question of nature and grace was part of a larger debate between the neo-Thomist establishment and the neopatristic *ressourcement* as to what exactly the object and end of theology was to be, and it often took the character of a broadly synchronic reading of Thomist definitions of absolute unchanging rational truth as over against the diachronic and phenomenological studies of theological and philosophical history, trends that were often derisively labeled as “Augustinian” (cf. Nichols 4-5; Daley 370-371). While it is mostly true as Adrian Hastings observes that the actual works of the French neopatristics were not widely known in England before World War II (113), their broad themes were being discussed. The discussion in the 1920s in England, for example, can be seen in *A Monument to St. Augustine* (1930), printed by popular Catholic publisher Sheed and Ward, which brought together key Catholic figures from England, France, and Germany, and while ostensibly discussing the legacy of Augustine, the writers, many representative of the neo-Thomist school, had to weigh Augustine over against the legacy of Aquinas. Other popular collections, such as *God and the Supernatural: A Catholic Statement of the Christian Faith* (printed in 1920, 1936, and 1954) also addressed the specific relations of the natural and supernatural.

One of the deep issues that drove the debate, and would continue to do so well into the 1970s, concerned the best way to describe the “natural” state of human beings, and therefore, their civilizations, including those that were pre- or

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Matthew A. Fisher, “Working at the Crossroads: Tolkien, St. Augustine, and the *Beowulf*-poet” for an Augustinian reading, and Alison Millbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*, 19-22, as well as her “Tolkien, Chesterton, and Thomism” for examples of Thomist readings.

non-Christian. All sides of the debate shared the conviction that human beings aspire to certain ends and that they choose what they perceive to be means towards those desired ends. This fundamental assumption about anthropology raised important questions, which often took a rather binary shape. Were all humans created by God with a singular end, an innate drive toward the highest good of union with God? Or did they have two ends, simply directed at first toward human happiness and justice with a desire for God coming as a later gift of grace?<sup>3</sup>

In *A Monument to St. Augustine*, Maurice Blondel, who would inspire the French *ressourcement*, could insist upon the singular position (339-343), while Martin D'Arcy, English Jesuit author and friend of Tolkien's, himself influenced by French theologian Pierre Rousselot, understood that "pure nature," a condition in which God might have created rational beings whose fulfillment was within the created order only, was at best a theoretical construct. As D'Arcy noted, "Man with nothing but his natural endowments is an abstraction; he has never existed" ("Philosophy" 160). As early as 1920, Catholic convert and English apologist C.C. Martindale already maintained "Adam was created in Grace" (10). Jacques Maritain, who held the two-end position, openly admitted that "the actual natural end of the world is this natural end superelevated" by God's constant free grace at work in the world (102). Nonetheless, the hypothesis that a pure natural end could exist was thought by many as necessary to protect the complete gratuity of God's gift of grace. Without a second, purely natural end, the beatific end would be something merely owed to human beings, a finalization or simple extension of what humans are already: "God would be the completion of incompleteness. [...] The soul would love Him in a finite way, as its fulfillment, the Truth and Life of itself," instead of in a radical transformation that transcends mere human nature (D'Arcy, "The Idea of God" 52). Those with the dual end position held that an inclination towards the Beatific Vision would not be freely offered if humans were designed with it as an end that they could not otherwise achieve. Likewise, a purely natural end helped to explain why the accomplishments of those outside the Church were admirable deeds that nevertheless seemed to have no eternal profit, for it provided a category in which the ends of earthly welfare and justice were still persuuable.

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<sup>3</sup> Readers interested in learning more about the French debate may consult Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*; Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon*; Gerald A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism*; and Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie New Theology*. For discussions closer to the debate, Henri de Lubac's *The Mystery of the Supernatural* and Karl Rahner's *Nature and Grace* are both valuable. Those looking for a briefer overview of the key issues should consult Louis Dupré's new introduction to De Lubac's *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*. Currently, no monograph exists on the debate's English and American counterparts.

On the other hand, those who held to a singular end for human beings felt they had history on their side. French historical theologians and philosophers, such as Marie-Dominique Chenu, Etienne Gilson, Henri de Lubac, and Jean Danielou would continue to point out in the 30s and 40s that neither the Patristic Fathers nor Aquinas would have understood the hypothesis of pure nature or that of a notion of dual ends. The final *telos* of humanity had always been the beholding of God. The “standard view” of the late nineteenth century, their work showed, had been introduced by the commentators of Second Scholasticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, partially in response to the fatalistic positions of Michel Baius and of Cornelius Jansen.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, theologians such as Rousselot and Joseph Maréchal had sought to show how the beatific vision did indeed supernaturally fulfill natural virtues. For Rousselot, natural self-love can only finally be satisfied by divine charity. In a similar fashion, Maréchal insisted that all human judgment, even unknowingly, moves as an “ontological affirmation” towards God’s Truth and Being (McCool 110-112; Maréchal 127-128). The desire for God, then, is native to humans but must be activated by the gift of God. Admittedly, for those removed from the period’s debates, this singular position can seem much like the dual version, yet at stake for Catholics was a definition of human freedom. Otherwise, those like Rousselot (and later Danielou and De Lubac), worried that free will could be encroached upon by grace, forcing human desire toward an alien supernatural end. As Martindale put it, though the supernatural completely transcends human nature as much as solving a complex mathematical question would transcend a dog’s capacities, it nonetheless “is wholly in harmony with human nature” in much the same way that the mind works within the brain yet surpasses it—one cannot be conceived without the other (10).

