

Beauty and Loss

Tolkien's Eucatastrophe as a Mandate for the Church

Mary Philpott

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Stephen Bell, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Thomas Provenzola, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Paul Muller, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

In his writings, Tolkien affirms the presence of loss and longing, beauty and despair and analyzes the function they serve in both the secondary world of Middle-earth and the primary world. This thesis will explore his theories of the eucatastrophe and the dyscatastrophe, and his insistence that the joy and hope which are expressed by the eucatastrophe are dependent upon the dyscatastrophe—the presence of sorrow and despair. This thesis will also examine how Christians' knowledge of Tolkien's philosophy can better equip them to cope with the brokenness of a fallen world as well as provide motivation for developing and engaging a secular culture.

Tolkien's Eucatastrophe as a Mandate for the Church

If our great grandparents could see the world today, they would probably be shocked at the state of affairs. Thankfully, there is no Hitler figure brazenly seeking world domination or slaughtering millions of Jews, yet at the same time society now faces new threats. Individuals intent on taking innocent lives strap bombs to themselves and walk into crowded marketplaces, while others enter elementary schools with automatic weapons. It is impossible to look around and not desire things to be different. JRR Tolkien was very aware of our desire to return to an Edenic time when evil was not so evident, and when beauty and truth were glorified rather than selfishness and greed. In his work, Tolkien addresses the pain and loss of being human and our desire to regain what has been lost. Tolkien's philosophy, that loss and longing are an intrinsic part of the human experience, is a core doctrine of Christianity, and the hope which he offers through the eucatastrophe enables Christians to face the uncertainties of a fallen world with joy, and respond to such uncertainties through engagement rather than withdrawal from a secular world.

The Philosophy of Brokenness

Broken. It is perhaps the most enigmatic word in the English language. The only reason one can know something is broken is because he or she has an understanding of the way something should work. To know that something is broken requires a knowledge of how it functions in its perfect state, yet this poses a problem for humans, especially those who adhere to a secular humanistic worldview. Every human is able to recognize that there is evil in the world he or she inhabits, that somewhere along the line, something went dreadfully wrong. It is a recognition of the brokenness around one and a

fundamental desire to escape it. This is evidenced through an often innate desire to return to what Christians might deem a pre-fallen state. Secular humanists, unlike Christians, do not believe that man has experienced an actual fall from grace, yet they too desire to recover something which has been lost. The manner in which they attempt to recover what they feel they have lost differs from person to person. For some, the perfect relationship will ostensibly fulfill that desire. For others, having a successful career, marriage, or social life are the keys to satisfaction. The fact that humanity is searching for something significant is evidence that it has lost something meaningful.

Christianity posits a feasible explanation as to why humanity subconsciously yearns for something more, a theme which Tolkien addresses time and again in his legendarium. However, it is necessary to first consider the implications of one's worldview regarding nostalgia before examining how Tolkien himself addresses it.

According to those naturalists who adhere to an evolutionary view, everything has evolved from some pre-existing life form. Darwin, most famous for his publication *The Origin of Species*, argued that what is seen in the world is the product of billions of years of evolution. One of the core arguments of his theory centers on the belief that evolution has struggled to produce the perfect organism—man. Survival of the fittest has guaranteed that each organism has evolved to function within its specific niche; it has evolved perfectly and accordingly lacks nothing. However, such a view is called directly into question by the presence of longing. How can evolutionists, who claim that everything has evolved to fulfill a niche, account for humanity's sense of loss? Why is it, if humans truly are perfectly evolved and adapted for their present role within the natural world, that they are not completely satisfied? If the evolutionary model is to be accepted,

humanity should be experiencing a sense of gain, not a sense of loss. Walker Percy was aware of this when he wrote that “man who has satisfied every biological and cultural need that can be abstracted by the scientific method may nevertheless be desperately alienated from himself.” He goes on to argue that “modern man is estranged from being, from his own being, from the being of other creatures in the world, from transcendent being. He has lost something—what, he does not know; he knows only that he is sick unto death with the loss of it.”¹

