

## Opening

Tonight, we try a theological reading of *Lord of the Rings*. I hope we all know the story, from the books, film, or both. I will start with opening remarks (with my view), we will discuss in groups (so you can give your view), and I'll end with summing up.

To reprise the plot: an ordinary person called Frodo (a hobbit or halfling) sets out to destroy an evil ring (the one ring to rule them all), precipitating the collapse of a great and evil power, Sauron, and thereby saving Frodo's home (the Shire) and the world (middle earth).

Frodo encounters grave perils and overcomes great obstacles, helped along the way by fellowship and especially by his loyal companion Sam. And broader events play their part too, such as the march of the Ents (Tree shepherds) to defeat Saruman, a wizard fallen into evil, and the rightful return of Gondor's king, Aragorn.

### *A place to start*

A place to start is how we personally relate to *Lord of the Rings*. For me, it is a masterpiece of imagination, and it's something I've returned to, many times. It stirs feelings of romance, heroism, of doing what is good and right, in the face of tough choices, and evil.

My favourite character of all is Samwise Gamgee (Sam), companion and servant to Frodo. He can be rough and ready (as he is sometimes with Gollum), he can blurt things out (as he does with Faramir, disclosing the truth of the ring), he can be untrusting of strangers (as he is with Aragorn on first meeting). And yet, he is also faithful, kind, shrewd, and practical. And so loyal. He gives us practical insight to big moral questions. I wish I could be as good and as faithful as him.

I will be interested to hear who your favourite character is, and why. In our discussions, you will have the chance to talk about a character, and reflect on what this means for theology.

### *The problem about interpreting Tolkien's work*

Interpreting the *Lord of the Rings* is problematic, not only because it's complex but also because what Tolkien himself said about its interpretation.

As fame of this work grew, people put to him what they thought the *Lord of the Rings* "really" meant. He responded: "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence." If you think he sounded testy, I think you're right.

By allegory, Tolkien is referring to a literary device in which a character, place, or event can be interpreted as standing for something else. He rejected (and got cross about) people claiming Sauron is an allegory for the Devil, Orcs as Nazis, battles in middle earth as world war, all that sort of thing.

For over three decades, Tolkien was an Oxford don, a professor of Anglo-Saxon and then English Language and Literature. Literature and language were his main game academically, and a major interest in his fiction writing. He served in the trenches of the Great War, at the Battle of the Somme. He lost close friends to war, and surely he knew all too well about hard times. And he was a devoted family man, to his wife and four children.

His life shows us the traces of the complex influences on Tolkien's imagination: language, war, friendship, family, and hard times. But again, we need to be careful, to quote Tolkien: "I object to the contemporary trend in criticism, with its excessive interest in the details of the lives of authors

and artists....(O)nly one's Guardian Angel, or indeed God himself, could unravel the real relationship between personal facts and an author's work."<sup>1</sup> He's sounding testy again.

And yet, as he noted to a close friend and Jesuit priest: "The *Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work." Tolkien was a devout Catholic, at odds with most of his contemporaries, who were in the main Protestant. From the time of his mother's conversion, his Catholicism was a conscious choice throughout his life, so we can safely take it that Tolkien reflected a lot on why he was Catholic, and this deep thinking was a major influence on him and his writing.

So how are we to proceed? Tolkien doesn't want *Lord of the Rings* to be treated as an allegory, to be seen as standing for anything else. By this account, *Lord of the Rings* is not 'about' anything but itself. Tolkien also objects to fiction as seen simply to be a function of the author's life. Fair enough. At the same time, he's also claiming it to be a religious and Catholic work. While we shouldn't necessarily be bound by what an author intended for his writing especially because it's fiction, we should at least treat his intentions seriously. I suggest two things.

First and foremost, *Lord of the Rings* is a story, a magnificent one, epic in scope and character, dealing with wondrous events and beings. So, let's enjoy it as the ripping good yarn that it is.

Secondly, it raises serious questions of ethics and morality and theology that any good fiction will. But I suggest Tolkien is asking us: don't go for the simple or the obvious or for "black and white". Instead, look for deeper symbolism and structure. Tolkien isn't preachy about it, because preachy fiction is bad fiction. He wants us to think and question for ourselves.

And because *Lord of the Rings* is fiction – and not say, a treatise on philosophy – this gives even more scope for the reader – you and me – to find our own meaning when we read it.

### *The struggle to do good*

What I'd like to talk about now is just one way to proceed, as seeing *Lord of the Rings* in theological terms as the *struggle to do good*. To my mind, what is interesting is *how* Tolkien deals with this struggle and what he means by 'the good'. I'll keep my comments brief (which means I'll leave lots of stuff out).