The singular position was also understood and adapted by Christopher Dawson, Tolkien’s fellow parish member at St. Aloysius in the 30s and 40s. Much of Dawson’s historical work could be said to call attention to the historical and cultural expressions of nature and grace. In “On Spiritual Intuition in Christian Philosophy” (1930), Dawson agreed with Maréchal, holding that non-Christian philosophical and mystical experience does suggest a natural orientation to the Beatific Vision, an inclination activated by grace. Earlier in his “The Nature and Destiny of Man” (1920), Dawson explored how cultural systems fail that either bifurcate or suppress either the material or spiritual element in humanity. Most human cultures have believed in a transcendent and ethical reality, and Dawson

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<sup>4</sup> Henri de Lubac’s *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* is a thorough summary of these findings.

explored how cultural accomplishments derived their energy from a rational and spiritual resistance to animal and instinctive existence (*Enquiries* 262-263).

The French debate continued to be followed by English and American theologians, especially as it reached a fevered pitch in the years immediately following World War II, and was also discussed in the educated circles of Anglican and Catholic alike through the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The English Downside Abbey, where Tolkien had taken a repast in 1949, was a particular center of support for the *nouvelle théologie*. In 1947, English monk Dom Illtyd Trethowan had reviewed De Lubac's infamous *Surnaturel* for the *Downside Review*, praising him for providing "the definitive solution of the long theological controversy about man's natural desire for the supernatural" (71). Dom Trethowan interpreted De Lubac to mean that there simply is no natural end. One must begin with God: "Natural knowledge is only a stage towards the acceptance or the rejection of the sole supernatural end," and the desire for God is endemic to all human beings because it is their final created end, an end we can only be given (71). Dom Sebastian Moore, also writing in the *Downside Review*, could cite De Lubac's *Surnaturel* quite enthusiastically, recommending its model of a singular end as a better way to understand human desires for the divine even while maintaining the freedom of God: "The Vision of God was 'supernatural' not in that it was not the only end of human nature, but that the approach of human nature to that end was in no sense a drawing of the end into itself" (255). He could claim, rightly or wrongly, "The notion of the desire for God as nature's preparation for the life of grace now finds common acceptance among theologians," even as he could acknowledge that same year the adverse criticism of De Lubac's book coming out of the American journal *Theological Studies* (246, 259). Dawson, too, in his 1947 Gifford Lectures would continue to use the singular position as a way of reading the history of cultures.<sup>5</sup>

The debate was also followed and discussed by Anglo-Catholics, including those within Tolkien's Oxford circles. Austin Farrer (friend of both Tolkien and C.S. Lewis) and Eric Mascall were shaped by Thomist arguments and concerns and were at times grouped in professional circles with the work of Mark Pontifex and Trethowan at Downside Abbey. Mascall in 1946 defended the singular view from critiques in Protestant quarters, such as that of Reinhold Niebuhr. Mascall insisted that the human potential for the supernatural "is not a mere nothing; were that so, a cow would be as fit for elevation to life in God as man is. [...] Supernature is neither contrary to nature nor indifferent to it; rather

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<sup>5</sup> "All religion is based on the recognition of a superhuman reality of which man is somehow conscious and towards which he must in some way orientate his life. The existence of the tremendous transcendent reality that we name GOD is the foundation of all religion in all ages and among all peoples" (*Religion and Culture* 25).



it is nature's fulfillment" (*Christ, the Christian, and the Church* 224). Farrer in his 1948 Bampton Lectures also insisted that "the supernatural enhances and intensifies, but does not remove nature" (qtd. Hefling 48).

The controversy became divisive enough that eventually the papacy was drawn in. As Aidan Nichols points out, with the encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) Pius XII, while suppressing for a season certain aspects of the *nouvelle théologie*, refused to name names and thus condemn individuals (16). As is well known, *Humani Generis* did lead to the silencing of De Lubac's work for a season, though he would be eventually be vindicated at Vatican II. Nonetheless, the encyclical hardly led to a complete cessation of discussion. Danielou continued to publish works in the 50s that assumed the position of a singular end, especially in regard to questions involving non-Christian religions, and these would be translated into English with the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* prominently displayed.<sup>6</sup> Trethowan, too, offered some of his more trenchant critiques of the dual position in the 50s.