Loss and the Christian Explanation

Unlike a naturalistic worldview, a Christian one both accepts and, to an extent, affirms humanity’s common experience of loss. This is because it teaches that humanity has experienced a literal fall from grace, as recorded in Genesis 3. Humanity has been separated from its Creator, and has lost the most important relationship it was ever meant to experience. Like so many of Tolkien’s characters, humans have lost something of great value and yearn to regain it. Clyde Kilby, a contemporary of Tolkien, writes that “Tolkien also believed in the *anima naturaliter christiana*, the sense of God and responsibility to Him inborn in mankind.”² Such a statement is reminiscent of Ecclesiastes 3:11, part of which states that “God has set eternity in the hearts of men” (NLT). God has set within his image bearers a knowledge of himself, and with that knowledge of a perfect God, comes an understanding, however blurry and distorted it may be, of our past Edenic state. Such nostalgia then is a natural product of this loss;

1. Walker Percy, “The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry,” in *Sign-Posts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 251-262.

2. Clyde Kilby, *Tolkien & The Silmarillion* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1977), 57.

humanity had at one point experienced the fullness of life as its Creator intended it, turned away from it, and now the wish to return to a perfected state consumes us.

The language which Tolkien employs in one of his many letters hints at his effort to understand this type of nostalgia. He describes desires which every reader has, such as “the desire to visit, free as a fish, the deep sea, or the longing for the noiseless, gracious, economical flight of a bird” as being “ancient as the Fall.”³ By employing such a specific reference to the Fall, Verlyn Flieger argues that he “has gone beyond that simple nostalgia for the past and for childhood which he, and all humankind, has felt at one time or another, to touch what he clearly feels is the deep source of that nostalgia—humankind’s longing for its own past, the childhood before the Fall.”⁴ Yet Tolkien does not simply stop there. He declares that humanity has not only suffered a simple loss of innocence, but rather that it has “a sense that it was a severance; a strange fate and a guilt lie on us.” “Severance” is a strong word, for it implies a conscious action of turning away—and that turning away from God was perhaps the most costly act in human history. Severance, argues Flieger “is the Fall” and has separated us not only from God, but from “the rest of creation”⁵. This desire to retrieve what was lost is at its core a spiritual one, yet it manifests itself through physical and emotional longing to recover, preserve, and sustain the beauty around us, which offers an echo—however fleeting—of what humankind once possessed.

Tolkien’s Theory of Dycatastrophe

3. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 26.

4. *Ibid.*, 27.

5. *Ibid.*

After the Fall instigated the loss of humanity's Edenic state, brokenness and sorrow entered the world, and Tolkien has much to say regarding the significance of such evil and brokenness in his groundbreaking essay "Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics." It is in this essay that he explores his theory of *dyscatastrophe*, the idea that, in the physical world, evil will ultimately triumph over good. Death conquers a man's physical body. In Beowulf's case, Tolkien writes: "He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy."⁶ Beowulf, like all of humanity, is doomed to be physically defeated by death. Flieger argues that the effect of the poem arises from "the inevitability of Beowulf's final defeat."⁷ While all mortals are doomed to die, the beauty and power of the poem is communicated through Beowulf's approach to his impending doom. Rather than despairing, as most would, Beowulf chooses instead to courageously face his final battle. He leaves the light and fellowship of *Comitatus* to do battle with the offspring of the darkness, and he is inevitably overwhelmed by the very darkness which he sought to conquer.

Ironically, Tolkien did not believe that such a dark and dismal view of life stood in opposition to his Christian belief. Rather than believing that man's Universal Final Defeat, or *dyscatastrophe* as he also referred to it, was a cause for despair, Tolkien held firm to the hope which the Gospel offers. For while he recognized that "the monsters do not depart, whether the gods go or come. A Christian was (and is) still like his forefathers

6. JRR Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *The Monsters and Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 5-44.

7. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 17.

a mortal hemmed in a hostile world,”⁸ he also recognized that Beowulf represented all men “fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned.”⁹ Tolkien himself found comfort in the knowledge that nothing, not even death itself, could dethrone man’s immortal soul. Tolkien firmly believed that the futility of a man’s earthly works and his inevitable physical death are common aspects of the human experience and as such should not be disdained, but accepted. Beowulf, Tolkien argues, offers humanity a beautiful example of how to meet one’s inevitable fate with grace, sacrifice, and courage.