The way I see it (and I think Tolkien too), good (and evil too, for that matter) *aren't just abstract notions*. To take the good, at least for human affairs, it isn't just like some beautiful Rembrandt painting that you look at it and admire, and being good isn't because you just are made that way.

Rather, doing good is to take action (or sometimes to withhold it), and sometimes it's not the easy choice. To do good is about how people think and act, whether you are an ordinary person like a hobbit or a great and powerful wizard, like Gandalf and Saruman.

Firstly, you have to work out what a good course of action should be. The debate at Rivendell and in the Fellowship about how to deal with the ring is a case in point: do we hide the ring, do we wield it against Sauron, do we bury it in the ocean, or do we try to destroy it once and for all? Good characters can face *tough choices*: on the breaking of the fellowship at Amon Hen, should Aragorn have followed Frodo and Sam, or pursued Saruman's orcs to save Merry and Pippin? Sometimes to do good is to work out the lesser of two evils.

Secondly, actions can have powerful effects that ripple out, causing all sorts of consequences for all sorts of people. Even small actions can have big consequences. Tolkien makes clear that *good things*

---

<sup>1</sup> See page xv of John Garth *Tolkien and the Great War*

*can result from evil action*. When, at the cracks of Mount Doom, Gollum forcibly takes the ring from Frodo, he does evil. Yet, as a result, he falls into the fire, and the ring is destroyed.

If good results can result from evil action, then the opposite is true too: evil consequences can result from well intentioned action. Tolkien though makes clear the peril of some actions – such as taking the ring – even with the intention to do good. People need to act well *and wisely*. This is why Galadriel and Gandalf refuse to bear the ring.

Thirdly, there is a context for doing good, for taking action. Tolkien includes a role for both providence and free will. While he doesn't explicitly deal with God or religion, there are hints of a deeper *providence*, powers that seek to thwart evil. Gandalf speaks of these deeper powers that guided the finding of the ring, when he says to Frodo: "...there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker...Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought."

This raises of course all sorts of questions about providence. What is it? How does it work? Should it take a more direct hand? These questions sound all too familiar.

At the same time, individuals have the capacity to exercise free will and to act. Even Sauron had a choice to do good or bad, once, long before the events of the story. And some characters have the chance for *redemption* – that is, for turning away from evil and to start to make good choices. The redemption of Gollum was an open question in Tolkien's mind, right to the very end. Saruman, a great and fallen wizard, is offered redemption by Gandalf and by Frodo.

And finally, goodness prevails. Not easily, to be sure. It is *hard won* through *struggle*. But there is prospect for hope. Being good is not a state of being, it is a process of becoming. Back to Samwise, ever shrewd and down to earth, who notes: "I seem to see ahead, in a kind of a way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness but I know I can't turn back...I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead...I must see it through..."

Tolkien, I think, would say that good prevails in real life, as it does in fiction. I guess we need to be the judge of that, for ourselves, in our own lives and for others, and for the planet. We need to think about what "good prevailing" means. In this life? In the next? For some of us? For most of us?

For Tolkien I think, the 'good' is bitter sweet, hard won, achieved through sacrifice, and then not available to all in this life (Frodo for instance is hurt too badly to fully enjoy the saving of the Shire).

To my mind, the theological significance of Tolkien's work isn't that it "solves" questions or provides easy answers. Instead, it's a way for us to open up to the hard questions. At the same time, there is still room for hope that good will ultimately prevail.

### *Conclusion*

These are introductory remarks. Tolkien created such a complex and multi-faceted world, in a magnificent work of fiction, that would admit to much interpretation and debate, which I invite you to consider and discuss now in groups. (In my summing up at the end, I'll give a few examples of what I've left out and where you might look to find out more).

## Tolkien and theology: questions for discussion in groups

Who is your favourite character, what does this character tell you about good and evil?

What are the potential turning points for this character?

- If good, when is the character tempted to do evil or at least refrain from doing good?
- If bad, is the character offered the chance for redemption and if so, what happens?

How do you think you might apply this in our own lives?