### **Natural Faërie and Anonymous Grace**

The debate, then, was concerned with a number of things: 1) What human beings were truly capable of in a fallen or unredeemed state, and if they were capable of good, then why and under what conditions? 2) How best to model the pull of God on the human person in order to preserve both God's free offer and human free choice; and 3) What is the historical and metaphysical relationship between non-Christian religions and the Catholic Church and its gospel? Even if Tolkien were only tangentially impacted by the formal terms of the debate, in such a context it would have been important for him to conceptualize the differences between a natural orientation and a supernatural one, as well as to consider what their functional relationship might have been. Whether one held a single or dual ends, in either case Catholic persons used to reflecting on the orders of nature and grace would be asking how elements in a pagan, non-Christian culture anticipate and prepare them for the things of Christ, and what comparative relationship these natural elements have to the higher channels of grace.

In 1954, Dom Trethowan saw clearly that the notion of one supernatural end nonetheless suggested that there were two kinds of faith—the conscious faith of Catholics within the Church, and the faith of those who, without conscious knowledge of the gospel, nonetheless received and accepted "God's summons" as they understood it (*An Essay in Christian Philosophy* 163-164). The question of how such faith arises, as well as whether knowledge and experience

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jean Danielou, *The Salvation of the Nations* chapter 4; and *God and the Ways of Knowing* 24-29, 36-40.

of God can be present in natural (i.e. non-Christian) capacities logically followed for those in Dom Trethowan's circles. Dom Trethowan critiqued D'Arcy's *The Nature of Belief* as an example of the possibilities and limits of the Rousselot school, believing in a singular end but not clearly defining it as De Lubac had done. (Tolkien himself had been given *The Nature of Belief* by Rene and Jack Eccles as a Christmas gift in 1931, though the book later passed into the library of Tolkien's eldest son, Father John Tolkien.) Dom Trethowan faulted D'Arcy for not being consistent—holding that humans might not have a natural experience of God, even while speculating that they might possess an indirect intuitional sense of God (*Certainty* 108-109). Nevertheless, what both understood is that there must be a way to account for the actual presence of grace in non-Christian contexts, as well as a way to legitimately recognize non-Christian experiences of the divine.

The terms of the debate manifest a concern with locating the "grace notes" in natural, pagan life and culture. They sought to uncover the action of God in the life of both the pagan past and the present Church, by locating parallels. Such studies were conducted not only by Maréchal and Danielou, but also by Louis Bouyer, who would befriend Tolkien in 1960 after introducing *The Lord of the Rings* to France in 1958.<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, too, shared these assumptions as is manifested in his 1943 conclusion to "On Fairy-Stories"—for example, his belief that the fairy tales are redeemed in the end, for "the happy ending" is an expectation of the Christian *eschaton* (78-79). The debate also suggests why it was important yet difficult for Tolkien to clearly define the relationship of Faërie to the supernatural and the natural. Faërie is neither human nor supernatural, but natural/magical, and by its powerful, non-human qualities, it stands as a middle realm pointing both to the mystical, truly supernatural and to "the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man" (44). As the drafts of "On Fairy-Stories" reveal, Tolkien considered identifying Faërie with the spiritual dynamic that Dawson in *Progress and Religion* had recognized in indigenous religious systems before settling on Faërie as finally natural (Mitchell 10-11), yet this position did not deny fantasy a role in supernatural preparedness: "Redeemed Man is still man. [...] The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them" (78).<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, in *Mythopoeia* (ca. 1931-35) Tolkien could, in his defense of Faërie, draw on the logic of both natural and supernatural ends. The ability to

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<sup>7</sup> Bouyer, in particular, was drawn to Tolkien's defense of fairy-tales via the Christian Incarnation. cf. Michaël Devaux, "Louis Bouyer & J.R.R. Tolkien: une amitié d'écrivains." For a brief English summary of this article, see Caldecott 141-142 n32.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Tolkien's statement with one by D'Arcy from 1942: "The material world will always keep those features which have grown familiar to us and endeared themselves to us as the nursing sister of our character and spiritual life. Its setting in a higher order will not change it out of countenance" (*Death and Life* 122-123).

sub-create secondary worlds is decidedly a natural one: "The right has not decayed./ We make still by the law in which we're made" (lines 69-70), and yet as he considers the final supernatural end of human beings, that of beholding the Beatific Vision, he is sure that there is a clear development and fit between it and the act of natural sub-creation. Grace does not violate nature. "Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys," he tells us, the "garden nor gardener, children nor their toys" (lines 137-138). Indeed, in the final purified and eternal state, the sub-creative gift will reach its complete end and purpose:

In Paradise they look no more awry;  
and though they make anew, they make no lie.  
Be sure they still will make, not being dead,  
and poets shall have flames upon their head,  
and harps whereon their faultless fingers fall:  
there each shall choose for ever from the All. (lines 143-148)

Significantly, Tolkien does not imagine a Beatific Vision that displaces the secondary vision necessary for poetic making, but one that purifies and multiplies its possibilities. Taken together his approach defends the natural facility of sub-creation, including its non-Christian expressions, and orients it to fulfillment in the Christian last things.