A Glimpse of Hope

While Tolkien acknowledged the reality of the dyscatastrophe, he also maintained that the narrative of the human story does not end in death and despair, and that even in the most dismal circumstances, there is always the possibility of hope. Therefore, he asserted that the eucatastrophe, his theory that hope is necessary in all circumstances, stands in contrast to the dyscatastrophe. He believed that the eucatastrophe is one of the most integral parts of the faerie genre not because it allows for consolation and a happy ending, which is sure to attract readers, but because it is an echo of something much deeper—something which is endemic to the human condition. According to Tolkien, the Christian Myth, or the Gospel, contains elements of faerie, as it has all the necessary ingredients such as sub-creation, an inner consistency of reality, and artistry. There is also no other story in all of human history which men would rather be true than the Gospel. Tolkien goes on to argue that the eucatastrophe, as experienced through faerie, is simply

8. JRR Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” in *The Monsters and Critics and Other Essays*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 5-44.

9. *Ibid.*, 23.

a gleam of what he calls the “Great Eucatastrophe which is of the same kind; but is preeminently high and joyous.”¹⁰ It is through the consolation of the happy ending that is experienced in faerie that Christians are able, at least for a moment, to see the possibility of what their future glorified states will be like.

It is the certainty of hope—hope which stands firm in the midst of defeat and despair—which lies at the heart of the eucatastrophe. Yet for Tolkien, this hope did not magically spring up from an individual’s own fortitude. The power of the eucatastrophe arises from Tolkien’s belief that it mirrored the Gospel, and the hope and joy which the Gospel offers is the exact same hope and joy contained within the eucatastrophe. This is because “The birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation.”¹¹ The hope and subsequent joy which Tolkien’s theory offers is simply “a glimpse” of the supernatural joy afforded to mankind through Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

The theory of eucatastrophe, which allows for hope in every situation, is only so powerful because it acts in opposition to its antithesis—dyscatastrophe. The dyscatastrophe, also referred to as the Universal Final Defeat, is the understanding that everything in the physical world will eventually fail, and that death is the only inevitable outcome. Just as one is only able to fully appreciate beauty because of ugliness, the presence of the dyscatastrophe heightens the power and grace of the eucatastrophe

10. J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 33-90.

11. Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2002), 29.

because it stands in opposition to it. Because the eucatastrophe is the unlooked-for glimpse of joy, it relies on the sorrow of the dyscatastrophe. Flieger states that

Tolkien makes it clear... that the joy of the turn, the consolation of the eucatastrophe, is dependent on the fear of its opposite, the bad turn toward sorrow and failure. The ever-present possibility of dyscatastrophe is what makes the joy at deliverance so piercing, and leads to the denial of “universal final defeat.”¹²

It was on the slopes of Mt. Doom, when all seemed lost, that Sam chose to hope in the possibility of success even in the very face of what seemed like ultimate defeat. Even though it would appear as if the world of Middle Earth is full of anguish and hardship, Tolkien’s theory of eucatastrophe, the idea that there is always hope no matter the circumstance enables the reader to see the necessity of hope in a broken and embittered world.

One of the core facets of Tolkien’s use of hope is that it often inspires action. Each character is faced with a choice as to how he or she will respond to events; despair is always a possible reaction as evidenced by Denethor’s desperation and subsequent suicide when the palantir reveals the might of Mordor. Yet the most admired characters always respond with hope, and it is not a shallow hope; rather, it is a deep-seated hope which spurs them to action. Samwise Gamgee offers an excellent example. He finds himself on the slopes of Mt. Doom, in the very heart of the dark land of Mordor. His master Frodo has already chosen to despair, and entreats Sam to “Lead me! As long as you’ve got any hope left. Mine is gone.”¹³ Stouthearted Sam, however, is not so easily crushed:

12. *Ibid.*, 27.

13. JRR Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 907.

But even as hope dies in Sam, or seemed to die, *it was turned into a new strength*. (emphasis mine). Sam's plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he felt all through his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness could subdue. With a new sense of responsibility he brought his eyes back to the ground near at hand, studying the next move.¹⁴

It is the very presence of hopelessness, the possibility of despair which empowers the characters to hope and makes their choice to pursue hope all the more powerful. Gabriel Marcel argues that “While the structure of the world we live in permits—and may even seem to counsel—absolute despair, it is only such a world that gives rise to an unconquerable hope.”¹⁵ Peter Kraft believes that action is the object of “the deeper hope that emerges when all hope is gone.”¹⁶ The fused presence of joy and sorrow, hope and despair is elemental within Tolkien's work. Yet he seems to also be suggesting that true hope is equivalent to action—acting in the midst of hopelessness is what empowers the characters. However, action is not simply a practical response to hope, it is a moral obligation—just as Tolkien argues that we are morally obligated to hope in the face of despair, so we are morally obligated to act, even if loss is inexorable.