=====

## Handout: Tolkien and theology: quotes

Topic	Quote	Source
<i>How religious is Lord of the Rings</i>	"The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. 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."	J.R.R Tolkien letter 142 (to friend and Jesuit priest, Robert Murray)
<i>Providence</i> And the finding of the Ring  In meeting the elves	Gandalf to Frodo: "...there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker...Bilbo was <i>meant</i> to find the Ring, and <i>not</i> by its maker. In which case you were <i>meant</i> to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought."  Gildor to Frodo: "In this meeting there may be more than chance, but the purpose is not clear to me, and I fear to say too much."	Lord of the Rings - Book 1 Chapter 2 - "Shadow of the Past" – p69  Lord of the Rings - Book 1 Chapter 3 - "Three is Company" – p98
<i>Redemption</i> Potential for redemption for all, such as Gollum	Frodo: "'(Gollum) deserves death.' Gandalf: 'Deserves it! I daresay he does.. Many live that deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it.'	Lord of the Rings - Book 1 Chapter 2 - "Shadow of the Past" – p73
<i>Struggle for Good</i>	Samwise: "I seem to see ahead, in a kind of a way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness but I know I can't turn back...I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead...I must see it through..."	Lord of the Rings - Book 1 Chapter 4 - "Short Cut to Mushrooms" – p100
<i>Good from evil</i>	Frodo: "...it was said to me that I should find friendship upon the way, secret and unlooked for...To have found it turns evil to great good."	Lord of the Rings - Book 4 Chapter 7 -

Topic	Quote	Source
	Gandalf: "let us remember that a traitor may betray himself and go good that he does not intend. It can be so, sometimes."	"Journey to the Cross-Roads" – p721  Lord of the Rings - Book 5 Chapter 4 - "Siege of Gondor" – p847
<i>Absolutes</i>	"In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing...I do not think that at any rate any 'rational being' is wholly evil."  "Some reviewers have called the whole thing simple-minded, just a plain fight between Good and Evil, with all the good just good, and the bad just bad." (a view that Tolkien refutes).	J.R.R Tolkien letter 184
<i>Sacrifices for Good</i>	Frodo:"...I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them."	Lord of the Rings - Book 6 Chapter 9 - "The Grey Havens" – p1067
<i>Life after death</i> Sailing to the West	"And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise."	Lord of the Rings - Book 6 Chapter 9 - "The Grey Havens" – p1068-1069

### Peter Kreeft's analysis of Christ-figures in The Lord of the Rings<sup>2</sup>

Christ-like attribute	Gandalf	Frodo	Aragorn
Sacrificial death	Dies in Moria	Symbolically dies under Morgul-knife	Takes Paths of the Dead
Resurrection	Reborn as Gandalf the White	Healed by Elrond	Reappears in Gondor
Saviour	All three help to save Middle-earth from Sauron		
Threefold Messianic symbolism	Prophet	Priest	King

<sup>2</sup> From [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_Middle-earth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Middle-earth)

## Concluding remarks

Thank you for being here tonight, and for your contribution. It was wonderful to hear your ideas and thoughts.

Tolkien would have been uncomfortable about being included in a lecture series (even one as exemplary as ours!) on theologians. He would have seen himself only as a layman theologically, even if he was an informed (and probably an opiated) one.

Yet still, we can consider Tolkien's work very productively for theological insight. *Lord of the Rings* is a colossal and wonderful work of fiction. It is not theology, but it does deal with big theological questions.

### *What I haven't covered*

There are so many questions raised by and ways to interpret Tolkien's work. For instance, in the second page of your handout, you will see an analysis of Christ-like figures represented by Frodo, Gandalf, and Aragorn. It's certainly interesting, and if you'd like to know more, I suggest look at the Wikipedia page on Lord of the Rings and Christianity. There's a good summary there.

We have focussed on the "good" tonight. *Lord of the Rings* also deals with what is "evil". Also, there are many other questions, such as the fellowship of the ring, and what it represents.

We need to remember too that Tolkien was *Catholic*, and there are specifically Catholic elements of the Sacrament, of Pilgrimage, of Transfiguration, of Confession that figure in Tolkien's mythic world creation, at least as parallel and allusion if not as direct allegory. Videos by Peter Kreeft outline a catholic reading of *Lord of the Rings*, which you'll find on Youtube.

(But just be careful, I'd suggest, of the type of analysis that uses allegory, remembering Tolkien's dislike of this literary device).

### *Conclusion*

We should take the story *as a story* wonderfully and imaginatively told. It is an adventure story. It is a romantic story. It is a story about heroes. And yes, along the way, it also raises important theological questions, in a deeply moving way.

To end on a humorous note that tells us something of the man himself:

Tolkien's grandson, Simon, told of attending church with his grandfather in Bournemouth, after the liturgy had changed from Latin to English. Tolkien "obviously didn't agree with this and made all the responses very loudly in Latin while the rest of the congregation answered in English. I found the whole experience quite excruciating, but My Grandfather was oblivious. He simply had to do what he believed to be right."<sup>3</sup>

I can only sympathise with the poor priest conducting the service, and to note that great people can sometimes be, well, difficult.

Thank you.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/2-september/faith/faith-features/j-r-r-tolkien-one-faith-to-bind-them-all>