In the late 1960s, when Tolkien took time to write about *Smith of Wootton Major*, he insisted again that Faërie was not religious per se, but that it was nonetheless necessary for human health. He stressed that the tale written by himself as a believer was not an allegory of religion, even if the Great Hall functioned as kind of church, for "religion is not absent but subsumed: the tale is not about religion or in particular about its relation to other things" (100). Instead, Faërie is about human imagination going outside the normative and learning again to love the created world, with an "awareness of a limitless world outside our domestic parish" (101). Admittedly, this approach makes Tolkien's conception of Faërie potentially unstable, for it upholds a natural end for human beings, yet at the same time, by its non-human aspects points to something beyond the human and contains echoes of the mystical. Its stability comes from recognizing the distinction and relation of the two. Faërie is an outward-turning love necessary for human health, a natural orientation that in one form or another prepares one for the love of God, yet at the same time, it cannot, indeed *must* not, be said to stand for it in any allegorical manner. Faërie is an element common to Christian and pagan alike. As Tolkien quips, the Elves themselves "are not busy with a plan to reawake religious devotion in Wootton" (100).

Once one introduces the additional element of a Middle-earth historically placed in the past of Europe and Asia, Tolkien's vertical method of analogy with his horizontal method of recapitulation function in tandem; nature

and grace, pagan and Christian, exist not only in an ontological relationship of orientation and gratuity, but also in a historical relationship of temporal type and ante-type. And the former necessitates the later. That the pagan Christs of James Frazer's *Golden Bough* can be understood to point to the True Myth of Christ, as they were by G.K. Chesterton, Tolkien, and eventually Lewis (Carpenter, *Inklings* 43-45) does not mean that they were considered disposable; indeed, they must be maintained for their own formidable beauty, even as they also prepare for and point to a greater.

It is now a standard of Tolkien criticism to observe that what Tolkien has to say about the Beowulf poet can be applied to his own work. In "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" he sets forth a context in which a Christian author is recalling the pagan past in order to praise what is valuable about it. This results in a poem in which the more cruel aspects of the Norse religion are suppressed and the Christian commentary is also minimized, mostly remaining in occasional insights in the tradition of Hebrew wisdom. Tolkien's analysis here, too, has echoes of the relationship between nature and grace: "The author of *Beowulf* showed forth the permanent value of that *pietas* which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned" (23). Tolkien imagines the original Christianized audience of such a poem experiencing "the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow" (27). The engraced position of the Christian audience does not deny the value of its pagan ancestry; it stands upon it, having been prepared by it. This, then, raises the further question of what the eternal state of such a noble and natural past is. In the appendix to his essay, Tolkien goes on to discuss how the Anglo-Saxon concept of *dom* has made the transition from a pre-Christian meaning of true judgment to the Christian meaning of the Last Judgment and conjectures that the Beowulf poet partially re-paganizes the meaning to both hint at the past heroic ideal and yet still hold out hope that Beowulf as a noble man might be saved.

Such a position does not mean that Tolkien denied the uniqueness or the normative role of the institutional Church. In a letter to his son Michael, in which the father sought to bolster the faith of the son, Tolkien made an extended argument for the presence of sacramental help in the daily partaking of the Eucharist, and he insisted that the trappings of priests, bishops, and the Mass were ultimately essential for maintaining the longevity of the Christian faith. Nonetheless, he admitted that there could be channels of grace outside the Church, though he held that "the channel must eventually run back into the ordained course, or run into the sands and perish." Tolkien in addition to the metaphor of the watercourse, employed that of sun and moon. "Besides the Sun there may be moonlight (even bright enough to read by); but if the Sun were

removed there would be no Moon to see" (*Letters* 339n). Even the good of the pagan past or that of the non-Christian present was reflected light from a greater source or a river overflowing the banks of its normal direction. In saying this, Tolkien was by no means unique. In addition to Dom Trethowan's examination of the two faiths implied by a singular supernatural end and Lewis's exploration of this theme in two works from 1956, *The Last Battle* and *Till We Have Faces*,<sup>9</sup> theologian Karl Rahner's reflections on this topic were being published in English by Sheed and Ward the same year as Tolkien's letter to his son. Rahner could observe that an "'anonymous' Christianity," that is those outside the Church, would nonetheless depend upon "the unique grace of Christ [...] the grace which finds in the Church its historical tangibility and bodily existence" (98).