The Inevitability of Loss

Humanity's sense of loss, brought about by the dyscatastrophe of the Fall, is thoroughly developed in Tolkien's work, and one of the first examples of the such loss is the destruction of Arda. Tolkien describes how the Valar “labored together in the

14. *Ibid.*, 917.

15. Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1959), 1-17.

16. Peter Kraft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 201.

ordering of the Earth and the curbing of its tumults.”¹⁷ Sadly, their efforts were constantly thwarted by Morgoth, for he was working in constant opposition of them. Yet they never despaired:

The Valar endeavored ever, in despite of Melkor, to rule the earth and prepare it for the coming of the Firstborn; and they built lands and Melkor destroyed them; valleys they delved and Melkor raised them up; mountains they carved and Melkor threw them down; seas they hollowed and Melkor spilled them; and naught might have peace and come to lasting growth, for as surely as the Valar began a labor so would Melkor undo it or corrupt it. And yet their labor was not all in vain; and though nowhere and in no work was their will and purpose wholly fulfilled, and all things were in hue and shape other than the Valar had at first intended, slowly nonetheless the Earth was fashioned and made firm.¹⁸

Even though they are powerful, the Valar are finite and therefore unable to restore Earth to the state it had been before Morgoth came. However, there is still beauty located in their creation, even though it is no longer considered perfect. Their repetitive actions showcase their innate desire to restore Earth to its pre-fallen state, and their inability to do so is representative of humanity’s inability to reclaim its originally good nature.

The inevitability of loss is further demonstrated by Galadriel, as she represents the fate of the remaining elves in Middle Earth. She was part of the Noldorian Rebellion, in which the elves defied the mandate of the Valar and were banished. As such, she has experienced a type of fall and its attendant loss. It is now her fate, like the rest of the Eldar, to dwindle and eventually fade until they are no longer in Middle Earth. Chris Brawley argues in his article entitled “*The Fading of the World: Tolkien’s Ecology and Loss in Lord of the Rings*” that Galadriel continually “reminds the company of the

17. JRR Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 11.

18. *Ibid.*, 12.

inevitability of loss.”¹⁹ She shares with Frodo how, regardless of the outcome of the War of the Ring, the elves “must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and be forgotten.”²⁰ Because of the Noldorian Rebellion, part of their punishment is the inevitability of their eventual fading—the continual decay and loss of all that they hold dear.

While Galadriel herself is a haunting instance of the loss associated with the fall of the Noldorian elves, her realm of Lorien offers another example of the tragic beauty associated with the inevitability of loss and the passing of time. The realm of Lorien was created and sustained through the power of Galadriel’s ring of power, Nenya. Although it is sustained through the power of the ring, it was originally named for a place where the Noldor used to dwell in the realm of Valinor.²¹ Frodo meets the elf queen Galadriel at the end of the Third Age, a very pivotal time in the history of Middle Earth, especially for the elves. Galadriel is keenly aware that the power of the elves is waning, and very soon it will be time for them to depart from Middle Earth forever. Eric Bronson argues that nobody, not even Elrond, is as aware of the inevitability of the passing of the elves and with them much of Middle Earth’s song, joy, beauty, and magic than Galadriel.²² Her response to the haunting knowledge of her peoples’ fate is to seek to preserve the beauty of the past while subsequently holding the shadows of Mordor at bay:

19. Chris Brawley, “The Fading of the World: Tolkien’s Ecology and Loss in Lord of the Rings,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18, no. 3 (2007): 292-307, accessed March 17, 2015, Academic OneFile.

20. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 431.

21. Eric Bronson, “Farewell to Lorien,” in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, Ed. By Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 75.

22. *Ibid.*, 76.

