

THE JOURNAL OF INKLINGS STUDIES

Paul E. Kerry, ed. *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and The Lord of the Rings*. Review by Shaun Blanchard The Journal of Inklings Studies Vol. 3, No. 1, April 2013

Paul E. Kerry, ed. *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and The Lord of the Rings* (Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011). 310 pp. ISBN 9781611470642.

Professor Paul E. Kerry's ambitious project – to bring together leading academic voices in the burgeoning area of Tolkien Studies to debate and explore the influence of Christianity on Tolkien's works (with special emphasis on *The Lord of the Rings*) is a success. Fourteen scholars of literature, theology, history, political science, and philosophy have contributed to Kerry's volume, lending it an interdisciplinary (and inter-confessional) range and depth that is unique for a work dealing with these particular questions. It should be read by any fans or students of Tolkien - Christian or otherwise, from university professors to mature high schoolers seeking a rigorous gateway into a deeper grasp and appreciation of one of the greatest storytellers in the English language.

Kerry's idea for such a volume began to germinate while attending C.S. Lewis Society meetings as a student at Oxford and seeing the wide array of members of Christian denominations and confessions that were touched by Lewis. Tolkien's influence is the same, and Kerry notes that although discussion of Tolkien's *legendarium* has stood the test of time (and recently received a hit of adrenaline with the release of Peter Jackson's blockbusters and such deserving accolades as 'book of the century') there is still a need for 'a comparative approach' regarding the influence of Catholicism upon his life-work, which would be 'useful in weighing evidence and evaluating arguments', since too often this exegetical work and analysis is 'done in isolation' (7).

Space prevents a discussion of each of the sixteen informative essays in the volume, which includes authors Joseph Pearce (this time writing on a Catholic understanding of community embedded in *The Lord of the Rings*) and Ralph Wood (who reflects on concept of 'weirdness' in the heartbreaking *Children of Hurin*). After a historiographical introduction from Kerry which is packed with useful information on a variety of perspectives regarding 'Christian approaches' to Tolkien, the volume moves into a fascinating debate between Bristol professor Ronald Hutton and

Norwegian theologian Nils Ivar Agøy concerning the relative importance of Christian and pagan influences in Tolkien's *legendarium*.

It will perhaps be difficult for any young Tolkien reader to imagine a time when he was not paraded as a 'Catholic author' (it is for this one), but Stratford Caldecott writes that 'not so long ago, Tolkien's Roman Catholicism was known to relatively few - the Tolkien Estate was allegedly reluctant to make much of it, thinking that it would be an obstacle to potential readers' (238). That is why Ronald Hutton's essay 'The Pagan Tolkien' is so surprising and intriguing. Hutton - himself a scholar of European paganism - argues thoroughly and robustly that the main influences upon The Lord of the Rings come from paganism, and that the backbone of the myths was constructed at a time when Tolkien was experiencing a profound crisis of faith (the 1920s - a period Hutton admits is 'badly represented' in surviving letters). Hutton points out Tolkien was not a theologian, was uninterested in the theological debates leading up to and springing from Vatican II, and the substance and foundation of his faith was primarily participation in the mystical rite of the Eucharist. The oft-repeated notion that a Christian ideal of forgiveness and redemption is present in Tolkien's work is brushed aside with the observation that 'Melkor, Sauron, and Saruman are all beneficiaries of grace, and all use it to do considerably more damage than before' (67). His cosmology, the forces at work in Middle Earth, and even the resolution of *The Lord of the Rings* (the accidental self-sacrifice of Gollum) can be read in Christian ways but this requires unnecessary wriggling. Whatever overt traces of Christianity that are present, Hutton argues, are the result of later editing (by Tolkien himself and by his son Christopher) and do not belong to the genesis of the work. Middle Earth does have a theology, argues Hutton, and 'if it was Christian, then it was a Christianity so unorthodox, and diluted, as to merit the term heretical' (69).

This is an ambitious thesis - one that Professor Agøy emphatically concludes is 'built on sand' (85). For one thing, he sees Hutton as basing far too much on rather ambiguous passages in Tolkien's letters, like the statement in 'Letter 250' that he 'almost ceased to practice' his faith in the 1920s. Agøy praises Hutton's caution in interpreting an author's back-projected statements about themselves (which Hutton says are often unscrupulously used to prove the work's Christianity), but points out that Hutton does not exercise such caution with Letter 250. The date it was written - 1962 - and the purpose of the letter - to buttress his son's spiritual flagging - are critical. Agøy also points to Tolkien's statement that he fell in love with the Eucharist early in life and 'by the mercy of God never have fallen out again' (73). Agøy concludes that Tolkien's statement, taken in context, probably meant that he

was receiving communion much less regularly, not that the formative years of his *legendarium* were marked by anything approaching unbelief.

Agøy goes on to show quite persuasively the deeply Christian underpinnings of *The Lord of the Rings*: the emphatically non-pagan view of time as not cyclical but linear, creation *ex nihilo*, the prominence of the virtues of forgiveness and pity (both were hardly lauded in Greco-Roman or European paganism), the celebration of ‘the least of these’, and, contra Hutton, the notion of a benign Providence at work in Middle Earth. Agøy concludes that the well-known ideas Tolkien expressed in ‘On Fairy Stories’ (sub-creation, etc.) are what truly underpins *The Lord of the Rings*.

By now, many Catholic (and other Christian) readers of *The Lord of the Rings* are familiar with the diverse elements of ‘applicability’ (though of course not allegory) present in the stories: Galadriel as a type of Mary, *lembas* as sacramentally nourishing, strong themes of providence (‘luck’ in *The Hobbit*), Gandalf as a servant of the Holy Spirit (‘the Secret Fire’) confronting demonic foes (‘a demon of the Ancient World’), and (most tellingly) the destruction of the ring occurring on March 25th – in the Catholic calendar the Feast of the Annunciation (the Incarnation, and also traditionally the date Jesus was crucified).

Perhaps it would be germane to close with Kerry’s contention that, for devout Catholics, faith is part of the *essentia* of the individual, not an addition to a secular self (237). It is understandably difficult for people to grasp this, since the Enlightenment sought (rather successfully in European society) to make ‘religion’ a private and optional extra. Devout Catholics, and many English Catholics in particular, have recognized this compartmentalization as psychologically false and ultimately inimical to faith. This does not suggest that it would have been impossible for Tolkien to write a primarily pagan myth, but rather supports Avøy’s contention that *The Lord of the Rings* is not one.

This collection of essays feature many other relevant debates and discussions that are well worth the time of a casual fan of Tolkien who seeks to learn more, or of a seasoned student or scholar deepening their knowledge and study of a profound corpus of writing.

Shaun Blanchard