### The Open End of Natural Religion

Another important example of this is the presence of theistic religion in Second Age Númenor. Catherine Madsen has pointed out rightly that the Númenóreans revere but do not worship *per se* ("Light" 37-40). It was important for Tolkien, after all, to limit Númenor to "a monotheistic world of 'natural theology'" in which their religious practices were spare and without explicit reference to his own Catholic faith (*Letters* 220). This is perhaps not surprising in light of the distinction between nature and grace. A typical demarcation for Catholics was to line out natural religion as that which humans understood to do without any assistance of the special gospel of the Church:

Worship of God springing from reverential homage is a dictate of natural reason; it is natural religion. What positive Divine or human law has done is merely to determine it in this way or that way. [...] Theological virtues have God for their direct object. He is the object of faith, of hope, of love. But He is the end of religious acts, not their direct object or "matter;" their matter is worship; for due worship is offered—say, sacrificial offerings—out of reverence for God. (Elmendorf 327-8)

Understood this way, Sauron's actions are an affront to what all people rationally know, not necessarily what only the Triune Catholic variety would hold. Faith, hope, and love transcend the natural response of reverence. In 1956, Tolkien

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<sup>9</sup> By mentioning Lewis's interest in the question of non-Christian religion's relationship to Christianity, I am not trying to sidestep Tolkien's estrangement from Lewis during the 50s nor that Lewis was more likely influenced by the broad *mysterium tremendum* arguments of Rudolf Otto than by Catholic concerns, though Lewis himself did late in his career in *Letters to Malcolm* (1964) agree: "If grace perfects nature it must expand all our natures into the full richness of the diversity which God intended when He made them [...]" (10).

interpreted both *The Lord of the Rings* and the Númenórean Second Age as "about God, and His sole right to divine honour. [...] Sauron desired to be a God-King, and was held to be this by his servants" (*Letters* 243). There are a number of affinities here between Tolkien's assumption that the Númenórean age is a "primitive age" (*Letters* 193n) and what Andrew Lang came to call "primitive monotheism," or what Father Wilhelm Schmidt would explore in his anthropological research as "primitive revelation." (Schmidt's work would be published in English as *High Gods in North America* [1933] and *Primitive Revelation* [1939].) Lang and Schmidt theorized that monotheism, rather than being a late evolutionary development, represented the earliest layer of anthropological evidence. Schmidt mustered much ethnological data to argue that the earliest forms of human religion involved a single, benevolent, all-powerful Sky Father who dwelled in heaven, did not take human form, ordered human moral behavior, punished with death through the proxy of lesser spirits, and who was worshiped by the sacrifice of first fruits, prayer, and simple ritual. Likewise, Schmidt could hold that the survival of such beliefs was impacted to some extent by human barbarity at various levels (39-41, 124-153, 184-187, 206-209).

The contrast between the "Satanic" sacrifice to Morgoth and the pure Pillar of Heaven on Mount Menelmin where the worship is that of a "bloodless sacrifice" (*Sauron Defeated* [SD] 400), a sacrifice of first fruits, is but one example of this parallel. Certainly, there are also important differences. Tolkien conceives of Númenor initially as a society repenting of the service of Morgoth, only to return to Sauron's seduction in the centuries following. At points, he conceives of them not practicing petitionary prayer, only offering thanksgiving, and perhaps even that only through the meditative king (*Letters* 204-205). What is important for my analysis here is that Tolkien could assume that Númenórean civilization could be ancient and pagan and yet be monotheistic. There could be a monotheistic pagan world that nonetheless matched the general moral seriousness of *Beowulf*. The action of grace in his myth, thus, need not be entirely anonymous, though it would be mediated. In the tradition of *The Fall of Númenor*, especially in varying versions of *The Drowning of Anadûnê*, supernatural action is consistently one of divine judgment. Ilúvatar's punishment for the violation of the Ban is openly enacted by the Valar, as is the terrible deliverance for the Faithful.

With all due respect to Madsen,<sup>10</sup> therefore, for those such as Tolkien, this perspective regarding primitive religion did not presuppose that a "supernatural answer deliberately cheats the primal desire of all rational beings, to have their lives make sense in terms on which they are lived" ("Light" 43).

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<sup>10</sup> Also see Madsen's insightful article in *The Ring and the Cross* (152-169) for an exploration of the personal ramifications of these positions.

Instead, it assumed that the supernatural answer was the *telos* orienting the natural life conditions of human culture. As D'Arcy put the Catholic single-end position: "Complete as human nature is in itself and theoretically explicable, [. . .] owing to God's gratuitous love neither it nor the universe can be made fully intelligible without reference to the supernatural end" (*Death and Life* 122). Admittedly, the name "Bliss-friend" Tolkien intended to be "one loyal to the Valar, content with the bliss and prosperity within the limits prescribed" (*Letters* 347), but this limit always presupposed for Tolkien a final human destiny beyond that of history. As the Númenóreans, especially their kings, envied more and more the deathless state of the Undying Lands, they began to push back against their immediate calling to the gift of death—a free gift, the gratuity (i.e. the grace) of Eru. Tolkien's 1951 letter to Milton Waldman described the potential perils of a closed system oriented only to this world: "Reward on earth is more dangerous for men than punishment! [...] Their long life aids their achievement in art and wisdom, but breeds a possessive attitude to these things, and desire awakes for more *time* for their enjoyment" (*Letters* 154). Tolkien pronounces their decision to run from death as another "fall from grace" (155). The unfaithful Númenóreans, rather than desiring their true final end beyond the world, which is mysterious but is known in some sense to contain a vision of Ilúvatar, desired the secondary and penultimate ends of human power and craft. And yet their punishment did not close off the original promised gift: "But the fate of Men, they said, is neither round nor ended, and is not complete within the world" (*SD* 339). The natural end of human beings is not itself a closed system; death, rather than being its conclusion, is the window to its fulfillment outside Time.