In Rivendell there was memory of ancient things; in Lorien the ancient things still lived in the waking world. Evil had been seen and heard there, sorrow had been known; the Elves feared and distrusted the world outside: wolves were howling on the wood's borders: but on the land of Lorien no shadow lay.²³

Yet again Tolkien's readers are reminded that there is no such thing as paradise in Tolkien's work; there is a price to be paid for every victory, for every aspect of life has been marred by evil. Neither Elrond nor Galadriel have escaped unscathed, for each of them have felt the darkening of their beloved realms. Pain, sorrow, and dispossession have been felt keenly by the elves, and yet "Galadriel presides over Lorien with songs of joy, and that is why the Fellowship takes such comfort in its beauty."²⁴ An integral part of the beauty of Lorien, and an example of the eucatastrophe at work, is found in the joy and hope which stand in defiance of Sauron's growing power. Even though shadows surround Lorien, still Galadriel joyously sings, as if to both spite and challenge her enemy. Bronson goes on to discuss how: "The elves are not ignorant of the dangers around them. They face the abyss every day and out of this confrontation their joyous music is born. Beauty is not diminished by dark times. As Tolkien elsewhere comments in the elvish quest for joy, 'sorrow and wisdom have enriched it.'²⁵

A Desire To Restore

Paradoxically, while loss is inevitable, there is still a desire to recover what has been lost. An example of this is found in the devastation of the trees Telperion and Laurelin, and Feanor's response. After Ungoliant destroys the trees, the Valar attempt to

23. JRR Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 392.

24. Eric Bronson, "Farewell to Lorien," in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, Ed. by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 73-7876.

25. JRR Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (New York: Ballantine Books: 1977), 49.

grow new trees, yet are unable to do so. But before the two trees die, they extract the last drops of dew from them. Feanor then takes the dew and uses it to create the Silmarils. While he is unable to recreate the light and beauty of the trees, he does manage to preserve the fractured light within the gems. Unfortunately, it is only a shadow of the natural beauty originally contained within the trees. Here, Tolkien seems to be arguing that the complete recovery of what has been lost is impossible. Will one then choose to gracefully accept that outright recovery is impossible, or will such knowledge lead to a futile and destructive effort to fully regain what has been lost?

The Beauty of Acceptance

Even though Lorien and Galadriel herself represent a bygone era which will soon be replaced by men and the dawning of the Fourth Age, there is also beauty to be found in her eventual acceptance of her fate. Up until this point, all of her faculties and powers have been bent toward the preservation of the past. The curse of the Valar lies heavily upon her, as does her position as a ring bearer, and protector and leader of one of the last elvish strongholds left in Middle Earth. For thousands of years she has attempted to preserve Lorien as “a refuge and an island of peace and beauty, a memorial of ancient days,” but she now finds herself “filled with misgiving, knowing that the golden dream was hastening to a dark awakening.”²⁶ Galadriel’s inability to relinquish the past showcases the futility of attempting to create and possess perfection in a fundamentally imperfect world. And yet, when Frodo offers Galadriel the One Ring which would give her the opportunity to usurp Sauron’s power and thus preserve her own beautiful

26. JRR Tolkien, “The History of Galadriel and Celeborn,” in *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 251.

kingdom, she declines, even though she knows that her choice signals the ending of her time on Middle Earth. Her refusal to take what Frodo offers and her acceptance that she “will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel”²⁷ signals her transition from one who clings futilely to the past to one who faces her future with courage and certainty.

The Necessity of Response

The hope extended through the eucatastrophe enables Galadriel, like Beowulf, to actively engage the evil around her. Just as Beowulf faced his dyscatastrophe with valor, and chose to fight evil until his last breath, so Galadriel also chooses to actively engage Saruman. Although she recognizes that the time of the elves is over, she still supports Rohan during the battle of Helm’s Deep. She and Elrond send several thousand elves to aid Theoden in his battle against the Uruk-hai, and it is only because of the elves that Theoden is victorious. Even though it costs her much, Galadriel acknowledges that she cannot afford to stand by and do nothing. True, the total recovery of all that is good is impossible, yet confronting evil enables Galadriel to preserve some of the goodness left in Middle-Earth.

