

**Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians:
The Fantasy of the Real*,
Review by Aidan Nichols, OP
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Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real. by
Alison Milbank. xvi + 184 pp. London and New York: T&T Clark,
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This is a rich and rewarding book. Its author is the spouse of John Milbank, the principal founder of the movement called ‘Radical Orthodoxy’. Her thinking—so I shall explain in due course—has been touched by his, though her language is less gnomic, her expository style less dense. In the Preface she explains her aims clearly enough. She will show that Chesterton influenced Tolkien, and moreover that he did so in such wise that the manner in which both men write bears witness to Christian doctrine and the latter’s natural philosophical underpinning: namely, metaphysical realism. (Such realism, even when it stresses the inter-connectedness of things, attests the independence of the created order from our appropriation of it.) Now, Alison Milbank has her primary preparation in literary criticism. On that basis, she finds in modernist aesthetics, and its pre-history in the work of the late nineteenth-century symbolists, the key to unlock the wider mysteries of these two fictional worlds. The ‘tropes’ Chesterton and Tolkien adopted in choosing particular techniques for story-telling enabled them to produce a ‘unique modern theological poetics’ (p. xv). To repeat, it is their manner as much as, or more than, their content which, for this author, brings great theological and philosophical themes into play.

A substantial Introduction begins the development of this claim, not least by introducing the topic of *faëry* which, towards the end of the book, will be defined as ‘a mode of exploring the real through the imagination..., the fictive site (in the sense of the constructed work of art) where the intuition of other modes of material life apart from our own may be explored’. *Faëry*, we are told, should not be ‘equated with the imagination’, but (now quoting Tolkien) with the desire ‘to survey the depths of space and time’ and ‘to hold communion with other living things’ (p. 146). These fragments of citation sufficiently explain Alison Milbank’s sub-title, ‘The Fantasy of the Real’. That phrase is a good example of Chesterton-type metaphysical (as distinct from simply rhetorical) paradox. It would have pleased Jacques Maritain, who has provided one of the lenses through which she looks at her materials. To suggest how a thorough-going Thomist realism can be not only complemented but served by the notion of the creative transposition of things by the artist’s mind is certainly daring. In the spirit of Maritain, as well as of Alison Milbank’s two chosen subjects, this book makes a major contribution to that

project. She is surely right to compare Tolkien's idea of artistic 'sub-creation' with Maritain's invocation, in the same context, of 'secondary creation'. I wonder, however, whether Maritain would have considered Tolkien's creation myth in *The Silmarillion* compatible with Thomas's creation doctrine, for it seems to permit the (partial) *delegation* of creation, and this the Thomist school has always resisted as a derogation from the uniquely fountal being of God.

After the Introduction, the rest of the book falls into two parts, entitled 'poiesis' and 'praxis'. These are Aristotelian terms for, respectively, artistic making and moral acting, terms favoured by Maritain, not least in his *Art et Scolastique*, the role of which among the Catholic intelligentsia in inter-war England Milbank rightly highlights. Under the heading 'poiesis', we soon become aware of how pertinent to her topic a grasp of literary history may be. The collapse of Romanticism was, at one level, a loss of confidence that poetic symbols participate in that which they symbolize, a claim staked out with peculiar forcefulness by Coleridge. Russian Formalism sought to address the consequent issue of the artificiality or 'deadness' of words. Chesterton (and, on his heels, Tolkien) responded to the same crisis by— independently of course—seizing on some of the same strategies, not, however, to empower subjects but, quite differently, to empower objects. 'De-familiarisation', the de-stabilizing of perception, the de-centering of man in the universe, the accentuating of the grotesque (something Milbank discusses with great subtlety for it points in more than one direction): all these, at the hands of secular theorizers, serve what may well be nihilistic purposes, or at any rate presuppositions. But with Chesterton, as later Tolkien, they are ways of making 'the object strange to us so that it may be reconnected by participation in a divine world' (p. 58).

One sign of the influence of Radical Orthodoxy on Alison Milbank's thought is the way she links such issues of artistic poiesis to matters political and economic—a general tendency of that school, though not at all in the reductionist manner of Marx or Freud. One important kind of connection we have lost, parallel to Coleridgean symbolic ontology, is that between 'makers and consumers' (p. 82). Like a 'fetishised' consumer commodity, the Ring of Power in *The Lord of the Rings* transfers 'being and agency to itself and away from its users' (p. 83). Milbank is on the lookout for signs of rebellion against high industrial capitalism in Chesterton and Tolkien, and she is not disappointed—though she rather underplays Chesterton's conscious rejection of Christian Socialism in favour of Distributism, inclining as she does to the view that, through the former's 'anarcho-syndicalist' elements, it quasi-approximates to the latter. This thesis would need, I think, a good deal more argumentative support than it receives here.

Before leaving 'poiesis', I should note the excellence of her treatment of the analogical relation between redemption in *The Lord of the Rings* and in Christian soteriology. Tolkien's narrative sets up, between Frodo and the Son of Man, a 'series of typological analogies...only to render them highly problematic' (p. 100). (Non-definitive) redemption happens in Middle-earth only because, not least in Frodo's moral crisis at Mount Doom and Gollum's persistence in a warped will, evil overreaches itself. The story thus 'presents a world that makes the Incarnation a necessity' (p. 101). If that sounds too swift a conclusion, she is not always so unrestrained. The 'final' separation of Sam and Frodo, even though they belong together, leaves the reader yearning for some way to re-unite them—and, by extension, bodily life and spiritual aspiration. But the eschatology that can deal with this is never stated. A space is opened, simply, where the reader can ponder.

Under 'praxis' Alison Milbank is concerned with the wider lessons for human behaviour we can draw from this literature. The fiction of Chesterton and Tolkien bestows a 'sense of the gifted and thus religious nature of existence' (p. 122). This can point in two directions. The first is economic. Drawing on the early twentieth-century social anthropologist Marcel Mauss: their fiction suggests a society dominated by gift-exchange, which, when functioning happily, inter-relates people in complex ways through tokens of peaceable co-existence, though it can also, as with Sauron's giving of the Rings, go awry. 'Stribs', new and old, will be pleased that for Milbank Distributivism approaches more closely to this ethos than does any other economic system. The second direction in which 'giftedness' moves is towards positing a significant 'third term' (p. 122) that can guarantee the significance and sacrality of the giving of gifts. That is a way of re-introducing God, of course. A world where gift-giving is a privileged locus of humanity calls out for some recognition of the primordial divine 'Christmas present' that is existence. (She has a lengthy discussion of Father Christmas which comes close to digression, but not perhaps for devotees of Narnia.) By 'excess' or deliberate 'superfluity' such figures (in *The Lord of the Rings*) as Bombadil and Gandalf make manifest the giftedness of creation itself. The way this theme governs the last chapters of *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians* reflects not only the work of these authors, but also that of Alison Milbank's husband. In John Milbank's theology, the category of gift is central as a way of understanding both (human) 'nature' and 'grace'. 'I exist in receiving ... I exist and persist also in giving, which is prior to any sacrificial loss'. These affirmations, in his *The Word Made Strange*, are crucial to the interpretive scheme of his wife. Her references to the 'natural desire for the supernatural' (p. 112, e.g.) rather rudely simplify what should be more nuanced statements, but echo her husband's reading of modern Catholic theology,

notably in his study of Henri de Lubac, *The Suspended Middle*. That, and her judgment in the Conclusion, 'In the Christian dispensation, anything can mediate the divine' (p. 168), are the two main points in this work for which a Scholastic reader would want some more distinctions registered. But what we have been given in her book is otherwise lucid and splendid enough.

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