### **The End of Elves and Men**

Thomas Aquinas wrote, "[H]e is better disposed to health who can attain perfect health, albeit by means of medicine, than he who can attain but imperfect health, without the help of medicine" (*De Lubac, Mystery* 152). Such a dilemma was at the heart of the differing ends for Men and Elves. In one version of *The Drowning of Anadûnê*, the Avalâi (that is the Undying Ones, here the Elves) say to the Númenóreans of their desire:

Eru does not punish without benefit, nor are his mercies without sternness. For we (you say) are unpunished and dwell ever in bliss; and so it is that we do not die, but we cannot escape, and we are bound to this world, never again to leave it, till all is changed. And you (you murmur) are punished, and so it is that ye die, but ye escape and leave the world and are not bound thereto. Which therefore of us should envy the other? (*SD* 345-346)

The eucatastrophic must be checked by "the long defeat" as long as we continue in history, but what of that outside Time? The deaths of Aragorn and Arwen are another notable example for this. While Aragorn may announce triumphantly that "we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory," he also must admit to Arwen that "there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world" (*Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A 1062-3), and she will die alone in what remains of the Golden Wood. Yet in her death, Arwen would seem to have achieved what the Elves long for—an escape of her own.

Tolkien in effect had created a scenario in which the Elves by their longevity, and in some versions of Tolkien's thinking by their return to Middle-earth after death, exist in the state of "pure nature" that the Second Scholastics contemplated. Indeed, Tolkien's decision to make Elvish reincarnation simply that—a conscious return to the same form—had the end result of making them even more creatures of apparently natural ends alone. In the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, which Christopher Tolkien dates somewhere between 1955 and 1959, J.R.R. Tolkien examined some of the implications of this scenario and sought to adjust his myth to be more in line with a consistent system of nature and grace. Tolkien uses the dialogue form to explore the different but interlocking ends of Elves and Men, both in Middle-earth and in a future Arda Healed. The realization that the race of Men might have originally also been deathless acts as the center-piece of the discussion, for "the original nature of Men must have been strange indeed and unlike that of any others of the dwellers of Arda" (*Morgoth's Ring* [MR] 304). In Tolkien's theoretical reflections on Númenórean history, he had noted that in the First Age "it is guessed that in the first design of God they were destined (after tutelage) to take on the governance of all the Earth, and ultimately to become Valar, to 'enrich Heaven', *Ilúve*" (*SD* 401). Thus, Tolkien posits that the remembrance of promised human *theosis* must have been strong at one point. Salvation as divinization was a position that Tolkien shared with Dawson: "[T]he whole material world, will be brought into a true relation with the soul, so that everywhere matter is the extension of spirit" and "the earthly, elevated with the divine, [will] be freed from corruptibility, and transfigured" (*Enquiries* 284-286). Such a hope would become more normative in Catholic reflection as the century progressed, being found in various forms in De Lubac, Chenu, and Danielou. Rahner, likewise, could insist that "grace is not only pardon for the poor sinner but 'sharing in the divine nature'" (128). The nature of Elves and Men, then, is important since their final ends are dependent upon their natures' purposes.

As such, the human push back against death is understandable, even as the call to accept death should be honored and obeyed. Andreth observes, "No heart of Man is content" before the shadow of death (*MR* 307). She and Finrod



debate whether death is of the nature of men as it is of the birds and beasts. Unfortunately, the counter-tradition among Men is fragmentary and mixed with much error. Death is not part of their “true nature” say the wise among Marach’s people (MR 309). Death for Men is of a different order than the Elves, for the former cannot escape it. But this is bounded by the makeup of creation itself. The principle of the world’s future ending is built upon the transcendence and *aseity* of God. Arda cannot last forever: “It was made by Eru, but He is not in it. The One only has no limits” (MR 311). Even the Elves will eventually fade away and die as a race, and they have no assurance of any existence beyond Arda’s limits. Yet for Men, Andreth insists, to live deathlessly had originally meant eternally, that is “*born to life everlasting, without any shadow of any end*” (MR 314). Death, on these terms, would seem to be a violation of the end purpose of Men, rather than as the Elves suppose it, a gift.