The Cost of Victory

Sadly, for Galadriel and Frodo, victory is not total; it comes with a price. Elrond and Galadriel both recognize that with the downfall of Sauron comes the diminishment and disappearance of the elves, for, as Stephen Morillo so eloquently states, “In Tolkien’s world even the winners must lose something.”²⁸ Neither can Frodo carry the Ring for so

27. JRR Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 411.

28. Stephen Morillo “The Entwines,” in *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and the Lord of the Rings*. Ed. by Paul Kerry (Lanham, MD: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 106-118.

long without continuing to feel its evil effects long after it has been destroyed. Even after returning to the Shire, the wounds which he suffered at Weathertop and Cirith Ungol continue to pain him, and even Elrond and Gandalf's careful ministrations cannot fully heal his wounds. Although Sam desires that Frodo enjoy the happiness of the Shire and the fruits of his labor, Frodo responds that he "has been too deeply hurt" and the wounds which he has suffered "will never really heal."²⁹ The inability to heal from wounds is something which Tolkien suffered from as well, for he himself describes "The dreadful sufferings of our [he and his wife's] childhood, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling."³⁰ Tolkien recognized from experience that all things come with a price. He argues that there can be beauty, but not without sorrow, just as there cannot be victory without loss. And yet, as with Galadriel, Frodo accepts the inevitable loss which accompanies his Quest. With that acceptance comes the realization that he must leave the Shire and seek healing in the Elvish lands beyond the sea.

A Lament for the Lost

There was one text which impacted Tolkien in such a significant way that the content, theme, and even the tone recur within certain parts of *Lord of the Rings*. The Old English poem "The Wanderer" is an elegy which offers a lament over the passing of time and the loss of that which is held most dear. For instance, the poet asks "Where is the horse gone, where the young rider?...where are the seats at the feasting gone... that hour

29. JRR Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 1006.

30. John Rosegrant, "The Interplay Between Loss and Enchantment in the Works of JRR Tolkien," *Psychoanalytical Psychology* (Oct. 2015): n.p., accessed December 22, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pap0000028>

has departed, dark under the shadow of night, as had it never been!”³¹ This elegiac monologue is very similar to a poem which Aragorn recites on his way to Edoras: “Where now is the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?”³² While this ancient poem certainly portrays the desire to regain what has been lost, it also encourages the wanderer to “not bemoan his loss and instead hold resolute.”³³ Stuart Lee explicitly draws the comparison between the wanderer in the poem and the Christian, as both are “exiled from Eden and temporarily from Heaven.”³⁴ Thus, although Christians are in exile, they must not become embittered or overly saddened by what they have lost, but rather “hold resolute” and cling to the knowledge that they will one day experience the joy, which now they can only glimpse through the eucatastrophe, of their future glorified states.

The Church’s Response

The presence of both the dyscatastrophe and the eucatastrophe affirms the tension between good and evil, but also demands a response from both individual Christians and the church at large. How will the church choose to acknowledge the inevitable presence of brokenness and sorrow in our primary world? While it is true that evil does not roam the earth personified as orcs, fell beasts, and lidless eyes ensconced in flames, Peter writes that our adversary “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to

31. Stuart D. Lee, “J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Wanderer*” *Tolkien Studies* 6 (2009): 189-211, accessed March 17, 2015, Project Muse.

32. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 118.

33. Stuart D. Lee, “J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Wanderer*” *Tolkien Studies* 6 (2009): 189-211, accessed March 17, 2015, Project Muse.

34. *Ibid.*

devour.”³⁵ Evil’s presence can be felt in the world, and sadly, rather than engaging the evil in the culture, different sects of Christians have at times chosen to isolate themselves. In response to growing secularism, Christians often reacted by building and establishing strictly “Christian” institutions such as colleges, publishing companies, and schools. Such institutions are not inherently bad things, but Christians must resist the impulse to view the secular world as intrinsically bad and the traditionally sacred world as the only good. Rather than seeking to integrate their faith and views into an increasingly secular culture, some Christians have withdrawn from it, thereby failing to exercise their influence on the culture of which they are inescapably a part.

Such hope which Tolkien offers through the eucatastrophe serves as a mandate for Christian engagement of a secular world. Peter Phillips argues that some movements within the church, such as the monastic approach, have failed to reach out to and engage the secular world.³⁶ This is because many Christians have a negative view of the secular. They see it as something which might tarnish their faith, and as such must be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately, this view contradicts Tolkien’s belief that even the secular is a vestige of God’s glory. Sadly, as Phillips argues, fear of the secular has led to the church’s secluded mentality. For instance, evidence of such a view was expressed by Martin Luther. Even though he is revered by many as the founding father of Protestantism, he did, at least at one point, write that Jews should be avoided because their beliefs and

35. 1 Peter 5:8 (ESV).

36. Peter Phillips, “The Universal Call to Holiness: Engaging with the Secular,” *New Blackfriars* 95, no. 1059 (2014): 579-592, accessed March 17, 2015, <http://10.1111/nbfr.12040>.

practices did not align with those of the Christian Church.³⁷ Sadly, this view has pervaded certain strands of Christianity throughout its history, and has rendered the Church ineffective in influencing and reaching those of different belief systems.

The actions of the monastic movement of Christianity, most closely associated with the Counter-culturalist model of cultural engagement,³⁸ is reminiscent of the Ents' initial decision to withdraw from the circumstances of Middle Earth. Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin that "we are never roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in danger."³⁹ The Ents have not actively participated in the affairs of Middle earth since Sauron first waged war with the men of Numenor at the end of the First Age. Their quietism inadvertently allowed Sauron to rebuild Barad-Dur and extend his power over much of Middle Earth. Only after Saruman cut down the forests bordering Isengard did the Ents finally decide to go to war with him; however, had they not decided to engage Saruman and destroy Orthanc, the outcome of the War of the Ring would have been terribly different. Through the actions of the Ents, Tolkien is showcasing the dangers of social quietism, and advocating for an awareness and confrontation of evil in the world around us.

Tolkien's understanding that the complete recovery of goodness is impossible should inform how the church engages a secular culture. Because evil and loss are intrinsic elements of a fallen world, the church must recognize what its precise role is.

37. Winston D Persaud, "Where is God? Engaging a Religiously Charged, Post-Secular World." *Currents In Theology And Mission* 30, no. 3 (2003): 197-205, accessed March 17, 2015, Academic OneFile.

38. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), 147.

39. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 83.

The church must understand that the complete redemption of decayed aspects of culture is not within its power, for according to Tolkien, complete recovery of what was once good is impossible to achieve through finite means. However, simply because total restoration is impossible does not mean the church should cease its attempt to cultivate what is true and beautiful.

Tolkien's view of the inevitability of loss allows the church to cope with the decay of life. Even though the loss of something or someone important is a heavy burden to bear, the pervading presence of death is what enables humanity to fully embrace life. In a world where so few see the beauty and significance of everyday life, a Christian who professes the goodness of life in spite of death has the opportunity to influence those around him. For while the dyscatastrophe dooms our physical world, the eucatastrophe points the church to a time when Christ will redeem and renew the entirety of creation, and so it is with joy that the church looks to the future.

A negative view of the secular disregards the fact that God looked upon all the he had created and saw that it was good.⁴⁰ The emphasis which God places on his children's knowledge that his creation is good, is evidenced by the fact that the phrase "And it was good appears" five times within the first chapter of Genesis. However, many Christians might argue that such statements were made before the Fall of Man. Indeed, it would be reckless to disregard the cosmic consequences of the Fall. Yet, although sin entered and marred creation, it did not destroy it. The Psalmist writes that "The earth is full of the

40. Genesis 1:10 (NIV).

41. Psalm 33:5 (ESV).

goodness of the Lord”⁴¹ The physical world continues to reflect the glory and goodness of the Lord, and it is necessary for the church to recognize this and to affirm the physical, rather than only the spiritual. Such a framework will help the church engage a culture whose reality resides in the physical. Even though the physical is flawed, there is hope, and it is precisely this hope to which Tolkien constantly refers. Our hope resides in the atoning work of Christ and his eventual redemption and perfecting of our physical states. John’s vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth in Revelation is evidence of God’s perfecting of the physical world. The fallen state of the world, its people and cultures, are not something that Christians can escape, nor should they seek to. James K.A. Smith argues that “The body of Christ should be a testimony to the Kingdom that is coming, bearing witness to how things will be otherwise,” and that “our work and our practices should be foretastes of that coming new city.”⁴²