Their discussion of the relationship of the bodies (*hröar*) and souls (*fëar*) of rational beings also engages the question of authentic human nature and its singular or dual ends. The Elves recognize that the *fëar* of Men are not in harmony with their *hröar*, for the former gesture toward a greater end than the later are able to accomplish; thus, the Elvish name for Men, “the guests.” Finrod, in particular, wonders at the human capacity for continually longing for something else other than that which is at hand. To which Andreth admits that “my heart is stirred as if by some truth that it recognizes even if it does not understand it” (MR 316). Of course, what Andreth longs for, according to all sides of the Catholic debate, is the final beatific vision of Eru, a desire that need not be understood as simply natural, for it is always, too, the gift of God. Finrod concludes that a deathless stay in Arda would violate the other end that Men have outside Time.

Their converse also raises the question of both Thomistic and Augustinian anthropologies, and Andreth is quick to reject any vision of the separation of the soul and body that implies the body as a house or raiment that can be easily cast away:

I hold it then that it is not to be thought that the severance of these two could be according to the true nature of Men. For were it ‘natural’ for the body to be abandoned and die, but ‘natural’ for the *fëa* to live on, then there would indeed be a disharmony in Man, and his parts would not be united by love. His body would be a hindrance at best, or a chain. (MR 317)

Andreth understands that the final bodily destiny of Men must be something other than death, and the design of Eru for his creation would mitigate against this kind of destiny. Finrod leaps to the necessary resurrection of bodies and holds out hope that in what Eru has perhaps promised as their true *telos*; Arda

Healed might surpass Arda Unmarred, though even here he insists on the absolute freedom of God to act as he wishes, just as the author need not reveal all in the preface (*MR* 319). Finrod speculates a final purpose for the Elves not unlike the one Tolkien proposes for the poets in paradise, where the Elves "there walk, maybe, with the Children of Men, their deliverers, and sing to them such songs as, even in the Bliss beyond bliss, should make the green valleys ring and the everlasting mountain-tops to throb like harps" (*MR* 319). This could be the case, Finrod insists, because the final end purpose of Elves would not change; they are designed for memory; thus, they would still function as elevated crafters of memory. In the *Athrabeth*, then, Tolkien, consciously or unconsciously, extends the argument of the *nouvelle théologie*. Even if God can make "intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision" (Pius XII), he will not. Elves are not intellectual beings of pure nature any more than the Second-born. Yet neither are they owed the final destiny for which their faith and hope (*estel*) hold out. If, as Tolkien points out, the "additions of Eru" are not "alien" to the nature of those who dwell in Arda, then they "may enhance the past and enrich its purpose and significance, but they will contain it and not destroy it" (*MR* 336). Tolkien returns to one of the themes of *Mythopoeia* and one of the key insights of the singular position: creation is already oriented towards God's final end for it.

Appropriately, Andreth's account of the Old Hope carries the discussion further, until Tolkien comes closest to daring what he had said only a few years earlier that he would not do—undertake to write (fictionally) of the Christian Incarnation (*Letters* 237). "[T]hey say that the One will himself enter into Arda, and heal men and all Marring from beginning to end" (*MR* 321). Tolkien has the two consider a version of the *protoeuangelium* in which only Eru himself can finally undo all the damage that Melkor-Morgoth has rendered. The logic of the Incarnation is that it is the nature of the second person of the Godhead to go forth in love and be embodied in his creation, even as such a deed breaks down all logic of "in-dwelling" and "out-living" (*MR* 322), yet this is an act of love and not one of debt repaid. Still, in Tolkien's mythology Finrod and Andreth are not Christians, and thus it follows necessarily that the dialogue should end focused on the unfulfillable love of Andreth and of Aegnorm, the brother of Finrod. Andreth can only doubt the character and intentions of Eru, while Finrod with more certain hope, can still only hope for what even the Valar have not been permitted to know.

### **The Pagan Frodo as a Lesson in Grace**

That Tolkien did insist that "the 'Third Age' was not a Christian world" (*Letters* 220) is important to keep in mind, too, when we consider the actions of his characters even in *The Lord of the Rings*. If the characters themselves are pre-Christian, they nonetheless are conceived by Tolkien as having various amounts

of true knowledge about the nature of Arda. Certainly, this guided Tolkien's own post-*Rings* analysis of which I will focus on one set of examples. In a number of letters between 1956 and 1963 (#181, 191, 192, 246), Tolkien recognized in Frodo's failure at Mount Doom both the action of nature and moral inability, as well as the gift of grace, that is of the One, the divine Author, who steps in when the pagan Frodo can no longer act. That he invokes the Lord's Prayer ("Lead us not in to temptation, but deliver us from evil.") might seem at first to run counter to his conception of the First, Second, and Third Ages of Middle-earth as pre-Christian, yet it need not be so. There are at least three ways this is possible. One could, of course, simply decide that Tolkien after writing *The Lord of the Rings* has changed his mind: Frodo really is a proto-Christian. Certainly he describes in the letters Frodo's struggle and "salvation" in Christian terms, invoking for example, the "double scale" of the saints; however, the bulk of the evidence I will suggest does not really support such a radical turn in Tolkien's thought. Secondly, one could read Tolkien's letters as exercises in applicability. Yet unlike the comparisons that Tolkien was prone to make in World War II, such as calling the Nazis orcs and so forth, his considerations and speculations on the matter of Frodo and Mount Doom stretch beyond this. He ventures not just to judge Frodo's actions by Catholic moral categories, but to offer him as a somewhat normative, rather than as an entirely exceptional, example. The third possibility is to allow that Tolkien may be reading Frodo as one of those outside the stream of the Church who nonetheless receives its waters, if not quite what Rahner came to call "anonymous Christianity," at least an example of God acting in a setting before and beyond the Church historic.

For Catholics, there are certain theological dangers to approaches like Rahner's, the most important being that the trajectory of such a position is increasingly to conflate the distinctions between nature and grace, one of the very things with which the *nouvelle théologie* was charged. In hopes of recognizing the sacred presence in the pagan or secular, one might be led to increasingly make the sacred nothing but the pagan by another name. I am willing to contend that ultimately Tolkien conceived, at least in these letters, Frodo's particular reception of God's grace as not alien to his natural struggle and moral suffering. At the same time, Tolkien's insistence on the role of grace coming *after* Frodo's struggle and failure kept the hobbit's natural religion from being reduced to a morality without the divine Author's involvement. In similar fashion, Tolkien's isolation of Frodo's natural struggle kept the grace that Frodo received from being absorbed into nature, becoming just another name for circumstance or human (i.e. hobbit) willpower. This can be seen in one of his extended footnotes to his letter to Eileen Elgar. He writes of Frodo's failure:

No account is here taken of 'grace' or the enhancement of our powers as instruments of Providence. Frodo was given 'grace': first to answer the call [...] after long resisting a complete surrender; and later in his resistance to the temptation of the Ring [...] and in his endurance of fear and suffering. But grace is not infinite, and for the most part seems in the Divine economy limited to what is sufficient for the accomplishment of the task appointed to one instrument in a pattern of circumstances and other instruments. (*Letters* 326n)

As Tolkien notes, in the last analysis, it is impossible for "incarnate creatures" to successfully resist Evil in the world forever. Frodo's particular heroism and struggle guarantee that nature is not absorbed into grace. He exhausts his freedom, unknowingly preparing the way for the gift of the Other Power's action. Though God is infinite, the offer of grace is not. In such circumstances because it is neither owed nor absorbed, Frodo's powers are already oriented and able to receive help, but they cannot expect it. Frodo is "rewarded by highest honour" for what he could do—a heart embracing pity and mercy and willing to suffer in humility with a sense of its own mortal inability. He is finally "saved," however, not by his own nature but by actions orchestrated beyond his control.

Indeed because Frodo is a pre-Christian, that salvation remains anonymous. While Tolkien may tell his correspondents that Frodo is finally saved by the action of the Other Power, Frodo himself does not know this. As D'Arcy observed, for the Catholic "natural religion [...] can [only] arrive at an inadequate knowledge of God. [...] The finite cannot comprehend the Infinite. A fuller revelation than that given in the natural order had to come; Truth had to manifest itself in flesh and blood; God to become man" ("The Idea of God" 51). Frodo sacrifices himself for those he loves; he is yet unaware that such love points to the greater *caritas* of the Author Unnamed. Frodo's "salvation" is finally for only a "purgatorial" season in the Undying Lands. He cannot be content in this world. (Nor can Sam in the very last analysis.) Frodo's restlessness is the condition of us all. The Undying Lands, though they may come close with the presumable presence of the Valar, are not in the last analysis the Beatific Vision. Unlike the Elves, who for the time being may return to Arda for which they were made, Frodo's future remains outside Time as he knows it. He is not a creature of "pure nature," dead to an extrinsic finality in Arda Healed. But neither is he a Catholic Christian.

The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff once advised Christians to be careful to listen to the interpretations and insights of those outside their faith because differing control beliefs can lead to differing results, and each has results worth learning from. In light of the Catholic debate over nature and grace, one wonders if Tolkien might not be sympathetic to Wolterstorff's point. Pagan readings of Tolkien's work are bound to notice those aspects of his mythology

that he wanted to keep pagan. If their light, he believed, was ultimately derived from a Catholic sun, he also believed that they nonetheless held the real differentiated light of the Moon, a light, lest we forget, that he deeply loved.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PHILIP IRVING MITCHELL is Director of the University Honors Program at Dallas Baptist University and Associate Professor of English. He is a contributor to *Tolkien Studies* and *Logos*, as well as the forthcoming Norton *Teaching The Lord of the Rings*. He also serves as book review editor for the journal *Christianity and Literature* and is interested in the historiography of writers in the Anglican and Catholic Renaissance.



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