It is important for Christians to remember that they were created to develop and delight in the natural world which God has created, not disengage from it. When God created man in his own image, it was “so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky.”⁴³ While being made in the image of God distinguishes humans from animals and gives us inherent value, it is also directly connected to involvement and dominion over the natural world. Words such as rule and subdue are direct mandates from God which serve as an explanation of humanity’s role within the natural world. However, like Tolkien’s Ents, Christians are not to exercise ruthless authoritarian power,

42. James K.A. Smith, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2016), 174.

43. Genesis 1:26-28 (NIV).

but rather shepherd and cultivate the world around them and through that, further God's rule and kingdom on earth.⁴⁴ John Stott once said that "Nature is what God gives; culture is what we do with it."⁴⁵ In creating us in his own image, God purposefully equipped humans to partake in an active role in bringing about his will and purpose on his earthly kingdom. Christians should not forget to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."⁴⁶

Regardless of whether or not nature, and by extension, culture is inherently evil, Christians are still called to imitate Christ. This means loving one's neighbor, seeking justice for the widowed and orphaned, desiring the good of others above ourselves, and obeying God's Word. In short, if they desire to follow God, they must care about culture because Christ cares about culture. The power of the Incarnation comes from the fact that the perfect God cared so much for his creation that he dwelt among sinful men so that he might bring them to himself. Christians must not forget that "God *so loved the world* that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (emphasis added).⁴⁷ While it is one of the most popular verses in the Bible, its message is one that many Christians have forgotten. God's love for the world caused him to become human, suffer, and die. While many Christians will not end up giving up their lives as Christ did, his mandate to imitate him means seeking to alleviate the suffering of

44. Dr. Joshua Chatraw, "Why Should We Care About Culture?" (lecture, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, February 9, 2016).

45. John Stott, *Issues Facing Christianity Today*, ed. Roy McCloughry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 222.

46. Matthew 6:10 (NIV).

47. John 3:16 (NIV).

those around us while sharing the hope which the Gospel offers. Regardless of how we perceive culture, Christians must engage it if for no other reason that is precisely what Christ did.

Yet just like the happy ending in fairy tales, there is hope regarding the way in which the Church views the secular world. Not all Christians believe that the secular should be disparaged. David Ranson argues eloquently that “the secular is not antithetical to the experience of God but the very locus in which such an experience might be rendered possible.”⁴⁸ Abraham Kuyper, an individual who greatly influenced the Transformationist approach to relating Christ to culture, also argued for the integration of Christian principles into every realm of daily life. According to Kuyper, there is no distinctly “Christian” calling, but rather art, science, philosophy, economics, and every other realm of study should be approached with the intent to glorify God. He went on to famously state that “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest” and continued with the statement: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”⁴⁹ Indeed, if Christians believe that Christ can only be glorified through sacred elements, they negate his power by relegating him to a certain sphere of sovereignty.

Tolkien firmly believed in the integration of the sacred and secular. Just as the dyscatastrophe is necessary for the eucatastrophe, so the brokenness of a secular world is necessary for the appreciation of the sacred elements found within that same world.

48. David Ranson, “From Secular Institute to Ecclesial Movement: Conjunctions of the Sacred and the Secular in the Twentieth Century.” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 89, no. 2 (2012): 133-46, accessed March 17, 2015, ProQuest.

49. Abraham Kuyper, “Speech Given at the Inauguration of the Free University” quoted in Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 186.

Christians must learn the importance of proactively seeking to minister and love those who may not share their beliefs, rather than hiding behind the walls which they have allowed their ideology to build up.

It is no secret that this world is marred by evil. One cannot help but see this—suicide, homelessness, genocide, and famine are just a few of the catastrophes occurring on a daily basis. For the Christian, it is easy to simply ignore these ills and look forward to a future in heaven where none of these problems will exist. Yet this is precisely the worldview which Tolkien so vehemently opposed. Yes, it is natural to long for the recovery of our pre-fallen state. Yes, living in such a broken world creates an uncomfortable tension. That is precisely the point. It is necessary to learn to live with and navigate through such tension in a manner that enhances oneself and those around him. Just as The Fellowship fought against all odds to save Middle Earth from evil incarnate, so must Christians seek to repel the forces of the Enemy and seek to engage those who are lost. The joy and hope which the eucatastrophe embodies provides a glimpse of eternity; it allows individuals to hope even in the darkest situations—for dark they will be. In the words of Tolkien himself, “The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed.”⁵⁰

50. J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 33-90.

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